Call Me What I Am

by Kyn

Summary

Sheer masculinity might be half the reason Raphael has trouble following the leader. On some biological level, being the biggest, heaviest monster around might just *feel* like it ought to make him the defacto 'alpha.' But then Red Turtle's strange stomach pains persist for over a week, leading Donatello to conduct an ultrasound to see if it's cancer...

It's not cancer.

*The remarkably unsexy fiction is inspired by the real life science of turtles. Like how a turtle's sex is determined! Spoiler alert: It's a lot more wibbly wobbly than in mammals, and doesn't even use XY chromosomes.*

Notes

This universe, while Freeform, is not connected to any of my other TMNT fictions.
The Setup

Mikey was the first one to pop his head into the lab and mention that something was up with Raphael and that he looked to be muscling through some pretty bad pain.

"He's not using the bench press," Mikey chattered conversationally, to a slightly-oblivious Donatello who otherwise would never have noticed all these tiny details had he not been in possession of a little brother precisely like Mikey. They synergized that way. "It's something with his stomach, yo, maybe bad indigestion? Flu? Dunno!"

Usually, Raphael treated pain like something of a challenge. If it hurt, he'd do it until it either stopped hurting or he collapsed from exhaustion. His recovery time for exercise was absolutely minuscule, and he could be back at the punching bag, weights, push-ups, sit-ups, or any dojo sparring in less than half the time it took his brothers. Long story short: His core muscles must have been pretty extensively compromised to the point where he didn't think he could lift from his chest without a spotter. And, of course, Raphael didn't ask for a spotter if he didn't intend on showing off.

Donnie kept an eye on their firebrand sibling for the rest of the day, and came to the same conclusion as Michelangelo: Raphael looked like he felt ill. He was in a terrible mood, not the least of which because Leonardo also seemed wise to him, and if Master Splinter so much as sniffed he wasn't at the top of his game, Sensei would not be allowing Raph scavenging at the dump or supermarket or anywhere else even remotely near the surface.

Still, predictably, Raphael sat there through dinner at the kitchen table, proudly curling that ridiculously heavy dumbbell, veins outlined under swollen muscles, knuckles tight around the iron, like he was silently telling them: 'I'm fucking fine.'

But, of course, he wasn't fine. And Leo knew it. So Sensei knew it. So Raph wouldn't be going topside until he caved and admitted to being in pain. Which he obviously was. There were dark circles under his eyes. He walked and sat without any of his usual slouch, holding a stiff-backed posture more appropriate to Leonardo.

Donnie shook his head into his own dinner and said nothing. Sometimes, the best way to deal with Raphael was not to hound him about things he already knew to be true. It meant patience. It meant waiting for him to come to you. Besides, if this was all just something like food poisoning, it'd be through his system in just another twenty-four hours or so. The four of them had pretty good immune systems, all things considered.

So they tiptoed around the problem for another day or two, until Master Splinter sent Leo and Michelangelo up topside for reconnaissance.

Raphael asked to go. Raphael was denied. Raphael clamped down on his own anger like a boiler pot ready to explode, a wide and furious grimace turning his mouth low, and he held very still with his head lowered until Sensei left the room. Then he surged to his feet with—well, with what could only possibly be described as a 'roar.' Only far from being some pathetic, nasal, old-man grunt like one might hear from a large tortoise, it nearly knocked the socks off all three of his brothers. It sounded like something that would have done a saltwater crocodile proud! Holy Toledo! It would have done a Tyrannosaurus proud!

Raphael stood there seething for a moment, pupils dilated, hands clenched.

"Bro," Mikey whispered, eyes wide, "is this another of those 'instinctive surges?'"
"Looks like," Donnie marveled, drawing out his omnipresent pad of paper to document the event.

'Natural instincts' were something they all had, although the word 'natural' was something of a stretch. Some of their instincts were mammalian, such as their affection for dairy products, or the fact that they got goosebumps and some of their scales stood up like hairs if they were chilled or frightened. They had a lot of testosterone, too, like most normal boys their age, and sometimes that made them want to beat the snot out of one another with their bare hands, and then collapse in a pile and sleep off the healing process, all slights forgiven.

Other instincts were sort of strange, screwy, quasi-alien, mutagen-enhanced versions of turtle instincts. They weren't like stuff you might read about in a paperback sci-fi novel (as Leo had once feared), or like the 'feral predators' from, say, Disney's *Zootopia,* (as Mikey had once feared), but they did pop up at weird times, such as when the brothers were hopped up on adrenaline, terrified, or exposed to certain algae smells. A surge of instinct would hit them, and suddenly they'd have a desire to do something like hiss, bury something, escape, or, apparently, roar.

They also had a sixth sense for the edibility of sea food. Leo, in particular, could identify a case of food poisoning in fish or shellfish from twenty yards away. He told Donnie it gave him the willies.

Regardless, the point was: Raphael did not attack anyone or turn into a monster. He vocally vented in a way that made sense to him, and Donnie took notes. Raphael stood there for a moment afterwards, breathing heavily, frustrated and angry. Then he stalked off to go sit in his room and, likely, brood.

"Should I talk to him before leaving?" Leo wondered slowly.

Mikey shot him a look like he was wondering if Leo was suddenly stupid.

"Should *Mikey* talk to him?" Leo amended.

Donatello put away his notebook and shook his head. "I think Dad has me scheduled to stay home for a reason. Maybe he thinks Raph's about to crack."

Leo wrinkled his nose. "Good luck with that," he said, as if Donnie were a martyr.
Sensei was meditating in the dojo and Leonardo and Michelangelo had been gone scarcely ten minutes before footsteps shuffled up alongside the lab and paused near the threshold. Donatello had left the door open for a reason, but Raphael clearly intended Donnie hear him coming to begin with.

"Hey, uh," Raphael hung his head in the doorway, shoulders bowed. "Dee? Ya busy?"

"Nooott particularly," Donatello said as he tabbed out of the Wikipedia page he'd been editing and turned around in his carpeted roll-around computer chair. His lab wasn't exactly sparkling chrome and glass the way he wished it was—the way he deep down hoped it would be one day!—but it didn't feel like a sewers anymore either, and he'd started painting the items he made out of garbage to give them a less amalgamated feel when stacked alongside the prettier things they'd salvaged. "What's up?"

"I'm sick," Raphael confessed very simply, like he hadn't been pridefully swallowing back on the words for— how long, exactly?

"When'd it start?"

"Like... Iunno," he shrugged, leaning in the doorway, not making eye contact. "Maybe a little over a week ago?"

Oh dear. Good humor slipped off Donatello's face, replaced by concern. A week was a little long to be experiencing debilitating pain. "Do... you wanna come in?" Donatello invited.

Raphael chewed the inside of his cheek and then nodded to himself, crossing the threshold. "Yeah." He came in and headed straight for the medical cot.

Donnie got up and hurried over to retrieve more than one diagnostic tool. The stethoscope alone would ordinarily be enough to detect basic bowel problems, but maybe Donatello didn't want to rule out anything systemic. Especially when he'd already just overlooked one aspect of the whole matter's severity. Great Kami, what if it was a kidney infection?

"Mikey said it looked like your stomach hurt."

"Yeah," Raphael agreed. "Something like that."

"Have you had any problems urinating?" Donatello asked as he approached his brother

"No," Raphael's head was up, at least, which meant Red had overcome his 'embarrassment at being sick' (or whatever it was) and would supply answers to whatever questions Donnie fixed him with. Good. "Ain't been a funny temperature or color or anythin, either."

Apparently someone had learned from the last ten times he'd ended up in their little sickbay.

"When's the last time you had a bowel movement."


"And?" Donatello prompted.

"Shall I describe it's consistancy to ya like it's a fine desert item?" Raphael growled. "It was normal."
"Hmm." Donatello had long ago outfitted his own stethoscope with more traditional headphone muffs because, of course, he lacked external ears and did not have an open ear canal the way humans did. It was a very valuable tool for their little family, and he took good care of it. Normal doctors could palpate—that meant to 'press on'—a person's abdomen to search for abnormalities or injuries. Donatello and his brothers had a rigid plastron and wide rib bones in the way. Being able to hear through all that keratin and osteoderm plating was vital to a good diagnosis.

Raphael held quite, and breathed when instructed. Perplexed, Donatello realized he could hear normal bowel sounds in all four quadrants. It was as Raphael said: there didn't seem to be anything wrong with his intestines. Donnie lifted a forearm and felt his forehead. Then he fetched a thermometer and presented Raph with it. They waited on a reading.

"That's weird," Donatello said of the absolutely normal temperature report they received. "If it was a physical blockage, you wouldn't be passing waste normally. If it was some kind of inflammation, and it had been going on, you ought to be running a temperature." Unsatisfied with the results of the test, he leaned over and gestured for Raphael to tilt slightly to the side, and then dug his fingers in above the hip joint, leading up under the plastron. This was the closest he could get to feeling normally over the abdominal muscles and traditionally palpable organs. He was trying to feel for any unexplained heat or localized inflammation, but found none.

"That hurts," Raphael said. "O-ow. Yeah. Right there." He took in a deep breath between his teeth. "I guess that means ya wanna-?"

"Breathe out and hold it that way," Donatello agreed, and Raphael muttered a 'fuck,' leaned over more to expose more of the joint, and did exactly as was instructed. The reduction in space taken up by air in the lungs gave just a little more space for Donatello to feel up into the body cavity, palpating for anything wrong. Raphael's ability to bite down on pain did have give a diagnostician certain advantages. Mikey would have been hopeless.

*Could it be a hernia of some kind?* Donatello wondered to himself, before pausing because his fingers had encountered resistance in a little firm wall of tissue.

"That is *not normal*," Donnie realized. "That's an object. I can't tell more, it's too deep. Is it a cyst?"

Raphael coughed a pained laugh, and tilted his head backwards. "Well I ain't Mike, so I ain't tried ta eat anything inedible," he drawled deductively. "And I ain't Fearless, so I ain't shoved anythin' up where it don't belong either-"

"That's disgusting," Donatello reprimanded distractedly, "please do not elaborate upon the standard-form insult of having a 'stick up one's ass' ever again. It was a nodule of something..."

Raphael wheezed and chuckled to himself. He took in a few deep breaths, proving he was controlling very real pain. Then he asked. "So, since we're all mutants... are we gonna all die of tumors or some shit?"

Donatello scowled at him. "Mutagen doesn't-" he began to scold, but then uncertainty hit him in a wave and he folded a palm over his mouth to think. Okay, maybe he was being paranoid. Maybe he was being ridiculous. But this seemed like a fine time to dig out that ultrasound. "I have a machine that might help give us some kind of visual, but I'll have to calibrate it. It's meant to be used on skin and I've yet to test it with our shells. You'll be patient?"

"Yeah," Raphael winced, leaning back on the palms of his hands. "Got all day."

"Okay. Um." Donatello took a detour over to his bottled water—Leo made him always keep some
there so he wouldn't dehydrate himself on coffee—and handed one to Raphael. "Hydrate," he encouraged, partially to keep his brother busy, partially because hydration was always good in the face of illness, and then he went to finish soldering the wires for that ultrasound they'd salvaged the month before.

Meanwhile he prayed to the Kami and to the spirits of Tang Shen and Hamato Yoshi that Raphael did not have a tumor in his abdomen. That was not only completely terrifying, but also in the absolute worst location—shy of the brain itself—for Donatello to be making some of his very first forays into serious surgery. No, no, hopefully it would be some kind of benign cyst, and hopefully it could be fixed with some kind of medication.
"Okay, the ultrasound is picking up something," Donatello realized. "Nifty."

"Ya call that 'something?" Raphael asked, also watching the black and white streaked screen. "It looks like a spider threw up on a broken windshield at night time."

It was proof things were amiss that Raphael was casually referring to spiders without looking nauseous, even despite his acute abdominal pain.

"Can you see that? How it's different?" Donatello pointed to a bundle of gray. "That's the shape. No sharp edges, at least."

"Hnh. Fine. So what is it, genius?"

"Do I look like a trained ultrasound technician?" Donatello quipped back. "Give me time to learn what I don't know. I'm going to print a couple views of it and then try to compare them with literature on the web. It's—what wavelength is this?—it's sort of big."

"How big?"

Donatello shook his head. "Gee, maybe as big around as a grapefruit, and that's just on its smallest dimension. It's oblong."

Raphael hesitated, as if that description did seem to add up to the right sum when compared against all the pain he'd been feeling. "That ain't small...

"No. Don't exercise any more today. If it's, for example, some kind of fluid-filled cyst, I don't, heh, want it breaking before I've verified whether it's harmless."

Raphael nodded quickly, some of the piss and wind knocked out of him now that Dee was confirming something was genuinely wrong. He held still as Donatello took those pics, nervously patient even as Dee recalibrated the instrument and sought out visual of the same area through the back of his shell.

"Hmm. There might be more than one," Donatello said, and Raphael mouthed a cuss.

Alright, well, at least now it all made a little bit more sense where the pain was coming from. At first Raphael had thought something had to be wrong with his plastron, and that maybe the muscle was torn in some place turtle genetics had never originally intended for there to be muscle. Now Donnie was telling him that each time he'd tried to flex his core muscles, there'd been a little pile of hefty bricks in the way.

Inside him. Like, deep inside, up above his guts.

"How ya gonna get rid of them?" Raph finally dared to ask.

"Depends what they are. If they're not filled with toxins, we can lance them open with a needle and let them drain out naturally. Then I'll just have to figure out what allergen or injury caused them."

Raphael accepted that, anchored by a single plan for one outcome because it helped him maintain faith Donatello would figure out what to do, no matter what these unwanted abdominal masonry
items ended up being made of.

"Just so I can rule out any systemic chromosome damage, can you give me another cheek swab?" Donnie requested as he tucked the old machine away and waited for it’s ancient little printer to crunch out the pictures he’d ordered.

"Yeah," Raphael agreed, propping himself up and shuffling over to the cabinets of medical supplies. He found a cleaned-out orange sample bottle, one of the swabs, and then rubbed it firmly against the side of his cheek and deposited it within to seal it.

Don liked studying their genes with whatever tools and chemical tests he could get his hands on. As far as Raphael understood it, it wasn’t just a matter of flicking on a microscope and reading a book down there. Was kinda inexact, like reading a game trail, where every bent leaf and stick counted. Either way, Raphael was accustomed to the peculiarity of being asked for a cheek swab at least once every two to three month.

Truth was, bodies were weird things, when they started failing a person. Was fucking frightening, when an arm couldn’t move or a headache wouldn't stop. And Raph—he trusted Donatello, trusted him to know better, or at least to know the right questions to ask—and so the needles and swabs and tests didn't weird him out the way they probably would have in anybody else's hands. Dee was the only doctor in the world for giant mutant turtles.

"Can I also get you to pee in a cup?" Donnie added on.

Raphael let a stream of air out through his nose. "Yep," he complied, dutifully reaching for another orange bottle.

Flustered by this strange illness, and with Raphael's question about 'tumors' still chasing him around in the back of his mind, Donatello finally abandoned internet research and placed some tracing paper over top of an ultrasound.

Mikey had been the one to introduce him to the technique of sketching out his thoughts. Mikey, despite occasionally coming off as midway between a complete floozy and a shiftless skater bro, was a goldmine of lateral reasoning ideas. A dramatic shift in approach might kick Donatello out of anxiety mode and reactivate the (slightly cocky) sureness he needed to solve problems like these.

Don dragged a red marker around, attempting to delineate the borders of the foreign object and to measure its orientation and relative sizing. The limitations of the fan shaped image produced by the ultrasound got in his way and he went on to guesstimate beyond them. Then he paused and stared down at the grainy, spider-webbed background stratum of the image... instead of the objects themselves.

He looked up at his computer, and then quickly brought up images of different types of ultrasound.

Epiphany hit him like lightning, like a trope, like a Nickelodeon Jimmy Neutron Brain Blast.

Donatello surged out of his chair and scrambled for his cabinets of test strips and chemicals. He rifled through, nervously pushing aside the simple things like blood type tests and cholesterol readings. He found the veterinary supplies they'd looted from the defunct Bird and Reptiles company, and pulled out a booklet of genetic tests for boa constrictors.

Right animal? Nope. Not even close. But Donatello didn't need to do a complete genetic profile of a serpent's ancestry in order to determine its congenital health defects. He tore the test out of its booklet and carried it over to the clinic desk.
He prepped Raphael's DNA sample for use, and dragged the resulting solution over the test strip. Slowly, ink marks bloomed down the test. He skipped them, because most were disordered, meaningless, or blank, skimming down to the bottom of the paper strip, on the bottom line, the line marked Z/W.

A bloom of ink spread across both categories.

Donatello reached out for the swabs and scraped the inside of his own cheek with one. He tore another test from the booklet, prepared and applied the new sample, and waited anxiously, hovering over the soon-to-be-chaotically-pocket-marked test page.

Z.

The ink only spread over the field marked 'Z,' this time, with nothing showing up under the 'W' category. Donatello stared.

Then, shoving these tests out of the way, Donnie scrambled back to his drawer where other ones awaited him.

Did he have anything for mammals?!
"Bro, check it out, we found this totally rockin-!" Mikey tried to say of the new Boombox slung over his shoulder, only to get a Q-tip stuffed in his mouth by a not-to-be slowed Purple brother.

"I need DNA swabs from both of you!" Donatello greeted them in a wild-eyed and frantic squawk.

Leo dutifully complied with his part, and no sooner had he turned over his swab than: Poof! went Donatello, back into his lab. Raphael, who was sitting at the kitchen table, barely even glanced after him, like the whole matter were boring.

"Well that was weird!" Mikey cooed.

"He looked frightened," Leo murmured at the empty air where Donatello had been, but Michelangelo was already skipping over to the kitchen table to say:

"Hey Raphie-boi, we got something to cheer you up with!" Orange set down a heavy plop of five Wendy's takeout bags upon the table. "Dinner eez serrrrrrved!"

Earlier in the day, Michelangelo and Leo had been joking about finding enough good food to appease 'The Foul-Tempered Monster of the Sewers,' but the truth ended up being that Raph looked more bored-out-of-his-mind than angry. He snatched a bag over to peer inside. "Holy shell," Red muttered upon extracting a burger. "Nice."

"Uh huh! We totally even managed to pay for it! Good karma, yo!" He lifted a hand for a hi-three and got one. Raph was in a decent mood.

"Did Donnie check out..." Leo got halfway into asking before remembering Raphael had yet to admit aloud his stomach was hurting. "Er." He covered up his blunder by neatly setting down his duffel bags of salvage.

"Yeah," Raph answered anyway, talking with his mouth full but being a little bit more graceful about it than Michelangelo would have. "It's cancer, we're all doomed."

"I knew it," Mikey hissed with a clenched fist and a fierce stare out at the universe before, apparently, deciding to flip flop to a mutually exclusive but equally ridiculous reaction to the 'news.' "Aw man, really bro? That's rough, how long you got?"

"Long enough ta drag ya inta the coffin with me!" Raphael grinned, making a grab for his younger brother, which Mikey squealed and tried to escape. Raphael snickered and went back to that burger, but when Michelangelo started doing a taunt-laden victory dance, Raphael abandoned the food, surged out of his seat, and gave chase. Michelangelo fled with a shriek.

Leonardo remained where he was standing, waiting for the tumble of turtles to go rolling past him. Then he walked up beside the table, leaned a hand on its edge, and squatted down. He reached around the table leg and plucked up a bottle of Ibuprofen from where Raphael must have cleverly hidden it upon their arrival. Red was still trying to hide his condition. How many pills were left? Four. Raphael had just taken twice the normal dose for someone his size.

Raphael hated pain meds.
What did this mean? Was he scared? Was the illness actually something as serious as a tumor?

Concerned, Leonardo stared at the bottle and re-read the dosing instructions as he rose to his feet. He glanced down the hallway towards Donnie's lab and thought to head that way, but then caught sight of Raphael with Mikey in a headlock. Flaming green eyes stabbed harder than sai blades.

"Back off," Raphael's stare said. "You don't get ta hear shit till I've heard it first."

Leo narrowed eyes at him and raise his chin, wanting to ream him for trying to hide the severity of his condition from them in the first place. *Deep breaths, Leo. Shouting at him for being dishonest isn't going to miraculously fix his health.* Leo reasoned Donatello was on some kind of lead, but needed some more time to prepare his findings anyway. He'd speak to him after reporting in to Sensei.

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Dinner kept Leonardo from checking in with Donatello, if only because their father came to the kitchen praise their good work almost immediately, and there was something of a rule of thumb in their family that hot food really oughtn't go to waste.

Mikey stuck his head in the lab and hollered that dinner was served. Donnie said something like, 'In a minute!' but then didn't actually show up. Ordinarily, Master Splinter would have insisted Donatello set down his work and come to eat with them like a family, especially when his brothers had gone to so much trouble to procure a rare treat for them all. But Sensei remained quiet, and tension crept up under all their shells.

The lab door creaked open right before clean up, and Donatello exited with a cute and slightly guilty expression upon his face. They'd expected him to look frazzled, disoriented, Consumed By A Typhoon of S-S-S-Science!, anxious, flustered, or even downright terrified. Instead, he fixed them all with a meek but admittedly charming smile, and gave a bashful raise of his shoulders. "I missed dinner." He gave an apologetic bob of his head. "I'm sorry."

Apparently his frantic demands for DNA swabs had proven less serious than they'd initially appeared? Perplexed, Leo leaned back in his seat. Mikey laughed and tossed Donatello his bag of fast food, sure this meant there was nothing to worry about. Raph squinted suspiciously.

"You have been engaged in important work," Master Splinter absolved as he slowly rose. "Come, there are plenty of leftovers."

"A-actually I was hoping I could talk to Raphael alone in the Lab for a sec," Donnie requested with another darling smile as he put his bag of food back on the table. "Only Raphael, please?" he shot Michelangelo a swift, stern, 'do not try me, wise-ass' glare, and then quickly turned another completely innocent smile back onto Raphael. Don even stood with his hands sort of behind his back, like he was shy. That was definitely weird.

Raphael blinked, taken aback the same as everyone else by how pleasant Donatello was acting when, a couple hours ago, he'd seemed pretty solidly alarmed. "Okay?" Raphael pushed back his chair, momentarily forgot his core muscles were aching, and stood up with a faltering wince. He paused and took a deep breath as he steadied himself.

Leo tensed. Michelangelo slurped on soda. Sensei didn't say anything. Donatello reached towards his arm, compassionately, but then apparently decided against mothering him. Instead, Dee just beckoned him to hurry up, and Raphael did and gave him an appreciative shoulder-bump. Leonardo caught one last glimpse of Donnie's face, which was suddenly both expressionless and driven; like he was 'in the zone' focusing on some extremely difficult task. The lab door swung quietly shut
behind them.

_Slluuuuuurp._

**BELCH!**

"Yup, he's got cancer," Mikey asserted authoritatively with a pop of his empty drink down on the table.

Master Splinter squinted at him, quietly shook his head, and gave a loud but ultimately harmless swat of his tail across Mikey's shell that nearly put the littlest turtle to leaping clear out of his skin.

Chapter End Notes

Donnie: *Internalized shrieking and flailing arms in terror like a little girl being chased by a chain saw*
Raphael and Donatello listened together at the Lab door for a moment to make sure they had no eavesdroppers. Nadda. That made sense: With Splinter in the kitchen, Michelangelo couldn't goof off and Leo wouldn't refuse nobody a reasonable request. They'd have a few second's peace.

Donatello let out a heavy rush of breath through pursed lips, and tore away from the door as if it burned him; he turned away, paced some distance from the door, and lifted up his arms, elbows out, to cup the back of his head. Raphael turned to warily eyeball him. Something was clearly wrong, but Donatello didn't look scared. He looked hopped up on adrenaline, almost, like he expected a fight.

"So...?" Raphael prompted, not sure what to brace himself for. "S'it serious?"

"Yes and no," their genius muttered in quiet agitation. "It's not anything even remotely approaching the severity of a tumor. But," a breath of laugh, "don't kill me."

Raphael tilted his head and shifted his weight nervously from foot to foot. "What are you trying ta tell me, exactly?" Cause this was mixed signals at it's finest.

"They're..." Donatello took a deep breath, and turned a bit to fix him with a stare out the corner of his eye, so Raph knew he wasn't joking. "They're eggs."

Raphael's nose wrinkled, and his skin pricked uncertainly. "What? How? I don't remember getting stung by any parasitoid wasps or shit in the near past."

Donatello's mouth stretched like he was trying not to bust out laughing under high stress, and that made Raphael angry because Genius's high-energy anxiety was apparently catching. "Wanna run by me what the fuck ya mean? How would eggs get inside me?"

"They're turtle eggs, Raph," Donnie said, mouth wide and twitching in an expression that wasn't really a smile. "The muscles of a womb are visible on the ultrasound. They're yours."

Expression slipped off Raphael's face, and his cheeks fell slack. He stared at Donatello with wide and searching green eyes.

Donatello dropped his arms and drew them in close to his chest, wringing at one thumb and wrist. Gone was the manic not-really-a-smile from his features. He frowned evasively, deeply, like he was scared.

Animation struck like a flash of light: Raphael stomped forward, gestured in the generalized direction of downward, and roared the most substantial and yet concise protest any dude could have possibly constructed in this situation, an argument which did honestly feel like it ought to have been good enough to void everything Donatello had just said:

"I have a dick!"

"I know you do!" Donatello chattered, high-pitched, at the floor, his shoulders raised in a cringe, because he'd once had the misfortune of barging into the bathroom in the wee hours of the morning to a very surprised older brother, and booooyyyyy did Raph have exactly what Raphael claimed to have. "That's clearly the problem, the eggs have no exit corridor!"
"No-!? WHAT!?" Raphael advanced on him, shoulders bowed in aggression. "What the FUCK are you saying-!?

"That you have ovaries!" Donatello raised hands to shield his face, shrinking down as he frantically tried to blurt the truth before he got hit. In his panic, it felt like Accuracy of Description, could somehow re-stabilize the universe for Raphael—like it would have done for Donatello. But they weren't nearly the same person; details were only ever soothing to one of them, and Raphael wasn't going to take this without a fight. "I checked all of our genes! I cross-checked and triple-checked! Those are eggs inside you!"

Raphael's enraged bully boy swagger slowed. The defensive rage faltered, and underneath his face went slack and colorless again. His posture listed to the side, and his words fumbled.

"Our... wh...?"

"Turtle sex is temperature sensitive!" Donatello hyperventilated into his forearms, nearly rocking himself. "Unless they incubate exactly right. Too hot, they're all born normal females; too cold, and they all develop into perfectly normal males. B-but we're different. We're different. We got bombed with mutagen halfway through our fetal development, and everything had a chance to change...!"

Raphael nearly lost his footing. He sank back on his heels, staring.

Donatello willed his own arms down, closing his fists and sucking in a slow, deep breath so that he could be the calm one. He looked hesitantly up at his stunned and expressionless brother, and then back down. "S-so I checked all of our genes, trying to figure out what had happened. At first I thought maybe your turtle genes might have been female and your human genes might have been male, but our human genes are actually extremely fragmented and random. I-i-in fact, I'm the only one of all four of us who tests positive for the masculizing 'Y' chromosome, which might be a false reading of thoroughly scrambled genetic material; either way, obviously that wasn't as important as-"

"You."

Donatello snorted a laugh. "Yeah. I don't exactly feel it, um-

But Raphael had lunged forward again, and loomed over him, teeth bared, voice crackling, buzzing, and growling: "Do I look like a girl ta you?"

Donnie looked up at him with wide eyes. "I never said that," he breathed.

"Yeah ya just fuckin' did!" Raphael roared, aggressing over him, technically shorter but still far stronger and heavier; and, fuck, Donnie just didn't have anything in him rallied to stand his ground against this; he had far, far too much sympathy.

"I s-said you-!" Donatello backed up, raising his hands pleadingly, realizing he'd blathered about the wrong choice of thing during his only chance to calm his brother down. "I-I tried to explain h-how-!"

"How I'm somehow secretly a chick!? That I'm a girl!? Look at me!"

Donatello's brain lunged forward, holding triumphantly aloft—as if in a clenched fist!—the bold idea that maybe this was exactly what Donatello ought to do: He looked from one solid, rounded shoulder to the other. To each bicep. He looked to the thickly chiseled shape of plastron scutes paneled over broad pectoral muscles, marred by thinned streaks near the sternum where carapace growth was still racing to cover the sheer breadth and volume of muscles their owner had demanded of them.
Donnie ducked his head again. "You reek of testosterone," he both agreed and praised, quietly, because it seemed this was the right thing to do, the right thing to draw attention to. *You are acutely anything but girlish.*

Raphael stood there, looming over him, fists shaking, corded muscles taut in what Donnie could see of his forearms.

"I didn't do this to you," Purple turtle begged. "They're eggs. Two eggs. S-so I tried to figure out *why*, s-so I'd know what to..." his voice cracked. "What to tell you..."

Rage billowed around Raphael like a mantle, visible in the wide flare of his nostrils as Donatello listened to him breath in short, hard snorts (like a bull in the arena, and just as trapped). The very air around him felt steamed with sweat and fury. Then Red whirled around and stomped across the lab. He overturned a table and sent notes flying. He pushed over a stack of crates with crashes and clattered. In the space he unnecessarily had just cleared, he started to pace.

Donatello slowly sagged onto his computer desk and tilted his head backwards, breathing deep.

Chapter End Notes

First place Raphael's mind jumped: 'Evil bugs laid eggs in me!?'
Oh no, Raphie, hon, if only it was that simple...
The Raw Materials

About two years ago, Donatello had been up late building a computer.

He'd been on his second cup of coffee (from their first ever coffee maker!), and he'd hit his second wind midway through soldering delicate connections back together on a scratched motherboard. It had been about four in the morning, and he'd been reading a complex description of board components, hadn't been hyper aware of his surroundings, and definitely hadn't expected anyone else to be up.

Donatello had opened the bathroom door without looking, still reading, and then stopped short. Raphael had been leaned back with his shell balanced against the lip of this sink, thighs casually spread and slicked with sweat, being as quiet as awkward teenage experimentation would allow for; tail curled forward, hands hesitantly feeling over different parts, cloacal lips spread, engorged black and violet phallus fully unfurled and easily two feet long with the tip opening into soft, delicate waves around the mound of a proper head.

'That is a turtle penis,' Donnnie's brain had informed Donnie. 'That is almost what red-eared slider penises really do look like.' Human genes looked like they had tightened up the core of it into a slimmer and more structurally sturdy unit, and a distinct cradle of pelvic anchoring muscles hinted at a very different muscular 'sheathe' within the cloaca, but there was a significant span of its upper length that might as well have been a trumpet flower. It... dear Kami above, it was moving, wheezing gently open and closed.

Donatello's must have stood there for sixty seconds straight, gaping between the proud, monstrous sea slug curling out from Raphael's tail, and the wide green eyes and embarrassed expression which accompanied it and confirmed Donatello's encyclopedic knowledge of anatomy had not deceived him.

The two of them well might have continued staring in horrified, terrified, (awe-inspired?) silence, indefinitely, had Raphael not overbalanced, slipped off the sink, landed with a painful-sounding crunch of shell against linoleum flooring, and reached out frantically for the bathroom towels.

"I'm so sorry!" Donnie had shrieked, slamming the door shut, only to bodily guard it against entry when Leo sprang out of his room, katana raised, ready for combat, and very confused.

"HE IS BUSY," Donatello had insisted, valiantly defending that door, until Leo's foggy brain had finally registered that private shenanigans were afoot and that absolutely nobody needed to go in and check if Raphael had just been murdered by evil bathroom cockroaches or anything.

Leo had turned scarlet so dark it had overwhelmed the green, and then he had quickly tiptoed away. Leo had been mortified for days, and he hadn't even seen anything.

And Donnie, who in natural circumstances might have gone another year or so before working up enough libido to go looking for his own genitalia, hadn't even made it forty-eight hours after that traumatizing encounter before pushing crates up against the door of his lab (so as not to get walked in on under any circumstances!) and curling up, timidly, to investigate himself with a flashlight, measuring tape, and mirror.

When he finally worked out how to get it out (feeling like a complete dunce the entire time; of course it didn't need to be pulled out manually, duh, keep up Dee), and got a good gawk in at it, the
only thing he could immediately think of was to thank god it wasn't as comically gigantic relative to body length as with normal turtles. It would have been potentially life threatening (think about the sudden drop in blood pressure!) and far more unnecessarily terrifying than it already was! Human DNA had sanely reigned things in! Gah!

Anyway.

That was how Donnie knew, by volume, that Raphael was roughly twice the size that he was. Clearly, the development of the external male organ had not been stunted by estrogen or any other chemical compound. Structurally, there had been no glaring differences between the two of them; none that were immediately visible.

Knowing that was an unexpected godsend. Donnie didn't have to ask to see anything at this incredibly delicate juncture. He didn't have to ask questions about it. He didn't have to push an already-terrified Raphael into talking about what might be 'wrong' with his genitalia. Donatello already knew no eggs were getting through the pelvic socket; that part didn't evert; it was humanoid and therefore it was solid.

Crash!

Okay, Don needed to do something to get this all back under control. At this rate, Raphael was going to get Master Splinter storming in here to find out what was wrong and whether Donatello needed any help. If that happened, Donatello was going to spill everything, right in front of Raphael, and possibly also in front of Mike and Leo, all way, way, way before Raph even had a chance to get his bearings. The situation would rapidly enter a downward helix.

Donnie opened his eyes and stood up from his desk. "Raph," he called to his violently pacing brother. "Raphael, stop, I don't- I really don't want to talk to Leo right now."

Raphael paused, hands tight upon the fallen table which, by the look of things, he'd intended to pick up and maybe hurl into the far wall.

Donatello centered himself with a deep breath, easing his feet out to shoulder width and forcing his knees to unlock, the way he would for Ninjitsu. "Raph, talk to me." Silence. "I'm... I'm just going to assume right off the bat that they're unfertilized."

Raphael twisted slowly, coiled, to fix him with one flame green eye. "What?" he growled."Who the shell would I-? Did you just suggest-!?"

"We need to get rid of them," Donatello said.

Raphael-The-Angry-Bull responded by quieting down, twitching and sniffing.

"They can't stay where they are." That was something they could both agree on. "Your body doesn't seem to be reabsorbing them, and if they're hard that means they're aging past the point they were supposed to be laid. That's called egg-binding, and it's going to result in life-threatening complications. It's a leading cause of death in pet turtles."


"It's possible there is some kind of aperture, higher up in the cloaca, where the muscular wall might not be completely fused together," Donatello suggested tactfully, but did not suggest anybody help Raph go looking for it.
"Doubt it," Raphael snorted. "I been strainin' on the crapper like I been constipated all week. S'half why havin regular shits' been confusin."

"I see. Okay. Then, I could try surgery," Donatello broached carefully. "I could... try and make an opening, and if they still don't come out, I could try forceps."

Raphael's attention riveted back on him as the implications Donatello's suggestion set in. His lip curled in a sneer, and he said, "You'll go through above the hip." He turned on Donatello, approaching more like a cougar than a bull. "You won't touch mah junk or cloaca or anythin!"

"That's a major surgery, Raphael," Donatello tried to make him see reason. "There's only so much blood we can give you, and if you have anything like an oviduct, it'd be much easier to just try and breach-!

"You're not cuttin' me a CUNT!" roared one brother up to the other.
"I absolutely didn't mean it like-!" Donatello snapped his beak shut, crossed his arms across his chest, and affected to take Raphael's opinion into account while he sorted his thoughts. "Okay, Raph," he started again, calmer, "let's assume for a second we don't run out of blood or anesthesia, and that an operation of this magnitude—which I've never done anything even remotely like before—goes off without a hitch, and you don't die of infection while on the mend." He paused. "There is a chance this is going to happen monthly."

His brother's violent sneer tugged down in disbelief, his respiration rate increased, and his breath came out in growls.

"Like, with a human," Donatello said.

"So pull it all out!" Raphael demanded. "All of it! Get rid of it!"

"The same organs which produce those eggs are likely also responsible for your sex hormones."

"So what!?"

"Well for you that's apparently testosterone. You'll lose your sex drive. Muscle volume. Aggression. I'd be castrating you."

Green eyes widened. Raphael staggered slightly, every breath big and rough and angry and frightened. He broke his stare and looked helplessly around, although whether it was in shock or out of a drive to find something he could break, it wasn't clear.

Donatello actually had no idea what the shell was going on with Raphael's gonads—he'd only just learned that they were ovaries instead of testes!—and couldn't say for certain what hormone they were producing or if the adrenal gland was compensating for everything. The genetic and chemical composition of this whole affair were clearly extremely complex, and it would take some time to work out the details.

None of that mattered. What mattered was Raphael needed to perceive certainty on Donatello's face, and it was absolutely certain that Donatello did not want to perform a hysterectomy on a previously-assumed-to-be-male person, underground in a sewer, under a plastron, through the tiny aperture into the body cavity above the hip joint. He didn't have the right tools. He didn't have the training. He didn't have the experience. Shell, he, he just didn't have enough blood bags. Maybe... maybe later in life.

(Raphael was going to have this hanging over his head his whole life?)

Also absolutely certain: Destroying any hormone-producing organs, regardless of what hormone they were producing, would irreversibly change Raphael in a lasting way that Raphael needed to be aware of. This wouldn't just stop the eggs. There would be side-effects much worse than eggs. There would be permanent changes to mood, metabolism, strength, and stamina. And Raphael was still growing...!

"No," Raphael finally said, just 'no,' (no to what? to castration? to the whole situation?) and then he turned around and started to walk about again, agitated, still very aggressive in stance and aura, but now looking lost, like he was wandering instead of pacing.

Donatello stared after him and faltered forward a step. Raph. He sank back on his heels, looked
around, and gnawed on his lower lip, racking his brain. "I'll..." He needed to read herpetology papers. Were all his database subscriptions up to date? He had maybe two weeks. One week? Shell, that wasn't a lot of time. "M-maybe I can try to whip up an experimental concoction. Something we can inject that will dissolve the egg shells. But-

Raphael looked back to him.

"-but we still don't know what that will do to you, or if you'll be able to pass the slurry out or reabsorb it. A human's uterine lining sheds every month; a reptile's doesn't. If you 'pop' an egg while trying to remove it from an egg-bound snake, the resulting infection is lethal even if the egg's perfectly healthy; reptiles aren't supposed to have calories in their oviducts. It might snowball into something very serious."

"I'm tough," Red asserted, homing in on that as something to maybe cling to, even if everything else was uncertain.

"Yeah," Donatello affirmed on realization. "And... maybe I really do know what to do if things go wrong with it, how to flush your system if you take ill. We might have to get our hands on some specific medical supplies... It's doable."

Raphael shifted in place, looking from him, to the floor, to the overturned table he'd wandered back to. "Why are they even there? I didn't fuck no one or nothing."

"Y-you didn't have to. A turtle can die from egg-binding in complete isolation. In fact, that's usually more dangerous, because she has no social cues to tell her she needs to lay." It's not your fault. You didn't do anything wrong.

"'She,'" Raphael said, voice low, leaning with one hand on that overturned table.

Donatello internally cursed. He'd been clinging to gender-neutral vocab even when describing female reproductive organs in other organisms, and he'd finally screwed that up.

Raph looked away, wincing, grimacing. "Fucking 'she.' That's what I am? That's the story?"

"The story? Of you? Donatello struggled, and then slowly articulated: "I-it d-doesn't have to be."

"The hell d'ya mean it doesn't have to be?" Raphael snarled with a vicious glare back at him and an accusatory finger point. "You're tellin me I've made eggs inside mahself. You're tellin' me it's written in mah genes. That I'm female. That I'm a girl. Is that the truth or not? Huh?"

Donatello raised a shoulder and cocked his head, gesturing, "Well, do you suddenly have an explanation for wild urges to throw on a Sailor Moon outfit and flounce around the Lair?"

Raphael bent that table leg in half with a snap and rounded on him, discarding it to the side. "Are you high?"

Raphael's expression broke, like he was dying inside thinking about how questions like that might become common place. That they were going to refer to him and treat him as something different, now. "I'm not..." he mumbled, pitch rising weakly, world crashing. "No, I'm not a..."

Donatello leaned back, chafing one of his arms. "You-" He shrugged. "No, you're not. You're my brother, Raphael. You've always been my brother. Why would I start calling you anything else,
unless you *told* me to?"
The Balm

Raphael's shoulders fell. Green eyes searched Donatello's face.

"I-I... I didn't call you in here to tell you you're 'a girl,'" Donatello offered with a slow gesture of a hand. "Have you looked in a mirror lately? I'm... less than half as masculine as you. I called you in to tell you we're on a timer to get rid of two eggs, and to try and offer some closure on how they managed to get inside you. You're... you're still my brother. You'll always be my brother. Unless you say different."

Silence.

Movement—

—Raphael grabbed hold of his arm: The touch was sudden, rough, and bruisingly tight, so Donatello nearly reeled back into a Ninjitsu stance and tried to defend himself out of reflex. But then Raphael had grabbed hold of his shell, and bundled him close, and Donatello realized this was actually a hug. Air deflated out of him and he slumped into his older brother's crushing embrace. Raphael shuddered over him, dragging in air through what sounded like the quietest and quakiest of sobs.

Donatello got both arms around his brother's shell and clung tightly back. "It's gonna be okay," he promised, conviction rising in him as he mentally enumerated scientific paper databases and the feasibility of protein solvents. "I'll help you. I'll figure every part of it out."

Raphael rocked some weight into him, using him as a physical support even as he was forcing Donatello into a crouch.

Out of respect for the issue, Donnie tried not to do anything overtly tender, like nuzzling against his cheek or petting his head or shell, even if the instinct to do so—to be nurturing—probably said more about Donatello's femininity than Raphael's. It just wasn't a good time for it. "I'll help you, bro," he repeated. "I'll help you."

"Y-you can't tell the others." Raph's voice was catching and tight from overhead. "You can't fuckin' tell."

"I-I can't lie to them!" Donatello gulped, eyes widening. "I can't lie to Dad, and Dad won't let you lie to them!"

"You don't tell them," Raphael growled, arms tightening. "Do you hear me?"

Donatello thought about that. "How about I just promise to hold Mikey down if it happens that you need to 'explain,'" air quotes were needed over the edge of Raph's shell, "your feelings to him?"

Raphael thought about that. Humor took the edge off, for both of them. A fear of betrayal—of Michelangelo's questions—of Leo's awkwardness—of losing face—faded to bemusement.

We're all still exactly the same. You still fight with Leo, and Mikey still taunts you into wailing on him, and I still fix things. You could have an entire MC Escher paradox under your plastron, and you'd still be Raphael. It doesn't change anything at all. You don't have to let it change anything. You don't have to suffer through having everything about the way we see each other change. You don't have to grit your teeth and endure hearing any word other than 'brother.'

"Dat... does sound like my usual method of discussin delicate subjects," Raphael did have to admit, if
quietly, and Donatello giggled.

And Raph hugged him a little bit longer, like he just needed Donnie there for a sec, close, someplace defensible, someplace supportive.

Leonardo hadn’t left the laboratory door. He’d leaned up against the wall on the opposite side of the hall, one leg kicked up, so that he couldn’t hear anything. He kept his head down and make a concentrated effort not to read into the glimpses of cuss words that snaked out to him. The crashing of crates—the knowledge that Raphael was attacking Donatello’s personal space—had him tensing up angrily. He was almost glad when Michelangelo turned on the television in the other room, and the auditory clutter made him less aware of whatever was happening in that lab.

The lab door cracked open as Raphael slowly shouldered it open, but paused as he realized how close Leo was.

The two of them glared at each other. Leo for how destructive Raphael was acting; Raphael, apparently, just for Leo being concerned.

"What-?" Donatello asked, trying to get Raphael to fully leave the lab. "Oh."

"So?" Leo prompted, standing up from the wall. "What is it?"

"Raphael!" Master Splinter called from the dojo. "My sons! Please come to the dojo."

"Sensei," Raphael grunted. With one last glare at Leo, he jogged to comply.

Leo straightened quickly, reaching out to intercept their genius from following and trying to see if he’d taken any hits amid that temper tantrum. Brawling in the dojo or in an egalitarian manner over juvenile mishaps was one things; venting on Donatello for trying to help him was absolutely unacceptable. Was Donnie alright-?

"I’m fine, Leo," Donnie said, dodging inquiry and pulling away too fast for Leo to be certain whether it was the truth or not. Blue Leader grimaced uncertainly after him, worried, especially because that episode in the lab had sounded distinctly one-sided. Maybe it was Leo's imagination, just because Raph was so much louder. Donnie usually traded back as sharp as he got in verbal arguments, but not exactly on the same volume.

Concerned for two siblings now, instead of just one, Leo went to make sure Mikey had heard their father's call.

Splinter waited until all four of his sons were present, seated before him in seiza posture from oldest to youngest. He looked to each of them in turn, and then lastly back to Raphael, whose head was bowed. "I am to understand there has been something of a health concern with you, my son," he prompted. "Has there been progress made in resolving it?"

Raphael took in a slow breath through his nose. Beside him, Donatello's quick changes in facial expression revealed that he’d not only identified the problem but was anxious to get working on a solution. Still, it seemed there was some deeper layer to all of this, because neither boy immediately answered him. Splinter lifted a paw to his chin and considered this.

Leonardo seemed to be unusually strongly affected by the situation, or perhaps just at odds with his brother, because he looked over at Raphael and said bitterly: "Sensei asked you a question."
Raphael's facial expression tightened at this implicit stab at his filial piety, and he lifted his head slowly to meet Splinter's gaze. His eyes told his father everything: Physical exhaustion, pain, fear, suffering, insecurity, stress, rivalry, vulnerability, anger, and the desire to take out that anger somehow, coupled with a strange, tired, weighted reluctance to actually hit any of his brothers. Raphael—still not a man, still a child—looked up at Splinter like he was world-weary.

Something of great importance had been revealed in that lab.

"Leonardo," Splinter admonished sharply, shocking his eldest son back into form. "Mind your place. Your brother is still collecting his thoughts, and were I ill content to wait on them, I would inform him thus."

Raphael lowered his gaze. Then he turned a little, looking slowly over at where Leo was internally squirming under Splinter's reprimand. Leo, cowed, didn't return the stare. Raphael's gaze flicked up and down his brother. Then he said, very clearly and directly to Leonardo: "It's two eggs."
Oh boy. Donnie held his breath.

Michelangelo wrinkled his nose, leaned over, and raised a brow at Raphael across Donatello. "It's what?" he asked, sure he'd heard incorrectly.

Raphael, who seemed to have found some consolation at the bottom of a barrel of shit in the realization he was going to get to terrify or disgust their eldest brother, had abruptly done an about-face on being embarrassed and was speaking in an utter dead-pan. He never looked away from Leonardo's face. He wanted to see every second of Leo's reaction.

"It's two eggs," Raph repeated. "Turtle - eggs."

By the way Leo was rapidly searching the void in front of him for answers, 'two turtle eggs' did not compute as a valid linguistics pattern.

Donatello looked hesitantly back up to their father, who seemed to be waiting for further elaboration. "I need to get back to my research," he said. "He has no way to lay them, and surgery's too risky, so I need to see if there's a way to get his body to destroy or reabsorb them. E-especially because, we don't know how often this is going to happen in the future."

*Does that explain things?* *Raph has the biological components required to manufacture eggs.* Donatello wondered exactly how much detail he ought to give their father. After all, turtle and mammalian sexual dimorphism tended to be extremely different, to the point where Donatello had hypothesized a female of their little 'species' might not look terribly different from a male. On the other hand, Master Splinter probably didn't need to hear the *exact specifics* of how much of Raphael's reproductive anatomy was or wasn't female. Right? TMI, right?

Well someone wanted to know, and Master Splinter wasn't the only one who understood what Donatello had been saying. Michelangelo twisted towards them in surprise, eyes going wide as he blurted out, "Raphie's a girl!?!"

"Ya call me a girl," Raphael said conversationally to Michelangelo without looking at him, still watching Leo, "ya gonna lose ya teeth."

"B-but-!" Mikey sputtered frantically.

Donatello saved himself the need to acquire a rapid proficiency in dental surgery by reaching up and covering Michelangelo's mouth with a hand. "Raph's our brother, Mikey," Donnie said, shooting him a warning glare. "Seriously. I just said 'his' and 'him' and 'he,' right?"

Mikey, his hyperactive mind already wondering a thousand things and making a million conjectures, searched Donnie and Raphael's faces rapidly as he tried to figure out whether to shove that hand away so he could unleash his questions.

"I see," Master Splinter said, startling all of them but Raphael, who never looked away from his victim. "It is immediately clear why this has been so troubling. Donatello, this research you speak of, you expect it to be difficult?"
"Yes Sensei," Donatello bobbed his head. "It's something of an emergency. Those eggs aren't connected to Raphael, like a mammalian embryo would be. They're not being rejuvenated by any biological process, and are going to rot."

Their father frowned in grave concern at him. "Has this process already begun? This rotting?"

"No. I doubt it. There'd be a fever. I think I still have at least a week." Then Donnie belated recalled Raphael had been in visibly debilitating pain for a week, and this had been insufficiently explained. "Oh! The eggs are 'done.' His-body's just under intense physiological stress trying to get rid of them. He's exhausted and sore." Because he's perpetually in labor, I just realized. But Donatello did not say 'labor' aloud, not with how tightly it'd be connected to the word 'pregnant,' not with Raphael right there, trusting in him to set the example; not with Leo still mute; not with Mikey looking so utterly confused.

Dad's eyes widened appreciatively, though, and Donnie had a funny feeling Dad didn't need the internet to know a thing or two about the matter. He wasn't a young rat. "Then you must be excused. Please begin work immediately."

"Yes, Sensei!" Donnie moved to stand, but then hesitated. What about Raph? Is he okay? Ask, but don't undermine him! Donnie elbowed his brother. "Yo, hey, do you need me for anything else?"

"Don't think so," Raphael said.

You have to accept that, Donnie. Coddling him isn't going to help a thing. "Alright." Donatello got up, bowed to Master Splinter, shared pleading eye contact with his father for a moment, and then hurried out. He leaned against the other side of the door for a moment. Dad. You understand, right? You'll protect him? Pleased understand. He's exactly the same. He hasn't changed.

Donatello couldn't worry about that. He had to offload everything from his brain to make room for scientific papers.

If Dad tried to give Raphael a feminine name, no big, the world would only crumble around them. Maybe they'd be saved from catastrophe by the random fact that angel names were technically androgynous.

Two Eggs. Turtle Eggs.

Leo was extremely conscious of being stared at, but he had absolutely no idea how to respond. He didn't dare make eye contact. He was pretty sure he didn't want to share whatever patchwork emotions Raphael would see in his face, and the last thing anyone had said to him—unless one counted Raphael's exposition—was father telling him to mind his place.

Meditate. Find your center. Breathe.

... F-find-

There was no - possible - way that was going to happen.

Leashed to some controlling force that wasn't his own, Leo jerkily looked towards Raphael, sort of, more towards his knees, and then—like tearing off a bandage—up to his almost tired expression.

Leo stared, unable to lift his head, exposed, flayed open, emotions on his sleeves; he stared, and understood nothing about what he was seeing, and gave away everything about himself—The exact and polar opposite of everything father had ever trained him to do.
Raphael's mouth twitched, tired expression morphing into something almost satisfied, not as if he liked anything he saw inside Leonardo, but rather as if he was just incredibly, deeply, content at having left him so helpless. Raph offered no condemnation, no coarse remark, nothing to take the high-road against. He just sat further back on his heels, almost happy, and then finally looked away to speak with their father.

*You're female? You can't be. We're not that different. We're not irreconcilable. We're brothers. Right?*

Leonardo stared at his brother's sister's face, lost, deaf.

When Father reached out to touch Leo, and his paw settled upon three-fingered hands, Leo nearly jumped out of his skin and looked up in terror. Vaguely, he registered that some time must have passed and that words had been spoken which he'd not heard, because Michelangelo and even Raphael had already been dismissed, and the latter was standing to leave.

"You are shaking," Father said to him, face drawn in concern. "Leonardo, my Leonardo, are you alright?"

Nope. 'My Leonardo?' Not 'my son'?

What were they going to call Raphael?

"I-I'm fine Sensei," he whispered, and ducked his head respectfully. "I just need to take some time to center myself."

**Chapter End Notes**

Gonna mention that Leo's panic/shock is a normal, valid emotional response to having your understanding of a person you love turned upside down. It's very common in kids, who then get very emotional and then need a parent or other older adult to comfort them and give some TLC and explain nothing bad has happened, and maybe even to help them through the first few steps of not 'withdrawing from' the person.
"I desire some time to meditate upon this unexpected revelation," Splinter had explained. "I must ask for the three of you to sequester yourselves until morning, and to spend time in reflection, after which we will take our tea together."

Michelangelo whined in pain, because this sounded as if it was specifically intended to keep him from asking questions of Raphael until Master Splinter had worked out his own stance. But then Orange surprised them all by bobbing himself, saying, "Yes Sensei!" and fleeing the room as soon as he was dismissed, probably just as quick and uncomfortable-looking as if he'd been holding his bladder.

Little brother slammed his door loudly shut behind him, and rushed across his room to grab up stuffed animals and bury himself in them.

Then it occurred to him he had no idea if the pink teddy bear was a chick or not, or if the blue shark was a dude.

The realization floored him.

Raphael figured maybe he'd be happier if he just imagined Mikey was running off to double and triple check under his tail to be sure he wasn't a girl.

Raphael went back to his room, but didn't enter, eyeing his hammock and some of his dumbbells. Pain was creeping back up on him. After a bit, he went to the kitchen, and broke open their reserve bottle of ibuprofen. There was a voice in the back of his head that accused 'wuss,' and there was another voice that said 'shove it, I'm carrying around rocks, and I need to not murder Don.'

Not the least of which was because Mike would engrave 'Raph was PMSing' on the tombstone.

Fuck. Fuck. No. Raphael clutched the bottle of pills tightly, bowing his head, leaning into the counter tops. He needed to actually try and meditate, like the master had instructed.

He shook out pills, counting them one by one to make sure he wasn't adding 'renal failure' to his list of problems, with two baseballs worth of potentially toxic egg yolks already on the horizon. Then he shuffled back into his room, and shoved the door shut with his shell. He leaned back into the wood and tilted his head back till it hit the surface. A shudder worked through him, from his sternum down into his belly. His breath came rough and fast.


Raphael grimaced. Heat beaded in moisture, and slipped down cheeks to the line of his mouth and dripped. He breathed in snuffles and snorts. He smeared a hand over his face, and smothered tears. His legs would have given out and let him sink to the ground there if he hadn't known, without a doubt, that the pain in his abdominal wall halfway down would be excruciating.

I'm not a girl. I'm not. I'm not a girl.
There was no one to beg; he was alone, and this wasn't a dream he was going to wake up from.

No one bothered Donatello, even just to check in on him. No one dared, even though their heads were all swimming. They'd all heard the word 'emergency,' and the idea that them bothering Donnie could mean Raphie died of being female must have ended up etched somewhere on their thoughts.

Leonardo lay awake on his bed in the early morning hours, rolling uncomfortably with sparks of adrenaline and anxiety trickling along his nerves. His stomach was coiled in a knot, and kept wiggling like butterflies were in it. No words swam around in the inside of his brain, nothing to fixate on, just this sense of dread and disorientation beating like a slow pulse, pumping wordless, unverbalized terror that the entire world had just been invalidated, and that some part, some part which shouldn't have been questioned, had just been proven fake.

He didn't feel like himself. Gone was his cool head. Gone was his keen eye for situational details, and his ability to weave them into a personal debriefing or plan. He felt like a child. He hadn't even been able to focus on his own father when Sensei had been speaking to him.

Cringing up in a ball, Leonardo covered his head with his hands. Every muscle was taut; he couldn't relax. He felt moisture drip onto his wrists, and he started to tremble and shake. Tight, full-body sobs shuddered out like coughs. Feeble little sniffles felt like some illicit little haven, something he wasn't supposed to have but somehow needed.

He rolled up further on himself, and rocked, and softly cried.

All four children had dark circles under their eyes as Splinter surveyed them the next morning. He quietly poured tea—black tea, it looked like they needed it—into each of their cups.

"My children," he began.

Donatello's gaze flicked up. "Sons," he said, quickly, before addressing his tea.

Raphael paused mid-sip, waiting.

"My sons," Splinter amended, "who are also therefore my children. I can see very few hours of sleep transpired last night. Donatello's excuse for this, I already understand."

"Is Raphael really a girl?" Michelangelo asked.

"Shut up Mike," Raphael growled, and drank his tea.

"Well are you!?" Mikey demanded.

"My sons," Splinter interrupted.

"I just want to know the real answer!" Michelangelo pleaded up to Splinter, brow furrowed in concern and confusion. "Why is everyone acting like I can't ask questions? It's a yes or no answer, right?"

Splinter cradled his face in a paw, sighing.

"Donnie," Leo said, tea eschewed, "How long have you known?"
This was going to take some work, if even dear Leonardo was presently speaking out of turn.

"What?" Donatello asked. "Known what?"

"That Raphael was different."

The child in question clenched his fists. His posture slouched with rebellious frustration, and his tail slapped angrily against the ground behind him.

"Since yesterday!" Donatello blurted in confusion. "Why would I-?! Oh." His eyes widened as some incident or another likely reoccurred to him. "Uh, Leo? It's not like that. Raphael still has-"

Whereupon Raphael flicked his tail up between his legs, and, for reasons and by methods that were clearly known only to Raphael, successfully pushed out several inches of masculinity to put it on display for his siblings.

"Raphael!" Splinter was startled out of his facepalm by shock one of his sons would be so brazenly shameless.

Donatello slapped a hand over his eyes. ":-a penis."

Leonardo recoiled in horror.

Michelangelo leaned over Donnie to get a better look.

So Donnie slapped a hand over Mikey's eyes, too, bless him.

Chapter End Notes

Raphael, you are from Manhattan. You can't just whip out to solve social problems with literal pecker waving contests like drunk 'Merican Southerners on the Fourth of July! Gosh! Were you raised in a gutter!?

... 

Nevermind, don't answer that, you get one or two free passes, Aye-aye-aye...
The Cockfight

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Raphael sat there, hands on his hips, delicates still unashamedly exposed. "S'that clarify some things for ya, Fearless?" he asked, before the effort of maintaining the immodest demonstration apparently became too difficult and it retracted.

"That's an instinctive behavior," Donatello broadcast in monotone as Mikey wrestled against him to free his vision. "It's called 'fanning' and it's a type of virility display. Yay, we all learned something new today. Now block it from your memories and don't ever do it again."

"Raphael," Splinter snapped fingers to interrupt one brother's predatory attention on the other. "Are you aware of yourself?"

Green eyes widened slowly. Raphael shrank slightly.

"There. I should not have to explain to you why that was inappropriate behavior. Just because things about the world are not as simple as they once seemed, my son, that does not fundamentally alter the basic virtue of privacy. Leonardo is still your leader in combat. This is still your family whom you are seated before. And you are no less kin to your brothers than you have ever been."

"I-I-" Raphael swiftly bowed his head, leaning over to place his hands on the ground and make ardent his submission. "Master." A blush evidenced a level of shame appropriate to the mistake. Thank goodness. The last thing Splinter needed was a bunch of teenage boys 'fanning' at one another in otherwise polite disputes. What would the ancestors say? No, no, no; some order and civility needed to be maintained. There were rules.

Splinter let Raphael absorb that lesson for a moment, but once he sensed his already understandably insecure son was growing frightened, he reached out and laid a paw upon his head and absolved him. "When you are well," Splinter said, "you will compensate for this oversight with some small punishment. That is fair?"

"Yes master," Raphael groveled. "I-I'm sorry. Real sorry."

Splinter raised his chin, and coaxed him back into a seated posture. "It is already forgiven." He gently cupped the side of the boy's head, but then leaned back on his heels to survey his four children. "Nevertheless, I sense other troubles amiss between you, my sons.

"Between you, Raphael, and you, Leonardo, in particular. I speak not of any new development, but rather of the prolonged strain which has been afflicting your relationship for quite some time. Ordinarily I would stand back, that you might resolve these disputes naturally, and with time, as young men must learn to do."

Both boys grew tense. Raphael's poise from the day before was gone, and Leonardo still seemed skittish and unsure of his footing. This would not do. They simply needed to resolve their differences—and this new difficult topic—before the situation between them worsened.

"Looking at you now, in light of the complex information we have recently received, I believe I must force you to an early resolution. Leonardo. Raphael. The two of you shall speak to one another, alone, as brothers and as members of the same fighting team. It is my hope that an honest conversation shall help bring greater clarity and stability to you both at this time, and bring closure on
the subject of your disagreements. Donatello, you are dismissed to continue your research. Michelangelo, you and I shall make breakfast, and I will speak with you about your innocent questions."

All four children looked up at him with a measure of trepidation. This confirmed, if nothing else, that the disharmony between the eldest sons was perceived by and affecting both younger brothers.

"Come, Michelangelo," Splinter said, standing.

"Yes Dad," his youngest mumbled, scrambling to follow. Donatello took a moment to decide if he ought to bolster or encourage one of his brothers. Then, with a soft,

"Good luck," to both older siblings, Donatello did get up and headed out as he'd been instructed.

'My son.' He'd said it directly to Raphael, not even just to all of them as a group. 'Son.' 'Young man.' 'Brothers.'

...

So. Uh.

What exactly was there to talk about? That stick up Leo's ass? Yeah, that'd just probably keep him from actually being able to talk about jack shit. The asshole looked fucking nauseous just being alone in the same room with him. Wouldn't even make eye-contact, just skirted over alongside the edge of the dojo like he wanted to phase through the walls, melt into the architecture, vanish.

The silence stretched. Raphael paced about and kicked the corner of a dojo rug to get it to lay flat. "So?" Red finally growled, getting angry he wasn't being grilled with questions. Leo always pried. Prying would have been normal. Reaming him for mistakes would have been normal. Anything but looking like a frightened deer would have been fucking normal, and the lack of 'normal' was edging under Raph's shell something foul.

"I..." Leo fumbled. "I don't know what I am supposed to say or ask."

"Yeah? Huh. That's fuckin new." Raph sniffed. "Leave ya Annoying Leader Handbook behind with Sun Tzu's Art of War under ya bed or somethin? Why don't you start with whatever goddamn entitled rant ya had prepared when I was walkin' out of the lab yesterday."

Leo blinked and lifted his head a little, like that was a lantern in fog, calling him back to his senses. "You were trashing the lab," he said. "Yelling at Donatello like he wasn't just trying to help you."

"Yeah I was havin a bit of a crisis at da time," Raphael remarked.

Leo swung towards him, still not yet looking directly at him, but it was an improvement. His change in focus, the attention, the simmer of anger in his voice—they felt better than revulsion. Or avoidance, or whatever.

"Just because you are angry about something," Leo intoned, lecture voice waxing on, "does not give you the right to attack people or their things."

"Uh-huh. Stuff it, Fearlesss, Ah've punched ya for makin' me angry all our lives."

"That's kinda the point, Raph. It's immature. It's not cute anymore."

"Cute?" Raphael cracked his knuckles, one at a time. "Pick ya next words carefully or we'll be
discussin' da matter ironically, with violence."

"That's exactly what I'm talking about," Leo met his stare. "That. You want to get away with never talking to anyone, ever, with solving every problem by hitting something. You don't listen, you don't explain yourself, you don't even admit when you are inj-"

"Ya ain't exactly entitled ta any a that! I ain't gotta explain mahself ta you!" Raphael laughed; the two of them nearly circling one another now, orbiting each other. "Ya think you're the sensei or somethin? Ya want a conversation, peg Mikey; I don't owe you shit."

"You think so?" Leo scoffed haughtily, eyes steel, elitism reengaged. "Fine. But a team is only as strong as it's weakest member, and you know what? For awhile now, that's been you Raphael."

Red paused, lip curling incredulously, eyes narrowing. Oh? Okay then. He tilted his head to either side, cracking his neck. Right. So.

Raphael was gonna kill this imperious fucker.

Chapter End Notes

Who has taught this child to swear like a sailor!? Does he go sneak up next to gutters beside construction crew members during their lunch break and just soak in the vernacular?!
Raphael's only question left was what exactly had put those fekkin words in Leo's mouth. Enraged, heating up like a forge for metalworking, Raphael wanted to know exactly what to kill him for.

"I see," Red baited sweetly; visibly boiling; arm and leg muscles flexing in preparation for a fight. "How'd ya figuah?"

Leo'd written a whole fuckin essay, and now that he weren't busy mistaking himself for a gazelle, it came out in all its patronizing splendor: "You are the one everyone else has to dedicate all this extra stress and effort to, Raph. Because we have to figure out when you're lying to us, when you're hiding things, when you can't actually handle catching a falling steel girder because you are ill. We have to sneak and tiptoe around you, sharing intel between ourselves about you, because apparently you can't handle the burdens of communication without throwing some childish temper tantrum."

Quaking, Raphael was quaking, gaze locked in his brother as they circled each other, sucking in this poison, feeding on it, facial expression locked in smiling hatred. "Says the turtle," he rumbled encouraging, "who can't handle not being 'in the know,' who can't handle not controlin every damn thing around him. Who can't handle a piece of goddamn lint out of place in the whole lair without getting his tail in a knot!"

"You can't even handle listening to words," Leo retorted at a scoff, raising his chin. "You can't critiques, can't handle advice. You can't handle anything, because everything is an insult, everything is an 'attack;' like you're some emotionally delicate diva we all just duck our heads and pander to."

Raphael twitched, sneering smile plastered over his face, unable to talk, eating every word.

"You think you're the strongest of us? The anchor point of our team, carrying every fight all on your own?" Leonardo challenged. "When Donatello's babying you, afraid to leave you alone because he knows what we all know, which is that you can't talk, can't control yourself; that you're at the mercy of your emotions. You think that makes you some 'badass motherfucker' people are scared to mess with? It makes you a snowflake with mood swings!"

Raphael broke circle and charged at him, and Leo—oh—Leo didn't even try to dodge out of the way, and that told Raphael the truth about everything. It told him how much Leo was fucked up right now, how much of his attitude, his beliefs, his ideas were just hoity toity self-delusion, how his fabled 'self control' was non-existent, just sneering down his nose at everyone else.

Cause if Leo had half an ounce of sense left in his head, he'd lead Raphael around like a bull, like normal, dragging everything out to try and embarrass him to prove a point. Leo was quick on his feet and acted like that somehow meant he was smarter, or better, or more skillful, when the reality was it was all just muscles and timing of one kind or another. Reality was: Leo couldn't take him unarmed in a hand-to-hand fight, not even close, and had to run, and he'd gotten good at running.

Not today. The two of them crashed into a tumble of grabs, twists, counters, elbows, knees. It devolved into an outright grapple, with Raphael in control. There wasn't a turtle in the family who could beat Raphael wrestling. Not a chance. Mikey alone could stand his ground just from having a shit ton of practice, but Mikey was an entire weight class below him and would eventually fold or resort to tricks to escape.
Leo kneed him.

Full-force and right in the plastron. Right where it shouldn't have done shit except busted Leo's knee, because Raphael was an armor-plated turtle with layers of bone, keratin, and alien optimizations between the contact and anything even remotely vulnerable. So when it knocked all the wind out of Raphael, blinded him with stars, deafened his ears, and sent him crumpling back in some frantic, desperate, instinctive effort to get pressure off all the suddenly crushing pain, his brain took awhile to catch up to what the fuck had just happened.

Leo held on as Raphael reeled, using his illicitly gained advantage to clamber on top of him. Raphael shoved at him, but arms were fucking useless without abdominal muscles. Leo stuffed both Raphael's hands into the carpet over his head, pinning him. Raphael could have, maybe, gotten his legs up to kick the bastard away from him. Maybe, if he'd been able to curl at all. As it was, he barely got his knees raised and crippling cramps rippled up and down his body, taut and shaking.

Had Leo aimed for the eggs? Ho, Raphael wanted to applaud. Fearless was not the family master of cheap shots. Fearless was the 'noble one,' 'honorable,' the golden boy. A tiny voice deep inside was so smug, so goddamn satisfied with this proof of hypocrisy, this evidence that Leo was plastic and just as dirty as any of them.

The rest of Raphael's head was preoccupied by excruciating agony that screamed at him to lay flat on his shell and stop moving.

"No one knows you're ill, Raphael!" Leo spat with a wild and out of control venom Raph hadn't ever fucking heard, like Leo's brain was on a trip someplace, a place less than pretty. "No one knows you need help, no one knows you can't get up, no one knows you can't protect your own fucking armor plating, no one knows you're down for the count, or that they need to get to you before you are killed!"

Muscles responded, bulging with force. Raphael grit his jaws. Pain screamed through him, but he could handle it, he'd handled worse. He tried to lift one knee, tried, tried to get it on the edge of Leo's shell to shove him. Nothing. He-he couldn't. The strength wasn't there, like the nerves to the muscles had just been severed. His leg did not respond, and he could not get Leo off of him.

No. No! Muscles slackened. Sh-shit! Shit. Shit...!

"I'm supposed to lead you!" Leo was shouting, screaming. "I'm supposed to be the one who knows what every part of my team is capable of! Whether we need to compensate for injuries! I'm the one who needs to always get you home alive!"

Chapter End Notes

AND I LOVE YOU! *Bawls with too much fraternal emotion, overwhelmed, needs nap*
Raphael's gaze rolled, roving the ceiling visible between his elbows, with his hands still pinned over his head.

*It's your job ta keep me alive? Huh. Doin' a bang up job. Wow. Was that to prove your point? That I'm compromised and 'didn't tell you?' I can't breathe. Holy fuck. God.*

"I'm responsible for you, and all you do is resent me for it!" Leo was venting something deep, shaking as he did so. "Don't you understand!? I'm supposed to take care of you! All of you!"

"I..."

"You won't even talk to me about normal everyday things anymore! Like television, or practice, or anything! Why do you hate me so much!? What did I do!? How do I undo it to get my brother back-!?"

Leo strangled off, biting down on the last syllable like he was scared he'd misspoken the word 'brother.'

Vigor flushed back into Raphael's veins, drowning pain as he lifted his head and glared flame through his brother. If Leo could hit below the belt, then turnabout was fair play.

Raphael stamped a foot into the ground to shove up a hip, and he slapped his tail against his brother's groin and shell. It startled a terrified jump from Leo that overbalanced him. He didn't fall clear off, but Raphael managed to free up his hands from that pin, tear them back down to himself, and get his forearms protectively over his belly.

*God. Okay.* Raph knew he had it in him to roll Leo off, but suddenly he wasn't sure it was worth it. He let his head fall back against the rug, closed his eyes and sucked air in hard between clenched teeth.

A silence passed but for the rushing of his pulse in his ears and the manic rate of Leo's breath.

"R-Raphael...?" Blue mumbled, voice raw. He propped himself up with hands and knees on either side of his shell, moving slow. "Raph?"

"Ya make a compelling point," Raphael complemented tightly. "Ya should consider communicating by violence more often. Got natural talent, good debate form."

"Are you-? Kami. Raph, did I hurt you?"

"Lil bit," Raphael agreed, trying to decide *what* exactly was causing all this pain. Weren't reptile eggs supposed to be leathery and kinda soft? No brittle edges or anything? They were pretty deep inside him, too, probably too deep for that knee to have done shit.

"I-I-" Fearless sounded like... like he was shaking apart, like shattered glass, like parts of him were in shards all over the place and he had no idea how to get any of them back. He tried to get up.

Raphael grabbed hold of his arms.
"I'll get Donnie," Leo protested. "Let me go-!"

"You think *I* nevah talk?" Raphael wheezed. "When you just wanna pull away, run away, and go hide in the back of ya head, pretending ya don't *feel* anything anymore, and we're all beneath ya fer feelin?"

"Raphael, please, that's not what-! Let me get-!" Pupils were wide, and too much white was visible round the iris.

"It's a cramped muscle," Raphael grit out through pain, because he was now pretty sure: overworked muscles, stressed out, *locked*. That was the only thing Raphael knew of which could just *steal* his strength from him like that. Only instead of just one pinched tendon or nerve, it was a sheet of them. "Who knows da most about those, 'side from Dad? Eh?"

"Then I'll get Master Splinter!" Leo begged him.

Annoyed and in pain, Raphael closed his eyes and dropped his head back down. He didn't let go of Leo's forearms, holding on with white-knuckles and every ounce of abdominal strength he didn't actually have.

Leonardo pulled feebly at his hold for a few seconds longer. He stopped. He hovered there, nervously. The sound of breath drifted as his attention moved side to side. When he tried to get up this time, Raphael let go of a forearm and grasped a shoulder instead, and Leo didn't leave and dabbed slowly along the scutes of Raphael's plastron with his fingers. He picked a spot, pushed the heel of his palm into the carapace, placed his other hand over top of it, and levered his weight slowly onto it.

Raphael breathed deep in and out. The heel of the palm moved slowly, pushing buried muscles around in a careful circle. Raphael dug his fingers into shoulder scales. Then, with one sharp shove from Leo, and one last pulsation of pain, everything eased up, triggering a domino effect of relaxing protein up and down his back and front. Raphael slumped.

"Raph?" Fingers felt along the grooves of his carapace, looking for his pulse, looking for tension, pressing gently against other scutes to test them. "Was that it?"

"Yeah," Raphael huffed, unable to articulate the sheer level of relief. "Yeah, that did it." He opened an eye. "Ya a fuckin' hypocrite by the way."

Leo was quiet a moment. "I shouldn't have made such an ignoble strike."

Raphael rolled his hands out in an exhausted shrug. "Maybe I deserved it. Wasn't what I meant, though."

A rapid headshake in the negative. "You didn't say anything deserving this."

"Sure I did. Just not today. Seems like you been bottling dat shit."

"I'm not supposed to display emotions. It is a weakness, as a ninja and as a leader to be prey to subjective emotions."

"Yeah well what about ta ya family? I'm ya brother, Leo." Raphael lifted his head again to look at his 'leader.' "You think you got what it takes ta figure out the entire universe alone? Or ya only need Master Splinter ta tell ya everythin about everythin? Ain't how it works. Like you just said: We're in this together, for life."
"My brother," Leo repeated, doubtfully.

Raphael grimaced. "Yeah."

"You are pregnant," Leo reminded him with a wince.

Pregnant! "With duds," Raphael established firmly, alarmed. "And so what? You think that changes shit?" He bared his teeth. "Ya find straddling me hot, then?"

Leo looked right at him, eyes widening. He shook his head, mute and almost paralyzed.

"Yeah, well me neither. Ya start gettin' awkward around me, gonna make it a little fuckin' hard for ya ta toss me on mah ass in the future." Raphael propped himself up on his elbows, as best as he could, to glare genuine threats up into his brother's soul. "I ain't gettin any weaker. I ain't gettin gentler. I'm only gettin stronger, and bigger, and meaner. And if you start treatin' me differently, s'gonna put ya off ya game, and I'm gonna crack ya shell open on the dojo floor one day and steal that title of 'leader' right out from under ya. Ya read me?"

Leo's face hardened. Matured. He was quiet for a moment, and then he nodded.

Raphael snorted, but then Leo leaned forward on his hands, and Raphael ducked his head, and they pressed their foreheads together in silence.

Brothers.

Brothers.

Chapter End Notes

When you don't actually resolve anything, but it technically doesn't matter, because some problems just require regular relationship maintenance instead of 'solutions.'
"Good. Glad we had this talk," Raphael said, and then knocked Leo's hands out from under him, grabbed his jaw with a hook, and shoved his face into the floor hard enough to hear the satisfying squish of cartilage against bone.

Leo propped himself back up, looping his leg off Raphael to sit beside him and rubbing his forearm across his bloody snout. He glanced at his hand. "I deserved that."

"Yeah, ya sure fuckin' did." Raphael pushed himself gingerly up, trying to do most of the work with his hands and arms instead of his trunk. He didn't want to talk about the goddamn eggs, or the stupid science of what might have happened if Leo'd had popped one. Hell, guilt would probably just make Fearless even more anal retentive.

"Are they okay?"

"Fuck, they ain't alive," Raphael snapped. "And if Don goes in after em with forceps, I'm boiling them and eating them."

Leo's jaw dropped, and he slowly tilted his head to the side as if he was wondering where Raphael's brain had gone off to.

Raphael sniffed at him. "What?" he asked, before it sank in that this had made about as much sense as the—what had Donnie called it?—uh, well, the pecker waving he'd somehow gotten away with earlier in the day. He wrinkled his nose. "They're, uh, they're in there pretty deep. We can watch ta see if I have a fever in an hour or whatever."

"I think some cultures might actually do that," Leo murmured, staring vacantly through walls. "Eat turtle eggs."

"Yeah, let's change the topic, that was my bad."

"Right." Leo snapped back to reality, turned about, and got under Raphael's shoulder to boost him up.

Raphael took the help, leaning on his bro's shell for support. His legs felt just a bit rubbery for a sec, but things normalized quickly enough and no new pain started up. "Thanks," he admitted with an awkward clear of his throat. "Uh. Bout what ya said... Earlier."

Awkward silence. Maybe neither of them wanted to exactly talk about what Leo had been shouting at him in the heat of the moment.

"Could... I... maybe hang out with you today?" Blue asked him nervously.

"Ya wanna babysit me?" Raphael muttered warily, not sure exactly where they stood.

"Well." Leo dabbed blood from his snout. "I.... could... try to avoid making concerned commentary on the severity of 'your condition,' while I hand you weights, food, and remote controls as some kind of penance." Pause. "S-so you aren't bored and angry."

"Hmm." Raphael smirked a little. Maybe he was just too tired, or maybe the fight had taken a kind of load off both of them, because he didn't feel half so ready to murder someone. He eased his weight back onto his brother's shell. "Fine," he yawned, "be my crutch. Gonna enjoy every lazy-ass minute
Leo snickered a little. "Careful I don't drop your fat ass in a fit of rebellion," he suggested.

"Ooh, look who's bringin' out da cuss words today," Raphael drawled, and then laughed when Leo reddened up a bit.

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No sooner had the two of them reached the kitchen than Michelangelo bolted across the room to intercept them. He moved so fast he somehow caught their father by surprise, and Splinter could be observed to jump slightly as he registered his youngest child wasn't at his elbow.

"-dad said I could ask any questions you were willing to answer, so hey, did you guys fight, you normally fight for longer than that, why do you look so happy, why are you hugging, it was a fight, wasn't it, oh my god was it not a fight, did you guys do something else, is that why you're smiling, what aren't you telling me, is that where the eggs came from, are you doing the kissy stuff, is that the secret behind why no one will let me ask questions, is Raphie really a girl now, what are we going to call him, you didn't pick a new name for him without me did you, is he going to need to make a nest, wait I'm supposed to call him a her now right, is it going to need straw like a birds nest or sand like a sea turtle's nest, do we have to feather the nest, and-"

Dad's loud background facepalm 'smack!' went unnoticed, because both Leonardo and Raphael were staring holes through Michelangelo. Michelangelo was still rapid-firing questions. Raphael twitched forward.

Leo quickly held out a hand and said, very courteously, "No no," to him. "Let me get this one for you. My treat."

Mikey blinked, cutting off mid-syllable and looking between both of them.

Raphael raised a brow and then gave a gentlemanly 'after you' partially flourished wave and bow, which was admittedly somewhat hampered by how his body did not presently want to be bowing or bending at the waist at all.

Leo rocketed from zero to sixty so fast Mike didn't even know what the heck hit him, but their littlest brother's reflexes were so well-honed from a life of escaping pranked siblings and/or otherwise avoiding being picked on that he managed to spin his shell out of the way of the wall and shake Leo loose to make for a hairsbreadth head start on bolting to the living room. Leo followed hot on his heels, murder intended.

"Make sure ya bring back the tattered remains of his carcass!" Raphael shouted encouragingly between both upraised hands, because Leo being the one after Mikey instead of the one defending the little runt was a rare change. "Ta 'feather mah nest' with! He's gonna make an excellent latrine when I'm done with 'im!"

"I didddin't dooo anyyytthinnngg!" Michelangelo wailed as a lightning-fast elite ninja chased him flip for flip, dodge for dodge around the house. "Daaaaad!"

Dad was too busy sighing heavily and shaking his head, asked himself where he'd gone wrong in Japanese.
Michelangelo stared. Mournfully. Like he was trying to develop telepathic powers to find a loophole through their gag order.

He stared over the kitchen table. He stared in the hall. He stared in the dojo.

He stared through breakfast, and he stared through lunch, and he was already staring when Raphael sat down for dinner. He stared from the time they woke up the next morning, through the whole center of the day, and all the way until they were gathering for dinner again.

Every single time Raph lifted his head, or asked someone to pass the algae, or picked up a pitcher to fill a cup, those huge blue eyes were fixed on him him like puppy dog eyes, 'xcept the only thing going on behind them were a thousand different ways of asking the same damn thing which Raphael had already told him to shut up about, because Fuck No.

The first day it sorta amused him because Mikey had just been stomped flat by Leo, but by evening the unrelenting attention was weirding him out. And by dinner time on the second day, Raphael might as well have had a chisel going 'tap tap tap' at his carapace all the goddamn afternoon. He was jumpy, he was tense, he wanted to throw something and obviously that was not going to help matters. He looked up from a plate of Tyson chicken they'd managed to loot twenty bags of a few months ago. Bam. Mikey staring. Never stopping. Not like a puppy, just like an owl.

Raphael slammed his drink down and stood up from their dinner. "I'm eating in my room," he announced.

"Raphael," Sensei protested.

"No, I'm done!" Raph broadcasted; agitated, loud, fed up. "I need ta get out from under this. Heave off, Mike."

"I didn't do anything!" Orange squealed for the umpteenth time since this whole damn thing had started.

"Yeah ya did!" he laughed out of anger. "Ya doin it right now! And until ya figure out how to stop, stay away from me! I'm going to my room, thanks for the cooking, blah blah blah!" He grabbed his plate and whirled from the table, limping away.

"Wait! Raph!" Mikey protested, scrambling to his feet before staring brokenheartedly off after his grumpiest brother.

If he'd just never told Donatello, if he'd never said anything, then none of this would be happening-

No, don't be stupid Mikey, Raph's really sick. This was important.

But that didn't make him feel any better, especially cause everyone was acting like they were in on some great secret they were shutting him out of. Raphael just yelled at him. Dad lectured him about being polite and patient. Leo pretended to understand but probably didn't really, but still seemed to know more than MIkey did. Which wasn't fair, because Mikey just wanted to understand what the
answers were so he could know what to do, so he'd know what everybody needed and how to help, but instead everyone was keeping those answers from him and getting angry at him for not already knowing, for not already understanding.

Mikey wanted Donnie to be done with his stupid cure already. Donnie would always explain things so Mikey could understand. But they had to not bother Donnie right now, because it was all an emergency, and no one wanted things to get even more messed up than they already were, especially cause Raph seemed a little scared when you caught sight of his face in the in-between moments, where thoughts could slip in.

Mikey clenched his hands together and then bolted out of the kitchen, leaving dinner behind, ignoring Dad and Leo so he could reach the safety of his room and slam his door and bury under all his stuffed animals.

He was pretty sure the blue shark was a girl, because she'd told him so and explained her reasoning, but the jury was still out on the pink teddy bear, who appeared to be doing some soul searching and was going to go out to the beach to sunbathe like mutant turtles never could and get some reflection done on the issue. He reached for his shelves to find him/her some sun glasses and gave them to him/her so he'd/she'd be properly prepared.

Mikey avoided Raphael the whole next day, exactly like Raph seemed to want. He would help cook, bolt out of the room, hide in his bedroom or at the TV until Raphael had finished, and only come back for leftovers.

He looked up at the chart on their refrigerator with all their chores, and tried to think of the ones Raphael would have a tough time with, and he did them ahead of time and checked them off on the sheet. He even did the laundry halfway through the day, when no one could catch him stealing the coverlet off the hammock and sheets of the beds. But he ended up doing it wrong, because he forgot you couldn't wash reds with whites, and everything ended up faded pink.

He sat on the washing machine with far, far, far too many pink articles of clothing, all of which were going to make people angry at him, and he started crying into his hands.

Leonardo popped up out the dojo door, listening to the house. He tilted his head to the side and then quickly strode out, following echoes and noises until he found his way into their little laundry cubby, and found Michelangelo curled up on top of the washing machine, bawling his eyes out, surrounded by pink sheets, pink towels, pink exercise bands, and one or two bright scarlet objects which must have belonged to Raphael.

For a moment, Blue stood in the threshold, knowing he could still back away and pretend he hadn't seen anything, or tip off their Father.

'-pretending ya don't feel anythin' anymore, and that we're beneath ya for feeling-'  

Leo took a deep breath to steady himself, and then quietly tiptoed up beside the washing machine, and sat himself down next to their littlest brother. He slipped an arm around Mikey's shell. Michelangelo jumped in place and hiccupped. And then he hiccupped again. He slapped hands over his face, and looked up at Leo with pink-rimmed eyes and a suddenly dawning horror that he was about to have a fit of the hiccoughs for the entire foreseeable future and, knowing Mikey, he was already wondering if they'd ever stop or if he'd have them till the day he died, and thus he was imagining all the strange things he'd have to do, like Ninjitsu and stealth, while hiccupping.

Leo pulled him into a slow, tight hug. Michelangelo latched on to him around the waist, buried into
his shoulder, and sobbed and hiccupped and sobbed some more. Leo thought about his own reaction the first night after they'd 'found out' about the eggs. Then he turned his face into the lip of his little brother's shell and rocked him in place.

"It's going to be okay," he said to Mikey. "I'm sure it's all going to be okay."

"Rea-*hic!*-eally?" Mikey blubbered.

"Yeah. I-I have, um, a special recipe for super white whites."

Chapter End Notes

Mikeyvision: *Leo stands there in heroic pose with blindingly bright white cape blowing in the wind*
It had been four days. Almost five.

Aimless pacing in the wee hours of the morning eventually brought Raphael shuffling up to the lab door to see if Donatello was working through the night. He eased open the door and leaned in the threshold. The blue glow of a computer screen competed with warmer illumination from a desk lamp. Donatello scribbled notes over print outs and sketched octagonal chemical formulas. He had everything turned down to reduce eye strain, at least.

"Hey," Raphael grunted. "You, uh, you gonna end up sleepin' t'night?"

"Maybe a few hours," Donatello said, without looking up. That right there was a good sign. Ease of focus usually meant Dee wasn't fooling himself, and was honestly on to something. Don was always pretty easy to startle if he was was hitting dead ends left and right in the eleventh hour.

Raphael shifted weight from one leg to another. He was doing his best not to get impatient, and knew it was best he didn't ask for updates. The less he knew, the less he'd be repeatedly turning all the exact wording of it all in his head, getting angry (or scared). "A'right."

"Can't sleep?" Donatello kept writing.

"Yeah." Raphael dabbed sleep from his face. "Hey. If you ain't needin' it, mind if I use ya bed?"

Donatello mouthed a formula to himself as he wrote it down. Then he glanced back at Raphael. "Sure. But what for?"

"'M thinkin it might be more comfortable than my hammock right now," Raphael admitted. "Slept on the couch the last two nights, n' it was a lot easier, but that old thing's kinda threadbare and I keep touching sticky patches where Mikey clearly spilled soda between the cushions and did a lazy ass job of cleaning it out. Also smells like hot sauce. Which, uh, gonna be honest here, kinda is makin me nauseous."

Donatello stared at him with a raised brow a little longer and then started snickering.

Raph smirked a little, rubbing sleepiness from his face.

"Yeah," Donatello agreed through laughs. "Yeah, go ahead. How have you been holding up, by the way?" Dee had been rather isolated in the lab since all this had started, asking them to monitor Raphael's temperature and notify him of any major changes.

"I'll survive. You runnin' on nothing but coffee?" There were dark circles under Donatello's eyes.

"Eh," Purple Turtle shrugged. "Little bit."

"Well stay hydrated," Raphael muttered as he straightened to head out. "Remember last year?"

"Oh. Uh, yup, I do." Donatello reached bashfully towards a stash of almost untouched water bottles. "Rebuke received. Thanks for checking on me."

Raphael gave that water bottle a pointed stare to say, 'yeah you drink that, Dee,' and then hobbled off
stifling a yawn.

Don's room always smelled of cleaning products, on account of him being a mite neurotic, but Raphael took a sniff and decided that the odors of Fabreeze and lemon agreed with him more than hot sauce and ancient Orange Crush stains.

He tiptoed around half-finished projects, toolboxes, and stacks of text and notebooks, respectful of the Organized Disorder of his bro's personal space, and then carefully folded aside the duvet of the neatly made bed.

He tried laying down on his belly, first, and wrapped his arms around the pillow...

"Hey."

A hand chafed his shell.

"How are you feeling?" A light voice asked. "Did it help?"

Did what help? Oh. The bed. Raphael breathed deep and lifted his head an inch, feeling like lead. "Was an excellent decision," he released with his breath. "D'you need to sleep?"

"It's morning," Donatello snickered. He looked and sounded absolutely exhausted. "Wow, you went out like a light. Do you want to sleep in?"

Raphael squinted groggily. It wasn't like he was Mikey, he hauled ass every morning regardless of what had happened the day before. Then again, he'd been sidelined from regular dojo practice, left to glower and lift small weights as he tried to memorize the new kata his brothers were practicing. Ugh. Okay, maybe delegate the answering of this question. "Can I do dat...?" he asked, blinking heavily to try and moisten his eyes and come a little more awake. It didn't help.

"Sure," Genius patted his shell. "You're under a lot more physical stress than you realize. You," big yawn, "you might as well have run a marathon every day."

Raphael teetered for a moment. Then he accepted the answer, and collapsed back on top of that pillow. He was going down, fast.

"Do you mind if I steal the edge of the bed for an hour or two? That description of the couch you gave was completely factual. And funny. And the medical cot is too close to my computer; I keep getting ideas and running back to study them."

"S'your room." Raphael would have given the entire bed back if he hadn't been spiraling fast back into slumber. As it was, he didn't even process that he probably ought to scoot over...

Raphael was roused by a loud crack, which might have been the sound of a shell hitting the ground because Dee had tried and failed to fit on the sliver of bed remaining.

Donatello climbed back onto the edge of the bed in a groggy haze. Without pausing, he climbed on top of Raphael's shell, which apparently looked like the most straightforward and sensible means of getting back to bed. Raph grew briefly indignant he'd been mistaken for a basking rock, even as a result of bed-thievery and sleep-deprived delirium, but then the weight of two hundred pounds of shelled sibling, distributed fairly across Raphael's skeleton and across all his aching muscles, was such a tremendous and unexpected relief that he deflated to enjoy the unexpected turtle pile and fade off to sleep.
Don just crossed both sets of limbs, wrists and ankles, over the crest of his shell, yawned big, smothered his face into one forearm, and curled up in a neat little ball up there, innocuous as a cat.

Mikey would have rolled around and kicked him in the face and eventually wedged himself between Raphael and the wall and pushed him off hours later. Mikey also couldn't manage to get in a hammock without dumping it, which hadn't stopped him from trying, twice, when he'd had nightmares and Raph had tried to ignore him.

Stupid Mikey.

Mutter grumble mutter.

Chapter End Notes

Shells: Ergonomically designed to be mistaken for cat beds, both by actual cats, and, apparently, by half-unconscious younger siblings. Wait a minute, Leo's the oldest! *Mental image of Red, Purple, and Orange being terrified of giant cockroach alien movie, rushing in, dogpiling Leo simultaneously as he lays there crushed beneath them all with a -_- expression because he told them not to watch it.*

Hmm. Yup, seems Legit.
The Behavioral Concerns

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"You don't have to avoid Raphael," Leo was explaining after observing Michelangelo hiding from the aforementioned brother. "But there's only so much attention anyone can take. Raph doesn't know what to tell you. This whole thing is very weird, and he's trying not to get overwhelmed, and you're bombarding him."

"I just want to understand," Mikey mumbled.

"What makes you think Raph understands, exactly?" Leo pressed. "The only person who knows exactly what's going on is Donatello, and we all have to wait until the end of the week and not distract him before he'll be able explains things."

Mikey sniffed. "Is Raph a girl?"

"I... I don't know. " Leo hesitated, and then described the truth as best as he understood it:
"Donnie was pretty clear we need to call him our brother, but whether that's just to keep Raphael calm while everything's turning inside out, or whether it's factual, only Donnie knows right now. Dad's following Donnie's example, and waiting patiently until the emergency is over. We all are."

Michelangelo calmed down a little, looking soothed now that Leo had been able to explain where everyone else was with understanding everything. "But... does Raph need anything different, now? Are we supposed to be helping with something?"

"No," Leo knew that answer. "Right now, Raphael needs us to treat him exactly the same. He's very ill, Mikey. He doesn't need the stress of figuring out if he's a girl right now; he needs to keep balanced so he can refrain from freaking out."

"So... we're keeping morale high?" Mikey slowly realized. "Everything's the same except we're being a little nicer cause he's hurting?"

Leo nodded hurriedly.

"I get that!" Mikey smiled, and then threw his arms around Leo and hugged. "Thank you!"

"My son, have you seen Raphael?"

Leonardo hadn't, not even for breakfast. He told his father he'd find him and, when Raphael proved elusive, Leo checked the lab. No sign of Raph, but Donatello was also missing. With two brothers MIA, Leo hurried up to Donatello's bedroom door and eased it silently open to see if Donnie was woefully off-schedule and stealing a few hours of shuteye.

He found two turtles stacked like rocks, one with a duvet cover up over him and a pillow crushed under his breastplate, and one nesting like a bird on top of his back, looking fast asleep despite the delicate balancing act that was keeping him contained to the surface of Raphael's shell.

All sensible turtles had fallen asleep on Raphael's shell at least once; it called out 'excellent location to park' to all sleepy siblings in view. None had ever done so quite as gracefully as Donatello, who could have submitted his present state as a form of origami to a Japanese cultural commission. Even
his tail was neatly tucked away under one knee, mimicking the way he'd tucked his head into his elbow.

Leo felt a lot of confused concerns simultaneously. He was concerned about the eggs. He was concerned that coed bunking might be a breach of propriety in light of recent information. On the other hand, Donatello had perched himself so elegantly he'd completely avoided any chance contact with Raphael's tail or legs, thereby removing every conceivable potential for misunderstanding. One could almost imagine his exhausted mind computationally calculating optimal surface area usage and coming to the conclusion that, yes, despite being taller, he could manage to fit. Check, plan approved.

He did look very happy up there. And Raphael looked blissfully unconscious, completely content to be crushed.

With a lingering tingle of uncertainty in his belly, Leonardo stood there, drawing blanks on an accurate description of the scene that didn't raise more questions.

"Father? It looks like Raph crashed with Donatello last night. His hammock might have been bothering him."

Even Leonardo hadn't known what would come out of his mouth when he opened it, and the neutral, casual vocabulary he'd managed to assemble nearly bowed his shoulders in relief. Thank the Kami. Filial piety successfully achieved, but with zero frantic blurting of information in awkward ways that would throw his brother(s) under the bus.

"Ah." Master Splinter nodded. "Donatello did an excellent job at managing Raphael's fear that first day. Take note of this synergy, Leonardo. Your brother struggles to admit his weaknesses aloud. If there is even one of you whom he will ask for help, then that is enough."

What? Leo looked to his father, mind temporarily blank. Then a pang of something like jealousy hit him, jealousy that he wasn't Raphael's confident. But, of course, he wouldn't be. Leo was the one who had to keep Raphael checked on missions; Donatello could afford a gentler or more nurturing touch.

"You seem off balance," Master Splinter noted.

"I... have been off balance several times this week," Leo admitted, with a bow of his head. "I apologize, Master."

"Hmm. You have taken an active role in both curtailing and soothing Michelangelo, and for doing so you should not be apologizing," their father said to him, and Leo was surprised Splinter knew. Of course he knew; he always knew. "But other tasks must be delegated. Do not agonize over the truth of that; it is a natural truth of leadership."

And if Leo really did want to be someone his brother's could come to when they had problems, then he might as well get to work practicing with Mikey. Raph was a considerably less-forgiving practice dummy. "Yes, father."

"Does something else bother you, my son?"

Leo was quiet for a moment. "I'm... I'm unclear," he nervously murmured, bringing his hands together, "on how appropriate behavior will change between us."

Shrewd eyes scrutinized him; Leo could feel them upon him.
"It is not the case that brothers should harbor inappropriate intentions towards their sisters," Master Splinter told him. "So it is not the case that raising them together, to sleep together, to eat together, to play together, could be inappropriate. Had you a sister, Leonardo, I would have raised her together with her brothers, without change."

Leonardo had always thought of his father as somewhat traditionalist—what Donnie called 'old-fashioned'—and was caught off-guard to receive an answer in which there was no overarching division between male and female children. He wondered if this was just Master Splinter's way of quietly warning his sons away from the abomination of incest just in case they needed to hear it.

But later, meditating upon these words, Leo discarded that explanation and found both peace and wisdom in the ruling. It might not have sounded 'old-fashioned,' exactly, but if Raphael was to be treated the same regardless of gender, then it didn't matter whether Donatello came back to tell them Raphael was male or Raphael was female.

Raph was still their sibling, and they were to demonstrate fraternal affection towards him exactly the same as they ever had.

Chapter End Notes

The one person who could be setting everyone straight about how he wants to be treated is too grumpy to muscle through these important conversations himself ;) Doh! That's actually very common. People usually have one of two urges: To stand out, or to fit in, and if you're the latter and something like this happens to you, it's very hard to metamorphose into your own biggest spokesperson overnight. Luckily, Leo gets 80% of it right on his behalf! Hopefully that other 20% will be fixable later.
Donnie was already babbling something apologetic by the time Raphael had blinked awake. Purple was up there trying to gracefully disembark from his perch while, at the same time, forgetting that would require being quiet about it.

"Yo," Raphael yawned.

"I'm sorry, Raph. I must have been sleep-drunk." Don climbed to the floor and lifted his hands off Raphael's shell to bunch them in front of himself. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, s'fine," Raphael forgave, getting his hands out from the pillow and pushing himself slowly upright. "My shell was achy and the weight helped."

"O-oh." Donatello nervously cleared his throat. "So you aren't mad at me for-? No. Of course you're not. Dee, keep up, come on, point of view."

Raphael paused and was unpleasantly reminded of the reason for his pain, and how everything from random turtle piles to joint locks and pins in the dojo might turn awkward from now on. He shot Donatello a dirty look. "Can ya like, just, not draw attention ta it all like that?" he still asked. "And just act as if nothin' was different?"

"I need coffee," Donatello submitted his get-out-of-jail-free card, as he leaned back on his heels and smeared a hand over his face to wake himself up. "Even if things were different, Westermarch's effect would still render the whole situation innocent."

"What effect?"

"Westermarch's effect. When organisms recognize their immediate family members and instinctively flag those faces as 'undesirable.' It's to promote genetic diversity, by making sure you don't sleep with your own mother."

"Why da fuck are we talking about this."

"To explain why siblings don't find one-another attractive. Regardless of gender."

Raphael squinted up at him, displeased.

Donatello blinked sleepily down at him for a moment. "Remind me never to try to comfort you with science in the future."

"Not before we've both had our coffees, at least," Raphael muttered, a smirk wiggling at the corner of his mouth because Don was harmless. "Ya gonna help me up, doc?"

"What? Oh!" Donatello reached quickly around him and got a shoulder under his arm, and he
boosted Raphael to Raphael's feet. Raphael tousled his mask tails to let him know he wasn't angry, and Donnie grinned appreciatively, relieved.

Leonardo and Michelangelo were setting the table for lunch, and perked up at the sound of Donnie's door opening down the hall. Leonardo heard the clatter of plastic and turned around to see Mikey missing and a cupboard door swinging shut. Leo raised a brow. Apparently someone wasn't quite ready to refrain from bombarding Raphael with questions.

"Hey!" Donatello greeted cheerfully with a big stretch and yawn as he and Raphael joined them. "Do we have any coffee?"

"I filled one of the thermoses," Leo said, poised over the table. "It should still be hot."

"Where's Mike?" Raphael asked.

Leo cleared his throat. "Hiding from you."

Donatello came back with two cups of coffee, and looked flatly between Raphael and Leonardo. "So... Basically you're telling me I was busy for five days and the family's already falling apart?"

Raphael, who by now was rubbing guiltily at his neck, glanced over to the kitchen refrigerator where check marks already stood out on a list of chores for the day. "Eh." Then he raised his voice. "Mike! Yo! Michelangelo!"

"Nuh-uh," called a petulant voice from inside their cupboards. "You told me to heave off and leave you alone."

"Yeah but when the fuck have you actually gone and done it?" Raphael asked. "Bothering me's ya full time hobby!"

"When it's important stuff," Mikey pouted.

Raphael grimaced for a couple seconds and then looked over to Donnie. "First set of questions out of his mouth included askin' whether me and Leo was fuckin' each other."

"That's not what he said," Leo interjected. "Tell the truth."

"Yeah, its what he meant, that's why ya beat his ass," Raphael replied.

Donatello sighed at both of them, and pushed a coffee cup into Raphael's hands. "I'm going to assume he was having a hyperactive meltdown and that this was absolutely not one of his moments of stellar character insight."

Leo briefly turned to an ice sculpture in mortification. Raphael straightened with a disbelieving glare. "Fuck you, Don, of course it ain't-!"

"Now, now, I never called you female," Donatello said, smile quirking as he stood up again. "You could just be gay." Then he zipped out of reach of Raphael's attempt at a headlock, and skipped up to go open that cupboard and find their baby brother. "I see our perfectly organized Tupperware has not survived its encounter with you."

"Is Raph a girl?" Mikey demanded, soliciting a bitter growl from the turtle in question.

"No," Donatello answered, definitively. "And everyone's family and nobody's gay, by the way, so don't ask unless you're just joking."
Mikey peeked out at Donnie, surprised to receive such a clear-cut answer. But, of course, Donnie always answered his questions. Mikey brightened a little. "How can he have eggs, then?"

"First of all, those eggs are blank. Like chicken eggs from the store."

"Ohhhh."

"Secondly, Raphael is intersex," Donatello said. "He's normal aside from a small issue which happened internally when we mutated. It caught him very slightly in-between, and made the weird eggs thing possible."

"That can happen?" Mikey asked, eyes widening. "People can be born in-between?!"

"Yes," Donatello answered just as surely, and now everyone in the room—Raphael included—was silently hanging on every word. "The normal and appropriate thing to do is to treat intersex people exactly how they want to be treated, regardless of what they ended up looking like. Raph lucked out. He feels male, he's supposed to be male, his body ended up ninety-nine percent male, and we all think of him as male. So think of it like this: the timing of the mutation just left him with a very peculiar medical condition."

"Okay. But, if the mutation caused it..." Michelangelo's eyes widened. "Could the egg thing happen to any of us?!

"I don't actually know for sure," Donatello's voice was blithely matter-of-fact for what had just come out of his mouth. "Turtle sex is really sensitive to temperature and neither you nor Leo ended up with male human DNA-"

Leo must have slipped or something because he knocked a glass onto a plate. Raphael looked knowingly at him. Leo ducked his head.

"-but there's actually a quirk to Raphael's DNA which would help explain if this only happened to him, so don't panic. I'll figure out some tests to run on the rest of us and rule it out once we've gotten rid of these eggs."

"Did-did you figure that out?" Mikey realized, face brightening again. "You're not in your lab!"

Donatello nodded curtly. "I think I've got it. We have to loot some specialized equipment, both to administer a chemical extremely deep into his abdomen and because I'm not taking any chances." Donnie looked Leo's way. "We can plan it out today, but we should probably get going by evening. It's not actually clear how long those eggs are going to last, and if they begin to decompose, my calculations will be off."

"Right," Leo breathed tightly.

Chapter End Notes

Settle down, people, settle down, Donnie is back and he can answer all the questions! Literally all of them.
"I have another question!" Mikey scooted to the edge of the cupboard, kicking his legs. "You said Raphael feels like a dude and that makes him a dude! What if I feel like a girl, does that make me a girl?!

Donatello looked back to Michelangelo as if his brain had just briefly gone blank. "Oh boy, I need to actually drink that coffee." But, much to surprise of his older brothers, Donnie continued with: "Technically, yes. If you felt it was absolutely necessary. Um. Do you, Mike...?" Leo tried to protest, but Donnie lifted up a hand to request he stay quiet.

Michelangelo sat and thought about it, mildly freaking out at least two of his older brothers. Donnie, it had to be said, now looked more curious and tired than terrified.

"I don't think it's necessary," Mike decided. "Is it? To keep liking cooking and stuffed animals and wigs and stuff?"

"No," Donatello had all the answers. "It's not necessary to be a certain gender to like anything. It's... more a self-image thing. Humans often have a very strong internal concept of what gender they are. It doesn't always match the rest of their biology, so..."

Mike beamed. "I'm sure I'm a dude!" he concluded as if immensely proud of himself, and he hopped down out of his cupboard. "And I'm sure Raph's a dude, too!"

Two older brothers slumped in relief.

"He just has a period!"

Leo had to intercept the angry dinosaur who overturned their table, sent plates flying left and right, and tried to surge through the mess to murder their youngest sibling. It wasn't terribly hard to stop him; Raphael was gravid with two eggs and under a terrible amount of strain, and had trouble even struggling to a full upright position. Donatello's expression went rigid and tense. He looked down at where two cups of spilled coffee seeped across their floor.

"But Raph, now I have so much more empathy for you, bro!" Mikey insisted.

"YOU ARE GONNA DIE!"

"Uh-oh. Uh! You can't kill me, you're not allowed to hit girls!"

"I-what?" Raphael and Leo both stopped struggling and blinked over at him.

"Donnie said I can be a girl if I want!" Mikey pointed.

Donnie immediately slapped a hand over his face. The warning 'coffee needed, coffee needed' might as well have been flashing in large red letters over his head, sirens blaring. "Guys..."

"He didn't mean just back and forth lickety split whenever ya goddamn please!"

"Why not?" Mikey demanded.

"Guys."

"I'm not a guy right now, nyah nyah!"
Raphael decided wildly mercurial gender identities were acceptable. "Okay girls," he concluded loudly with a mean spirited hug of Leo to include him, "I’m officially perfectly okay with punching ya regardless of ya gendah!"

"Crap."

"But I’m not...!"

"Raphie," Donatello growled prohibitively from behind his facepalm. His quiet, threatening tone immediately hooked everyone's attention. "You just dumped my coffee on the ground. Which was all of the coffee we had. If you don't want to spend the rest of your short miserable life trying to push two grapefruit sized eggs out your penis, you will sit your tail back down and—God help you all—an alternative source of caffeine will get into my bloodstream before the next fifteen minutes are out."

Stillness fell over the siblings.

Raphael slumped back into his chair. Leo quickly righted the table and saved their dishes from the floor. "Donnie’s in Evil Mode!" Mikey squeaked and dashed for the instant coffee and the microwave. "I'll fix it!"

Nobody said anything else until Donatello was back in a seat, expression unamused, sipping on his absolutely terrible instant coffee, and then it was just to ask Mikey to pass the orange juice.

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Donatello and Leonardo went to their father immediately after lunch, bringing him a sandwich and a cup of tea, to explain Donnie had a plan and the three of them—Donatello, Leonardo, and Michelangelo—hoped to go topside that evening to get their hands on the necessary equipment.

"I want Raphael to accompany us to the manhole up," Donnie said, surprising his elders. "He can serve as lookout."

"Raphael's not doing well," Leo argued. "I don't know how much you saw of it earlier today, but he's starting to limp."

"I'm not saying he leaves the sewers," Don retorted. "But he'd rather wait on location for us than be left behind again."

"I fear I must forbid this," Master Splinter reasoned. "Raphael is in no condition to deal with matters should something unexpected happen. It is best not to get overeager mere hours before his illness will have treatment."

"I need to put six inch needles up into his body to administer highly caustic solutions," Donatello replied, already having thought the matter out. "Depending on which direction I take, I have to avoid puncturing kidneys, intestines, spleens, and everything in-between. I might even need to insert a catheter to drain the slurry out. A catheter's a tube. You can guess where it goes."

Leonardo could have been said to turn a little green, if only that were not his natural color.

"And if the eggs are still blocked off from there, I have to cut a path to them, which Raphael is already vehemently against because the shortest way in is through his cloaca. So. I want him tuckered out and docile, not biting at the bit, cursing up a storm, and twitching at every 'insult.' If emergency decisions have to be made for or by him during treatment later tonight, he needs to be calm."
Their father considered this. Then he nodded. "Very well. But if my gravely ill child is to be out on the open sewer this evening, then I shall join this mission as assistant to it's lookout. Leonardo, you are still to lead the mission into the clinic. Perform the task with care and efficiency, just as you would in ordinary circumstances."

Leo wasn't entirely sure how Raphael would feel being allowed on a mission only to be babysat by their father the entire time, but one supposed one could always rib him and say he was the one really protecting Splinter. Whether or not he believed it, phrasing it that way would at least give him some way of avoiding feelings of humiliation.

"Yes, father," Leo acknowledged with a crisp nod. "Don, let's go over exactly what we need and where we expect it to be in the clinic. I don't want to be out there a second longer than necessary."
The Targets Which are Acquired

Raphael had gotten to stand lookout topside. It might have been a consolation for being made to feel like a child, but, honestly, it was a lot more than Raph had expected. His father was higher up the wall of the alleyway, perched motionless on a fire escape. Raphael stayed crouched below, shell leaned back against the brick to alleviate strain, shell-cell on and set to press-to-talk group mode with his siblings. Raph wished he actually could hear more of them; Mikey rarely managed to pull off a mission without throwing out half a dozen one-liners, but of course they weren't pressing to send that shit across the airwaves and back his way.

The rush of white noise greeted him. "Raph," Don said over the cell. "Remind me to look into headsets."

Raph grinned to himself. At least they were thinking of him. He depressed the button. "Keep ya head on da mission, genius."

The clinic they were breaking into sold medical supplies, both individually and in bulk to hospitals: Everything from wheelchairs and prosthetic arms to special medicines, knee braces, and all kinds of hypodermic needle. Raphael tried not to think about some of the things he knew were on the shopping list. He wasn't fond of needles. Don had told him he'd be going in above the hip joint as long as Raphael agreed to take a tab of Valium to relax, because he'd need to lay perfectly still in an awkwardly stretched out position.

As much as Raphael wasn't looking forward to being drugged and injected with shit, Donnie had abandoned straightforward and conventional solutions to figure out how to help him in a way that wasn't fucking... emasculating. So he'd take whatever pills Donnie put in his hand, and he'd be a saint on that medical cot, and if shit got messed up, he'd trust Dee's Plan B, C, and D.

Michelangelo was in the middle of looking in what clearly were all the wrong places on the shelving units, thinking 'man am I bad at this,' when curiosity drew his attention to an interesting package labeled 'fluid dispensing syringe.' He picked it up to have a look. He had it less than a second.

"Ooh. I didn't know if they'd have those," Donatello said, snatching the package eagerly and putting it into his bag. "Good work, Mike, I didn't even write that one down because I didn't want to distract us."

"The longest hypodermic they have is four inches," Leo whispered across the room. "And it's for an 'epidural.' Does that make it different?"

Donatello muttered a long-winded disappointed substitution for a cuss word, and Mikey decided he should probably go over there and see if he had magical luck at finding things today.

"Remind me to rob a veterinary institution next time," Donatello muttered glumly. "Or just a metal foundry. Alright. Take one. I'll make it work."

"Hey, this one says six!" Mikey reported at a happy whisper and with a biiiiigg shrug.

"How did you-? I already checked there. Twice."

A loud altercation came up the road, and Raphael frowned, balancing on the balls of his feet. A tall, skinny guy—maybe a high-schooler—was backing away from aggressors. He was begging. "Just let
me go!" Two much larger guys hemmed him up against a building and started picking on and insulting him. One of them wiped his nose, grinned at his friend, and then suddenly threw a punch at their victim. The guy lifted his arms like he had no clue how to defend himself, and squeaked.

Raphael tensed, staring in confusion and dismay. He didn't often get to see humans up close, even through sewage grates, and definitely not while topside. Closest he usually got was usually at the construction sites, when the sewers were open for editing and the workers were sitting about, sweaty but laughing in camaraderie with each other, eating their sandwiches and complaining about wives, sisters, girlfriends, and mothers. Sometimes they got in fights or traded pot or something between each other, something illegal, but that wasn't like this.

Wasn't like watching some random kid getting wailed on by two other much bigger guys, who were laughing their asses off as they called him words like 'faggot' and 'wuss' which may or may not have meant real things to them. When the skinny guy went down to try and get away from them, they kicked him. Raphael rose slowly to his feet, feeling uncertainly back for his sai.

Dad must have been waiting for that, because that was the point at which Master Splinter dropped down beside him and laid a paw on his arm. "I understand," Master Splinter said to him, softly and in Japanese so there was no chance they might be overheard or understood. "But our family is at a time its life cycle in which we must turn our heads and care for ourselves first. We cannot risk more. You are still, all of you, very young."

"Are they gonna kill him?" Raphael whispered, gaze locked on the scene.

Master Splinter's fingers tightened, and Raphael looked up only to receive an indescribable shock at seeing his own expression on his father's face. "No," Splinter abruptly promised him, chin held high, angry eyes locked on the fight. "They will stop, or I will intervene."

Raph wouldn't have admitted it to anybody, but, in that moment, sick and 'pregnant' with eggs, just fifteen years old, and watching a real crime happen right in front of him, with sai in his hands and no way to help, and brothers who'd all be at risk if he tried; it was some kind of sacred relief to have his Dad standing there above him, telling him these fuckers would not get away with killing this kid and that Dad, himself, would step in and kick both their asses if they tried.

That wasn't what ended up happening. The bullies gave up soon afterward. But Raph would remember his father didn't relax until that happened, until they finally stepped away and called it 'no fun' and left, elbowing and joshing each other. Raphael stared after them, fingers tight around the crosspieces of the sai.

It took awhile for the victim they'd left behind to pick himself up from the curb. Kid felt around for and picked up bent and twisted glasses with one cracked lens, and sniffled at them while biting at his lower lip and cringing into himself and rocking a bit.
If you caught that Splinter is still taller than Raph, and it threw you for a loop, well, that's just because our boys still have a lot of growing to do. Is it any wonder Splinter still sees itty bitty babies when he looks at them? <3

Mike frowned, curiously, trying to read what had happened out here while they'd been in the clinic. Raph looked like, totally grim or something.

Leo usually climbed down last of all of them, covering their tails and making sure none of them had gone missing on him for as they left the surface behind. With Dad present, they all felt the pressure to be more quiet than usual, and didn't start slapping each other on the shell or talking about the mission.

They reentered the house, and Leo barred the door behind them and set to delivering a verbal report to Master Splinter.

Mikey tugged on Donnie's arm, pulling him up back. "Look at Raph," he whispered.

Donnie did a double-take. He wasn't bad at reading people, he just had to be reminded to look.

"Make a light dinner for everyone and keep Leo and Dad distracted for about ten minutes," Donnie whispered, re-shouldering his bag of supplies. It looked like his master plan to chill Raphael out might have failed.

Mikey nodded with a flash of an 'okay' sign like he was saying 'piece of cake.'

"Raph?" Donatello came up to touch his arm, and Raphael immediately looked over at him. "Mind if I give you a thorough checkup ahead of time?"

"Yeah. 'Course."

Okay, that was a good sign. Maybe he was just feeling a little exhausted or resigned. He didn't seem contrary.

The two of them got into the lab, and Donatello unloaded the supplies onto a table beside a sterilized wash basin. Usually, Raphael got a bit creeped out around medical equipment. One needle was fine, but if it was all laid out or in bulk, he'd stare and visibly squirm. Not today. Today he sat gingerly down on the cot, and his head was somewhere else.

Donatello washed his hands—he'd be washing his hands almost obsessively until the night was over—and fetched the ultrasound and flicked it on. "Did something happen?" he asked as he calibrated settings. Unexpected, a hand caught him around the midsection and pulled him back onto the cot. Donatello twisted in surprise, only to find himself on the receiving end of a hug.

"I'm fine," Raphael said without quite looking at him. "M'sorry for breaking the leg off your table the other day. N'throwing and knocking over stuff."
"Uh." Donatello was more than a little surprised by the timing of the confession. "Y-you were having a particularly bad day."

"Doesn't matter." Raphael leaned the edge of his jaw on Donatello's shoulder. "Shouldn't have been unloading on ya like that. Was just actin' like a bully."

Okay. Something had definitely happened. It took a heck of a big event to shake Raphael up into acting clingy or heartwarming or sweet.

Despite having eggs to assess and delicate operations to get ready for, Donatello got both arms around his brother's head and neck and hugged him tightly back. "I forgive you," he promised. "You, ah, didn't throw the table that had my work on it, after all."

"Heh. Thought about it," Raph admitted. He smiled faded. "I trust you, by the way. If you have ta do somethin' cause it's necessary... I won't fight."

That should have been a weight off Donatello's shoulders; instead, for the first time since he'd started brainstorming, Donnie felt his own pulse pick up speed. If Raph had told him 'absolutely not,' he could have rationalized arguing him down for his own good. Having that ultimate authority handed over without a fight, brought all the pressure home to roost.

Donnie took a deep breath. He promised: "I'm not putting any holes in you I don't intend to suture up at the end of the day."

Raph hugged him a little more. "Means a lot."

"It's-it's gonna be okay." Donatello pulled back an inch and leaned his forehead to his brother's.

Raphael on Valium was quiet, passive, and had zero bite to him. At another time the effect could have been a little funny, seeing as Valium—or the generic, diazepam—was an emergency anti-anxiety drug for intercepting panic attacks, and didn't magically make people nicer. Donatello only had them on hand in the first place because Donatello occasionally suffered from Night Terrors, and a single tablet could prevent one day of Terrors from snowballing into a week of them.

Rather than tease Raphael about it, the family was grateful for his soporific state. He'd also taken his ibuprofen without complaint, and now laid down to expose the hip joint for Donatello's inspection. Leo and Mikey helped him hold the stretched out position without cramps by leaning weight on his shoulder and knee, respectively, to pin them down.

"Okay," Donnie pushed his hand up under the plastron. "This is much better, the anti-inflammatory drugs are reducing swelling."

"Is that the easiest way in?" Leo asked, suspicious.

"Hush, no questioning the doctor," Mikey chastised.

"This is how I found them to begin with," Donnie muttered, pressing as deep as the excess skin between plastron wall and limb would let him. "I can't palpate them, so we're going to have to- Oh? Oh there it is. Okay. Perfect. That's going to be so much easier than trying to guess through the ultrasound alone."

"That hurts like ya literally have an entire broadheaded axe embedded in my side," Raphael mentioned calmly.
Mikey and Leo shared a look, and both snickered a little.

Donatello passed Leo the ultrasound head.

Leo stiffened, with 'I'm unqualified to use whatever this is!' written all over his face.

Donatello guided his hand until two oblong, rounded shapes peeked into the viewfinder. "There," Donnie said. "Keep it exactly there. That angle and everything."

"Hey, I wanna help with that!" Mikey complained, leaning over with wide eyes to stare up at the viewfinder. "That's so cool! Is that them?"

"Mikey, I didn't pick Leo because I think he has a magical affinity for egg-finding," Donatello sassed as he turned to their father and requested the first prepped syringe. "I just know his hands are steady and he won't get distracted."

"Oh, yup, that's Leo," Mikey agreed. "Gold medalist champion at holding still for very long periods of time. Unchallenged Master of Boringness."

Leo, far from being offended, calmed down at all the sense this now made, and held resolutely in place.

Splinter carefully passed Donnie the syringe, and Donnie leaned close and slowly fed the hypodermic up through excess skin, under bone, over organs, through the muscle wall, and into the first egg.
And here we have a return of an otherwise sweet and adorable Donatello brandishing visceral scientific descriptions like defensive weaponry. Annoy him at your own peril!

"There's three steps to removing each egg," Donatello said as he hooked up his first vial to the syringe. "The first one is to inject the egg with a solution that will dissolve the partially solidified interior back to a fully liquid consistency. Right now it should be about the consistency of refrigerated jello."

"Yum!" Mikey giggled.

"Should be?" Leo asked.

"You'd be amazed how much of medical practice is guesswork," Donnie hummed, depressing on the syringe slowly and carefully to send fluid through the needle, while checking the ultrasound to make sure none was escaping. It was caustic, and needed to stay contained by the shell. "Fortunately turtles aren't very closely related to squamates, and there's no risk of parthenogenesis, so that's a relief."

"Parthawhat?" Mikey asked.

"When nobody impresses a lady lizard and she decides she'd rather fertilize her own eggs," Donatello answered as he administered the solution. "Or, you know, gets lonely on a deserted island and pulls off a virgin birth to give herself some company."

"Lizards can do that?" Mikey disbelieved. "Whoa!"

"Mnhmm. Half to a quarter of the eggs will be nonviable, depending on parthenogenesis method, and there's a large risk of genetic defects, but when all you have is lemons..."

"And there's absolutely no chance of anything like that," Leonardo repeated, seeking confirmation.

"Leo, we got mutated by strange inter-dimensional alien space juice. There's a 'chance' we could all metamorphose into butterflies tomorrow, and I'd have to just throw my arms up and roll with it."

"But you said yourself he's in between! So-?"

Brown eyes glanced up at Leo with an edge. "So, would you please leave the science to me? Okay, the next part is to drain out the liquidated jello."

"I'm only asking if there's any chance that-!"

"They're alive?" Donatello completed, as he changed off the container attached to the syringe. "In the biologically unprecedented event that Raphael is hermaphroditic and has one ovarie and one teste, that both are miraculously still functional, that he somehow ejaculated backwards up into his own body, that we aren't all sexually sterile to begin with because we're piecemeal hybrids, that Raphael isn't sterile in particular because of hormone imbalances or irregularly formed gametes, and that the eggs didn't inherit fatal double genes like the WW genotype, they'd still have suffocated
inside him before we even knew they were there.

"So, yes, Leo, unless there's something exciting you're not telling me, I'm pretty damn positive I didn't just abort anybody's nephew. But thanks for your confidence in me!"

"Leo," Raphael instructed as if nothing altogether upsetting or jarring had just been said, "stop talking to Donnie. He's tryin ta work."

Leo was wincing at the unnecessarily vivid info-dump he'd bought down upon them all. "You're right."

"Wow. Can we put Raph on this medicine like full time?" Mikey asked, peeking down at Raphael's face. "He is so zen right now."

"He must have been hiding a lot of anxiety for it to have this effect," Donnie mentioned sympathetically, with a gentle pat of their patient's plastron. "Diazepam—Valium—it just suppresses fear."

Splinter hadn't interrupted his sons, whether to rein in Leonardo or correct Donatello's off-color remarks.

He supplied each sterilized tool and chemical as it was required, and kept his attention upon Raphael.

In the tension of the situation, Donatello and Leonardo were still negotiating their exact standing with one-another. They hadn't the experience to know the difference between leadership and micromanagement. That would come with time, developed through exchanges like these in which a younger brother stood his ground.

Many were the things he could not teach them. Things they had to learn to do for themselves.

It still seemed yesterday they'd scarcely come up to his knee...

Donatello adjusted the syringe, and out flowed a milky yellow liquid from Raphael that filled up the container. It was the color of pus, but there was so much of it maybe it could be said to look more like melted butter. One of the eggs on the ultrasound crumpled inward.

"Look!" Mikey pointed.

"Bingo," Donatello smirked, reaching out for a vial of a clear fluid and some saline as he waited for the egg to drain entirely. "And no red pigmentation or other signs of an embryo, so I was right. Right! Next, we inject the crumpled shell with an enzyme solution that targets calcium." He clipped off the syringe pressure, removed the egg-filling receptacle, and attached the enzyme solution.

"Why's it impossible Raph's got uh, two different kinds of working parts?" Michelangelo wondered conversationally.

"It's not strictly-speaking impossible," Donatello said, "but in all recorded human history, it's never happened. And it doesn't happen to turtles, either. My guesses are always rooted pretty solidly in the existing scientific literature, and it rarely lets me down. Even when stuff's still weird, like our finger count, I can usually track down what happened."

"Why do we only have three fingers?"
"Near as I can tell, mutagen sacrificed the other two midway through adding in human genes for our digestive track. Intestines, specifically."

"How are intestines and fingers related?"

"It has to do with the evolution of the first terrestrial organisms. Fish don't have five fingers, but everything after that pretty much does. I bumped into it while looking up dinosaurs."

"Leo, Donnie says we're dinosaurs!"

The remains of the first egg began dissolving inward on the ultrasound. Donnie sucked in deep breath and nodded to himself. "Okay," he said. "Raph, hold still, I need to withdraw the needle and find the second egg."

"Kay," agreed Raphael.

Donatello tried to palpate for the second egg.


Donnie squinted at Mikey and then to the screen. He paused in administering the needle, and then slumped onto his elbows and breathed out the mother of all curse words from a doctor: "Oops."

"What has happened?" Splinter inquired swiftly.

"The enzyme," Mikey realized, looking in realization to Donnie. "It was too much, somehow. It ate both shells. All that's left is the jello!"

"Regrettably solid jello," Donatello agreed glumly.

"Oh dear," even Leo understood. "And it's on the loose."
"Yo, it's going to be more like pudding than jello soon," Mikey observed.

"I was worried about this," Donatello admitted, "I had no means of testing shell thickness, so I based it on data about normal turtle eggs. Which I had no samples of, so I may have overestimated their structural soundness in an effort to find a quick-acting dissolvant. I should have used two needles and tried to locate the second egg just as soon as the first was imploded."

"Can you still drain out what remains?" Leo worried.

"Not by the same means, not safely." Donatello set down the needle to bridge his fingers and think. "If I try to carefully liquidate the interior, any drop that escapes will burn the interior of the womb, possibly setting off a chain reaction of infections and secondary complications."

"So what happens now?" Mikey asked as Leo digested that there was, in fact, something called a 'womb' in there.

Donatello was studying that ultrasound. "Next would be to gently pump in warm saline and a buffer, wait, flush it out, rinse and repeat. For that I'd want to use the catheter, not a needle. But," Donatello tapped a forefinger against his beak, "no. No, I want to leave it alone to test whether his body can reabsorb it in this state. With the shell gone."

"You want to check this now?" Leo questioned.

"It's a straightforward test," Donatello justified. "His body will either react like it's a foreign body and start trying to 'attack' it, in which case he'll develop a fever, or else things will gradually improve and we'll watch it shrink in the ultrasound over the next few days."

"Got a question," asked Raphael, who had been so subdued they'd almost forgotten to counsel him. "S'there any parti'clar benefit to figurin' dis out? Like, why wait for it ta get worse?"

"Part of it's in the hope I don't have to put a tube up your genitalia, which, in addition to being undignified, carries its own risks for infection and scarring. Part of it is that I want to buy another hour to go back over my molar mass calculations for the dissolvants so I don't make another mistake."

"Kay, figuahed. What else?"

"I am ninety-six percent certain I can come up with a drug that will prevent egg shells from developing inside you. So, if you can reabsorb unshelled eggs on your own, or liquidate them and pass them out, we'll have a minimalist solution to your condition. No surgery needed. No more invasive or dangerous operations, just some kind of medicine you take once a month or season or whatever it ends up being."

"Well, crap, get me a thermometer," Raph insisted. "I'm not on my death bed, people." Then a perplexed expression suddenly crossed his face. His tail slapped against his underside and curled tightly. "Bucket," he demanded without inflection. "Now."

Donnie perked up. "That's a good sign!"
Kinda funny: Everyone politely looked away, even though Leo was helping Raphael sit and Mikey was supplying that damn bucket. Dee evaluated the result.

Turned out that Raphael had been able to pass the remains of the shell and enzyme in liquid form, and Don said this meant if they had to insert anything later on, they could do it without surgery. Knowing that seemed to lift his confidence back up, which was kinda important. Raph could tell he was a little off-kilter from miscalculating the enzymes.

As Donnie went to his work table to recheck all his calculations, Raphael stayed seated and rubbed the back of his hand against his face. He hadn’t slept properly in days, but then neither had Dee. Mikey looked like he was going to crash from the adrenaline from the mission topside, or, ya know, just because Mikey liked to sleep. But Leo was full awake, and he sat slowly down beside Raphael.

"How are you feeling?" Blue asked.

Raphael thought about the question. "I can actually tell half of it's gone," he admitted with a glance back at Leo. "I mean, ya think of it," he lifted up a hand to indicate the size of a grapefruit, "that's gotta be two or three pounds, ain't it?"

"At least," Leo agreed, looking a little nauseous after having watched those pounds drain out up close and personal, but nevertheless acting like solidarity was important to him. "Are you hungry?"

"Kinda. Nothing sounds good." He hadn't eaten dinner with the rest of them, but that had been owed to the possibility of abdominal surgery.

"I could get you some juice or something," Mikey offered with a big yawn.

Raphael thought about that, and then nodded. "Thanks."

"You're going to need to try and sleep," Donatello mentioned from his desk as he moved numbers around. "The diazepam in your system should help knock you out. If you can get to the non-REM deep sleep phase, it'll stimulate healing."

"Right, doc."

"Donatello," Master Splinter instructed as he fetched pillow and blanket. "You will retire for the night."

Raphael's stomach flipped on him or something.

Donnie twisted about in his seat. "Dad, I need to stay with him. We still don't know-"

"I am sending you to bed to keep your mind sharp," Splinter overruled, "I will remain with Raphael through the night in your stead, and will wake you in the event of an emergency. Come morning, you will be equipped to make the best decision heading forward."

"I... Yes, Sensei." Donnie looked Raphael's way, brows pushing anxiously up in the middle.

Well. Wouldn't help anyone if Donnie laid awake staring at the ceiling. Raph managed a nonchalant shrug. "I'm not gonna die before mornin. Master Splinter's right, you ain't slept properly in days."

"Father," Leo spoke up, "you should rest. I am willing to look after Raphael."

Oh great. Maybe Raphael could ask Leo to bore him to sleep.
Splinter considered this. "Leonardo, you are the one who will have to lead a mission if your brother requires additional medicines or equipment. You, too, must remain clear-headed and in good health."

"Of course, Father," Leo said, standing up to obey without even the pretense of a fight. Raphael eyed the floor, and didn't feel much hungry or thirsty when Mikey got back to him with that juice.

Leo came back about less than a minute after. Raphael blinked.

Without addressing anybody, or asking a lick of permission, Leo set down a stack of sleeping bags, laid them all very neatly out on the hard floor, set aside his katana and protective gear, and went promptly to bed there with a polite little broadcast of, "Goodnight."

Raphael leaned over to peer past his knee at Fearless. A grin hit him, a big one. And, just because he knew Leo hated it, Raph put his feet on his bro's shell. Leo gave a completely silent sigh. Raphael grinned more.

Chapter End Notes

'I saw you didn't want Donnie to leave and I sneakily set up more than one sleeping bag >:3'

Whoa now Leo, are you sure about this, that's some Dark!Leo level of rebellion right there XD XD XD
'Yoshi, yoshi' is the Japanese equivalent of hushing a baby or reassuring someone who is crying. Which should be mentioned ahead of time, or you'll confuse it for Hamato Yoshi’s name.

Raphael was tossing uncomfortably. It was clear he'd wake himself if his distress continued. Splinter sat down at the head of the cot and carefully gathered up the boy's shoulders and shell into his lap. By now he was an old hat at cradling turtles. He eased Raphael into the support at the crook of his elbow, and felt his brow. The temperature was very slightly elevated.

Raphael kicked weakly. Splinter caressed the side of his face and rocked, slowly and carefully, so the motion did not wake a child who so seldom stood for coddling. Raphael gradually slumped into his hold.

To his brothers, Raphael was already fit, heavy, temperamental, and strong.

To his father, Raphael was still a headstrong and vulnerable child.

If only he could keep them safe from the world forever.

Memories came back to Splinter unbidden, as easy as if they had happened yesterday. Michelangelo had taken to running far in advance of his brothers, who had still been crawling or making their first forays into balancing upright against walls and furniture. This was far too slow-pace for Michelangelo. The youngest child would jump up mid re-diapering and go streaking across the room at full clip, bottle in hand, bum still dirty, running apparently just for the sake of running. Naturally he'd trip, but after he fell down and squeaked in surprise, he'd almost always start laughing.

He and all his brothers were very durable. Many were the days Splinter had returned home from scavenging to find two children peering over a ledge Michelangelo had fallen off of. Raphael would normally be down there, too, because no sooner would Michelangelo begin to cry than Raphael would work up the courage to jump (tumble) off the ledge after him. Raphael had always been the, ah, 'first responder' in the event of a bawling sibling. Give them long enough and Donatello or Leonardo would end up down there, too, and the fourth would follow soon after so as not to be left alone.

Speaking of ledges, it had been impossible to find spaces in the sewers to dwell upon which were safe from flooding, warm, dry, and naturally baby proof. Had Splinter possessed the time to loot bricks and mortar or wood and nails, he might have been able to give them fewer dangerously hard surfaces to run into or off of. As it was he’d been strapped for time just to snatch enough food and disposable provisions. He'd thanked the Goddess of Mercy daily they'd never cracked their heads open on anything!

But those days were gone, and the problems of today were in ways more frightening. Often, Splinter asked himself, 'Have I done enough?' 'Will they be ready?' 'Who or what will learn of them first?' 'Will they survive?' 'Is Saki still out there?'
Only time would tell him the answers.

Slowly, Splinter looked down at where the other three had camped out on the floor. Leonardo, alone, looked to be steadfast in a valiant attempt to operate a sleeping bag the way its inventors had originally intended. Michelangelo was sprawled out horizontally along what had fast become a nest, and Donatello was curled up in a ball, upside down, in the triangular gap between both brothers. Blankets and limbs were tossed everywhere and over everyone.

Splinter sighed.

Fifteen years old, and Michelangelo was still sucking his thumb. That wasn't doing wonders for Splinter's perception of their maturity.

Raphael shuddered. A dream fluttered his eyelids and then he thrashed slightly and woke up tense and blinking rapidly into the gloom. Splinter pet reassuring over his brow. Raphael took a moment of heavy breathing and looking around himself to recognize what had happened. Then his brows pursed upward in an expression befitting tears, and he grimaced up at Splinter through several quaky intakes of breath.

"My son," the father prompted gently.

"I'm supposed to be the tough guy," his hurting child whimpered. "But I'm not even a guy."

Splinter pulled the boy into him, and crushed him gently there. "You are the passionate 'guy,'" Splinter corrected, using the same vernacular to counteract this fear. "In everything you do, you put your all. Your hatred. Your anger. Your love. Your loyalty. Your energy. You think with your heart, Raphael, and that is where your tremendous power comes from. That has not changed with this news."

"Donnie told it all pretty to make it line up," Raphael voice crackled. "But that's not how it is. My genes are female. I wasn't 'supposed' to be male, it only ever happened cause it was cold...!"

"Yoshi, yoshi." Splinter ran his nails gently up and down the shell skutes, rocking openly now. Inconsolable, the child whimpered, "Everything about me is wrong and messed up, and it's never going away. From top to bottom, all of it's-

"No," Splinter chastised, with a gentle swat on the shell. "Everything about you is Raphael."

The boy sniffled hard several times, trying to calm down.

"Listen to me: Change frightens you because you draw comfort from what is familiar; that is part of your personality. But Raphael, your body has not betrayed you. It has served you exactly as you have demanded of it."

"It made eggs! It can't even lay them, it's not female, it's not anything, it's—" the last word was tiny: "d-defective..."

Splinter leaned back, and looked down into his son's face. "How could you disrespect it with such insults? After all the effort you have put into it, and after all the results it has given you? Is Raphael not the strongest of four brothers?"

"B-But- but it's-"

"Your body required care from you, and you provided that care, and in turn it has repaid you tenfold..."
with strength, stamina and speed. You demand much of it, and yet it has let you push it harder than any of your brothers, and it has flourished under your care. It is not defective. It is the tool Raphael has striven to master, and it has proven itself worth mastering. That, Raphael, is a truth."

Raphael quieted down. Green eyes flicked uncertainly back and forward, the product of thought.

Splinter took the boy's forearm and brought up that they could both see it. "Look at this. It was not Donatello who scrounged the dumps for fitness magazines to instruct him on weights and nutrition, not Michelangelo who craved, found, and restored a bench press, not Leonardo who tracked his own weigh gain. No, this is Raphael's handiwork. This is part of Raphael, born from his passion and drive and his curious genes. And should Raphael require some additional care to flourish, then that is acceptable."

The boy shuddered again. Then he reached out to hug his father, and Splinter held him tightly back and kissed his head and scratched and rubbed his carapace. Shivers and sniffles slowly eased off into calm exhaustion.

Chapter End Notes

Ah, Splinter: equal parts powerful ninja kami guru... and elderly housemom. Housedad? Houserat? Oh whatever.
Raphael slept deeply through the morning hours, and Donatello and Michelangelo stayed down with him. Leonardo alone required no external alarm clock to rise by, but he stayed in place and slipped back off to sleep so that he did not risk disturbing his siblings.

Around noon, the four of them began to stir simultaneously. Donatello rolled, and Michelangelo yawned, and Raphael gradually roused. Splinter slipped carefully off the head of the cot to let Raphael prop himself up.

He left them to begin breakfast preparations.

Leonardo persistently shook Michelangelo until Michelangelo stopped trying to go back to sleep.

"Hey," Donnie greeted Raphael, getting his elbows on the edge of the bed, stifling a yawn with the back of his hand, and slurring: "How's it?"

"Not sure," Raphael hesitated, frowning at himself.

"Just lay back." Donatello patted his bicep. "No moving till I've had a look."

"Kay."

Donatello gave their patient a thermometer and turned on the ultrasound.

"Okay, no temperature," Donatello noted with another stifled yawn as he moved the ultrasound head around, "Mike's prediction was right, that egg got pulverized between your abdominal muscles. It's going to be a little hard for me to estimate exactly how much is left."

"I feel better," Raphael decided.

Donatello gnawed on his lower lip for a moment, and then lifted up a finger as if to say, 'Ding! I have an idea.' He settled down the ultrasound head, and then went to the hip joint and had Raphael stretch to expose it. He pushed his hand up to feel under the plastron.

Raphael considered. "That, uh, that doesn't hurt as bad as before. Like nowhere near as bad."

"I can tell," Donatello agreed, excitement mounting. "The localized swelling's down."

"So there's no infection," Raphael perked up.

"Does that mean it's over?" Mikey asked drowsily as Leonardo fetched them all water bottles.

"Not yet." Donatello withdrew his hand. "We still need to keep checking to make sure it isn't just sitting there getting old; it has to be flushed out or reabsorbed. Do you need a bucket, Raph?"

"Can I have one just in case?" he asked, a little embarrassed. "Cause, uh, last time, I didn't feel like I knew how to hold it in."

"Well if you did you'd be the only one," Donatello mentioned, "seeing as it's probably coming out of your-"

Raphael caught Donatello with a hand over his mouth. "Sorry, ya brain ta mouth filter's gotten a lil wonky dis week," he suggested to his startled sibling.
Leo looked back to them in alarm. "Coffee first!"

Breakfast told the family a great lot about Raphael's condition. He wasn't limping, he wasn't holding himself awkwardly straight, and he ate with an appetite heartier than Michelangelo's.

"You definitely *look* like the egg-binding's over," Donatello mentioned of a brother who was pigging out on Cheerios.

"Egg-binding?" Mikey asked.

*Dystocia*. Egg-binding. It's an umbrella term for any one of a thousand reasons egg-laying fails."

"There's a whole word for that?"

"I kid you not, it's like the leading cause of death in pet reptiles and birds."

"Seriously?"

"Mnhmm! Tons of data on it for me to mine."

"Can we not talk about biology in the kitchen?" Leo requested politely.

Raphael didn't say anything, focusing on those Cheerios, but perhaps he felt a little mollified that his wasn't the only body in the world making eggs it needed help dealing with.

Over the next few days, Raphael bluntly reported he'd managed to pass out 'tapioca pudding' while on the toilet, but, he said, it wasn't nearly enough to account for the entire egg.

Splinter daily prayed to both the Kannon Buddha and the Goddess Benzaiten.

They waited anxiously for Raphael to take ill. Instead, they found him back at his bench press, streaked in sweat, thoroughly enjoying himself. Leo tried to tell him he ought to be resting. Raphael told him to go lecture a plant.

"Besides," Raph added with a grin, "should probably convince my body it needs the calories, eh?"

"It's gone," Donatello confirmed on the fourth day. "Completely reabsorbed."

Raphael gave a macho fist-pump. "Told ya I'd eat the damn things," he growled happily, clearly feeling himself again.

"Color me relieved you didn't boil them first," Leo muttered.

"I feel like I missed an awesome conversation," Mikey giggled.

"Let me check through the shell, just to be sure," Donatello said, and they waited through a few minutes more of calibrations and searching. "Gentlemen, it is *gone*. Mission accomplished."

"*Fuck* yeah. Ya gonna have some medicine fah me ta take by the end of the month or whenever?"

"Maybe not that fast," Donatello admitted. "But I'm already working on it, and your body ought to know it's supposed to take a rest."

"That means you report any pain, ASAP," Leo translated.
"Oh yeah, no, I'm done grinnin' and bearin' it," Raphael agreed. "Learned mah lesson."

"Alright. One more thing, and this is going to sound very strange," Donatello precluded.

"Uh oh."

"Doctor's orders: You should masturbate."

"What!?" Raphael busted out laughing, especially because Leo's face went white in mortification. "Dee!"

"I'm actually serious," Donnie instructed. "You secreted a few milliliters of egg filling, which will have thrown the pH off and left behind sediments. You need to flush your system and re-normalize your biochemistry, to prevent major complications like yeast infections."

Raphael squinted at him and then saluted. "Orders received, Doc. Should I start now? Ya gonna wanna take a sample of something?"

Mikey started laughing so hard, especially when Donatello stuffed a sample cup into an unwitting Raphael's hand, saying:

"Somewhere not around us, please."

"Ho-kay then." Raphael began to stand. "Yo Leo, don't let nobody in the bathroom for an hour. Doctor's Orders: Gotta go jizz in a cup."

Leo made a strangled noise to indicate he'd heard.

"Clean up after you're done!" Donatello yelled after him. "The last thing anyone needs is you reeking of dude turtle musk for the next ten hours as some sort of insecurity thing!"

"Yeah can't hear ya, Dee, too busy imaginin' women's beach volleyball!"

"Well," Donnie said after an awkward moment. "At least we have confirmation on his sexual orientation."

"Dude," Mikey eyed him like he was dim, "what planet have you been on?"

Donatello looked over at the person whose initial assumption in all of this had been that the eggs were a result of Raphael and Leo kissing. Then he sighed, shook his head, and patted Mikey's shoulder.
Ninjitsu practice concluded early that day, but not because anyone was lugging around eggs. Donatello had been thinking about chemical distillations on his work bench, and Michelangelo nearly took his head off with a nunchaku. WHAM.

It wasn't Mikey's fault. Nunchaku were very difficult weapons to pull back from a committed strike, and when you were sparring someone you kind of depended on your opponent to actually block. Donnie had missed an easy interception by a landslide. Woops.

Anyway, Nunchaku ranked just after Leo's razor sharp katana as the most dangerous objects in the room. Their harmless appearance and interesting gimmick had long beguiled curious children and unsuspecting parents, but no other type of melee weapon had caused so many hospital visits since antiquity. Not even close. From concussions to gruesome and deadly skull fractures, the European Union might as well as had a Pediatricians Against Ninja Sticks Association. In the EU they were prohibited from being so much as depicted in children's cartoons, and they were banned in numerous states across the USA.

Nunchaku were lethal.

Anyway, starbursts brought him back to reality, and the next thing Donatello was aware of he was kneeling on the ground, Bo and hands raised to instinctively shield his head. His brothers were leaned over him and tried to get their arms under his. One of them had a grip on his shoulder, and someone else was carefully cradling the back of his head and tilting him gently to keep an eye on the site of the impact.

"Holy shell, I'm sorry, Dee!"

"My fault," Donatello groaned, because he knew what his mistake was. Splinter always warned him that balancing Science against Ninjitsu would be difficult, and that there would be plenty of times he'd fall off to one side or the other. "Failed to compartmentalize."

"Ya gonna have a beautiful shiner come lunch time," drawled Raphael as his thumbs felt along the shape of the cheek and orbital bones, looking for fractures. "Gonna need ta chill that somethin' solid."

"Ow, ow, ow. That hurts."

"Yeah, but ya ain't swoonin' no more," Raph snickered. "Good sign!"

"I'll get an ice pack," Leo said. "Get him off the floor, would you?"

"Got it," Raphael said, squatting down.

If Donatello had expected a shoulder up, he sure got the surprise of his life when Raphael scooped him up bridal style. "Raph!" He flailed in alarm, grabbing hold of his brother's shell. Raphael laughed.

"You went down hard," Mikey crooned worriedly, hopping alongside Raphael as the latter carried Donnie over to the side of the dojo and set him down on the bench there. "Are you dizzy?"

"I'm-" Dee was frazzled, and put a hand over his face, "I'm just embarrassed."
"Awww!"

Leo hurried back with a gel ice pack and hand towel. All three brothers fussed over him, carefully applying the cold to his face and bandaging it there without causing him discomfort. One chafed his shell. Another worried a thumb in the muscles at the back of his neck, loosening tendons that'd otherwise end up suffering from whiplash with how fast his head had been thrown back.

"I think that should end practice for today," Leo told them. "I'll tell father. You're okay, Donnie?"

"Everything but my pride," Donatello agreed sadly into the cossetting, face leaning into his palm.

"I'll make your favorite for lunch!" Michelangelo gushed. "Do you want any medicine? I'll get it!"

"Acetaminophen," Donatello mumbled. "Always acetaminophen if there's a chance of concussion of other internal bleeding." He hoped his drug advice stuck with them if they were ever hurt and on their own.

Raphael gave his neck one last rub, pulling gently under the end of the trapezius to keep it from tightening up. Then he squatted down into Donnie's field of view, and grinned knowingly up at him. "Ya embarrassed?" he asked.

Donatello looked at him from between the gaps in his fingers. "I'm the worst ninja in this family."

"What?" Raph snickered. "Don, ya can catch and throw shit with ya feet. X'actly why d'ya think ya 'Da Worst Ninja'?"

"If I didn't have a shell I'd be clinically underweight for my height. I'm always distracted. I have zero athletic physical hobbies. Michelangelo skateboards, you weight lift, you and Mikey wrestle and practice jujitsu, and Leo balances on one foot for an hour communing with what he and Dad would have me believe is the astral plane."

Raphael squinted at him for a long moment as if he found this argument absurd, but he didn't immediately say anything.

Donatello looked down at his lap and wormed his toes together. Even his hands looked less biologically adjusted for labor. Palmistry might have been a pseudoscience, but Raphael's hands were very broad across with extra meat to the thumbs and hypothenar regions, good for gripping. Donatello's hands were long, oval shaped, and looked delicate by comparison.

"Yo, listen, Dee, Ninjitsu ain't about any of dat shit. Ninjitsu's about havin' somethin' up ya sleeve or in ya playbook ya enemy ain't never seen and didn't manage to plan for. Ya realize what I got? One hell of a punch. Dat's a little too straightforward for a very good ninja, dontcha think?"

Donatello stared, flabbergasted, a blush creeping up in his face. It was one thing to ask him to fix everything, thank him, and call him one-off words like 'genius.' Those kinds of complements were without specificity, detail, or comprehension of all the work he put into things. Th-this was very
different. This had never happened before.

"So I say you're the best ninja, and Leo can go cry himself a river and drown in it, cause you're a swiss army knife of unexpected plays. Though, eh, ya should eat more, ain't gonna lie there."

He jabbed Donatello in the plastron.

Now embarrassed, on cloud nine, and feeling good from head to toe, Donatello wordlessly bobbed his head. He was too giddy to even say 'thank you.'
The Need for Cheese

Chapter Notes

Omigod Raf, look at how happy you made this adorable Donnie. Looky!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Raphael stood, and gently touched foreheads with Donatello (on his uninjured side). Then he walked over to his bench press, and came back with one of his fitness magazines, and flicked through it. He passed it to Donatello. "Most guys as smart as you don't do tha fitness thing," he mentioned. "S'good for ya brain ta practice Ninjitsu. Science says so. See? Article cites papers fah ya ta read and everything."

Donatello snickered red-faced to himself as he took the magazine and nodded again.

Raphael patted his shell. "I'mma box while you compose yaself, if ya don't mind," he said. "Dat way if ya pass out from a concussion I ain't left ya alone, but I can still pretend I'm the tough guy."

Nod nod nod!

Raphael went to guzzle half a bottle of water, and Donatello had to stare unseeing at the magazine for a bit to 'compose' all his happy emotions, because it would have been unthinkable not to immediately attend to the fitness article with utmost devotion, regardless of whether he knew everything it contained better than the author did!

Eventually his brain slowed down enough to to hook on the first paragraph, and he ingested the simplified, upbeat, fitness-loving tone of the article with care. Hee! He didn't make a mental list of all the chemicals that weren't listed therein; he focused on what was present, and on the bonding moment it had just given him with his brother.

"I think I've composed myself!" Donatello notified Raphael afterwards. Raph grunted. "Thanks for the article, by the way! I'll go see if lunch is ready."

"A'ight. Keep ya hand on da wall when ya walkin, ya did take a solid hit back there."

"Got it."

As he headed out, Donnie paused in the threshold and smiled back into the room behind him. Raphael was back in his own, fully focused on that punching bag. Bunched biceps, steady stance, quick footwork, veins visible to increase blood capacity during an active workout regimen; Raph vented heat even in the chilly underground environment of the Lair. There was no sign of the emotional hurdles he'd been going through. No sign of alienation from his body or even anger with it.

Those would have been common psychological responses to the kind of shock he'd just endured. Instead, it looked like Raph was going to make it through all this unscathed, more eager to push himself than ever. He looked happy. Dee admired for a bit, proud.

Now that they knew about the intersex factor, Donatello was nearly positive female sexual hormones had rounded out Raphael's already impressive testosterone to make for the perfect exercise cocktail.
Thanks to the ovaries, there were six times the male level of growth hormone for stamina, there was progesterone and estrogen for rapid healing and short recovery times, and there was still clearly tremendous testosterone for bulking. Raphael was not lean. His body could shred through fat and carbohydrates the same as protein, giving him a better metabolism for foods like pizza than Michelangelo.

With these fresh insights, Donnie finally had an explanation for why Raphael could push himself as hard as Raphael did. He was the right brother to have taken an interest in lifting!

But Donatello wasn't sure he ought to actually tell Raphael about it. These hormone details were interesting to Donatello because they explained what had once been a mystery. Raphael probably wouldn't be half as excited. It might be weird for him to be forced to attribute some of his physical fitness to 'female hormones.'

He might have looked alright on the outside, but basic psychology ought to tell Donnie that Raphael's skin was thin right now. They'd need to keep an eye on him. Mikey would need to keep an eye on him, and Donnie would have to warn him not to tease for a bit. Leo would need to be supportive without saying the wrong things. Donnie would need to keep notes.

Maybe in a few years, if everyone was more secure.

Besides, Raphael wasn't entirely oblivious he was a little different. He tracked his own routines and he knew how much punishment he could take and that it was more than Leo or Mikey (and obviously more than Donnie).

WHACK.

"Nice roundhouse!" Donatello called as he turned to exit, and Raphael ducked in surprise, grinned wide, and waved.

Raphael had gone back to his regular self so fast that when Donatello called him in for an ultrasound, it almost seemed to spook him, like he'd been trying to put the whole experience of the eggs away as a bad dream so he didn't have to think about them.

Leo came with him and patted Raphael's shell like he was trying to say he understood.

"Nothing this month, not so far," Donatello finally announced. "I didn't expect anything; usually there's a rest period between clutches for every species."

"So, next month?" Raphael asked.

"I'm not actually sure," Donnie admitted. "That would match a human cycle, but unfertilized eggs are a big source of nutritional waste. Turtles can range, from being very regular, to laying them once in their lives and never again."

"S'better ta screen. S'better I don't... ya know... forget about it."

Donatello hesitated.

Leo suggested, "Just don't get crushed by the weight of thinking about it too much."

"Talkin from experience?" Raphael asked, and Leo shrugged gently. Leo was a little better with Raphael, lately.
"The eggs actually helped me figure out something important," Donatello segued gently. "I tested the calcium content and they must have been paper thin."

Leo grayed. Raphael frowned. "Really?"

"Yeah. We are lucky they did not rupture on their own because I would have panicked and gone in after them. We need a lot more calcium than we're getting. A lot. That's why pizza and cereal tastes like seventh heaven to us, it's our body congratulating us."

"Well, damn. I even take whey powder."

"I know, right? Good thing you do! I'm researching other ways we can intake calcium, but, guys? I'm very serious. It's going to affect our shells, our height, everything about health. Let's abuse our lactose tolerance."

Leo nodded curtly. "I'll talk to father."

Raphael lifted a hand, imagining that conversation: "'Dad. We need more cheese.'"

Chapter End Notes

Splinter *Looks in pantry for snack. Sees it is filled from top to bottom with cheese. :O ....*  
Mikey "Donnie said we needed more!"
Splinter *Hearts blooming everywhere around him, standing there in shocked awe, reeling.*

They really are your sons, dad!
We are nearing the end of Part One of this story.

For Part Two, we're going to take a short break from gender issues and medical procedures, both for ourselves and for Raph to believably get some background healing done in. There's only so much SCIENCE you can take in one sitting!

Plus! We need our feels to have time to get all raw and sensitive again for a very, very dark opener to Part Three.

"Okay," Donatello said, finally leaving the lab sometime about an hour prior to dinner, and holding aloft a glass of brown liquid he was stirring. "This smells like, looks like, and probably tastes like turpentine. If Raphael dies, it's my fault."

Raphael straightened up from the couch where he'd been neck and neck with Mikey in Mario Carts. "Gotta bail," he said, tossing the controller to Leo, who always sucked at Bowser and was going to lose, but oh well. He got up and rounded the couch, hurrying to Donatello.

"Is that it?" he asked, looking at the tumbler. "For the shells?"

"Yes, and it's oily and disgusting, so I threw in aspartame and grape flavoring." Donatello passed it to him. "But it won't actually kill you, promise."

It had been two months, and the ultrasound had picked up on two small nodules. More eggs. Raphael hadn't been able to sleep that night, he'd just laid awake in his hammock and lifted small weights from dusk till dawn, trying to think about nothing. His arms were still sore, actually.

"Even with the shells gone, are they still going to get big enough to hurt?" Raphael asked.

Donatello didn't know. "We'll find out this time around. One thing that shouldn't happen is your body shouldn't tense up trying to shove them out."

"Least that." Raphael drank.

Mmph.

Yup, that grape flavoring went a long way. Not quite long enough.

"All of it?" he asked Donatello, who couldn't help but laugh. Raphael covered his nose so he couldn't smell it, and drank the rest.

That night, he had to lift again, not because it was good for him but because it was shutting out the noise in his head. He didn't want to think about eggs, or about the one month thing, because 'periods' were something women had, and if he had to hear the word again, he was going to kill-

His door cracked open.
"Raphie!" Mikey scurried in and came up to his hammock. "It's the Monster Under My Bed Which Doesn't Exist Cause Mikey We've Been Through This!"

"Get outta my-!"

But Michelangelo climbed on top of him, and Raphael knew if he tried to throw him off he'd only end up dumping himself. He leaned back to counterbalance, and Mikey climbed in and went flush against him like a blanket.

"Excuse me," Raphael growled. "Get off. Ain't enough ya botherin' me during da day, ya gotta-"

"You'll protect me, right?!" squeaked a terrified brother, heart racing audibly through his plastron.

Raphael slumped angrily and dropped his head against the hammock. Then he sighed, reached out, and fed his free weight onto the shelf. "Yeah Mike." He draped that arm over Mikey's shell, and settled into sleep. "I'll protect ya."

Daily ultrasounds kept them up to day. The eggs grew to about the size of chicken eggs, stopped there, and disappeared quickly afterwards.

"Crucial structures for creating the exterior form of the egg are missing," Donatello explained. "The first layer of calcium isn't visible, it's just for structure, and without it the eggs are left exposed and the body concludes they're failures."

That was fucking great news. So that meant more turpentine with grape. Raph swallowed it each time, and sat as still as he could for the ultrasounds. Donnie refined his formula, and soon the eggs were barely showing up as blips, snuffing out nearly as soon as they'd started.

He was twenty-eight days regular. On the dot. That was a perfect human cycle, with an ovulation from both ovaries each time.

Sometimes, when Raph took his medicine, he was over-the-top grateful for it and barely noticed how horrible it was plopping like an oil spill down his throat. He was just relieved the problem was manageable. Other times he went to take it, he just got pissed staring at it swirling in the tumbler, and had to stomp around a bit before drinking it, because everything about needing it offended him. Everything about himself, and Donnie, and everyone else offended him. It was a begrudging, angry fight to choke it all down, gulp by disgusting gulp.

Donnie told him he'd be figuring out how to make soft gels out of it, but it would take some time.

If only the taste was the worst bit.

He finally heard it. Barely, when they thought he'd left the room, the whisper of three mocking letters shared from one brother to another:

"P - M - Eesssssssss! Am I right?!"

He stopped cold.

"False," Donatello said while mashing video game controller buttons. "Even if Raphael menstruated, which he does not, PMS symptoms occur the week before menstruation and last only six days,
which isn't even close to right now. If he has any type of cycle, now would actually be when testosterone is highest."

"Which means he will murder you, Mikey," Leo added serenely over a book of Haiku, "and then possibly molest your corpse."

Terrified Silence.

"Unless you clean the couch," came Donnie's whirlwind hustle.

Raphael had to escape because he was halfway between 'murdering someone and molesting their corpse' and breaking down to laugh (or, shit, cry) as loud as he possibly could. He retreated to the dojo, he mauled that punching bag until it swung back and hit him. He sagged into it, wiping his face of MANLY EYE WATER, and taking deep breaths to try and calm down.

*Th-thanks guys.*

"Hey Raph?" Mikey asked, coming in to peer over him while Raphael was at the bench press.

Raph pressed the weight out, holding it aloft. "Yeah?" he asked.

"Are we not allowed to make jokes anymore about all that stuff?"

"I'm missin' half a conversation here, Mikey," he lied. *Go away and don't bother me.*

"Is it off-limits to call each other girls?" Mikey didn't take the hint. "Like Leo for reading poetry."

Raph had been thinking about it. He brought the weight down.

"Or me for my fab disguises. Or you for being so sensitive."

"Sensitive?" Raphael growled. "Depends if ya actually jokin' or not."

"Are you joking when you call me gay?" Mikey asked.

"Uhm. Y-yeah, Mike."

"Cause you sure never sound like it's a nice joke."

"Yeah, well, I ain't nice. What's it matter? Ya not actually gay."

Mikey shrugged. "You're not actually a girl."

Raphael breathed out through his nose. He raised the bar again. "Like *one joke at a time,*" he growled. "Ya go overboard, or act like you believe the shit commin' outta ya mouth, I'm not pullin' punches."

Mikey lit up like a happy sunshine. "Kay! *You lift like a girl!*" he squealed and bolted away from Raphael's half-hearted kick.

*PMS.*

He'd have to learn to laugh at it.
"Can I talk ta ya?" Raphael asked rather late at night, swiveling the computer chair around and dropping an impressively clean brand new violet scarf on his shoulders.

Donatello blinked, pushing aside his keyboard and wrapping himself in a present he knew better than to actually comment on. "Sure. What about?"

"Well..." Raphael shrugged a little. "Two things. First is: Kinda wondering if... I could ask ya ta explain the long of it all for me."

Don hesitated. "The long of... what's happened to you?"

"Yeah," he finally answered, backing up to sit on the edge of one of the work tables.

Donnie hesitated and then put his things aside, organized them into piles, and turned fully towards him. He crossed his arms over his chest and thoughtfully folded a hand over his mouth. "Was there some question in specific you wanted to start at?"

"What actually am I?" Raphael asked. "Calling me a dude for the sake of normalcy's one thing. But what's the real truth? Am I female?"

"You are nonbinary. You're intersex. It happens to humans sometimes, too."

Raphael wrinkled his nose. "Not often, I'd imagine."

"It's as common as red hair."

"Really?"

"Mnhmm, about one in fifty. The actual number may be higher. It's not as obvious, and... fifty years ago people didn't talk about things like this. If anything looked wrong from the outside, doctors would just surgically edit the children's genitalia at birth, either according to whatever it looked closest to, or according to parent preferences. Parents didn't often tell their children. Once DNA tests became easier, they used those."

"And that was bad? Sounds like their parents just wanted ta give em normalcy."

"You'd think that, but it had the reverse effect. Turns out nobody who'd been assigned the right gender really needed to think about it before puberty, but everyone who did not agree with the gender their parents assigned them were being lied to and forced into a role that freaked them out. Remember what your own genes say, and remember you do not feel like a girl. What if someone had done a DNA test on you at birth and gone 'well no this is wrong' and lopped off your penis and cut..."
an entryway?"

"O-oh." Raphael thought about that. "I'd have grown up into the same person?"

"Kinda. You'd have been different based on what people were expecting of you. Splinter's said he'd have raised you the same, but I can't the same for every Asian family. Halfway through thirteen years old, your pink dresses and bows would have started to feel really weird. Especially with how easily—and I should put that in quotes, because I know how hard you work, so 'easily'—you put on muscle."

"Yeaaah."

"Anyway, it's now recommended to wait until the person has gone through puberty and can figure out what, if anything, they want to match with."

"How's it happen ta humans? Ya said mine was caused by mutation."

"Well... Are you actually ready for the long of it? Cause it's long."

Raphael nodded. "I wanna know. I know that means ya gotta tell me lots of background shit, even just so I'll understand."

"Okay." Donatello leaned forward and clasped his hands. "People think of genes as a master plan, but take one listen to Leo and then tell me that plans are always perfect. See, your genes don't know what male or female are. They don't even know what ovaries or testes are. Your sex isn't determined by your genes, it's determined by the chemical bath which organs grow in. If there are different levels of chemicals over time, or in different areas of the body, or if the mother herself has strong hormones, the baby will end up with variations in sex identity between its different organs. Brain included.

"Now your different genes are supposed to control the chemical bath. Masculizing genes like the human Y chromosome, for example, code for some proteins which—if nothing goes wrong, if nothing in the surrounding environment is wrong, if it gets formed right and placed right—will cause a bit of testosterone and other chemicals to form in the gonads, which will cause the gonads to develop into testes, after which they'll produce more and more and more of the same 'masculizing' chemicals.

"If any one of a million things go wrong, if, for example, the gene for coding absorption of certain nutrients through the bloodstream is 2% wrong, and that causes the transport mechanism for hormones from the testes to the external genitalia to be inefficient for an important week period in fetal development, suddenly you have a male born with a slightly open penis. That's fine, that can be surgically closed. But it's a very mild example of an intersex issue. And not all intersex issues are 'mild.'

"Today people are more sensitive to the realization your brain can also have a very different perception of your gender than your body. Whether that's caused by strictly intersex issues or something else, it's what Trans people experience. Gender dysphoria."

"Is that what I am? Trans?"

Donnie gave a so-so wave of his hand. "You wouldn't be completely wrong if you claimed to be trans, but it would be more correct to say you are intersex. Nature did intend you to be male despite what was written in your genes."

Raphael wrinkled his nose and was quiet a moment, like he wasn't sure if he believed that. After a bit, he asked, "What's exactly in my genes?"
"Well, quick overview: Humans have a default sex—female—which occurs as a result of the default chromosome, the 'X' chromosome. Human females have a pair, XX, of which one is technically unnecessary and gets disabled pseudo-randomly. Then there's this small, extra, masculizing gene, Y, which only human males get. Males have XY, and the Y codes for testosterone."

"You're the only one of us with that Y," Raphael recalled.

"Yeah and what's with that?" Donnie asked the universe. "The 'X' encodes for height and intelligence, by the way!"

Raphael snickered.

"Remember though that the X is the default, and all human guys already have one—need one! Heck, technically human guys have as many active 'X' chromosomes as human girls do."

"So ya basically saying X genes ain't fighters. If 'male turtle' was already decided by the time they showed up, then, fine, they went with the flow. X's ain't what turned me part female."

"Exactly. And a 'Y' showing up in a woman would have done a lot more 'fighting.'"

"Cause Y's the 'extra stuff' that shoves the human off default female hormones to male." Nod. "So what's up with turtle genes? They ain't like that, ain't X's and Y's?"

"Turtles are the opposite of the humans, the 'default' sex is male and the default chromosome is Z, so that means males have ZZ, with one deactivated Z. By default, turtles produce testosterone, and they produce a bit of a protein that turns some testosterone into estrogen. Then there's a small, feminizing gene, W. If a turtle has ZW, the W will build more of that protein that turns testosterone into estrogen. More estrogen during sex determination equals female."

"And I have that gene," Raphael finally got it. "The W gene, the extra stuff, the non-default gene, the fighter gene."

"Yes. You're ZW. Mikey, Leo, and I are all ZZ. But that doesn't necessarily mean we're safe from what happened to you."

Raphael blinked. "What? Why?"

"Temperature, Raph."
"Y-ya mentioned that before," Raphael recalled. "All turtles are male if it's cold, they're all female if it's hot?"

"Yes. See, human genes try to do their thing no matter what else is wrong or right. Turtle genes are more like tiebreakers. If the temperature isn't enough to tell the turtle whether its supposed to be female or be male, there's a tie. The genes switch on to break that tie. My guess is you developed a four chambered heart and became warm blooded, your temperature went from similar to your surroundings to much, much, much higher, and your W chromosome activated extremely late.

"With all your organs now developing differently according to some half-human time table, there was enough time for your gonads to produce some concentrated estrogen and to start making eggs instead of sperm, but the transition was incomplete. For whatever reason, your gonads did not buy into the idea they were supposed to stop making testosterone. You didn't end up ambiguous on the exterior at all. You don't even have a short tail.

"A short tail?"

"Female turtles have short tails. The tail's practically a reproductive organ; it's purpose is to give a male turtle safe storage, reach, and flexibility. None of which the female turtle requires."

"We need to start wearing pants."

"It's the only thing I can be sure of is masculine! I don't have a female turtle around to know if they're curvy like human females!" Donatello snickered. "Anyway, the story doesn't end there. "Human body temperature is a lot hotter than the narrow window of temperatures where turtle genes act like tie breakers. That hot, and all our bodies should have done the exact same thing yours did, which was start making those proteins which turn testosterone into estrogen. If we were all still in that temperature-sensitive window, we all ought to have flipped female."

"Except maybe you. Cause of the 'Y,'" Raph realized, suddenly visibly concerned for his bros. "But... Doesn't seem like Leo or Mikey have the same egg problem."

"No, it doesn't," Donatello agreed, leaning back thoughtfully. "I don't actually know how fast we mutated, or what rate our bodies heated up at. Theoretically it's possible we were at the exact right right temperatures for the exact right window of time, but that seems a weird coincidence. More likely is that once we became half human, our temperature sensitive window changed. It was now centered on our current body temperature, so—being warmblooded and able to stay a stable temperature on our own—our turtle sex genes suddenly became important again. Mine, Mikey's, and Leo's all said 'business as usual.'"

"Mine said 'hold da phone, it said go left, now it says go right.'"

"But late," Donatello stressed. "Very late."
"Not late enough. Hnh. Ya said somethin' about it not being like a hermaphrodite?"

"Oh. Hermaphrodites are very rare and almost always genetic chimeras. That's when two eggs fuse together and you end up with half your cells from one plan and half from the other—if those two plans are different genders and conveniently happen to split you through one of your sex organs, you can end up with an ovarie that has some testicular tissue on it, or vise versa."

"And how common is that?"

"Eleven people. Ever. Since the start of written medical science."

"Okay, so, way, way rarer. But you said those organs ain't even 'functional' then."

"They're not in the right place, the rest of the plumbing's not right, the chemical bath both gonads grow in is a mix of both plans' hormones, the hormones fight for expression, and one type of tissue struggles on at half-efficiency while the other basically gives up. There's never been a case where both types of tissue are genuinely functional. There was a case of a boy in China a short while back. He'd been split down the middle, one ovarie, one teste. His parents couldn't accept the idea they actually had a girl, because you know the whole Asian culture thing with sons. He was, like, eleven. So they performed an operation to make him 'normal.' I've seen no follow up; I got the impression they were very traditional and this would all be getting swept under the rug for them."

"I can... imagine dat feelin' nice ta start but hauntin' a person anyway." Raphael dwelt on that for a moment. "So, why'd ya ask me for a sperm sample?"

"To see if there was any sperm in it. I wanted to definitively rule out the hermaphrodite thing because, you know: Mutagen, aliens, magic; I'm always very thorough, and I wanted to give you the best possible advice about what hormones your sex organs were producing. If you were like that Chinese boy, and had a working teste, you deserved to know. But the sperm count was zero. That coupled with knowing you've had two eggs each and every time you've ovulated pretty much tells us you have two decently formed ovaries who are completely sure they're male but, fine, if biology insists, they'll make these stupid eggs, whatever."

"Well. As long as they ain't happy about."

"There's no possible way your adrenal gland compensated for perfectly healthy male external genitalia; your ovaries are sure they are male. Whatever that means. Never tell them the odds."

Raphael was a little grim, but maybe a little cheered by how factually albeit gently Donatello was taking the learning material.

"Do you have any other questions?" Donnie wondered.

"Those eggs... do they, ya know, would they even work? Ya said the ovaries are pretty messed up."

"Ninety percent sure they'd be sterile. But then we're genetic hybrids, there's a good chance we're all already sterile. Like when you mate a horse and a donkey and get a mule. Besides, what would we be having sex with to test? Humans? I somehow don't think they're going to approve. Red eared sliders? Uh... not going to fit."

Raphael snorted.

Donatello was quiet a moment, and then said, "I guess the answer to that's not actually important. For a guy in your position, to suddenly have this chunk of your identity flipped on you, it sounds like it would be extremely normal to have some kind of deep, primitive, anxious fear, this need to know if
it's even possible for you ever become pregnant.

"Whether it's because your skin's crawling with a suddenly very personal homophobia, or maybe germaphobia about some vaguely defined source of cross-contamination, it really doesn't matter, you deserve to have fears lingering at the back of your mind alleviated. I've told you about Westermarck effect; your brothers aren't suddenly going to get in a competition to decide who gets to date you. As for sitting on something Mikey's failed to clean—don't think about that one too hard, I try not to—I would tell you there'd be only the barest of risks if you had an external female genitalia and no tail protecting the opening. But with what you've got, the chance of a foreign contaminant getting up a tube designed to expel things out is miniscule; my simulation basically has twenty zeros after a decimal point before any numbers show up. So put your fears to rest. It's never going to happen. Those eggs are duds, and will stay duds."

Raphael huffed out air. "S'no one else in the entire fuckin' world I'da let finish sayin' what ya just said."

"I'm your doctor," Donatello leaned over with a grin. "I get special trust permissions. Right?"

Raphael eyed him.

Donnie snickered. "There has to be someone you can ask the scary questions of, even if they sound crazy in your own head. Besides," he got up and sat next to Raphael. "We only have each other, and that's probably all we'll ever have. It'd be lonely never again waking up to find out I'd crashed on top of my big brother for a few hours because there was nowhere else to sleep. And you'd be horrible to live with if you thought you could never be nice to anyone for fear of looking weak or feminine or whatever. Your only redeeming attribute is your willingness to put up with people falling asleep on you."

Raphael smirked. Then he shifted, and put an arm around Donnie's shell, and hugged him, and Donnie grinned and did the same. They touched foreheads for a moment.

"Thanks Dee." He hugged a little more. "Thanks for everything."

"Sure. Always. Um. What's the second thing you came in here for?"

"I, uh, I want to build a bike."

"A what?"

"A motorcycle. Got nowhere quiet to work. Got a lot ta figure out from scratch. Don't need any advice till after I know what I'm doin, or I'll get annoyed but, ah... Can I have a corner of ya lab?"

Someone else wanted to cause a mechanical object to come into existence? And do their own work on it? Without forcing Donnie to do it for them?

"Dee?"

"Ab-so-lutely."
The turtles were nine, and it was the dead of winter and they were starving. But Dad had a plan, and they'd head out when he got back at sunset.

Raphael lifted his head, pushing his black and white striped bandanna out of the way of his eyes, and looked blearily around the nest. Dad still wasn't back yet. Leo was still seated, and leaning shell-to-shell against Raphael, trying to wait up for their missing father. Leo looked back at Raphael, worried. Raph wasn't worried; Dad could kick anything's butt.

Raphael lifted the edge of their battered rose print comforter, and found two sleepy brown eyes peeking up at him from under the edge of a gray knit hat with shark teeth and googly eyes. "Cold?"

Donnie bobbed his head miserably. Donnie was always cold, and being hungry made it worse.

Raphael reached down, and picked up his brother's feet, one at a time, and pinned them between his legs, and he put Donnie's hands under his armpit. He reached over and grabbed hold of Mikey to roll him back over towards them, adjusted Mikey's baseball cap so it kept his dumb head warm, and then he settled down with an arm over both of them.

Leo gave up his vigil to turn into Raphael's shell, and reorganized blankets and rags and excess clothes until he was satisfied they were all evenly distributed. He threw a leg over Raphael's to help defrost their genius.

Nobody's metabolism was running hot when Dad woke them up to leave, not even Raphael's, who's tended to match his bright red kerchief. They hadn't eaten in twenty-four hours, and they hadn't eaten much before that, and they knew it was snowing up there and snowing hard.

Their extra large puffy jackets would hold off most of the cold, but they still needed to make pants work despite the contrary shape of their shells. Old worn belts made of cotton caught pretty well on the grooves of their scutes.

Leo wrapped Donatello's feet extra carefully, using the puffy cotton lining he'd snipped out of a ruined coat with a box cutter. He helped him stuff each foot into boots. Dee was wearing red, green, and white Christmas stockings up to his knees and white ballerina tights, but nobody ever made fun of that, cause Don needed the insulation. Mikey gave Dee a second hat. Raphael looped two purple scarfs around his neck, mouth and snout so he wasn't breathing in ice.

They crept up slowly topside, hands tight on improvised clubs and knives in their big baggy pockets. The nighttime Christian soup kitchen gave them one boxed meal a piece. They all copied dad, kept their heads low and their hoods fully up, and said "Thank you, Ma'am!" Leo was so sweet he got a pat on the head that nearly scared them all out of their shells.
Mikey almost forgot to wait till they were seated, and Raphael reached over to shove a hand in his face. Not yet, stupid!

Dad discretely pushed one table full into the corner, five seats, five of them, so they were as safe as possible. He also sat right next to Mikey, cause if anyone was going to look around at all the people and decorations and break their cover, it'd be Mikey.

That night, Dad picked the lock on the rear door of a Goodwill, and gave them all plastic bags. He left some crumpled money—mostly coins and ones—on a cashier's desk, and they ran about and picked out four presents each—one for themselves and ones for each other—as he gathered up heavier and more important things which the four of them would be helping to carry home.

Mikey ended up in a wedding dress with a rainbow wig that went down all the way to his hips. Dad told him, yes, he really could have that as his present.

Donnie got them all schoolbooks.

Raphael loaded up on sports stuff for everybody. He spied a Santa hat, which he gave to Dad. Dad actually put it on. Hee!

Leo was missing for a bit but once they were underground he nervously presented them with their brand new Nintendo 64 and waited anxiously to see if he'd selected his mega big Christmas Present correctly. It took them a moment to realize what it was, and they recognized the name and cartridges from their ancient Game Boy. He'd picked out 'Mario Carts.'

Leo was a hero.

They dog-piled on him as Donnie figured out how to plug everything in.

Mikey was the only one who'd made presents before the shopping trip, and when it wasn't his turn to play, he crawled up (still in a dress) to each of them, to pull a ninja mask over each one of their faces. Leo and Raph peeked in a hand mirror, shared a scandalized look and immediately swapped. Phew! Huh. They were sorta nice. Like having hair, but less fake.

"Why would you ever give me Orange!??" Donatello demanded, searching Michelangelo for another color. "Do I look like an orange!??"

"I thought it would keep you warm, like a candle!"
Thank you 1990s live action. You were a cult classic.

It all started with the fedora.

Well, getting his hands on a stained but perfectly functional beige trench coat was arguably the harder feat, since most of their clothing was made of whatever clean fabric they could stitch together. But the fedora was what cemented a restless teenager's rebellious notion that he could get away with roaming topside under dim streetlights with battered leather gloves sewn to hide a couple odd things about his hands.

The first time, he moseyed around getting used to things from ground level. He already knew where the drug deals went down and where college kids tended to end up on the wrong side of a gun. He'd learned that watching from the gutters.

Then things got fun.

Couple weeks in found him waiting at the side of a bus station, newspaper out, sai tucked into his pockets as insurance in case things ever went bad, with shell phone and strip ties ready. The process was this: a quick cellphone snapshot of the crime in progress, a sent message to the police, a few solid punches to the face, and then he'd leave some punk hog tied with plastic strip ties, any additional evidence laid out in front of them.

Raph loved the whole damn process of it. The stake out. The wait. The reading of the paper, Raph liked the paper. Then came the homing in on a problem, like some coke-starved druggie walking too close to a couple. Raph went from a bystander to a panther, creeping up silent behind the commotion.

Bam. As soon as Raph jumped in, the victim would run off screaming, leaving the criminal to him. He loved breaking teeth and noses. He loved the terrified expressions he got on the rare chance someone put up enough of a fight to get a look at his face. And he loved leaving their dazed asses on the concrete sidewalk, to be picked up by the police.

Sometimes he hung out to see it actually happened: The police really did show up, and the criminals really did get carted off in handcuffs. Felt like a pat-yourself-on-the-back moment every damn time, because Raph woulda taken them down regardless, but this kinda, ya know, added that nice rosy smell to it all.

He thought about the bullies, sometime. The ones outside the clinic. Thought about the lanky kid they’d wailed on that night way back at the start of the year.

He wondered if he was kinda looking for them.

Leo was riding his tail so much about sneaking out to 'brood' these days, he hardly got a chance to get topside, but punching bags had nothing on the real deal. So he wasn't giving this up, not until he
had to.

He didn't want to start getting staked out himself, of course, and needing to keep everything secretive taught him a thing or two about ramping up his game. He started taking to the buildings the way he'd traverse sewer pipes underground. He'd climb up to get a bird's eye view on what he was after.

Today it was Purple Dragons.

Raphael knew the jist of what they were: a gang of thugs who enforced a protection racket on street vendors and black marketers up and down the neighborhood. They'd started off above a Chinese Laundromat almost a hundred years ago, and supposedly the higher ups were all penny-pinching old Chinese scrooge-types who just saw this shit as a traditional family business.

There was some big talk about the intermediate guys, and the whole web of them was supposed to know Kung Fu, but all Raph saw any of them doing 'round these parts was showing up in big groups of big guys, holding people still, and punching faces left and right with a form that'd make a boxing instructor sad for them.

They didn't stick to their racket in this part of town, either. They did what they wanted. It was like they thought distant mafia colors would protect them from rivals. Pissed - him - off. But these dudes were a head taller than Raphael with their own solid workout routines, and even if he was secretly stronger, heavier, and better than any of them, Raph couldn't risk messing up. If he got his ass kicked and someone wanted to teach him a lesson, they were going to notice the shell, and then things could get ugly fast.

But just two Purple Dragons? Oh yeah. Oh yeah, that was the bread and butter of Raph's trips topside these days. Just challenging enough to be fun, just easy enough not to be stupid.

So he waited, cell phone up, as the two of them, both in purple hoodies, crept up behind this nice-lookin dame in a bright yellow outfit who was taller'n both of them. Raph's nose wrinkled in disgust. He had a funny feeling this was more'n a robbery. She was walking brisk and careful and didn't even have a purse on her.

Bam, the first one of them made a grab. Raphael captured the evidence, sent it, stood from his lookout post, bolted across the rooftop, and followed them from above. The chick was actually putting up a good fight for somebody who hadn't the strength to take these guys down, and she was trying to get a can of pepper spray out and stomping at the guy's feet. Didn't seem she gave a fuck the other dude had a knife pulled on her, either.

He leaped from the rooftop, sai out and spinning, trench coat catching the air.

Cowabunga.
What Raphael had missed was that there were actually four Purple Dragons.

He felt the oncoming footsteps through his feet, and transitioned from an offensive sai grip to a defensive one to catch the fall of a baseball bat. The second guy grabbed his elbow and Raphael twisted around to throw him away. The bat, though, it came up from below in a home run strike, hitting Raph's elbow and sending that sai out of his hand.

Shit. Partially disarmed.

Raphael turned his shell into the third bat strike, but defending himself forced him to keep his head down. He'd lost his bead on the first two assholes, and they'd peeled themselves off of the ground and rushed back at him hard and angry.

Raphael kept his remaining sai in a defensive grip, blade pointed backwards across the forearm. He slashed out hard with the pommel and scored a long welt across a guy's face, dropping him to the pavement. But the other two Dragons grabbed hold of either of Raphael's arms, and that was a problem. One guy pulled a hand back and punched him with those brass knuckles, repeatedly. Crack. Crack. Crack.

Raphael weathered through it. Tickled a bit. These fuckers had no idea what they were dealing with. He might have been a head shorter than all of them, but he was ten times the monster.

The crew of them seemed to guess he was wearing something, maybe like a stab vest, and started trying to get his coat off. A real growl ripped out his chest; he flew back into motion. He head butted one guy, stomped a foot hard enough to make him howl, threw another guy over his shoulder, freed his arm, punched a dude, and slashed with the tip of his sai. Blood flew, but-

-But then he was hit across the head with that bat, and the world exploded in stars. His remaining sai went missing as he staggered in place. Someone picked him up—that was a feat in itself; Raphael's shell made Raphael heavy—and bodily threw him across the alleyway. He skid on his shell and hit his aching head up against a brick wall, right beside where they'd temporarily 'stored' the chick they'd been stalking.

(Funny story that, apparently they'd gotten her phone away from her while Raphael was fighting them and, instead of running away like any sane person, she'd tried to save the phone. Whereupon she'd been thrown to the ground and had twisted her ankle, and hadn't been able to rise since. Great work, Legs, stellar self preservation instincts there.)

Fuck. Ow. Raphael grimaced and looked up, only to get an eyeful of the chick staring straight down at him, big green eyes wide, hair the color of fire in the lone alleyway light. He blinked. She blinked. Then she shoved one of his lost sai into his hand, and wrapped his fingers around the hilt.

Oh-ho. I take it back, Legs, you're a life saver.

Raphael rolled forward onto his feet, once more tucked the sai against his forearm to block with, and reached into a pocket for a throwing star. He took a single glance up at that alleyway light.

"The fuck is wrong with that guy? Hey, Li! Li, you ever seen anybody so ugly?"
Eh? Oh, yeah. Fedora was definitely gone. Heh. Ugly was gonna break some jaws.

Round Two.

_Fight._

Raphael slipped down the manhole to the high pitched whine of approaching police sirens, leaving four groaning and unconscious bodies strewn out on the concrete behind him.

"Wait!" Helpful Chick's voice followed him from above, but Raphael pulled on the manhole cover knowing it was a solid hundred pounds and there was no way anybody's be following him the second it was shut. Done! He braced his heels on either side of the ladder and slid to the ground. Tires passed over the metal above.

_Get home._

_Get home, get home, get home._

He'd fucked up. He'd nearly gotten his tail kicked. He'd been _seen_, and not just by one coked up kid or fucker high on acid. He'd been seen by four gang members. He'd been seen by a chick who was going to spill everything to the police!

Most people in her position would have recoiled in horror at the sight of him, taken their chances using that sai themselves, or just rolled over and given up, pleading for mercy. Legs had put the weapon in his hands even knowing he'd just taken a hit to the head and after watching a less-than-stellar Round One performance.

Dad was still gonna kill him, and there was no possible way even Raphael could risk sitting on or trying to hide the astronomical mistake he'd just made.

"Where have you been?"

Leo was waiting for him at the door. Of course he was. Couldn't have the decency to be absent the one day Raphael had fucked up and wanted to fess everything to their Dad himself, no, this had to be the day Leo finally decided to run an inquisition.

"Ain't none of ya business, where's Dad?"

"What happened to you?" Donatello got up from the couch and abandoned his game controller to a Michelangelo who was all too happy to take it from him. "Raph, your face-"

"I got in a fight trying to save some chick, where's Dad?"

"You were _topside!_?" Leo exploded to a chorus of Michelangelo demanding, "There was a chick?!" and Donnie asking, "Do you have any other injuries?!"

"I am here, my son."

Raphael gulped but immediately shoved past Leo and Donnie to kneel before his father. "I been going topside to mess up robbers and gang members," he confessed it, straight, all of it. "Been doing it for months, but I ain't ever fucked up like I did tonight."

Master Splinter absorbed this. "What happened?" he asked gravely.
"Misjudged a fight I jumped in. Thought there was two guys, was actually four. Got seen by all of em, all members of the same gang, and got seen by the chick they was tryin' ta grab, too. She had a phone, only I don't think she got a picture. I ain't entirely sure." He ducked his head low. "I'm sorry, Master."

"You're sorry?" Leo whispered from the doorway. "Not for going topside, alone, against all our rules, for months, but just for losing a fight? Raph-"

"Yeah shut it," Raphael growled.

"Your Leader is not wrong," Master Splinter said.

Rebellion died in Raphael's throat. He dropped his head.

"There are many reasons I restrict your missions to those which are necessary or educational. Reasons I permit you only to go in groups. You are vulnerable, my son. Your brothers are vulnerable. You are unready for the true gravity of the consequences that might arise from this..."

"I'm sorry," Raph repeated quietly, biting the insides of his cheeks.

"I know you are. And yet... You have still done it."

"I will get online and put my bots to scraping data immediately; if there's pictures, I'll get them," Donatello said, heading for the lab. "Come on, Raph, I'll-"

Splinter raised a hand. "I must speak with your brother in the dojo, alone," he told them.

"Master," Raphael breathed, and rose to follow.

Chapter End Notes

I'm enjoying writing the turtles at their traditional sixteen year old height of roughly half a foot shorter than April. Thoroughly enjoying it. Milking it, even.
They'd all heard how angry their dad was. The dojo door was only wood and paper. Sensei so rarely raised his voice at any of them.

Head hung low and flushed with shame, Raphael left the dojo at a shuffle. He wasn't a coward and didn't go hide in his room. He went to the refrigerator and got out the water filter to pour himself a drink. Leo was sitting at the table, sharpening his katana. Shrrrk. Shrrrk. Shrrrrrk.

"You saw a girl, bro?"

Raphael found Michelangelo right at his elbow.

"Like... up close?"

"It's kinda the other way around that's screwin me over," Raphael muttered.

Leo coldly interjected: "Win fifty times; lose everything but once; blame is still the gambler's."

Raphael sneered down at his water.

But Mike couldn't be shut down that easy: "Was she hot?"

Raph sat back on his heels. "Was a fuckin' eight or nine, at least," he admitted, glancing back at their littlest brother. "'N that was with like a sprained ankle and her hair all messed up and shit, in bad lighting."

"Holy crap. Really? You're not just screwing with me?"

"I'm not screwin' with ya Mike."

"But... If you had to describe her in terms of chili peppers?" Mikey had to be sure.

"Jalapeño," Gasp. "She was, like, maybe an inch shy of six feet tall in flats, with red hair."

"This happened," Leo's whetstone paused, "because of an attractive woman?"

"Why? Askin' if I've developed another vice?"

"Violent, a liar, sneaks cigarettes; should we add 'thinks with his dick' to the list of-

"That cigarette thing was once, and I could barely see her till I was on the ground, so cool ya jets," Raphael muttered. "Just heard em call her a fine price off ass, n' knew they didn't want her wallet."

"So this was heroism?" Leo scoffed, like he didn't believe it.

Raphael shrugged. "S'taken my aggression out on targets what actually deserve it," he admitted

Leo eyed him, but then seemed to settle back to think.

"Dude, I'm so jeal-ooous," Mikey gushed. "Even if you messed up, uh, good job not letting the hot chick get, ya know."

Raph ducked his head and drank his water, his father's rebukes ringing in his ears.
You are a child, still, Raphael! You are not ready! You have put your entire family at risk, for petty reasons! What if the surface world begins looking for you? Why was this worth the thrill of the hunt to you, Raphael?

Splinter was right. Raphael hadn't been doing anything noble. Raphael had been doing something fun, something he could get angry about, and riled up to enjoy the catharsis of it all. Raphael wasn't Leo, or whatever Leo would be in his shoes; heroic vigilante and people's protector. Raph was more interested in the criminal than the victim.

"'I was being surrounded by four men who were all wearing similar clothing,'" Donatello said suddenly from behind them, striding forward with a print out in hand which he was reading from. 
"'Can you describe the clothing?' 'Yes, they were all in purple, with Asian dragon motifs on the backs and front. I couldn't tell you what ethnicity.'"

"Is that the police transcript?" Leo realized, standing.

"Mn-hmm, but wait I'm almost at the good part. 'Then, all of a sudden, this short black man ran up and began attacking them with some sort of iron club. He whistled to get their attention. I receive the distinct impression he was trying to help me. I'm guessing he ran away when he heard the cops coming because he didn't want to explain himself or thought he might get in trouble. You know, with all that 'Black Lives Matters' stuff? The guys who attacked me were all a lot lighter than this guy.'"

"That's bullshit," Raphael uttered, eyes widening. "I lost the hat. She got a look right at my face. From three feet away, closer'n I am ta you right now. I could tell the color of her goddamn eyes, so she sure as hell noticed I was green and wearing a bright red mask."

"Yeah, well," Donatello passed the transcript off to Leo, "you sure know how to pick your damsels, because this one just got you off scott free. They grilled her for an hour and she stuck to her story."

Raphael sank back on his heels.

"Who is she?" Mikey asked.

"Her name's redacted to protect her anonymity."

Raphael was quiet a moment longer. "D'they find any evidence at the scene? Weapons?"

"They found a throwing star lodged in one of the lights but they're blaming that on the gang members, who allegedly know some kind of martial art," Donatello said. "Why?"

Raphael was quiet a long moment. Then, with guilt and jitters, he slowly eased aside his trench coat, and revealed the lone sai thrust into his belt sash.

His brother's grew quiet.

"You lost a sai," Donatello said, quietly, covering his mouth as he did so.

No one had to rub it in that drop-forged and hand-refined Japanese sai didn't grow on trees. It was already written all over Raphael's face. He'd lost something entrusted onto him by their father, something which he had no means of replacing.

"Bro," Mikey crooned sympathetically, "that is not how you leave a chick your number."

Raphael grimaced, and shrugged the coat back on.
Leo looked back to the police report. He sat down to think.
Mistakes; Everyone Makes Them

Raphael wasn't the only one who sneaked topside; he was just the worst offender.

Now, Donatello knew that if he put together a shopping list of parts he wanted, his family would happily to organize a mission to the dump later that week. 'Missions' to the dump were the fun days, days out from under Splinter, filled with jokes, games of tag, uncovering and playing with with all manner of discarded object, fresh air (comparatively), and convincing Michelangelo that, no, he did not need to bring home that large goose lawn ornament. The worst part about them was Donatello needing to obsessive compulsively wash every inch of himself afterwards, while wheedling his brothers (especially Mikey!) to do likewise.

But sometimes Donnie needed just one teeny mechanical part, fast, or got a tip from one of his text scrapers that a university was throwing out something valuable today. Those days, Donnie didn't want to bother his family, disrupt their plans, or, worse, wait, so he pulled on his rubber boots and slipped out discretely. Besides, Donnie never screwed around at the dump alone; he got his hands on what he wanted, carefully packed it up, and got out.

Now today he really could have easily brought Raphael along and they would have gotten a quick 'okay' to the plan from Splinter (pairs to the dump were usually considered safe), except Hothead had just gone and gotten himself grounded. Sometimes, Raphael. Some. Times.

Not everything could make it to the dump in good enough condition to be salvaged. So Donnie had scrapers all over New York's social media scene, chewing through text and feeding him tips whenever some juicy bit of garbage might be lying in wait. If the junk was good enough, he and his brothers would sneak out to the neighborhood in question and raid the trash cans there.

They'd had a good laugh to learn this raiding-of-trash-cans was something regular poor humans did, especially in rich neighborhoods. They'd drive around waiting for a perfectly good old sofa to be thrown away, or old toys and clothing during spring cleaning. It was called 'Dumpster Diving.'

Well! This Dumpster Diving Donnie was after something sturdier than that, and he slid excitedly down beside a freshly totaled and junked motorcycle, its front end twisted into something unrecognizable by the delivery truck which had gone and obliviously backed up over it. The engine had slipped forward in the chassis and endured some blunt force trauma of its own, but that didn't mean there weren't plenty of parts to recycle.

Raphael was going to love this.

Okay!

He couldn't bring a whole motorcycle home and take it apart there because everyone else would know he'd sneaked out, but he also wanted to salvage more than a single wheel or spark plug, so he rummaged around his things and wrapped a handy dandy thick rug around his arm to avoid cutting himself on torn metal, and then pulled up the front of the motorcycle. He'd roll it along on the rear wheel to the old forgotten maintenance hatch they used to get from dump to sewers, and carefully slide it down stair by crumbled stair.

The motorcycle was deceptively heavy. The broken bulk of it was so awkward he almost didn't feel the cylinder which slammed into his arm, almost dismissed it for a piece of debris, until a lingering
sting and a neurotic paranoia about germs made him look twice.

A syringe hung there, hypodermic embedded in his bicep, tuft of synthetic feather barely visible.

_A tranquilizer dart? Here?_

Donatello started in disbelief at it, trying to put one and one together to arrive at two, despite the utter nonsense of finding a tranquilizer dart in his arm in the middle of a dump in New York City, a place where tranquilizer darts obviously ought not to be. What coot staked out a dump with air-soft rifles and expensive drugs?

_De. Dee wake up!_ The steel ball in the rear of the dart would have depressed the internal syringe on impact. _Whatever was in that dart, it's now inside you!_

Donatello threw the motorcycle down, grabbing ineffectually at the dart to extract it and throw it away, even if the damage was already done. Where was the shooter?! Based in the angle, somewhere to the side, and they couldn't have been particularly far to have landed a dart without audible explosive charges!

_Stop thinking, Dee, it doesn't matter where they are because accuracy of tactical knowledge is useless when you can't afford to fight them! Get your shell underground!_

He whirled towards that maintainable access and bolted towards it.

He skit to a halt in the trash, breathing hard.

Maybe human eyes couldn't have picked it up, not in such bad lighting, but Donatello and his brothers could see a smidgen in the infrared, and Donatello saw two camouflaged shapes above the maintainable shaft. A black net hung across the entryway, loops of it bunched on the floor. Donatello could run for it and try to get around the left side, maybe, but that was assuming neither of the people (people!) above the entrance had alternative means of stopping him.

Donatello grabbed his Bo off his back, turned, and bolted to get out of the dump. He was fast and had a long stride, leaping from piled to pile and vaulting furniture and stacks of tired. That made it one heck of a surprise when another whistle of air and a small hard 'thwack!' against his shell told him he'd been hit with another tranquilizer. Thank god for shells because it bounced straight off, payload spurting harmlessly over his scutes. Whoever was after him sure knew how to aim!

Okay.

He had to outrun his target so he could buy enough time to get a manhole cover off, but that was going to be a tall order. How long did he have? Tranquilizers could drop an ape in ten minutes, but that was wholly depending on what cocktail was inside them. Was this muscle inhibitors? Sedatives? (If he thought about the symptoms, was he going to mess up and miss some very important clues in the real world that there were more men than three?)

Footsteps! He heard footsteps, chasing from behind at a full sprint run! Whoever this was, they sounded spry.

_Move move move move move move-!

A sound like a video game catapult or crossbow came whirling at him from behind, and Donatello dropped and rolled to the side. The feeling of a very large, heavy, and fast-moving object skimmed one scute, and then he was back on his feet again to the sight of a giant weighted bola net hitting a
refrigerator and engulfing it.

AH.

Stop staring!

_Holy Toledo, Dee, these people are equipped! Shake your tail! Move!_
Leet Ninja Skillz; Still Got Em

Donnie didn't look back because he couldn't afford to trip. He reached the dump property fence but lost time in climbing it, and that was when his pursuer must have skid to his knees to aim. Because as Donnie landed on the other side of the fence and a tranquiler skimmed the side of his knee and flew past him.

Another close one.

Donatello turned.

An SUV sitting in a fire zone suddenly threw on its brights. Stunned by drug-induced light sensitivity and flabbergasted by comprehensive planning of this attack, Donatello reeled in place long enough for a tranquiler to hit him right in the thigh.

Donnie turned and ran. The sound of a key twisting in an ignition preluded the SUV rumbling to life, and then it was following him down the street and Donatello had ten seconds to pick an alleyway before the damn thing overran him.

If he'd been Leo he might have realized his pursuers were driving him into that exact alleyway on purpose. In the gloom Donatello stepped straight into a foothold trap—a bear trap—and it snapped shut on his ankle.

A squeal left him, with an almost indignant anger, because this couldn't be happening. It made no sense. Donatello leaned back, jammed his bo into the teeth of the trap, and pried it open, and freed his leg. He looked around the alleyway, saw an air conditioner, and climbed on top of it. His leg throbbed and something in his system was making his arm muscles painfully tight.

Heading up was the first thing he'd done that evening it seemed his pursuers hadn't anticipated. Maybe they'd expected him to get stuck permanently, or double back, or panic. Oh, Donnie was panicking, that was for sure! Panic was Donatello's middle name! He was just very, very, very good at staying in motion while panicking!

The car slammed on its breaks somewhere beyond, backed up, and Donatello was already reaching the parapet of the rooftop and pulling himself up when-

Vwoosh-TCK!

An agonizing, fiery tightness flew over Donatello, locking his muscles down, stealing his breath, his thoughts, his coordination, and making it impossible to scream. If Raphael had been here, Raphael could have muscled through it. Donatello endured through sheer terror. He pitched forward onto the roof instead of falling backwards off of it, and the taser must have been lodged very weakly into the side of his plastron. When he hit the rooftop, the power cord for the electric discharge snapped taut against the edge of the parapet, and that yanked the taser out.

Mildly baked by electricity, and feeling as if he now knew what a seizure might feel like, Donatello gasped for air.

A tiny internal voice screamed to keep moving, but it was paved over by the muck of 'holy shit I was just electrocuted.' He told the voice that movement could wait, that right now he had to remember how to operate his own internal organs. Adrenaline flailed, shrieked, and grew louder through the haze of his disorientation: move Move MOVE MOVE!
Donatello heard footsteps on a fire escape, and even though he was momentarily confused about what exactly that meant, it still terrified him. He pushed himself up to his hands and knees. He grabbed up his bo, and tried to stand, and that was the moment someone appeared on the roof beside him, clad in leather and wearing a motorcycle helmet, with the dart gun leveled at him.

A thousand hours in the dojo left his body able to react, and it did so before Donnie's brain could freeze. He spun the Bo around like a baton to slam with emergency force against the side of the rifle, right at the point where this man's fingers met the handle and trigger finger. The force threw the weapon out and away, to clatter into the void beyond.

Scared and hopped up on adrenaline to fight back the sedatives, Donatello's feet carried him forward and his Bo slammed across this faceless monster's shoulder. Faceless Helmet Man fell off the roof. But. Instead of a splatter of limbs upon concrete, a creak of metal suggested he'd caught hold of the fire escape and broken his fall.

Donatello's brain came back, and he was more terrified of these people than angry or vindictive, so the choice to turn and retreat was natural.

His leg was starting to clench and tighten irregularly, and that meant Donatello couldn't jump to the next rooftop. He didn't have to. He stabbed his Bo into the concrete parapet and he pole-vaulted, and he cleared the gap between rooftops and rolled to a clumsy sprawl as he made the landing.

*Get back up!*

His heartbeat was racing in his temples. His muscles were cramping, and, when he stood up, he was off-balance, disoriented, and over-correcting himself. This was the sedative coming in to play. How long had it taken to work? The full ten minutes? He'd been hit by more than one. And just because it might take ten minutes to render him completely unconscious, didn't mean he'd be able to escape with the latter half of the time.

Why was anyone after him in the first place!? These people didn't look like special ops or military or anything remotely recognizable, they just looked like people—maybe game hunters? Even if they'd known about Donnie and his brothers, why had they seen four monsters and planned a stake out!? Who *did* that!?

Mostly because this situation didn't make any sense, terror was kneading it’s meaty claws around the interior of his chest. These people were herding him like an animal, which meant he had to be smarter than an animal. His brothers! Donatello reached for his shell cell, only to be treated to the displeasure of realizing the taser had effected it. Donatello had made them waterproof, and they should have been able to withstand static and other shocks, so hopefully this only meant a capacitor had been overloaded and needed time to cool off before-

>-Jesus, *Donatello, this is not the time to worry about mechanical devices!*

Crack-whoosh!

With a squeal of rejuvenated terror, Donatello flattened to the ground and another net passed over him, hooked his arm and Bo, and smacked against his shell. He screamed and pulled at it like a panicked deer for a second. Then he slapped himself in the face, shouting,

"Use your opposable *thumbs*, Dee!"
Donatello stood, abandoning his Bo but successfully throwing the net aside.

Why does ANYONE have all this stuff set up just for me!? This is IMPROBABLE!

Though still awkwardly suffering the tinges of paralysis, Donatello could still use his trump card of Ninjitsu training to escape, and did not need a staircase down. He stepped off the parapet, using the least affected of his arms to slide down bricks, catch on to window ledge, and eventually steady himself on the ground.

Then Helmet Guy reappeared with speed and stamina Donatello just didn't understand, skidding into the alleyway beside him and holding that gun, which he'd somehow miraculously recovered, now held with the opposite hand.

Donatello's jaw and shoulders drooped. Bad guys aren't supposed to do that. You kick their butts and then it's Team Rocket Blasting Off Again. You get at least an episode's reprieve. It's in the rules.

Donatello was much heavier and could take much higher payloads of drugs than these people had likely calibrated for, so he was still probably capable of escape. It would be smart to track the barrel direction and turn his shell into the oncoming tranquilizer. Block or dodge it, and it would take time before Faceless managed to reload. He might not even get another shot off; aiming on the run was nearly impossible, and tranquilizer darts from an air gun were silent but not exactly accurate.

Depression somehow kept him from moving. The next dart hit Donatello right in the collar, above his plastron, almost at his neck. He flinched back with a disbelieving sound, a betrayed or disillusioned feeling in his gut, because this was not how anything was supposed to be. This was not how the dump was supposed to be, or the surface world, or its people.

Too hurt and scared to waste time pursuing a fight he wasn’t certain of winning, Donatello turned and ran (limped) out of the alleyway. His gaze was tunnel-visioned on the manhole ahead of him and he skid to his knees to grab at it. It weighed over a hundred pounds. Pull! Pull it up, and get it back on over top of him, and he'd have at least the safety of his home turf and the luxury of darkness. Maybe he'd do something truly desperate, like hold his breath and slide into the sewage canal.

He heard wheels on pavement.

He felt the impact as the SUV slammed into him at about thirty miles an hour. Then he was dragging his scraped and bruised self off the pavement, tears in his eyes, skeleton pulsating with the aftershocks of the hit. The world more than a few feet from his face was just very slightly blurry, which meant he'd lost his glasses.

Leave me alone. Stop it. Please leave me alone.

He pushed himself up to his knees and felt the whisper of something across his face. That was followed by the shock of a plastic noose tightening around his neck.

A scream made it out of his throat; the noose was only tightened enough to hold onto and control his head, and didn't play at strangulation. He grabbed back and up, twisting onto his shell, trying to see what had caught him. He saw a broad thug standing over him with a long pole, like a dog catcher might use. That was what his head was caught in. Donatello grabbed for the pole with both hands, and swung his feet at his adversary. He kicked out a leg, and the thug went down on a knee in surprise, but the pole got jerked to the side and cut welts into Donatello's throat as it jerked his head.
He kicked blindly, hitting the man in the groin to gain complete control of the pole. Donatello dragged himself an inch away and tried to feel with his toes for whatever switch or button controlled the noose.

Other people ran up. Other people with one of those nets in hand, and another of those tasers. The Faceless man had his gun loaded but didn't shoot; he waved the tasers and nets aside and grabbed hold of the pole instead.

"No," Donatello breathed. "Stop."

"Animals don't talk," someone said, and then a firm object hit Donatello in the side of the head.


Then the Faceless Man was crouching over him, still helmeted, with a needle in hand, shouting unintelligible things at someone else. Faceless was probably the ringleader. If that was true, he might be angry anyone could mistake 'blunt force trauma to the head' as a valid method for sedating a person. Did that mean he'd done this before? With animals, or with people, or...?

Donatello felt a stethoscope scraping his plastron, and someone lifted up one of his eyelids and flashed a light in. His wrists hurt, and when Donatello tried to twitch, he realized he'd been tied up with something. What? He nibbled at them. *Strip ties?*

"He'll hold," a woman said, pulling his chin back so he couldn't chomp through his bonds. "We need to gag him."

"Carefully," Faceless said. "He hyperventilates, you pull it out. Blindfold him and put the ear mufflers on."

"What the hell for?" asked a contrary voice. "Just bag him."

"First of all, you're fired. Second of all, reducing stimuli makes sure he doesn't terrify himself into cardiac arrest. If we wanted a cadaver, we could have saved ourselves a shitload of trouble, now couldn't we've?" Pause. "Make sure his airways stay clear, Janet, the gag's got nothing to do with keeping Pistol Whip McGee over here happy."

Donatello was already plenty 'terrified.' He felt them stripping off his clothing, his exercise sleeves with their expensive gel cap knee pads, and his purple mask, and every scrap of gear. Their hands, everywhere, felt like the tentacles of a deep ocean krakan, and he was drowning deeper and deeper and deeper...

"Leo, Leo, come on, Leo!"

Leo blinked tiredly awake, squinting into the darkness. "Mikey?"

"Something's wrong," his baby brother mumbled. "Donnie's not home."

Leo blinked sleepily at him. "Not home?"

"He's not in his lab, the dojo, his bedroom, or the living room. He's not anywhere!"

Leo was pretty sure Donatello was out walking to clear his head (or sneaking to the dump on a miniature mission he thought Leo didn't know about). Still, despite being annoyed with
Michelangelo for interrupting his perfectly scheduled sleep, Leo immediately grabbed his shell cell off the counter top and dialed for Donatello.

Don didn't pick up.
Responsibility; Take It

Splinter stood, ice cold, within the center of the laboratory.

Leonardo was sitting at the computer, piecing together memories on how to get the GPS tracking software loaded up, digesting instructions from a Michelangelo who remembered every step of it but all of them in the wrong order. Donatello had left for the dump that evening, backtracked for the maintenance shaft, paused, and then escaped along an increasingly erratic route that dead-ended in an alleyway and stayed there.

"Th' hell is everybody?" growled Raphael, who paced the house and finally found them. "Thought ya had a mission ta plan for-" The sight of anybody but Donatello at Donatello's computer, especially without Donatello's over-the-shoulder helicoptering, cued him in. His face dropped. "Where's Donnie?" he breathed.

"Nobody knows!" Mikey turned back to him with a wail. "Do you!?"

"He went topside to salvage something," Leo added. "His phone is still there, but he isn't."

Raphael stared stunned between the two of them, and then looked to Splinter like he was asking for Splinter to somehow deny it and, through sheer parental magic, make the absence undo itself.

"I told you, my son," Splinter whispered, "that you and your brothers were vulnerable."

Raphael reeled; staggered, glancing repeatedly from parent to absent sibling, he turned and clumsily fled the room. He must have wavered there before recalling he was both grounded and unbriefed. They eventually heard his door slam shut behind him.

Splinter performed the reconnaissance himself. He left immediately, before the evidence could vanish or grow obscured, following one son's footsteps out to the dump as he forbade the others from leaving the Lair.

His nose led him to his first clue.

There were traces of two human men around the mouth of the tunnel, and signs of some quickly installed screws that may have supported devices. Footsteps were hard to track amid so much visual clutter and strong odors. Outside the dump were burnt rubber streaks on the pavement and sidewalk. A vehicle had been involved.

Droplets of blood led Splinter up an alleyway wall, and a three-toed footprint in red told him his limping child had made a vault to the next rooftop. It was there he found a heavy black net made of synthetic fiber and large round weights. Underneath it was Donatello's phone and Bo.

He'd been trying to call for help.

Raphael came out of his room, pumping a weight. Exercising. With Donatello missing and Father topside during the day, and with tension wound tight as a violin string around all of them, Raphael was weightlifting.

Leonardo remained silent.
"Hey," Mikey smiled all wrong, offering him a plate of food.

Raphael looked down at it. And then he dared, he dared utter the unforgivable: "It ain't my fault."

Leonardo whirled to his feet, shoulders raised, growl rattling in his throat.

"I ain't never gone to the dump while-!"

"TAKE RESPONSIBILITY!" Leonardo roared, larynx vibrating. "Who has been topside messing with gangs!? WHO HAS BEEN SEEN!?!"

Raphael whirled on him, puffing up. "You fuckin' take that and-!"

"YOU THINK WITH YOUR BICEPS!!" Leo boomed. "Ten thousand times you were told, and NEVER LISTENED!"

"Like you ain't evah done anythin' when Dad ain't lookin'!" Raphael advanced on him, arms spread. "Like you're some kind of saint!?"

"You don't CARE ABOUT US!" Leo screamed. "You do EXACTLY what you want the SECOND you can get away with it, and you DON'T CARE HOW ANYONE SUFFERS! You don't care about ANYONE! Not even the people you were RESCUING!"

"Fuck YOU!" Raphael threw a punch, and Leo caught it, and they ended up slamming into the wall and grappling. "I'd have nevah hurt-!"

Leo did not conserve air to fight; his voice was hoarse and enraged. "Donnie is MISSING! Swallow your fucking EXCUSES and live in the same world as everyone else!"

Raphael recoiled, face locked in a sneer. Tears slipped down Leonardo's face. He breathed in hard and fast, trying to stifle them as signs of weakness. "Our rules exist for a reason, they're to-!"

"-keep us all safe," Raphael whispered, violently shaking, anguish leaking out in a nova around nettles and armor, guilt and reality both finally making some dent.

The front door opened.

They looked to their father, and to the Bo he cradled in his arms.

It was the worst moment of their lives.

Donatello woke up in a heavy black canvas bag with the top unzipped. People were craning over him. A woman in a lab coat was excited, and feeling his arms and legs up like she was appraising a horse, whispering delighted remarks to herself. Words were so many jumbled sounds.

Lab Lady wanted to see his eyes, and she was all smiles but they were the wrong kind. They were like how Mikey smiled at food. They were like how Donatello smiled at beakers. It was unclear whether her terrifyingly intense enthusiasm was of the 'I need this for my aquarium!' or the 'I need to vivisect this!' variety.

She sexed him. She really did, just—whoop!—one thumb under the cloaca and a set of gloved and lubricated fingers up into it. "Male!"
Donatello wanted to shriek that she now needed to register as a sex offender for inappropriate contact with a minor. He could imagine a therapist with a doll: ‘Point to where the bad lady touched you.’

The hunting crew could tell he was conscious, and they bared his thigh and rested their weight on his knee and hip to hold him steady. Donnie saw the needle coming. The depths of despair rose up in his throat, crinkled his brow, and gushed out through his nose in a moan of, 'Please no, don't put anything else inside me,' but then the tip went into the interior vein of his thigh, and the plunger was pressed slowly down, and the full dose of whatever that was began swimming lightning fast through his body with every pump of his heart.

It took the pain away, this time. Come to think of it, was there some diazepam in it? It didn't feel like ketamine anymore. So whoever had prepared it was used to mixing humane tranquilizers for live animal capture.

Huh. Weird.

Doesn't it matter that I can talk?

...Obviously you missed that day of ethics class.

They pulled his blindfold back on, and someone pat his flank like they were Steve Irwin with a sedated alligator ("ain’t he a beauty!"), and they zipped him back up in that coarse bag, alone, with a courteous mesh weave on the sides and top so he could breathe. Probably like the kind of bag you'd take your pet to the vet with. Just bigger.

He was drowning again, under wave after wave of muffled pressure. He felt the SUV accelerate and break unusually fast. Then there was a bump akin to driving over a curb.
On an utterly ordinary Sunday afternoon, April stopped the car, threw it into park, locked the doors, and depressed the parking break for extra insurance anyone who tried to steal it would give themselves away before the car actually moved. Because who actually used parking breaks? No one. She took the key out of the ignition and the dark alleyway went very quiet.

Quiet except for the soft whimpers coming from the trunk.

Slowly, after taking a minute to bask in the afterglow of all that adrenaline, April released the seat belt and got up into a crouch to squeeze between the front and middle seats, back to where the rear bench had been taken out and a long black bag was strapped down with bungee cords. She unlocked the zipper, took a deep breath, and pulled it down. Vvvwwpp.

Within was a dark, smooth shape bound in cloth. Reaching inward, she felt unusual skin, smooth and glossy like border-less lizard scales. Hmm. That shape there was the dome of the head. Then the neck, where she could feel his whimpers. Her hand was pricked by the edge of a strip tie, and that was how she found and closed her fingers around his hands.

Three fingers. With an unexpectedly narrow palm, actually.

"Jesus. You're real."

She lifted a hand and scrambled at the roof light. Click, click, there! Illumination fell, and she looked down to a strikingly green skin color, the visibility of a human thumb and fingernail—all green—and narrowly bowed shoulders.

Blindfold, get the blindfold off.

The eyes she uncovered were brown instead of green, but, suddenly the previously shapeless head became recognizable and human. There was a muzzle to it, yeah, a snout of sorts, with a pointed tip and flat nostrils. But those eyes—a person's eyes—looked up with her with wide, dilated pupils, full of dazed and fearful thoughts.

"I'm not going to hurt you," she promised, pulling the gag free. "I'm not with those guys."

The mouth was wide, but there were human lips to it. He was still crying.

"Can," she hesitated, "can you understand me?"

The crying rasped off to silence. A tongue, pink, ran along the lips as the the throat bobbed repeatedly, swallowing. The edges of the mouth were raw where the gag and saliva had chafed them. Was he dehydrated?

She looked about herself for anything to give him. There were water bottles stashed under one of the seats, branded with Mountain Spring Water and pine trees. She grabbed one, pulled it free of the plastic wrap, opened it, and sniffed to make sure it wasn't disguised as something else. Then she crushed down part of the bag, got the water bottle near his mouth and dampened her fingers to touch at his snout.

He jerked his head in response to the bottle, recognized it after a second, and chomped on the mouth of it with completely human looking teeth. He guzzled hard. She marveled, and lifted the water bottle back up when he released.
"Drugged," he said in a whisper, so soft she almost missed it.

"I can tell," she agreed, cupping his face to study those eyes. "You are high as a kite. Let's get you out of this bag, okay?"

He nodded rapidly.

She looked around and felt in side pockets and under chairs. A hunting knife; the kind that folded. She opened it with a snap and he jumped in surprise, head lifted, listening.

"Let me cut those strip ties, okay?" Pause. "Can you hear me?" Nothing. "Kid?"

"Hi."

Oh boy. She'd do his feet first. She reached around his legs, pulled them out from within, and got her hands on the strip ties at his ankles, and sawed. Probably was the wrong motion; the knife didn't have any teeth on it, but then she wasn't the world's strongest woman. His feet came free with a snap. She clambered up to find the ties around his arms, flattening out the bag. "Scary knife's coming near your face, don't freak out," she warned.

He stared through her, gulping slowly.

"There," she said, closing the knife and reaching around him to the surprise of finding hard ridges down there. He was very heavy as she pulled him full out of the bag, and it took all her breath not to drop him.

Sprawled there under one car light for illumination, green, scaly, and brown-eyed, with three toes and three fingers on each limb, an armor-plated torso, visibly human arm and leg muscles, and exaggerated but reasonably humanoid facial features, he didn't immediately strike her as anything she had words for. Not an animal, not an alien. He ought to have been impossible, the sort of thing you'd only see in person if someone had built a life-sized statue of a video game character for some kind of convention or promotion.

His hands were shaking. She took one wrist into her hand, seeing it was worn raw from the ties. She rubbed a thumb over the pink marks, because that was just what you did for a person's circulation. Then she found the palm, and somehow it was shocking to feel the lines and callouses there.

If those wide pupils as any indication, he couldn't see much other than a blob of yellow. He didn't know who or what she was.

"H-hey," she greeted again after a moment's long and awkward silence. "Uh. S-sorry for staring. Grandma always said I ought to be glad I wasn't a cat. Ya know, because of the whole- Okay, never mind, not the right time for bad jokes."

His breath hitched. She watched tears bubble up and realized his mouth was thin and his throat was bobbing for a reason.

"Oh. Oh no, hon," she reached around him, pulling him up.

He jerked stiffly, maybe less than thrilled with being grabbed, but then his forearm settled around her shoulders, and he clung to her and started to cry. The plating on his back was completely ovoid. He had a shell. He was a turtle?

"I'm so sorry," she whispered, rocking what was very clearly not an adult, no matter how heavy he was. "I'm so sorry. It's okay, it's gonna be okay... Shh..."
Splinter had gone out alone, returned, and taken time in meditation. The boys were forbidden from leaving. By then, Raph couldn't talk, Mikey was talking a mile per minute, and Leo was pacing.

They needed to do something. They needed to help.

Leo paused and told them that Master Splinter was scared, and couldn't take losing another one of them. Raph and Mikey turned to him, and wordlessly the three of them synchronized thoughts: For them, this wasn't about conserving losses; it was all-or-nothing, four or none. Either the world would give them back their sibling, or they'd all end up kidnapped, too.

Leo squared his shoulders. He nodded. Calmly, he marched in to the dojo to speak with Splinter, to explain it no longer mattered how 'unready' or young or vulnerable they were.

Raphael and Michelangelo stood waiting, not knowing whether Blue could pull it off.

He emerged two whole hours later, shaking but victorious, clinging to one last remaining ace: Dad couldn't use technology.


Long, slow, numb shuffles. A bus ride, with an arm around his shoulders and his head turned into someone's neck whose scent he didn't really recognize. A hand under his knee as he listed into a creaking railing, urging him into a high step so he could mount a stairwell. The jangle of keys and the creak of an old door. Toeing a threshold. Tripping over it and nearly bringing someone down on top of him.

His hand rested on a soft surface, and he ended up puddling onto a couch. She huffed from the effort of supporting him, felt his limbs and briefly held his face. He bristled, shaking, before the feeling of five fingers on each side of his head became calming instead of paralyzing.

"Am I scary?" he croaked, effectively blind.

The woman laughed and told him he was a little trippy.

The sound of running water.

She sat on the beside him like he was a sick toddler who couldn't speak to tell her what was wrong. He could feel the curve of her butt as she pet his shell, and the strange brunt of her curiousity felt tender instead of violating.

A hand towel was hot and moist as it mussed over him.

Then there was a white, puffy sort of towel for drying.

He spiraled off again.

The problem with finding Donatello without Donatello was the lack of instant digital intelligence to
get them started.

They tried to bump into his unknown abductors, which meant revisiting the dump. Master Splinter arrived first from an alternate route and stood lookout. They kept their hands on speed dial buttons. No baddies showed.

Raphael stooped down beside a busted motorcycle and for a second Leo nearly unloaded on him then and there and full throttle. In the nick of time, he saw the tranquilizer dart Raph had found, and the way his throat was bobbing. Leo stared. And then looked quickly away, ashamed of his first assumption.

They wanted to figure out what vehicle had left skid marks on the sidewalk, which meant tapping routine security footage from every joint on the corner before it had a chance to disappear on them. That would take figuring out how to log into four different systems of computers. If a card was needed, they had to steal it. If a password was needed, they had to oversee it.

It would take time. Painstaking time they didn't have.

When not topside, they gingerly poked around at Donnie's software to find their way. His notes were always short form, with sarcastic jokes written in the margins. Very 'helpful.'

Nobody at the dump ever logged in to check their own damn security footage, so no dice on figuring out how it was done.

Until Mikey dragged them back there on the third day, jumped in the seat, typed in 'password' for the password, and that fucking worked. They might have kissed him, but this was the cam that finally gave them a glimpse of their brother pursued by men with guns, nets, and tasers. They saw a car hit him. People swarmed in like vultures (or dog catchers) as he tried to rise.

Raphael's nostrils flared. Leo's eyes narrowed. Mikey clenched his teeth. They tabbed frame by frame and worked out a plate number.

Holy crap, he was going to give her a bloody nose! "Hey, hey, hey...!" She fended off a thrashing knee and caressed firmly over his shoulder, trying to orient him.

He jumped slightly, shuddering and breathing hard, tilting into her hand.

"Can you hear me?" she asked, unpacking supplies from the corner pharmacy with her teeth. "Kid?"

A plea tore out of him like he was being sexually assaulted: "Stop!"

"You're safe!" She withdrew her hands. Sometimes she just couldn't tell when people needed space. "You're not in a cage!"

He twitched, turning his head a little, expression doubtful.

"Remember me...? Take deep breaths," she urged. "In... out..."

That actually worked; he sucked them in slowly through his teeth like a yoga pro.

"Oh... Kid..." She touched his leg gently. He didn't lash out. The moments passed in silence as she cradled his bloody ankle and dabbed it clean to apply some butterfly stitches.
"H-help," he unexpectedly whimpered.

"I know. I'm working on it." She needed to get some ice. "Think you can sleep a little more for me, hon?"

He hesitated and then bobbed his head and slowly turned back into the couch. His breathing leveled out a little.

"Look at you," she mouthed, glancing over at him. Curled there: All gangling long limbs and coiled tail, a crisp shell but human-enough hands, a teenager by every visual clue. But then the corners of his mouth were turned down in such abject sadness, and her wonderment faltered back to concern. She grabbed blankets from the back of the couch, grandma's finest, and covered him modestly up.

He sniffled a little. She headed for the freezer, only to hear the start of piteous, miserable, full-body sobs.

She scrambled back to sit with him.

Chapter End Notes

Without the administration of reversal agents, sedative cocktails can actually take a long time to work their way out of a creature's system.
Donatello groaned. His head was pounding.

What had happened? Had he given himself caffeine poisoning at his desk again? No, this was a soft surface. Sort of like the couch, but without the stink.

He turned his head, and stared at the cream and floral print in front of his snout. Nothing in the lair looked or smelled like this. Not so clean, not flowers, not fragrant over an era of close contact with potpourri and (presumably) womens' perfume. He didn't recognize the blanket on top of him either; it was flawlessly soft, buffering something heavier. And the light streaming through it just felt wrong: wrong direction, wrong spectrum, wrong color.

Panic rising, and body throbbing with aches and pains, Donatello counted to five and then flipped the blanket off of his head.

He was curled up on top of a couch in a very small and reasonably tidy living room parlor. Light, natural light, was filtering in through cream and floral curtains, and falling over him. Upon the tea table in front of him was a message written on letter sized paper and folded to stand up like a card. It sat beside a friendly looking teddy bear in a graduation cap.

Donatello squinted at it. Light hurt. His head hurt. Did he have a concussion? He looked at himself, saw white gauze, red splotches, and pink welts and bruises, and then looked back out of his makeshift blanket shelter and slowly reached out to bring the paper to himself.

"Don't Panic :) ," it read in large print. Pigment cued him in that there was writing on the other side, just like a card. He shakily opened it.

"You nearly got kidnapped! D: " the neat, presumably feminine handwriting read, and memories flashed back to him like a bolt of lightning, stealing his breath and making every muscle in his body quake: Being tranquilized, being chased, being pulled down with nets and ropes, being manhandled and injected with something intravenous... tears pressed at his eyes, and he rubbed at them.

"I stole their SUV," the letter continued, "and ran over one of the guys who did it o.o' You've been asleep since yesterday and I need to head out for class >.< There's a frozen pizza in the freezer, and the bathroom's behind you, but be careful getting up because you might still have drugs in your system. If you don't feel well, just crash on the couch and wait for me, I'll help you.

"See you soon!

"Sincerely, April.

"PS: Just in case you need to borrow them, I laid a Burberry coat, a cowboy hat, and some galoshes on my bed."

Donatello slowly pushed himself up, scooting to a seat on the couch. He held the letter disbelievingly, every line of it strange.

'I stole their SUV.' Who randomly oversaw mutant turtles being loaded into trucks and decided they wanted to even stick their nose in the matter, much less jump to such decisive conclusions as jumping in the driver's seat and committing vehicular manslaughter?

'I need to head out to class.' So she was a college student? This didn't look like a dormitory; it
seemed more like a one-bedroom apartment. And it wasn't quite decorated right. How old was this person? She was using emoticons in a hand-written letter, but the wallpaper was mildly iridescent floral print from at least the sixties.

'Frozen pizza.' Was Donatello still sedated somewhere and just imagining a long list of hysterically wonderful things to hear from a theoretical rescuer?!

Who owned a Burberry coat, a cowboy hat, and galoshes and just randomly knew where to find them on short notice?! Women, maybe?

'Be careful getting up.' Okay that was sound advice; there was no telling what the hell he still had in him.

'I'll help you.' There was evidence to suggest this was a true assertion. Donatello looked around himself, at the bandages all over his arms and leg, and the bags of previously frozen green peas which had apparently stood in as ice packs.

'See you soon!' Why are you happy about that!? You should be running and screaming! I'm terrifying! I'm some kind of Monster.

Donatello looked hesitantly around the house again, with its curtains dancing very gently in the breeze, and it's vacuumed floors, and it's mild aroma of musty age which was gradually being ousted by the odors of cleaning products. It was quite clean in here, and positively stainless. The tea table and couch had matching clawed wooden feet, suggesting they were both part of a set and maybe a little antique.

Reverent, suddenly, for the cleanliness around him, Donatello took the fleece and folded it neatly back up. He picked up throw pillows from the floor, and put them back on the couch, but leaning over made him dizzy and he grabbed hold of the tea table. Afraid to fall and put scratches in her walls with his shell, he grabbed tightly hold of the couch arm rest and gingerly boosted himself to his feet.

Hmm. A little wobbly. Really wobbly! He reached out to the wall for support, catching the corner carefully and noting the decorative molding on the floor and ceiling. He saw into the bathroom, and leaned on each wall and the frame of the door until he managed to locate and collapse onto the toilet.

A very nice shower curtain that looked to have actual dried roses pressed between its waterproofed layers was drawn off to the side, and an old ornate ceramic and brass bath tub had been meticulously cleaned of mildew stains. A bucket sat to the side with yellow rubber gloves draped over it and a mop drying beside it. The tiles on the floor were cracked in a place or two, and it had probably been a week or two since they'd been cleaned; the towels were not part of a matching set, and the medicine cabinet was cheap plastic, but the mirror over the sink was old and fancy with a few black spots on it and a thick brass trim.

Donatello sat on the toilet, trying to think of what he ought to be thinking.

Then he snapped his fingers on the realization: This apartment and/or its furnishing had been inherited. Some older relative had either passed away or moved away. That was the reason for the odd mix of cheap modern things and nicer but older things. No wonder the explanation had eluded him; he'd never previously in his life encountered anything like it except on television.

That is not the first thing you should be focusing on, Dee.

What ought he to be focusing on?
With a slowly mounting trepidation, Donatello realized he didn't know.
Introductions; They're Good

Chapter Notes

We're going with April's original canon career path in technology. Even in the original Mirage comics she was an extremely talented programmer. I mean, she was the one doing all the grunt work programming the Mousers.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Donatello had clumsily stumbled his way into the kitchen and opened the freezer. He was still trying to decide what his odds were of burning himself if he tried to cook the lone pizza within, when the rattle of keys nearly scared him out of his shell. He grabbed reflexively at the back of a kitchen chair, ready to make a makeshift shield out of it.

The front door opened with a lot of noise and commotion, and Donatello shrunk nervously.

Carrying one-too-many things, a woman with shockingly orange hair pushed the door open with her shoulder, looking about herself and muttering things like, 'okay, fresh bandage, food, got that, this is over here, did I forget-?'

"What are you going to do with me?" rasped out of his mouth.

"Jesus!" she jumped. "Uh. Hi!" Her smile turned wondrous and bright. "Do you eat Sushi?"

Donatello stared, separated from her by less than six feet, visually eating every detail of a person he hadn't previously been able to see. She was taller than he was, and wearing a one-piece black and yellow exercise jumpsuit, with a decorative long-sleeved jacket around her shoulders that didn't clasp in the front and didn't extend down further than the chest.

"Yes," he answered quickly.

"Oh, good," she said, getting inside and closing the door behind her. "Cause that was all I managed to grab aside from another frozen pizza and it never even occurred to me to ask whether you were lactose tolerant."

"It's... both are fine."

She eased a laptop bag off her shoulder and onto the counter, deposited plastic bags roundabout here there and everywhere, and tossed junk mail to the trash. "You look much better," she said, once she had a moment's breathing room.

"You aren't bothered by what I look like?" he tested.

"I'm dying of curiousity, so I probably bombed my exam," she admitted as she glanced at the open freezer (he ducked bashfully and poked it close). She took the kitchen seat farthest from him, and plopped down unceremoniously to open a bag. "Are you hungry now?"

Donatello inched hesitantly forward. "You saw someone capture me?" he asked

"I don't think so. I think I heard them trying to fence you." She opened up one of her trays of take-
out sushi and packets of soy sauce and wasabi. "I thought I was looking at sex traffickers for a second. Then I realized you were green."

"And you just... helped me?" he asked warily.

She paused with a piece of sushi in hand and blinked at him for a moment. Maybe she'd been on an adrenaline high and reality just shocked her, because she swallowed a little uncertainly and shrugged. "Someone had to," she finally said. "How old are you?"

"Sixteen," Donatello whispered.

"Well," she pigged out on her sushi, "s'close enough to human traffickers in my book."

"How... how old are you?" he asked.

"Twenty," she said. "So if you were hoping I could be your ticket to underaged alcohol consumption, no dice."

He choked slightly on something that felt like a laugh. She smiled. He reflected a small smile back at her. Then, hesitantly, he stepped closer again, and eased into the chair he'd been holding onto.

She pushed him a box of sushi, and he took it and opened it. He wanted packet of wasabi, just wasabi. She watched him apply it, and he was a little self conscious about it and maybe blushed a bit. The first bites of sushi were worth it though. He felt incredibly strange and strangely good at the same time.

"Do you have anyone for us to call?" she asked after she'd finished her tray. "Parents? Someone who needs to hear you're safe?"

"Yes." Donatello looked up at her.

She reached in her back pocket and pulled out a phone in a bumblebee striped case, passing it across to him. Donnie took it eagerly. His thumbs hovered over the keypad. His elation fell.

"I can't remember their numbers."

She choked a laugh. "That happened to me last time I lost my phone, too."

"No." Donatello looked forlorn to her. "I can remember fourteen digit numbers flawlessly. And right now... I... I can't even remember the name of who I want to call."

She straightened. "That's... Okay, don't panic: Pretend I'm a mirror." She raised her hands to gesture. "You took a hit to the head right here."

He remembered seeing that in the mirror, and it had scared him then, too, and now he remembered why. "That's the medial temporal lobe. Where the hippocampus is, it's vital to memory."

"I-I don't think your memory is doing that bad, Mr. Advanced Medical Jargon." Her sushi lay forgotten. "Maybe we just need to wait out the concussion?"

Donnie hesitated. "Can..." He looked at her phone. "Can I google retrograde amnesia for a moment?"

"Yes!" He swiped. "Do you remember your name?"
"Dee?" he hesitated. "Donnie," his eyes brightened. "Donatello."

She sat back. "Damn. I should have taken you to school with me."

He blinked rapidly.

"It was an Art History test," she confided. 

He snorted in surprise and then started grinning and looked away. "I don't actually know much about that," he confessed. "I'm more maths and sciences."

"Oh really?" she asked, before diverting over to one of her bags. She pulled out a book that said, to his complete astonishment, 'LISP.'

"What class are you in that would possibly have you learning that?" Donatello wondered, eyes wide.

"Machine Learning and Robotics," she said. "The teacher is from the era of dinosaurs and likes everything weird; I'm lucky he doesn't have me programming by punch card."

Donatello's attention riveted on her face.

"Though honestly anything other than JavaScript is fine in my-" April narrowed her eyes at him. "Did I get stereotyped?" she demanded with a forgiving twitch at the corner of her mouth. "You were expecting, perhaps, a Sociology major? English? Medieval Studies? Hairdressing?"

"What major are you?" Donatello breathed wondrously.

"Duel Major," she said, snagging her laptop bag. "Honors Computer Science and Computer Engineering. Don't worry, I forgive you; I'm one of four girls in my class, two of whom are Middle Eastern and one of whom is trans. A teacher spent five minutes trying to explain the interior designers were in the class across the hall. Then my peers asked to see my fingers because someone had told them that all women had a middle finger shorter than their forefinger, and apparently they didn’t have enough data to assess the statement's veracity."

Donatello coughed more than one laugh, leaning forward as she took the seat beside him, set her laptop down, and opened up a strikingly familiar operating system: A Kali Linux distribution, probably in a fullscreen VM to cut out distractions.

"I can't even use Ubuntu," she confided, "because apparently that's too mainstream and means I'm just 'faking it,'" she did air quotes. "Had to go with Debian for a bit."

"You're a hacker," Donatello breathed, awestruck, as he scanned the icons on her desktop.

"Why thank you," she beamed. "Nice of someone to finally notice."

Chapter End Notes

I like to imagine April's career path to reporter at this point in time can be something in the 'Hacking corrupt company's databases -> Major corporate scandal exposed through hacking -> Hey you actually look nice and have a good speaking voice, why don't you report on it yourself? -> Online news -> TV News' variety of pathways.
Wheels Turning; Progress Slow

"Retrograde amnesia is usually temporary," Donatello reported over the laptop, "barring brain lesions." Uh oh. Hypochondria was all coming back to him.

"Well this is just a bit of swelling," April reminded as she collected sushi trays for disposal.

He jerked his chin in quick uncertainty. "And whatever's in my bloodstream."

"Well don't WebMD yourself into a panic, since the point of tranquilizers is not to cause permanent damage," she quipped.

"True," he acknowledged with a raise of a finger. "No upper bounds on what 'temporary' means, though." How would he normally dig to find out that kind of information? Scientific papers?

"If it'll be a few days before we manage to get you home," she opened her refrigerator to squint critically at it, "we're going to need more than a half gallon of milk and two frozen pizzas. Grandma would be ashamed of me."

"I can stay with you?" he babbled, feeling a little air-headed and at less than half his usual sharpness.

"Of course!" She tossed the refrigerator door shut. "What kind of Good Samaritan kicks an amnesia patient out on the street?" She returned to him with a wink, plopping her hands on her hips. "I'd have to turn in my scouts badge for sure."

He started blushing, and tucked his chin, and was absorbed in how warm and fluffy this left him feeling for a few seconds.

"You've been weaving," she mentioned. "Maybe it's too early to be on a computer, light sensitivity and all?"

"What?" he squeaked, distracted, but then recalled he'd been grabbing onto walls, chairs, and couches at crutches across the house so as not to fall. He lifted a hand and tried to hold it steady. "Good news," he sighed of his drunken coordination, "no underage alcohol consumption needed."

She laughed and slipped a hand around his shell that had him looking immediately and attentively up to her. "Let's get you back to the couch, as a precaution. I don't want you to fall and hit your head on anything."

"That is logical," he agreed, and then realized he had to get his arm around her shoulders and maybe lean some weight on her.

"C'mon," she encouraged, coaxing him up to his feet "Theeereee ya go. I hit CVS for some real ice packs and better bandages. And some Gatorade. Yesterday was a breeze keeping you hydrated, by the way, you took any bottle of water I gave you."

"Lots of experience," Donatello admitted, stumbling and sagging as she helped him limp and totter back over to the couch.

"Doing what?" she asked.

"Recovering from injuries," he explained. "Though not half as often as-" the trail of his memories ended mid-sentence, and he paused in front of the couch. "I can't picture who I'm thinking of," he
realized. "I-I don't know anything about them."

There was a certain pain in drawing so many black spaces around formative memories. Was this someone he cared about? Someone he hated? An enemy or rival? Family? Friend? Someone he lived with? Someone he rarely saw? None of the possibilities Donatello cycled through jumped out as correct, and that was the scary part, that lack of recognition.

"It's gonna be okay," April told him. "If your memory takes its sweet time in coming back, you've got a safe couch to sleep on."

He looked to her face, which was right there beside him, just inches away from his nose. She did, as had been previously reported, have vividly green eyes. "Thank you," he said, earnestly. "Nobody ever helps us."

Her brows came together in concern like she wanted to talk to him about that, but then apparently she decided it wasn't the time, and instead she gave him another smile. "You can thank me by sitting down so I don't have back pain later," she teased.

Eep! Donatello crawled onto the safety of the couch and collapsed there for a bit, as requested. "Oh," he'd belatedly thought of something, and looked up to see she'd gone and returned with those medical supplies she'd mentioned. "Frozen pizza is the... Twinkies of the pizza world. When all fails; come hell, high water, zombies, Godzilla; there's still Frozen Pizza. 'It has all the important food groups: Cheese, vegetable, grain, more cheese...'"

"College life would suit you, Dee," she said as she sat down beside him. Heh. Dee. His name. "Would you know if you can take any medicine for the swelling?"

"Acetaminophen. Always Acetaminophen if there's a chance for internal bleeding." She was trying to think if she had that. "Tylenol? The red bottle."

"Oh! I think I have some of that!"

He giggled, fond of this reaction, and reminded of someone of whom he was sure he was also fond.

The only thing Raphael, Leo, or Michelangelo actually knew about tracking cars came from action movies and Disney's Zootopia, but the internet told them it was illegal to run a plate unless you were in law enforcement or worked for the Department of Motor Vehicles. The latter was walled behind red tape, but breaking in at night and operating the equipment was probably a safer plan than grand theft auto of a police cruiser.

Okay. They knew where to go. But one look at the packed New York DMV left them with a problem: They needed that high volume of customers to chance overseeing a plate being run, and to learn the procedure, but not even Raphael in a trench coat could successfully mosey into that building and loiter about without giving his species away.

After scoping the place out, Raphael and Leonardo packed lunches, broke in to the building before opening hours, climbed up under the drop ceiling, tethered themselves to the steel roof support beams and ventilation shafts, and stabbed small peep holes in the plywood. The family stethoscope and empty cup let them pick out individual conversations. This would be a solid twenty-four hour commitment, even in ideal conditions where they managed to identify and steal all proper clearance items.

More time they maybe didn't have. And if they messed up, they'd be topside, during the day, in a room packed full of people, and in deep shit.
Neither of them talked to one another. Might have helped the tension between them if Mike had been there, but Mike was not the bro you wanted confined in a tight space with orders to stay quiet for a whole day solid.
April woke up to the sound of a hard collision, maybe like someone had dropped a chair to the ground. She caught her breath peering around the dark interior of her room. It took a split second to recall the existence of her couch surfer, and that he was at risk of falls. And/or being kidnapped by futuristic monster hunters. Concerned, she reached down to the side of her nightstand to pick up the billy club there. She tiptoed to her bedroom door, easing it open. The bathroom light was on. Oh dear. She left the billy club behind, crossing the hall and blinking rapidly to acclimate her eyes.

There he was, crouched in a squat over the edge of the bath tub, one hand on the faucet, weaving unsteadily from side to side. From the look of things, the noise she'd heard had been nothing more than his hard torso bumping up against the side of the tub.

"Donnie?" she asked

His neck twisted so he could look back at her, but he leaned heavier against the tub like he needed the support. His blinks were slow and languid, and he looked headier than before she'd put him to bed. Maybe he'd been masking the symptoms before?

"Hi," he said.

"Do... do you want to take a bath?" she asked.

Swivel went that unsteady head at the top of that long, thin neck. He looked at the bathtub, and then back at her. "Uh-huh," he said.

"Do you need help?" she asked.

Donatello was quiet a moment, like he needed to deliberate on the question. Even so, she was surprised by his remarkably coherent answer: "I was concerned the sudden increase in temperature could cause me to faint," he said, "and that there would be nothing to explicitly prevent me from drowning. I was trying to assess how high I should fill the tub. I didn't mean to wake you."

"It's okay." She smiled at her poor, wobbly, scientifically-minded, teenage new roommate. "I'll stay with you," she offered.

"Okay."

Slowly, trying not to scare him in this peculiar state of mind, she tiptoed into the bathroom, and knelt over the tub to get at the chronically leaky faucet. He leaned back on the balls of his feet, and she spun about and grabbed at his shoulder, frightened he'd teeter over. He stayed up. Maybe more importantly, he was unafraid of her quick grab towards him, only turning his head to peer belated at the contact like it was a source of curiosity. She released warm skin, watched that he continued to stay up, and slowly turned to attend to the bath.

There was some kind of anthropomorphic turtle in her house.

"Your name is April, right?" he asked.

She nodded. "April O'Neil."

He thought about that. "You're really pretty, Miss April," he decided.
Mirth put a big grin on her face. "Is that so?" she asked.

"Uh-huh," Donnie confirmed, only to go on conversationally: "Like, an expensive basking lamp. The ones that are equivalent to natural sunlight. Five out of five chili peppers. The full one million Scoville Units. Those are units for describing hot sauce. One million is the world's best Indian Ghost Chillies. As hot as the Planck temperature during the Big Bang. That's an excess of ten to the thirty-second power degrees Celsius. It's the highest theoretically possible temperature, owed to the predicted effects on fundamental forces. A bombshell, specifically of the MOAB variety, or-

April busted out laughing so hard she very nearly scared him into falling over, and so she threw her arms around this innocent fountain of absurd nerd poetry and dragged him to her—never mind how much that shell weighed or how his armor dug into her flimsy nightgown!—and she squeezed him to her and laughed and laughed and laughed. At first nervous (and who wouldn't be, she was laughing her fool head off!), Donnie nevertheless slowly hugged her back, and giggled into her shoulder.

"I'm sorry," he told her, sounding happily bashful, like he'd realized just how much dorkisms he'd managed to pack into a single conversation, but was still much too light-headed to be mortified or embarrassed.

"No," she choked, and gave him a tight squeeze. "No, you sweet thing, that was the nicest stuff anyone's ever said to me. That's gonna be my comeback now, whenever someone says I must have gotten an internship or scholarship or anything else by looks. I'm gonna whip around and by like, 'Bi-atch, I am one million scoville units, I am the Planck temperature, you ain't got nothing on me!' And then waltz away leaving them scratching their heads. That's my new plan!"

Donnie giggled more, sounding highly supportive of this. "Good," he said. "Cause it's true."
April had stayed with Donnie through the bath, though she'd sat on the toilet and read one of her grandmother's Chicken Soup for the Soul books to give him a measure of privacy. She sort of noticed he huddled up a bit on himself, and kept neurotically scrubbing at his legs and arms like he was trying to get something more than sweat and dirt off himself.

"She sexed me," Donatello said.

"What?"

"The woman," he failed to specify, staring down between his legs while feeling self-consciously at bruises around his throat. "She put her fingers in me."

April hesitated, eyes tracing the marks on his neck. He'd been in some kind of choke collar, near as she could tell. "I'm sorry. That had to be really dehumanizing."

"I'm not human," he murmured. "But I'm... I am close, right?"

"It's," she rapidly shook her head. "It's the same. You and us, it's obviously the same."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

He chafed at his arms and elbows, obviously upset. "I-I mean, I get it: Turtles don't have incredible sexual dimorphism, true. So why not just remove the gag and ask? Even if I was uncooperative, timbre of my voice proves I have humanoid vocal chords and a male timbre; turtles only have laryngeal furrows which allow for growls, or coos or... basically alligator noises, just less impressive. I heard a roar once, though, that was definitely impressive."

"I don't think you should dwell on the ethical priorities of kidnappers," April told him, reaching over to pet gently over his head. "Hey, do you normally wear any kind of clothing?"

He breathed in deep and leaned back a bit, thinking hard. "I don't think I even can. Nothing really fits the shell. But... I remember wearing something because I remember it being stripped off of me."

Hmm.

Food for thought.

"Why, um," she cleared her throat and waved the book, "why don't I read you some of this? It's a collection of heartwarming anecdotes, poems, and life advice."

He looked up at her, big brown puppy-dog eyes hopeful. "Please do."

Donatello slept straight through Tuesday.

He only woke for a few minutes at a time, and then only to use the bathroom and intake water. He wasn't hungry.

Her Tuesday schedule was, as usual, jam-packed with classes and homework. With all the work on
her plate, it was almost a relief to find her roommate exactly where she'd left him on returning home. Maybe that was a selfish sentiment, but April hoped it meant she'd succeeded in making him feel safe in his new surroundings. Safe enough to shut down and heal for a bit, confident someone was looking out for him while he was unconscious.

After checking on him and getting him to nurse on a Gatorade, she set up with her laptop at the kitchen table so the light wouldn't disturb him, and worked—as did many college students—well into the early morning hours.

April wasn't certain what to expect when she woke up on Wednesday, but the sound of brewing coffee wasn't it. Confused, she got up and blearily made her way out into the apartment, rubbing sleep from her eyes.

The coffee maker had been broken for about five months, and April usually found it more convenient to grab a cup of espresso from the nearest morning coffee shop on her way to class. But there it stood, hard at work, liquor black as coal trickling into the pot. Standing before it was a lanky teenage boy, green and shelled, holding and eating out of a bowl of Corn Flakes with a spoon. From the look of things, he'd polished off that half gallon of milk.

"Donnie?" she wondered.

"Good morning!" he greeted hopefully, covering his mouth with hand and spoon as he finished chewing crunchy flakes. "I fixed the coffee machine."

April stared and blinked slowly. "I see that."

"But don't leave it plugged in unless you're using it," he suggested, "The cable's bad and needs to be cut and resoldered. Or some pliers and electrical tape could work in a pinch. Was forming a short circuit and getting very hot, and I'm not sure exactly what the combustion point for the wallpaper in here is."

April O'Neil put her hands on her hips, squinting from Mr. Handy Dandy Fixit Boy to his bowl of Kelloggs's cereal. "Are you eating those dry?" she demanded.

"Sort of," he frowned at his bowl. "I ran out of milk. " He stirred his half-soggy flakes. "Should have rationed better to account for this. Oh! Are you hungry?" His face turned unnecessarily guilty, like he was enumerating the horrors of inflicting milk-less cereal on her and reprimanding himself for this oversight.

April went over to have a look at her coffee maker. It was indeed operational. She stood up and glanced her (slightly self-conscious) roommate up and down. Then she smirked. "Let's hit the grocery store. We can pick out what you want to eat for the next week or so."

"But—wait, with me? I can't go into a grocery store, I'm..." he gestured to himself

"Challenge accepted," she told him, patting his arm and turning about to saunter back to her room. "Let me just get dressed."

One yellow romper and a purple cardigan later—the color drew Donatello's eye but he wasn't exactly sure why—April returned from her room carrying a bundle of clothing and some rain boots.

Donatello had hand washed her bowl and spoon in an effort to keep his mind busy while he worried about all the horrible things that could go wrong in the middle of the day in public (most of which he
couldn't remember, but, still, it was clearly programmed into him that being seen was bad!), and he turned around as he was drying off his hands to see what on earth her plan might be.

"Hand over your feet," she joked, bunching up the legs of a garment till they were just two unidentifiable holes.

Embarrassed, Donnie did hesitantly lift a knee, and she looped the pant leg over that foot, and then over the other foot, and then she pulled the waistline up to his hips. His tail clamped tight between his legs so as not to get in the way. Now, Donatello expected the hem of the pants to get caught up against the underneath of his shell, and it did. But much to his surprise, the front of the pants made it up around his waist and plastron and clung tightly to hold onto him. The whole of the garment clung tightly, outlining how slender he was. It was very elastic.

"There we go!" she dusted off her hands with a cocky wink. "Yoga pants are magic. They can do anything."

Blushing but intrigued, Donatello twisted to get a look down at the "Rochester Institute of Technology" branding down his leg. He decided he was much too alone in the world to begrudge being anybody's dress-up doll for the day. April seemed to be hands-on and slightly impulsive, and sometimes forgot about personal space. All of that explained why she'd had the gumption to rescue him in the first place, so he liked it all about her, and smiled hopefully.

She pulled a baggy hoodie ('RIT Tigers') over his head and down around his shell, popped an orange baseball cap on top of his head, pulled up the hoodie's hood over the baseball cap, and then shook out the fabric so it sat well. "There we go!"

"Is this going to work?" She gave him boots. "I look like two skinny twigs coming out of a pumpkin!"

"I know! That's been the standard unfashionable antisocial teenage look since the evolution of the modern hoodie! Before then, people had to pair leggings with overlarge jackets; it wasn't half as casual looking. Now keep your head down, your hands in your pocket, and stick close to me! If you need to point something out, use a lazy, indolent point of your elbow. There you go, yeah! Like that."
Armed with a hot coffee mug in one hand, keys in the other, and her purse across her shoulder, April O'Neil headed down the narrow staircase from the apartment to exit her quaint but ancient townhouse. Her equally quaint and ancient neighbor was waiting on the ground floor, as if in ambush. April quickly clasped Donatello to her side, and pulled her best convincing smile.

"Oh hi Mrs. Maza!" she greeted the elderly Native America (or was it African? Both? April forgot) woman. "This is my cousin, Donald! Well, second cousin actually. He's going to be staying with me for a bit! He's-he's shy."

"Parents having trouble with him?" Mrs. Maza wondered suspiciously, eyes always sharp.

"Oh n-not really," April assured, for heaven forbid Mrs. Maza call the police on random suspicion that scratches and clatters from upstairs meant April's visitor was trying to burn the townhouse down. "He's just visiting." (Yoo-hoo, April! It's the middle of the school year!) "He's home-schooled, so he'll be home during the day while I'm in class."

"I'm pretty quiet," Donnie piped up, sounding far too friendly and helpful for his Nobody Understands Me Ugh Just Leave Me Alone style of disguise.

"Hmm," said Mrs. Maza, who turned around with a flick of a thick braid of pin straight gray hair, and went back to brooming her stoop until it was surely clean enough that one could eat off of it.

April pulled Donatello past, and the two of the descended the front steps to an early morning Brooklyn. "She's always like that," April promised Donatello. "If she ever comes knocking at the door and I'm not home, open the door and talk to her without removing the chain lock or looking at her. I swear that's the standard procedure for signaling 'my apartment is my private property, you don't get to see inside' in this silly city."

"You're not from around here?" Donnie asked her, cringing a bit at a bicycle that passed them and huddling up to avoid looking at any pedestrians.

"I'm originally from upstate," April explained, guiding him to her car. "You?"

Donnie paused. "I... I don't know."

She drummed fingers on the car roof, thinking. "I've got an idea for a test. I read something about amnesia and psychological priming the other day. The boroughs of New York are Brooklyn, the Bronx ...?"

"Manhattan, Queens and Staten Island," Donatello completed.

"Aha! See, I doubt anyone who wasn't from the area would know Staten Island." She tapped his snout.

"I do seem to remember being apprehended in a city," he agreed, brightening up and lifting his head just a bit, only for his expression to suddenly falter. "It seems logically sound to reason I'm from New York City, but I feel literally zero familiarity with the idea."

That sounded downright terrifying, especially as April was pretty sure he was an NYC native. It put his inability to remember the faces and phone numbers of his loved ones in a sobering light; he was drawing blanks on serious portions of his own contextual identity. She cleared her throat and put an
arm around his back to squeeze him. "Well, we'll worry about that later. Right now we need milk."

"Right! Are-are we driving?"

"This is, in fact, my car," she agreed with a laugh. "Hop in, Dee, you've got shotgun!"
Donatello was a privileged pleasure to have in the passenger seat, peeking around at everything inside and out. At first he was interested in the car itself, from how the seatbelt worked, to what he could see in the mirrors, to the automatic locks and windows, to the sound of her blinkers and the thrum of the accelerator.

He leaned over discreetly to see her speedometer and presumably the rest of the dash board—everything but the radio, which was usually what most passengers headed for first!—and then exclaimed, "is your transmission manual?"

"I'm always getting stereotyped by you!" she complained.

"No! No I'm just curious!" he pleaded, and she laughed.

"I grew up in the countryside," she explained. "Dad never liked automatics, said they cost too much."

"How'd you get into computers?" he wondered.

"We weren't savages," she grinned. "I got interested through the school, and Dad was always great about encouraging us. Me and my sister Robyn."

"Where are they now?"

"Well Robyn's at Pratt, but Dad's still back home."

"Pratt? Pratt. Does your sister live far from here?"

"No, buuuuutt Grandma wrote her out out of the inheritance when they had a hilarious fight over throw cushions. Grandma and Robyn are both sensitive artsy types, and, uh, lacked a shared vision. I was unable to broker a peace treaty."

Donatello fell almost reverently quiet. "Where, um, where is your Grandma?"

"She's, uh," April's smile faltered. "She's receiving end of life care right now, in a hospice near here. The dementia's in the final phase, so everything's shutting down."

"Oh. I-I'm sorry." Donnie looked at his hands. "Wow, you've probably had your fill of people who can't remember things."

"Nah," April smirked. "You aren't calling me by my Mom's name, this is a whole new ball game! A winnable one! My morale is sky high! But if it takes awhile for your memories to come back, don't panic. You can talk to me. I'm a veteran." She reached over and patted his head like you'd tousle a person's hair.

Donnie ducked his head bashfully. "Thanks, April."

He looked askance at the window and, after a few minutes, nervously leaned close to peer out at everything.

Enthusiasm mounted again until it leaked out in words: "Huh. Ooh. Whoa. Wow. Look at that! Holy Toledo, look at this lady, she's huge. Is that a dog? Oh my god, what is that? I've never seen boutiques open like this. I-I don't think I've seen so many people before, either."
"Soak it all in," she snickered. "My treat."

"I've never been in a store like this," Donatello nervously whispered at her elbow, glued to her side. "Not with the lights on."

April stopped walking. An absolutely gargantuan man with most of his butt overflowing his extra tight pants, slowly drove past them on a motorized scooter chair for shoppers with disabilities. He was eating a turkey leg.

"Trust me," April whispered. "You are completely invisible. You are the least remarkable person here. We have come to the right place."

"I'll get a cart," he agreed on the realization absolutely no one would stop him.

And, a few minutes later, Donatello in the cereal aisle was everything April could have ever hoped for and more. If ever there was a time to stop, smell the roses, and enjoy life, it was when an amnesiac overenthusiastic socially awkward large turtle teen was hugging six different boxes of brightly colored cereal to himself and wordlessly (meekly, hopefully, excitedly) asking how many he was allowed to have.

"Put 'em all in," she instructed. "This is going to save me a fortune in coffee shop scones and Frappuccinos."

So it went with many an aisle, either grabbing every form of pizza, pasta, juice, and cola off the walls, or else quickly strolling past (or pushing the cart to roll quickly and then riding upon it, as April was still partially convinced was a time-honored mode of superstore locomotion), until at last they had a cart swollen with all the essentially College Student Food Groups, and were swinging around to approach the registers. On a whim, April side-tracked across the clothing aisles. She looked for mittens, but it seemed all the winter stock had been ousted for bathing suits and sundresses. A pity; she was nearly positive soft spoken nerd boys in a shark hat and shark mittens would somehow make a perverse form of sense, even year round. It carried a whiff of East Asian cultural appropriation about it, almost.

April became distracted by a yellow rain jacket. When she looked up, her responsibility was nowhere to be found! Alarmed, she looked up at the signs hanging overhead, progressed to the end of the aisle, and there she found him peering curiously into a hardware aisle.

Oh-ho! April thought about how much money still did and did not have in her checking account this month. Switching colleges right before freshman year'd started had cheated April out of a lot of scholarships and aid money, and she knew keenly the pangs of being buried in debt while jumping emotional hurdles 'back home' because there was a sick family member to look after. But then Grandma had demanded to help her out financially, and, between that, her high grades, and a few essays and stellar networking sessions, things had turned out for the better. Dr. Stockman wasn't exactly a magnanimous employer, but he'd slapped down a respectable salary in front of her—including a signing bonus—if she agreed to stay once her (unpaid) internship ended.

So at the present moment in time, April was one of very few college students her age bringing in a steady wage. Her scholarships were back. She also didn't have room and board to pay for, like poor Robyn. And now she also didn't have to replace a broken coffee maker, either.

April pushed the cart forward, walked up beside Donatello, and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Assemble a toolbox," she announced. "There's an appliance back home which sorely needs you...! Probably more than one."
The result was even better than the cereal aisle.

Donatello looked tired by the time they came home. It was little wonder; he'd had an exciting morning. April cooked some ramen with fresh vegetables, and the calories revitalized both of them.

So he took the coffee maker back apart at the kitchen table. He opened and assembled the packages of his new tools. He was quiet, no longer chattering about every little feature, nob, and switch; in the way introverts often were quiet after they'd overfilled their social quota and were ready to focus on inanimate things. April sat comfortably across the table, paging through her school books, getting ready for class. He didn't bother her. She didn't bother him.

When it came time to leave, she rose and reached for her purse, explaining that she'd be back in time for dinner.

He blinked up at her, and smiled faintly, setting down things and standing up to see her off at the door.

"Make sure you get plenty of rest." She told him. "And no electrocuting yourself or starting any fires."

He crossed both fingers for her to see.

April grinned—Donatello had her smiling a lot, all the time, which was one heck of a welcome change—and she reached back to squeeze him to her in the sort of hug which was an older sister's due. The way she'd hug Robyn. Then she waved and stepped out.

He waited to close the door until she was out of sight down the staircase.
Emotions; Layers of Them

Chapter Notes

After finishing up Part 1 of Call Me What I Am, and finalizing two other fics, I was at a pretty good stopping point if I needed to quit fanfiction for awhile. And since I'm an adult now, I was thinking I might have to stop writing and... ya know. Be an adult. Everyone has to eat, ya know?

Instead of giving up, you can now find me on Patreon. It allows me to chat via personal message, show off WIPs before they're ready, and accept donations.

This chapter's dedicated to CMY, Patron of the Arts, who for some reason felt this fic had some value he didn't want to go without, and who kept me afloat.

On lookout and hovering crouched upon the countertop, Raphael glanced one-too-many times at his only remaining sai. Near as he could tell, Master Splinter hadn't noticed it was gone yet. Too much else to worry about.

It was raining heavy outside.

*Leo's right, and you just don't wanna admit ta it.*

And Raphael should have never, ever jumped in to rescue that woman. Shouldn't have even been topside, shouldn't have been *dicking around* with known gang members, ones who mighta had friends in higher places. There was a chunk of lowlifes sitting in jail cells who knew they'd gotten their asses kicked by a short, bald, green guy. Still, if somebody out there wanted their personal revenge on the freak what had been messing up their guys, they oughta have made a scene about it. They'd have *let Raph know* they had Don. It'a been a personal thing.

But what other explanation was there for the dump? Who else was there to worry about? Nobody just crept around lookin' for clues mutants might be hanging out in the local sewers. Shit was Science Fiction.

Wasn't it?

Maybe Raphael didn't know. Maybe the stuff that had made him and his brothers, made their dad, maybe it had *belonged to someone*. Some kind of new-fangled science they'd been looking into, something *proprietary*. Maybe they knew they'd had a spill, lost some of it, and now they was sendin' out feelers, looking for ecological damage or maybe just tryin' ta reclaim *their property*. Then the only question was whether they knew there was *more* of em, that Don wasn't the only one. Would change whether they used him as bait or just...

...or just what? What did people do with mutants? Cage em? Study em in some kinda habitat? Take blood samples? *Cut em up on a dissection table?*

(Was Donnie still alive?)

Leo was fucking right, and Raphael just didn't want to *admit to it*. That was what had him stomping around like a bull, glowering in his brother's shadow, slamming every door and stabbing food off his
plate without tasting shit. That was what had him exercising twice as hard, and talking to no one, and not taking breaks. (What had him curled up in his hammock with a scarf tucked under the pillow so nobody could see how fucking cracked he was, that it had him shaking through the night cause he wouldn't cry, not till he knew what the *fuck* had happened to Dee.)

Leo was right.

The only person who coulda led this shit home to their family? It had been Raph.

But if it had been some kind of scientists or lab guys, why wouldn't Splinter have told them about it? Told them specific people mighta been looking for them? A warnin' might have been fucking nice!

(Master always told us not to go anywhere alone. Warned us it was dangerous, up and down. And ya kinda stopped believin' him, didn't ya? Figured you had it handled, didn't read between the lines, didn't get the subtleties, didn't get that he was tryin' ta protect ya from more than one kinda thing.)

Fucking Leo.

*Leo* probably took for granted this was exactly what Splinter had been protecting them from, just assumed all the warnings'd make sense eventually, and that Dad'd be right about absolutely-flippin-everything. Scept Leo shoulda fuckin' appreciated wanting to know what the rules of a game were *before* ya played, since he'd never touch a console controller unless Mike or Raph or whoever broke shit down for him first and he had time to watch from the background for an hour or two. *More'n that.* Leo oughta fuckin' understand wantin' family ta be open with ya, honest with ya, seein' as he was always askin' for it all the time!

(Had Dad known somebody might be after them, but just kept them underground *with rules* instead of *with reasons*?)

(Cause, fuck, did that feel unfair in what it'd made Raphael *cause.*)

(If ya'd just have told me...)

But it was still his fault.

"The vehicle's registered to some place in Nebraska," Leo said in monotone over the terminal.

Raphael grimaced. "Dead lead, then. Ain't fuckin' anything *in* Nebraska."

"Maybe there's an underground prison, or laboratory or..."

"Yeah, well name one way you, I, Mike, and Dad can get out there ta find out. Or why you'd register a goddamn *car* to the entrance of ya secret lair. We got a name on the title, at least? Whoever did dis was hired out, and they ain't livin' around here so we can't knock on their door-"

"Quiet."

'Quiet?' Raphael wanted to leap over the counter and *kill this son of a bitch.*

And all of that churned inside his stomach and made him hate himself, made him shrink just a bit inside, because he knew it was there, he knew he was *capable of it,* and that he kinda *wanted it,* and that he wanted it because he was angry at Leo for not having done anything wrong, when he, Raphael, had done *everything wrong.*

"The vehicle's been impounded."
Raphael shed thoughts, rounding on a new rush of hope."Let's figure it out where."

Leo nodded.

Master Splinter's arthritis was acting up something foul, and all three boys could tell. He hadn't been taking good enough care of himself, and Leo was in obedient-soldier-mode and not running after him with heat wraps like you'd think he would. Mikey was looking worriedly from them to him when they got back, and they could tell he was bent double on his cane for a reason. No Donnie around, either, to natter on about pills or supplements.

What the hell was it they usually looted for this? Gluda... Gluta-co-sa-... *Shit* Raph, you can do this. Ya listen ta Donnie blather all day.

(Listen-ed)

Okay. Whip out your phone. Start typing. 'Glucosamine.' There, for joint pain. Perfect. Now ya just have ta actually talk ta Leo ta suggest we pick some up. And get Dad ta agree to it, with *one of us missing*. How ya gonna phrase it?

Maybe ask Mikey.

"Father, I will lead this trip as well," they heard through the dojo walls, soon after Leo had reported in.

"You do not worry it is another trap? " Master Splinter asked. Funny he was worried about sending all three of them together, but not *two*. Like keeping one of them in reserve chilled him out, made him think 'at least I won't lose *all of them*.' (What did it say if Dad was scared? It said they might never find their brother if they were as careful as Dad wanted them to be.)

"No," Leo answered clearly. "Whoever took Donatello wouldn't assume we're advanced enough to run plates. They approached him like they were expecting an animal."

"They have had him in custody over a week. Their knowledge has changed."

"The car was impounded almost immediately. It was parked illegally half a state away, and towed. It seems like they were disposing of it, or like there may have been a falling-out between people involved with the event. Whatever happened, I doubt it culminated in a trap this subtle."

"I see."

Leo won. They knew he would, for Dad's sake; the weather outside was cold and bad, a blow-back to winter.

Raphael texted the word 'Glucosamine' to Michelangelo.

*Let him* talk to Leo.
The car involved in Donatello's kidnapping was listed as a 'Jeep Cherokee,' which Mikey was totally impressed to learn Raphael could recognize by sight, because he pointed it out from a mile away across a super big lot at night time in the pouring rain. Apparently Raph liked cars, who knew? Was that almost exactly like liking motorcycles? Either way Mikey made a mental note to ask Donnie to download more racing games or driving simulators or something, just as soon as they'd rescued him and gotten him home safely (It couldn't take much longer, right?)

Mikey tucked a pin between his teeth so he could use both of his hands, and twisted open the hangar he was carrying. He'd planned to use it as his primary tool for getting open the jeep door (Mikey had rolled 'thief' for this adventuring party!) but when the four of them arrived, they were surprised to find the driver side window had been broken open, possibly by some kind of fireman's hammer.

Weird!

Leonardo waved Raphael up to guard duty, but Raphie was already halfway to taking it anyway, getting all quiet up on top of the hood and leaning hard into the windshield to watch their surroundings with good cover and a good vantage point. Mikey snickered a joke about fatness, because even though Raph was totally quiet, the car rocked. Leo threw a dangerous eyeball back his way, made a hand gesture across this throat that said to cut it out, and then climbed silently into the vehicle to investigate. Mikey pouted.

Leo and Raph had both been awful. Why couldn't they appreciate he was trying to keep morale up? How were they going to find Donnie if they were fighting each other? Ugh. They were impossible sometimes.

Mikey gave a big roll of his eyes but then shimmied his makeshift poncho off and climbed in after Leo. And instead of heading into the back, like Leo did, Mikey started going through the CD drawer and the glove compartments and the side pockets on the door and the back pockets on the seats and... and... where was everything? There wasn't anything in here, no personal effects, no car manuals, not even napkins from drive through restaurants or those little itty bitty left over papers from plastic straw wrappers. Mikey picked up the floor carpets. There were clear signs of vacuuming down there, and what little dirt and debris remained looked like it was just some tenacious mud.

"This car got picked clean," Mikey realized out loud. He heard Raphael curse, and his own stomach sank as he realized this meant they were no closer to Donnie than they'd ever been. "Wait, but who would do that?"

"Police?" Raphael muttered from the roof, still keeping watch. "Checking out the decals and bumper stickers on the rear. This guy was some kinda game hunter. Maybe he didn't have the right licenses, or they found the car with guns in it or something."

"I dunno, they vacuumed," Mikey was sure. "But not very well. Like they were trying to be anal retentive but didn't have enough time?"
"Hnh." Raphael speculated from above. "Like someone was tryin' ta get rid of some kind of evidence of a crime?"

"The smell in here is pretty intense, too," Mikey concluded. "That's not a new car smell, yo, this thing's from the nineties."

"It's tannin, I think," called Leo from farther inside the vehicle. He'd crouched down and was taking in sniffs of the upholstery. "They had leather back here," he said. "Or hides, furs, that type of thing."

"Definitely hunters then," Mikey realized with a grimace. "Were they hunting Dee? Oh my god, did they take him cause they're going to stuff him and put him in a museum-!?"

"By Buddha's Fat Ass, Mike!" Raphael roared very un-ninja-like from the roof. "The fuck ya babblin' about somethin' dat morbid for? Ain't even how taxidermy works, ya don't need people alive! Do ya?"

"No," Leo said, which was the first time Mike had seen Raphael and Leo participate in the same conversation in, like, a week. Progress? "There are discolorations here, from dust," Leo reported. "There was some kind of metal box, or maybe a cage screwed into the back."

"So they did live capture. Maybe pest control, or dog catchin'." Raphael supposed slowly, and his voice was all rough like raw wood splinters, like he felt guilty or unsure, which meant Mikey wasn't the only one who'd noticed Red and Blue had just successfully exchanged sentences.

Michelangelo popped the back of the jeep to peek around in all the nooks and crannies surrounding the bed of the spacious trunk. He checked out the rear seats. Finding nothing, he shimmied back into his poncho and peeked up at Raphael. "Dude, you wanna switch? I can't think of anywhere else to look."

A pause. "A'right."

He didn't fucking know where he stood with Leo right now.

Raphael climbed slowly down into the back of the vehicle, switching places with Mikey, and shooting a quiet glance over at where Leo was meticulously rechecking everything their little brother had plowed through in search of evidence.

Raphael wasn't sure what he was looking for. He was kind of the meat of the team, and he didn't have Donnie or Leo's obsession with details, or Michelangelo's random and unexplainable good luck. But if neither of them could find anything, and the Hamato family was going to have to go back to the drawing board, then Raph had to at least take a look at the place their path had dead-ended. He couldn't just get irritable and frustrated and tear off in a different direction. Donatello wouldn't have. He'd have inspected everything.

The place where the cage had been was pretty obvious, because it took up a huge chunk of the rear of the vehicle. It was a much lighter square of flooring, where dirt and sunshine and shit hadn't been getting to it, and there were neat holes showing where it had been bolted down. No indication who'd made off with the cage itself, though, or what it had been used to contain.

Felt like a fucking funeral in here. And Raph had never even been to an actual godamn funeral. He hunkered there, committing things almost accidentally to memory: The smell of tannin, the color scheme, the logos on all the decals, the year on the vehicle. He couldn't tell if he felt solemn and defeated, panicked and hysterical, or if he was just about to crack with rage like some kind of volcano and punch a hole through a wall. Technically there wasn't even any proof Donnie had even
been—

—Raphael twisted around. He got down on hands and knees, on hands and elbows, and he pressed his snout into the flooring.

"Donnie," Raphael growled sharp and guttural. "He was here."

Leo twisted about to look his way. "You're sure?"

"I'm sure." Nostrils flared, Raphael drank in the lingering smell of sweat and panic, trailing it a few steps across the floor like a bloodhound. The spot he homed in on must have been the place where they'd originally loaded Dee into the vehicle, because it seemed like they'd pulled him in a bit more later on, and maybe packaged him up in a cage or crate or whatever. This had to have happened over a week ago, yeah, but with only one window open there hadn't been any cross airflow, and the smell lingered. Raphael slammed a hand against the floor, anger and energy lighting up his back. "He was here."

(So close, but no closer.)

Leo approached him but didn't take a sniff of his own, indicating he at least took Raphael's word. "There's no other sign of him, and no further information about the people who took him."

"What if I Facebooked the guy the car's registered to?" Mikey wondered blithely from the car roof, probably doing a shit job at being lookout. "If he's not good at privacy settings, he might have tons of public posts with location tagging enabled. At minimum he'll have a profile picture!"

"I'm not sure how much a picture of someone from a different state could help us in New York," Leo said. "Even if he is still here, the population density."

"Get that pic, get anythin' ya can," Raphael growled. "He just lost his car and 'parently can't afford ta get it back. If the fucker's still alive, he's going to be at a bar, drownin' his sorrows in cheap beer, rantin' his life story ta da bartender."

"And I suppose you'd know a lot about that?" Leo said rhetorically.

Raphael tensed scalp to tail, charged by fresh intel, ready for a fight.

"Splinter will be worried. Let's prove he was right to let us out 'alone' by returning home promptly."

Raphael closed his eyes, letting the heat wrack through him in waves.

Leo left the vehicle first.

(Donnie hadn't died here. No smell of blood. No smell of death. They'd taken him someplace, but they'd taken him alive.)

Raphael slowly sat up, letting the emotions crest off of him like so much water, wiping a hand across his face. He could do this. He could focus on getting their brother back. He opened his eyes to the brightness of the overhead interior car light.

He blinked.

Disbelief crested over him.

Raphael reached up and touched the overhead light, and pulled from it a single, bright, coppery, red strand of hair.
Chapter End Notes

Now now, I'm sure it's a coincidence.

...

<<
Flagellation; Self

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Splinter was waiting for them in the atrium, stooped over his cane. He'd been pacing.

His sons had taken a short detour to go rummaging through dispensary waste for arthritis medicine. Nobody outed nobody out on that one. Instead, they turned on their Household Ninjitsu to overdrive. The freshly looted pill bottle had to get to the pantry without a single rattle. Then it could be 'miraculously rediscovered' as surplus tomorrow morning.

Raphael fed it out of his coat sleeve and into Mikey's hand so he had both hands available to tear a refrigerator door open for milk and slam it shut. Mikey joked and ate fruit while passing it on a foot under the table, Leo was the dictionary definition of Obedient Japanese Eldest Son while transferring it with the tip of his katana sheathe, and Raphael glowered menacingly at boxes of cereal as he shouldered it stealthily up onto the top rack.

Dad, who could hear a pin drop three rooms away, didn't give them a single knowing stare.

Fuck yeah. Was time for a consolation prize amid all the bad news.

Raphael already knew what Leo's debriefing was gonna sound like: They'd found the car, but not a trail. Raph was betting his money these guys had been freelancers, not in-house employees of any big operation, lab, or government cover up. Nothing about that jeep had signaled 'spic-and-span-lab-coats,' 'mook suits,' or even 'blue collar uniform.' As to why the car had been abandoned and picked clean, though, or what to do next, that was up to Leo and Master Splinter's best guess. They'd looked like professional trappers of some kind.

Had there been some kind of infighting over payout percentages? Had somebody hired the hunters out and then decided to silence them? Sounded risky to murder a bunch of armed dudes who might have families or colleagues what might bite you in the ass. Easier just to hire quiet guys and pay them fairly. Plus, it wasn't like they knew story anyone would believe. Mutants in New York's sewer? Pfft.

Mikey even joked, "Is this James Bond, The Godfather, or Pulp Fiction? What movie are we in? Man, what genre are we in?"

Raph snorted, ignored the dojo door, and went to his room. He wasn't going to linger around in hallways like he was one of two Followers of Leo waitin' for the boss to finish a meeting. Junior could go fuck himself.

He slammed the door shut behind himself, closed it, locked it, and then leaned back into it a moment as his heart rate escalated. When Mikey didn't follow him or intrude on his space, Raphael shrugged off his coat, crossed the room at a stagger, and fished out the scarf from under the hammock pillow to hold it to himself (like a doll, like he was a toddler). Pacing and breathing hard and raspy into purple fabric let him shake the jitters out before he exploded on someone (or collapsed). He reached for a dumbbell, his heaviest, and he paced with it and lifted, and lifted, and lifted.

When your own existence violated all commonly held conceptions about what was possible in 'the real world,' the hell were you supposed to base your assumptions on? Mikey wasn't crazy comparing this to a movie. Donnie could have at least told them what level of technology was likely real. But
who could tell them truth from fiction about how well organized kidnappers might be?

The hours slurred into a gray mash.

Raphael sat upon his hammock when his eyes were heavy. With a grimace, he rocked to the side to draw out his lone remaining sai. He held it flat across his palm, feeling it's weight.

That hair hadn't been a figment of his imagination, had it?

Raphael turned his coat over and reached into the breast pocket. He'd placed the hair there, and it was still there now. He drew it out and twirled it around, staring at the coppery color. The look of it was bothering him, mostly because he couldn't tell if it was important. If it was important, Leo was going to get suspicious at him for 'hiding shit.'

This color had to be a coincidence. Legs had owned pepper spray instead of a firearm, she couldn't fight, and there was nothing whatsoever about her that yelled big game hunter. She didn't fit the MO. And there'd been something about the way she'd put his sai back into his hand during the fight that had felt honest, like someone shouting, 'Hey, you're getting killed in there, tiger, try a right hook!' and not at all like, 'I'm a mad scientist conveniently getting an early sneak peak at my next project.'

She'd covered for him with the police, and maybe that had been because she was involved with shady people, but Raph hadn't gotten that vibe. And if Raphael's intuition was as shit as the rest of him, what did he have left to find his brother with?

...Anyway.

Raphael would have shown the hair to Leo, saying, 'Yo, seems like one of our bad guys has red hair, FYI,' except he already knew the second he said 'red hair,' Mikey was going to remember Legs, and Leo was going to remember the sai, and they'd add one to two and accuse Raphael of just wanting to get the sai back before Splinter found out. They wouldn't even be entirely wrong. Raph's first impulse really was to get his tail outside, track Legs down, and figure out where his fucking sai was and whether she, the police, or the Purple Dragons had it.

But as much as any kid wanted to avoid trouble with their parents, or recover a lost heirloom, that wasn't why its absence was weighing on him like a millstone.

The night Raphael had lost the sai had been the night he'd cost them their brother. The only explanation for how anyone had been looking for Donatello in the first place, was prison inmates talking about getting their assess kicked by short, bald, green dudes. And even if the timing of that had been some kind of coincidence, even if the people who'd taken Dee had gotten their tip from someplace else, even if—by some magic—the guys hunting down mutant turtles in New York City hadn't heard about suspiciously turtle-like vigilantes kicking ass in the ghettos, Donatello's kidnapping was still Raphael's fault.

Because if Raphael hadn't been grounded, Donatello wouldn't have gone to the dump alone.

After motorcycle parts.

For Raphael.
Oh come on Raphael, you have to give Leo a chance to believe you or you're as bad as he is!
Raphael started walking the sewers alone at night. He paced the corridors and abandoned subway tunnels. He needed the cold air and the quietness to think by. He needed to get away.

He found himself staring up at manhole covers, listening to the world. Listening to shouts and jostles and laughter. He caught himself glimpsing newspapers still in their plastic packaging, washing down the sewers from the houses of slobs. He came across a moth-eaten, stained, wide-brimmed hat. He kept one hand clamped tightly over his missing sai.

*Remember what happened last time, you dumb, angry sack of meat.*

He kept himself underground.

Master Splinter sent Michelangelo and Leonardo out to scout one of the gun clubs that had featured on the Jeep Cherokee's bumper stickers. They had a small profile pic of their suspect, an unfortunately boring dude with brown hair.

Listening at his brother's foots disappeared down the tunnels, Raphael knew why he hadn't been sent. Leo and Mikey were literally headed into a firearms convention. Master Splinter knew Raphael was roaming at night. He was silently asking him to stop.

Raphael wanted to obey his only parent. He looked up to Master Splinter with everything in himself. Dad wasn't 'out to get him.' Raphael wanted to calm down, meditate, iron out his temper, and make his sensei proud of him.

Instead, no sooner had Splinter gone to meditate than Raphael pulled on his coat and went to stomp around the sewers, kicking cans and wandering down to lower tunnels where he could scream his anger off into the void and nobody would hear him. He wandered up near the surface again, and ended up listening to some lady get mugged overhead. He stared at the manhole cover the sound was trickling through, reminding himself that the urge to climb up there was *anything* but heroic.

Raphael stayed underground.

There were no leads to be found at the gun convention.

Raphael went out again, to bleed himself dry of anger. When he got home, it was to the sight of Leo waiting at the door for him, all iron and ice.

"Where were you?" No beating around the bush.

"Not topside, so heave off."

"You're still *grounded.*"

Raphael laughed, shouldering past him.

Leo grabbed his arm and spun him around. "The *fuck* is the matter with you?!" Junior hissed. "Why disobey Master Splinter and leave the house at all if not to go topside, huh?! Have you forgotten
what the situation is, do you have any long term memory at all!? We're all still in danger!

This is how he says he's worried about you. Everyone is wasting time and energy worrying about you.

"Leave," Raphael leaned forward into his brother's face, "Me," he pried the hand off his shoulder without succumbing to the temptation to break it, "Alone."

Leo leaned back a step, brows furrowing uncertainly.

Raph went to his room.

They were low on real food. It was weird worrying about mundane things with Donatello missing and zero fresh clues. Leonardo and Michelangelo were sent out, and Raphael was not. It could have been a coincidence, but it wasn't.

Raphael stood in the atrium, head cocked, listening to footprints disappear.

Behind him, at the kitchen table, Master Splinter was watching him. Waiting for him. Waiting for him to yell, break down, make demands, ask questions, apologize, or, hell, just talk to him.

Dad deserved an apology or at least an explanation. Everyone did. Raphael wasn't even being subtle about disobeying him, barely did shit to hide it. And fuck were they under a lot of stress. Mikey had slowly stopped smiling. Leo had zero personality remaining. Raphael was lifting so much he felt a muscular burn at all times.

Calmly, Raphael put on his coat right in front of Splinter, opened the door and walked out of it. Like he was throwing the old rat the middle finger. This was the person Raphael respected most in the world, whom he wanted to prostrate himself before and beg forgiveness from.

All he could say for himself was that he stayed underground.

"Dad's worried about you," Mikey said.

"Don't wanna talk."


Raphael believed it; the master looked pretty haggard. More shit you're fucking up for people, meathead. "I'm getting stir crazy down here," Raphael growled petulantly, "and he thinks the answer is to cage me up more."

Mikey shuffled. "Why do you think it's that?"

"The fuck else could it be?"

"The guys who grabbed Donnie watched him come out of the sewers, right? What if they come down here looking for us? Do you think Dad wants to get ambushed down here with me? I'm like a liability. I'm feeling crazy too, but I game all day with the volume way up. You could at least could help him fight."

Raphael didn't say anything. He felt worse.
When Raphael went to leave, he found Master Splinter sitting in a kitchen chair beside the door. He had both hands rested atop his cane, and gave Raphael a very tired and knowing look.

Raph faltered. His asshole quotient had been through the roof lately, but he wasn't going to push through a direct confrontation with his dad. His dad who had been having trouble walking these past two weeks.

Raphael stepped back, jamming his hands in his pockets and lowering his head.

"Come here, my son."

Oh, Raphael did not want to do that. Especially not while in a bad mood, with anger wafting out of his pores. He obeyed, though, shuffling nervously up before his father. "Master."

"I know you are upset, my son. But there are times for expression, and there are times for teamwork. Your brothers are on eggshells with you."

"Master," Raphael acknowledged Dad had spoken, even if the words didn't translate into anything he knew what to do with. *Shut up and listen to Leo?*

Splinter took a deep breath and let it out like he was sad.

Heartbroken and too constipated to show it, Raphael could only stand there.

"Be safe, my child," Splinter said, standing, and leaving for his bedroom.

Raphael fled the house.

He didn't go topside.

He sat at the edge of an old drainage pipe, rubbing purple fabric between thumb and forefinger, wiping tears from his face with the back of his hand and trying to understand literally anything about his own lack of self control.

Chapter End Notes

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Splinter selected Raphael and Mikey to fetch expired produce from the corner mart.

Raphael popped up to attention at the sound of his name so fast that a free weight ended up taking a chunk out of the floor. Leo scoffed like Raph didn't understand the gift he'd been given. Oh-ho, Raph understood just fine, and bowed deep before their master. Food run, yup! No trouble! No distractions! Won't even punch Mike!

Mikey joked a bit about Leo's face on the way out, and Raph joked back. Their route took them through the dump, and they drew their weapons out as they neared the mouth of the tunnel. This was the only place a member of their family had ever been attacked. Raph wasn't scared by that; it left him eager.

More than eager?

Adrenaline crept up his Raphael's neck. Something about this all was wrong. He slowed way down, easing a step forward.

Michelangelo grabbed his arm, and leaned close, and Raph was so jumpy he had to refrain from shoving his brother away. "Where are the rats?" Mikey asked.

"What?"

"Normally when we come up here, rats scatter."

Raphael paused. His empty hand and sai were shaking. Somebody's out there.

He thought of Donatello, and Purple Dragons, and the rush of diving off a building at midnight to cream crooks and druggies. His pulse rushed in his veins, almost audible.

He thought about Dad, worn with arthritis from too many missions topside with them, hobbling back and forward across the atrium with his cane, too scared to let all three of them out alone because if he lost all of them, then he'd lost everything, the whole of his family, and he might never get them back.

"Text Master Splinter," Raphael whispered.

"What?"

"Dad and Leo. Do it quiet now. Tell em to swing around for a pincer. Whoever's out there, they ain't gonna get a chance to run."

And I won't get to 'accidentally' kill em before they fess up to where Donnie is.

Raphael and Michelangelo army-crawled up to the mouth of the tunnel, keeping maximum cover and presenting their shells as the biggest targets to a potential assailant. They strained their weak infravision to its limits, trying to pick up on any blobs of heat in the dark.

Nothing yet. Raph signaled Mike to stay low and be ready.

The minutes crawled by in agonizing stillness. A rat came out to investigate Mike's hand. It's boldness kinda proved someone had been walking the access tunnel right before Mike and Raphael. What if they'd overheard Mike and Raphael further in? What if they guessed they'd been detected...
and split?

Hold position. Don't startle the fox.

Out in the distance, a pigeon cooed.

*That's Leo.* He and Splinter were on-site and circling around to check things out.

Mike kept quiet and signaled to Raphael, asking if one of them should 'stick their neck out.' It was a hard call to make. The hunters might give themselves away for bait, but the trade-off was giving them that first strike. He and Mike didn't know how many guys were out there. If it was a whole group, the way it had been with Don, then the four of them were already outnumbered, and they might need every hand they could get.

The minutes stretched. There wasn't a sound of conflict, and there weren't any further bird-calls to tell Raph Leo'd found anything. Either that, or he'd found *too much.* Frustrated at the lack of progress when all his nerves were on fire, Raphael tried to weigh the risks vs. rewards of showing himself. If he went out there, would he need to hold still like a sitting duck to bait out a tranq dart to the arm or leg? Or would they mobilize to capture him immediately, potentially letting him dive for cover?

Fed up with waiting, Raphael got up into a low squat, getting ready to bolt. He'd try and flush them out with suddenness. One. Two.

Mikey beat him to the punch, and Raphael hissed after him in surprise! *No! Bonehead, get back here!*

"Woohoo!" Orange squealed, signalling to literally anyone and everybody that a *complete idiot* had just exited the tunnel and was jumping around in a circle like a maniac. "Dumpsploration time!"

With all that racket, it was a wonder how Mikey heard the dart coming. But he did: The cough of the airsoft rifle, and the whistle of the projectile, and then Michelangelo spun mid-dance, bringing the butt of his nanchaku through the dart mid-air, catching it on the wood.

"Whoopidasies!" he chirped blithely. Right before getting hit in the calf by a second dart from the complete other side.

Raphael rocketed forward, registering Leo's sharp whistle for *Attack!* and changing his plan from grabbing hold of Michelangelo to pushing past him. Leo had been on the left, so Raphael kicked off the wall of the tunnel and left its mouth headed right. He vaulted garbage onto to find himself face to face with surprise barbed wire on the ground. He rolled his shell over it, and got to the other side. A subtle jump of surprise drew his attention up beside a junked car, to where a gun nose and bipod poked out from under camouflaged fabric.

Paff! The dart came out of the barrel as Raphael dropped his weight, and the twirling barrel of the syringe went singing just over the edge of his shoulder, hitting on the shell lip. Raphael bolted forward. The hunter threw the camouflage away, grabbing up his gun and scrambling backwards to try and get to his feet.

*Mine.*

Raphael ran, climbed, leaped, and swung himself up, and then he was higher than the guy, running from car roof to car roof. The bastard threw aside his rifle, pulling out what looked like a handgun and spinning about to level the barrel on his wrist. That was the instant Raphael had to register the guy knew what he was doing. BANG. BANG. The guy was firing up into the air, in the dark, from
uneven footing onto an uneven platform. Raphael spun out the sai and jumped.
Raphael didn't miss. He made contact with one foot at hip height and the opposite knee into the sternum. Take down! Raphael's open hand hit the shoulder to refine the aim of his sai, and his sai fell onto the gun with a crunch that may or may not have disabled it, but the crosspiece had stabbed flesh, and the hunter gave a satisfying pig-like shriek when Raphael twisted the handle and spun the gun away.

Raphael had been hit by something on sticking the lading. He felt like he'd been clubbed across the chest with a bat, or like he'd misjudged a jump and clipped a steel girder on the way down. Possible. The guy he'd pinned shoved ineffectually at his shell lip, trying to struggle free. Raphael was smaller but heavier and much stronger, and clenched with his legs to hold onto his prey. He grabbed hold of the bastard's neck, and squeezed. He got the sai up, and held it's tip over the man's face in an unspoken threat. The bucking and thrashing stopped.

A plain human face stared up at him in fear and disbelief. Boring, almost. But he matched the Facebook photo.

You. That was your car.

Something like a grin lit up Raphael's face, and he squeezzzeddd. Eyes bulged. Normal fear turned to end-of-life panic. Limbs flopped ineffectually like beached fish.

"Raphael!"

Master Splinter's voice.

Did they really need two guys alive?

Raphael released the throat anyway, leaving his prey to collapse and shudder, bloody hands at bruised larynx, wheezing, whimpering, and coughing. Slightly winded himself, Raphael looked around for other bogies. Nothing. Had it only been two of them? With a growl, Raphael turned back to the man, frisked him for additional weapons, stripped him of shoes and coat, and then grabbed him about the waist, heaved him off the ground, and half-carried, half-dragged the long-limbed fucker back over to his family.

The guy Leo'd gotten the jump on still looked like he smelled of roses. Roses and stale cigarettes, guy was built big and slow. Just just sat there on his ass, not even a black eye on him, with his wrists restrained by cheap zip-ties. Splinter, Leo, and Mikey stood around him.

"Were there any more of you dudes?" Mikey asked, hunkering down to grin at the bastard. "Cause if there were, we'd have to split up to chase them and you totally might get a chance to escape."

"Huh! Yeah! Four of them! They-they had a car, they're probably getting away right now!"

Leo and Mikey shared a look. "Yo, that was like the worst lying I've ever heard. You do all the normal tells, dude, haven't you ever practiced before?"

"P-p-? I'm talking to a goddamn fuckin' lizard, Jesus Christ save me."

"Rude," Mikey pouted. "And here I was trying to be the nice cop."

"The-? Okay, look, um, we're not even supposed to be here, okay? This was supposed to already be
over! Zahíno didn't even want me on the goddamn team anymore, fucking control freak, and he owed me this paycheck, okay, owed me, and he-

Raphael reached them and threw his burden face-first and shoeless onto the ground in front of his buddy. He sagged there with a muffled sob.

"Was that entirely necessary?" Leo asked him, as if offended his entire takedown had looked less pretty.

"Yeah. It's a sampler what's gonna happen ta him if he doesn't stop pissing wind." Raphael confirmed, shoving Jeep-Owner over with a kick. "Now tell us where the fuck our brother is, or I'll be turning ya inside out startin at ya feet."

"Your-?"

"Brother," Raphael confirmed. "Talk."

"I-I," the big tough entitled smartass's voice got lower, weaker, "I don't know."

"Course ya do," Raphael leaned over, and picked up a shard of glass from the ground. "Looks like us. Green. Bald. Ya hit him with a car what got impounded. Should be ringin' some bells."

"Fuck you, I don't know! That's the goddamn fucking problem!" the man shouted at him, scooting backwards.

Splinter reached out a hand, keeping Raphael back for a silent pause. "What do you mean, 'that is the problem'?" the master asked very kindly.

That man looked from them to their father, back again, forward again. He seemed to register that Splinter was the leader, or maybe the more reasonable person present, even if he was a giant rat. "That's just it, nobody knows what the fuck happened. I figured Zahíno gyped us, Sam figured it was the lab, running off with the goods, but then it didn't make sense why they'd run clear over the broad we was fencing everything to. Mighta been rivals, we dunno, lab ain't talking, just told us not to contact them again unless we had the goods. Ain't paying a retainer, either."

"The turtle which you captured," Splinter said, even though he shoulda said 'kidnapped,' "He was taken from your custody by force?"

"Stole Sam's car! Stole the-'turtle,' we don't have shit, we're just trying to break even here!"

"I see. And this 'Zahíno,' if we wanted to speak with him, how would we go about it?"

"H-he ain't got the goods," the man seemed to be admitting that to himself. "If anyone's got em, it's gotta be the company that hired us out, right? O-or their rivals! Yeah. Right?"

So Raphael and Leo hadn't captured anyone high up on the totem pole, but this was something. Intelligence. Places to search. Finally! "Why ya askin' us?" Raphael wondered, cracking knuckles cause he figured he could milk out more. "Maybe I should make ya position more clear with some 'questions' of mah own."

"Raph." That was Leo this time, like he had the right to quiet Raphael down like Splinter had. Raphael flicked him off with a sai as the middle finger.

Father said to the man, "Do you recall the names and information of who hired Zahíno?"
"Z-Zahíno handled most of it. I didn't even drive, wasn't my job!"

Ignorance wasn't gonna fly. "Hmm." Father lowered his hand a bit, and Raphael licked his lower lip.

"Sh-shit. Shit. S-sam!" he kicked at the guy who was already down. "Sam! Wake the fuck up!" A moan answered them. "Tell em! Tell em where the fuck we drove that freak to! When we got jumped!"

The guy whom Raphael had nearly killed lay there for a second, almost long enough for someone else to start talking again. Then he rasped out: "S-sachs.' "

Father stiffened. "Pardon?" he asked.

"S-sachs' Lab-boritories."
It is actually an error that I am spelling 'Sacks' as 'Sachs.' But since I've done it, I've decided to continue on with it, seeing as I like the spelling better. So that makes Eric Sacks into Eric Sachs.

Dad swayed, and Raphael looked up to see his face blank of expression, like he'd just seen a ghost.

"Tell them more!" The asshole whom Leo had barely touched kept kicking the guy whom Raph'd nearly killed. "Tell em who normally hires Zahíno! You got me into this! Fuck you! Wait, I know: It's this big shot, this business magnate guy." Asshole looked up at them with eager, hopeful panic that if he was a good prisoner, they'd go easy on him. "Zahíno's hunting buddies with him or something, handles a lot of hush-hush under-the-table bounty hunting jobs, repossession, fur trade, rhino horns, tiger dicks, stuff like that!"

Mikey and Leo were waiting on an interpretation, to see if the name meant anything to their father. Clearly, it did. Splinter turned to the three of them.

"Nobody'll ever believe I saw you, right?" Asshole was asking. "Giant talking animals, heh. I'm heading out to California tomorrow, you don't have ta worry about me anymore."

Splinter locked eyes with Leonardo and quietly held out a hand, palm up. For a second, nobody—Leo included—got what that meant. N'then Leo stiffened, and his eyes widened a bit like he was asking 'Really?'

Dad nodded.

Leo reached hesitantly about himself, and drew a katana, and lifted it up with both hands to offer it submissively to their dad.

Wait.

Is he gonna-?

"I didn't do nothing wrong," Asshole breathed, scooting backwards. "I didn't do shit! It was a trapping job, just bringing in a lost animal!"

"Despite the language you have used to describe my under-aged child," Splinter intoned, "I apologize to you." Back to the three of them, in Japanese, Splinter said: "Please look away, my sons."

Raph wanted to see it. Leo and Mike didn't want it to happen. Then Leo turned away first, and Raph and Mikey followed.

"Keep away from me! You're animals! It was their property to begin with! You don't have a single right anywhere to-!"
Swoosh.

Slump.

No fight put up. No gargling or choking. No rolling around in the blood. A quick look back explained, and Raphael rocked on his heels. The head was off, and Master Splinter was already quietly cleaning off the katana. Holy shit. Katana were made for skin, not for cleaving bone. Raphael stared. Was still staring, even as Dad turned and gave the katana back to Leo.

Mike was cringing. Leo looked a little in shock. Raph felt a little in shock. The guy dying wasn't satisfying, somehow. It just felt... creepy. Like in a second he'd pop up again talking shit.

"Please fetch plastic bags," Master Splinter instructed Mikey. "We cannot leave a body here. We will need to move it. I am sorry I must request your help in this morbid task."

Mikey bobbed his head rapidly and scrambled to get back into the tunnel.

Raph cleared his throat. "What about the other one?"

"Help him to his knees, Raphael, Leonardo. Give him some water."

Surprised, but thrown off his attack vector and feeling weird and subdued, Raphael nodded. He hunkered down over the guy and pulled him up off the ground. The guy didn't say anything, just slumped there on his knees, hugging his bleeding hand under his elbow, with his opposite fingers curled protectively over his neck.

Raph glanced over at Leo shakily joined him and broke the seal on a water bottle. They offered it to the guy, who took a moment to register it was there. Then, stifling breaths that mighta been sobs, he took the bottle from them and sipped on it.

None of them had seen somebody die before. When Leo finally snuck a real look over at the headless corpse, he flinched but then stared long and hard like he was fuckin' memorizing it. Like it was a textbook, or nuanced tapestry, in need of attention.

Raph snapped fingers in front of his face. Leo nearly jumped out of his skin.

"Hey. The name of that place scared Dad."

"That wasn't my imagination?" Leo asked.

Raphael shook his head and laid a hand flat against Leo's shell. Not a hug. Definitely not a hug.

"I didn't know," the man rasped, and they both kinda jumped (nerves) and looked down at him.

"Didn't know what?" Raphael growled.

"That it—that he had a family. I didn't know. I didn't know it was just a kid," he breathed more than spoke. "Ya don't even take fawns hunting deer."

Raph and Leo shared a hesitant look.

"Told us it'd be 'smart.' Never... never told us it could talk."

"You came back for another one of us," Raph said, looking down at him with a sneer. "And dis time
ya knew bettah. Fah what? Fah cash ta get ya car back? S'my little brothers we're talkin' about. S'a chair empty at breakfast, a bedroom nobody's sleepin' in, n' his favorite cereal ain't been touched in weeks, cause everybody's in denial of the fact it'll be stale betime we get him home."

The guy cried regrets silently into his water bottle, too late for it to help anybody, and definitely way too late to help Donnie.

Chapter End Notes

Donnie, your concussion just got avenged.
The Best Policy; Honesty

Chapter Notes

I'm enjoying working with less than clear-cut information. The nitty gritty of all the details, some important, some not, some right, some wrong, seems to echo the earlier scientific tone pleasantly.

Mike got back and Dad insisted on packing up the body first. Raphael stomped in to insist on helping, because lugging around two hundred pounds of dead weight wasn't something his dad, who owned a cane, ought to be doing for the sake of his 'innocence.' Raphael handled the corpse like it was a bag of potatoes, no fucks given. Uh. Dad picked up the head.

Only when the mess was cleaned did Splinter come up to the wounded guy—was his name Sam?—and squat down before him to speak one-to-one. He filched the guy's wallet first, and leafed through it.

"Mr. Morrison, will you tell me the name of this 'business magnate' whom your partner spoke off?"

"Yeah." Sam Morrison had no fight in him. His hand hadn't stopped bleeding; he was probably feelin' heady. "He's a foreign investor, lives here in New York City. Surname's 'Oroko,' but I'm not sure about the vowels, or tones, or anything like that. I know it's Asian."

"I see," Master Splinter sounded like he'd just been reading the obituaries. He folded the wallet.

"Have you met this Mr. Oroko?"

"No." He shook his head weakly. "I was just with Zahíno. And, um. Z-zahíno's not... not a 'he,' she's a she."

Pause. "Your partner had not personally met her?"

"I don't-I don't mean to ramble if it's not important..."

"You are not rambling. Please, continue."

"Okay. S-she's just real easy to mistake for a guy, happens a lot, and she doesn't correct anybody. Alto, short hair, flat chested, likes girls. Almost always in athletic biking gear, not sexy stuff, no grunge art, blank and black. Doesn't show her face much. She's uh, she's served."

"Served?"

"In the military. I met her coming home from Afghanistan, only she was an officer. Sergeant major in, in, god," he rubbed his throat, "th-the 5th SFG Airborne, I think. Had a blue and gold specialist collar. Doesn't talk about it much. We were both game hunters, we talked about that instead. I dunno if that helps any." He rubbed his nose. "Guess they skip the random cluttered details part in the movies."

Mike winced, and turned a kinda pleading look towards Leo, who didn't know what to tell him.
"There are many good sayings about the importance of details," Master Splinter said, as he filched Sam's phone to inspect it. "You have worked with Ms. Zahíno before?"

"Under her. She's the one who always hired me, she's got a huge network, knows lots of talented people and vets. She'd put together teams for lots of odd jobs. Moved a black rhino onto a conservation for her once, n' she paid me out of pocket. That big brute's still alive today. She's not how 'my partner' made her out to be, she's a conservationist, doesn't smuggle ivory or any of the things he said. Or, I guess if she did, I didn't know about it. She hasn't been state-side for a bit..."

"But she knows this 'Mr. Oroko' personally?"

Bleak nod. "Pretty sure. His aides call her for updates. I figure she does a lot of PR control, because he's got tons of money in health sciences and conservation. I've heard he's in business with Sachs, but you'd have to look it up, it's just what I heard. I don't actually know if he's a hunter."

"Ah. Have you worked with her recently?"

"A couple jobs, nothing like this." Sam thought about it. "I helped transport an alligator from the Keys. Florida? Huge thing, but not normal, the legs and arms were wrong. We used a semi-truck. I-I don't know if that means it was like you. Like you or your kids. I don't know. It was for Sachs' Labs, too, so I guess it could be the same thing."

"I see. And is it true that my son was 'stolen' from your possession?"

"Yeah. The thief got into the driver's seat right under our noses. We were waiting for the final haggle on exact payment, and nobody was looking."

"That was many days ago, yet you did not return here until now. Your Ms. Zahíno, does she know there is more than one of us?"

"I-I don't think so. When the two of us set up here tonight, we didn't know if we'd find anything, or if there was more than one. Was a long shot, cause we were broke. Zahíno is off trying to recover the missing, um, the kid. Trying to figure out who stole him."

"And she discarded you when you no longer had a car?"

"I- No. T-to be honest, I kinda got that mobster vibe back there, kinda freaked out. Y-you know? Like the buyers weren't so much angry the 'goods' didn't arrive, as they were super offended anyone would dare rob them. Wanted to know who to go lop fingers off of, that kind of thing. I got spooked, told her I planned to head home, left on friendly terms."

Master Splinter was silent for a long pause. "Mister Morrison, do you have children?"

Sam gave a weak bob of his head.

"Back in... Nevada, was it?"

Another weak nod.

"I see. Then you will go home by whatever means available to you. Hitchhike, if you must, but go promptly, and without stopping for anything. When you arrive, hug and kiss your children, make love your wife, and be grateful for every moment you have with them."

The guy's eyes flew open wide and he looked up in disbelief. Master Splinter stood, and turned to his children. "I apologize again, my sons, but I will need your help in moving the body to a location
where it can do us no further harm,” he said, as if that concluded matters. "Raphael?"

Raphael took a long, long look at Sam Morrison, and then stepped past to go pick up the bagged corpse behind him.
"I'm hooome!" April had a rotisserie style chicken with her, but the apathetic and morose expression on her roommate's face as he huddled in the corner of the couch wasn't a total surprise. She'd been expecting this. Setting down the chicken, April made her way over beside him.

He'd fixed the busted Dell she'd left him with, and a new Linux operating system was chugging away installing a long queue of packages. "Hey," Donnie murmured belatedly,

"Spill," she instructed, draping an arm across his shell. "You look like I did the day they canceled Firefly."

"What if I never remember?" he asked her. "The swelling's almost gone. I'm fine."

"Donnie, it's only been a few weeks since you were brutally beaten, kidnapped, and injected with cocktail sedatives. You've just started recovering, and you already want to talk about 'never'?"

A millennial who was used to having all the information he needed at the touch of a button gave a heavy sigh.

April hugged him knowingly. She knew how frustrating it could be working with non-deterministic black box systems. "I was going to give you another week's rest, but maybe you and I should talk about mental exercises for recovering memories."

"I've been reading into it already." He looked up at her. "I tried ink blots and psychological priming exercises with word couplets."

"Uh-oh. And?"

"Nothing. I just froze, and nothing came." He took in a raw breath. "It feels like every time I try to remember something and fail, that I just lose it. Like I only have a moment to recapture the memory, like you might try to remember a dream after you wake up. And then it's gone. No second chances. And it's like I'm eventually going to run out of exercises left to try, and that'll be it."

"Oh boy. Hey. Look, Donnie, putting yourself under extreme pressure to remember something makes it harder to remember. Which increases anxiety. Insert snowball effect. Trust me on this one, this is college test-taking knowledge 101."

"I guess you're right," he moped. "I'm sorry. I got overeager."

"It'll still come back," she told him. "I know it's not easy waiting for something that doesn't have a clear arrival date."

He nodded. "Thanks for keeping me busy."

She looked at the computer. "Well I was secretly hoping once you got the computer up and
running, you might autopilot into trying to log in to various websites."

He gave another big sigh, and reached down to tab open an internet browser. He had very nearly a million tabs open, all to the different log-in pages of web sites. "I tried."

"No," April lamented, thoroughly impressed by him, "you panicked and tried to log into every single site on the interwebs, instead of waiting patiently for that autopilot. Damn. I was hoping you'd log in to G-Mail. Then we'd have your contact list."

"Yeah. Now I feel like I tried out those neurons, failed, and lost my only chance."

"No. No, no no. Look, Don, you remembered—forty, sixty—seventy-three different web pages that you know you have logins at. That's pretty impressive for a boy who is moaning about how all his memories are gone."

He sniffed. "Some of them were just extrapolations based on other websites. Or interpolations, depending."

"That's the second kind of exercise I wanted to bring up to you," April segued. "Technically speaking, you don't have to remember your family to find them again."

He straightened a little, big brown eyes looking up to her.

"Your family is probably looking for you! We might be able to signal to them where you are."

"I don't even know if I have a family," he blurted suddenly, becoming very emotional.

"Oh. Honey. Donnie," she withdrew her hand from his shell so she could cup his cheeks. "You asked to call someone immediately upon hitting consciousness. You use 'shell' as a curse word and have asked me for a 'high-three.' You not only have a family, you have an entire vernacular."

He looked meekly up at her like her ability to hold firm and insist upon these things was a necessary validation to keep believing in them. Then he closed his eyes and nodded weakly. April hugged him. He might have been an athletically fit sixteen year old boy, but Donnie clearly wasn't scared of being emasculated by hugs.

"Anyway," she breathed deep as she pet his shell. "Just because your memories are still in hiding doesn't mean there aren't clues about your past lying around, waiting to be found. Look at all the websites you went to. All of those are clues. For instance, there's not a single bank account on here, but there's a lot of tech sites. So you have a computer back home, but either someone pays for it, or you bum off the city somehow. See? Clues."

Donatello, peeked out past her arm at the computer. He took some slow deep breaths, and then nodded. "Yeah," he agreed, perking up a little. "Yeah. You're right." He gave a partially alleviated sigh. "I should probably only work on this memory stuff when you're around, you're going to catch these things."

April squeezed him, and then released so he could sit up again.

Morale restored, Donatello looked like he could once more handle the world and it's problems. "Is that a chicken?" he even asked.

"Ayup! But before we get into chicken," she raised one finger to stall him, and then pushed herself up from the couch, "I actually have been saving something pretty big which might help jar your memory."
"You have?" he turned to her a second if slightly frazzled. "Where?"

Ha! Oh, about a week after meeting him, Donatello had gone through all her photo albums, mail, drawers, and half the boxes in her attic. She'd found him in the middle of her house surrounded by everything from Christmas lights to old birthday cards, reading and examining everything. She'd plopped her hands on her hips and given him a look, and he'd blinked up at her in sudden realization that he'd been caught snooping.

"I had a fit of paranoia," he had told her quietly, while shrinking as small as he'd been able to shrink. "I maybe got carried away." But April had busted out laughing and forgiven him immediately.

Anyways! "In the attic," she answered blithely.

"Oh but I... looked... there..." he mumbled bashfully.

"It was pretty small and I hid it under the insulation in case the cops ever searched my house looking for aliens," she explained. "Hold just a second."
Aliens? Police!?

"In case of what?" Donatello stammered, twisting around on the couch, before sternly demanding: "What have you been hacking lately!?"

He heard her laugh from the bedroom attic entrance. "Nothing like that! Well, not that anyone would be able to trace. Turns out, you aren't the only green, bald person I've ever bumped into."

He was silent a brief moment, sensation dropping out of his stomach. "What?" he asked softly.

"Mn-hmm!" she called, returning to the room with a bundle under her arm. "It happened before I met you, and it was part of the reason I was unnaturally chill about what you looked like."

Donnie stared up at her, slowly pushing himself to stand. She was carrying a hat partially rolled up in a newspaper.

"I was going to ask you about it when you first woke up!" April explained. "This guy jumped in out of nowhere to rescue me from street thugs, and nearly got his tail handed to him in the process. But when you ended up amnesiac, well..." she shrugged helplessly, "I figured I'd not overburden you all in one go, and instead save it until you were feeling better."

Donatello looked from her face down to the bundle.

"Just, um, don't fall into a depression if it doesn't work, okay? I lived with a woman with Alzheimer's, I know what's statistically helpful, but I also there's no surefire reliable way to trigger memories. If this doesn't work, it's not the end of the world. We just have bad random number generation, that's all."

"It's a hat?" Donatello asked her uncertainly.

"Well, apart from his impeccable fashion sense and the local funnies, he also accidentally left behind one of these..." She pulled a three-pronged knife out from its humble newspaper disguise.

*I've seen that before!*

Donatello staggered forward immediately, compelled to reach out and touch this one familiar object. It wasn't a knife. It was *shaped* like a knife, but Donatello already knew the edges would be blunt before he touched them. It was a type of *baton*, sharpened only at the tip, thick and heavy for blocking, useful for disorienting, disarming, and punching through armor.

He turned, pacing slightly, shaking the knife, willing the memory to come back.
"Name. There's a name! A name, a person, a feeling-!

But... but it...

It slipped from his fingers, and disintegrated, and the more he tried to grab for fragments of it, the more the memory disappeared, like it had simply never been.

"I know who this belongs to," Donatello gushed furiously, miserably. "It's a—it's a sai. I know that word, I know this sai, specifically! There's- there should be," he turned it over, and found writing inscribed on the reverse. "'Look not for peace on the outside.' It has a mate. The other one says, 'Peace is only found within!'

"That looks like Japanese," April said, coming up beside him. "You apparently speak Japanese?"

Donatello shuddered. "I do? I do." He squeezed the sai, and bit his lip. "But there was more! It was there, April! It was there, the name of who owned this sai, all of it, everything about them, on the tip of my tongue! And..." His shoulders slumped. He leaned backwards. "And now it's not. It's gone."

"Do you know what letter it started with? Male or female? A certain color, or tone of voice, maybe?"

He shook his head. "No." Tears came back.

April took his hand, and squeezed. "It's just under the surface, Donnie," she told him. "It's not gone. There's no real damage. It just needs more time, like a splinter you're working out, bit by bit."

*Like a splinter.*

Donnie nodded and turned into her for some comfort, which she supplied. A certain word carried no especial familiarity to him.

Only a borough away, 'a Splinter' calmly helped fill a set of bags with rocks, and a family dumped a body into the Hudson river.

"About the sai guy," Donatello broached once they'd pigged out on chicken. He was feeling a lot better with food in his belly. "Rhyme unintentional. He looked like me?"

"Yup," she confirmed. "Green, three fingers, and a shell would explain how he walked off those brass knuckles to the ribs. His eyes were lime green, and he was wearing a band of cloth around his head, like a Zoro mask."

"What color?"

"Aha," April tapped the table. "Most people would have assumed black; you assumed a color. It was red."

He rubbed his face. "I wish I knew what that meant."

"He was a really good fighter. Like, I don't know how to describe it. I'm not into boxing or judo or any of that stuff. It was fluid, I guess, like he had great spacial sense. Hey! You remember the other day when you caught my mug using your foot?"

"Uh, yeah, but that really wasn't-"

"Well, I suppose we mustn't waste any more time. Donnie," she said, "we can handle this."

"Handle what?"

"Never mind. We can handle this."

"I mean, I know what you're trying to do, Donnie. And I appreciate it, but--"

"But what?"

"But this is a Splinter, a real Splinter. It just can't be as close to the surface as this one."

"That's what I'm trying to say. This is a little too easy."

"I don't know, Donnie."

"I know, I know, I know."

"Well then, I'll leave it."

"You'll do what?"

"I'll leave it. I just want you to understand."

"Understood."
"Your reflexes were automatic, and that's what he sort of looked like. Like fighting was automatic."

He blushed.

"But then the police showed up, and he disappeared into the sewers!"

Donatello straightened.

"Mn-hmm! Pulled the manhole cover off like it was pizza dough and jumped in." She snapped her fingers. "Like he'd done it a thousand times."

"Is that were I lived?" Donatello wondered to himself, trying to make his dots connect. "Here, but underground?"

"It'd explain how you're still people-shy in NYC!"

That was a sound theory. "Where'd this happen?"

April grabbed her phone, swiped, leaned across the table, and set down a location pinned on Google Maps in front of him. "I bet," she said, "that staking out that neighborhood at night will lead us back to your family."

"But this is a place you were assaulted!" Donatello disapproved. "It's unsafe! Even if he is out there at night time with any regularity—an unproven underlying assumption, by the way!—why would he approach you?"

She waved the sai. "Lost and found!"

"If you were recognizable, local gang members would recognize you too!"

"Oh come on, Donnie, they're in jail. Be brave! I'll bring you and we'll be extra careful. What's the worst that can happen?"

"Your grades will plummet, when you stay out all night waiting for random sewer dwelling mutants to bump into you and politely ask for their ninja knives back," Donatello scoffed, eyeing her sternly. "Plan vetoed!"

April eyeballed him, but then smirked and leaned back. "Okay. You're probably right," she admitted with a snicker. "We'll think of something else!"

Chapter End Notes

You two are lame, if Leo was amnesiac, he'd totally have a plan!

*Shot to DarkLeo mindlessly serving with utmost loyalty whoever it is his patron is regardless of honor or morals*

Um... ...N-nevermind, you're both geniuses, I'm sure you'll figure it out...!

*Sweatdrop...*
Master Splinter led the way home, once more taking up his cane.

Leo followed in cold silence, zero expression, hands tight on his katana, more traumatized by what the swords had just been used for than he was willing to let on. Not that Raph was 'letting' much 'on,' either.

Mikey's posture was all huddled up, and he walked close to Leo for a bit. When Leo was lost entirely in Leo's own head, Mike fell back nearer to Raphael. He was looking for some kind of comfort nobody knew how to give him, but Raph tended to do most of his thinking outside his head, in the real world, where his eyes still worked. After a bit, he bit the bullet and dropped an arm over Mikey's shoulders. Leo wouldn't notice or think nothin' of it. Leo was on a trip.

Mike weren't gonna tease him either. Little brother was as quiet as death. Raph bumped temples with him, and that was as much affection as he'd give.

Was weird to think they'd needed to kill somebody just for seeing them. Suddenly there was someone out there who'd pay good money for that kind of information, for rumors about mutant turtles, and who'd come after them. It screwed up everything they knew about safety and humans. Before now, before today, they been skittish around people because of safety, but not... Hnh.

Leo was probably worrying that Dad had let the other guy go for their sake, and not because it was best. Raphael sure as fuck was. Then again, Dad could read people like books, and he had an extremely good nose and extremely good ears, and could tell stuff about when a person was lying or trying to lead him on. And he wasn't some murderer. That asshole he'd beheaded had been a necessary kill; guy would have sold them out the second they'd let him go. He'd known exactly who to tell, too, and he'd known those people would believe him if he told them giant mutant green people were squatting under New York.

When they reached home, Master Splinter ushered them inside the front door, and then shut it behind him. He barred the door.

"My sons," he said, leaning upon the door as if for support. "I know you are distressed, but I cannot yet answer your questions, for I have many of my own which I must meditate upon."

"We understand father," Leo answered automatically, even though they didn't.

"No. You do not." The master gave a heavy sigh, and then turned to them, and placed both hands upon his cane. "But that is not your fault. Listen to me closely, for these instructions must not be disobeyed: Until I have decided our next course of action, my sons, you are not to leave the Lair. I
"Master," Raphael acknowledged, knowing this was aimed at him. But now that they finally had some clues, he was feeling less angry. Of course he could mind himself for a day or two while Dad figured out what was next.

"Raphael," Splinter fixed him with a dangerous stare. "You are not to leave."

Raph hadn't expected to be called out like that. Hadn't Dad just trusted him with the grocery run a few hours back? "Master," he repeated, confused but feeling mighty obedient.

Splinter fixed them all with a long stare and then limped up to them. "Michelangelo? Ration our foodstuffs accordingly. We will not have fresh supplies until I have finished my deliberation."

With those ominous words uttered, Splinter continued onto the Lair, and all three boys turned to stare after him in disorientation.

"Ration? What about Donnie?" Raphael asked the air. "We ain't still lookin' for him...?"

The silence stretched. "We... we have to wait for Dad to be done meditating? But what happens until then?" Mikey asked. "What do we do?"

Click.

"We're going to do exactly what Master Splinter says," Leo said serenely, and then turned about to fix Raphael with an expression that nearly made Red's skin crawl off his body, because there was a playful gleam to his eye, and that didn't make any fucking sense. "Right, Raphie?"

O-Kay. Leo needed sleep. And not to guard the front door all night long. Which would be a difficult thing to convince Leo to do, what with Raphael's recent track record of breaking rules.

"I'm bunking with Raph," Michelangelo interrupted, killing two birds with one stone and startling Leo back from whatever the fuck Leo had just gone. "Because ghosts." This time nobody could argue the ghosts weren't real.

"Right. Sure. Whatever." Raphael agreed, and headed for the pantry to polish off the Cheerios before Mikey could get to them first.

April and Donatello were out buying embedded boards for a small robotics prototype for her job—Donnie was helping!—when her phone rang and she took a call.

"Hey Dad!" she answered, and a pang shot through Donatello as she turned and peered wondrously up at her. "I'm right next door actually! Oh? Oh. Yeah, okay, I can meet you. Yeah. No, it's fine. See you in a minute! Mwah!" She hung up and looked to Donnie. "You've just been shanghaied into visiting Grams with me," she admitted to him.

Donatello hesitated. "Is that safe...?"

"Probably not, but the alternative is you wandering around the park enjoying the sunshine, which is clearly an order of magnitude more dangerous."

"Right," Donatello agreed that it was. "But is your father going to be there?"

"Yeah, I must have missed a text from him this morning," she said, looking to her phone and thumbing over it. "He said he's fifteen minutes away."
"Should I wait in the car?"

"No, he does that cute thing where he looks for my car and parks next to me. He'll see you. And if I show up late he'll be standing in the parking lot, guarding the spot next to him, waving me in like he's flagging down an aircraft." Tremendous eye-roll.

"I could climb in the trunk," Donatello offered.

"In this weather? With no windows?" It was the first hot day of spring, honestly. "Just trust me, kay? You're cute as a button in that shark hat, by the way."

"It has a pom pom on the top," Donatello crossed his arms. Matching knitted shark hats and mittens, as it turned out, had only been an Amazon.com away. "I look stupid."

"Cute As A Button," she corrected, draping an arm over him and leading him along so they could buy those boards. "Can you fake a Japanese accent?"


"Excellent. You're now a super shy ESL student. Ooh! Grab that Japanese book on C++ we're going to need it to supplement your disguise."

"This is Chinese," Donatello scolded, before blinking rapidly at the book. "Which I can also read, apparently. Though not very well, hmm. Jhe shih na ge... Is this pronounced 'yi'?"

Chapter End Notes

Oh, Donnie. You're just.... you're just so.... *cute*. Everyone knows it.
"Hey Dad!" April greeted, coming up to hug a salt-and-pepper haired man as he entered the waiting room. The man had a baseball cap branded with 'RIT Tigers.'

"Hey, honey...!" A hug was reciprocated. "Do you have time for lunch with me and Robyn later?"

April got them out of that one. "Sorry, didn't see your message, and we kinda already ate."

Donatello shoved his nose in that book. Mr. O'Neil blinked his way.

"Donnie here is super shy," April leaned close to her father and whispered something like, "Don't ask, remind me and I'll text you about it later." She was passing Donatello off as having a mild but quality-of-life-impairing mental or developmental condition, and hinting that it wasn't polite to talk about it in front of him, but, oh, hey, by the way, he wouldn't be saying hello in any normal fashion. What a way to take advantage of social norms!

Donatello peeped a tiny, "Hi Mr. O'Neil," from behind his book, which he hoped was convincing for someone with severe social anxiety. (Was severe social anxiety really that hard for Donnie to fake well? Probably not!)

"Hi, there!" Mr. O'Neil chuckled, immediately giving the impression that he was neither nosy nor possessed of any sense of entitlement, and that he was perfectly okay with people in the surrounding room behind unable to meet or address him face-to-face. Maybe having a severely ill mother (or mother-in-law? Donnie had forgotten to ask!) had helped. "It's nice to meet you."

"Yeah," Donnie peeped in high-strung nervousness he didn't even have to fake at all. "You, too!" Meeting anybody at all was kinda amazing, even if there was a book in the way.

April suppressed a snicker, and then reached out and waved inclusively to Donatello. "Come on, we're going into the room now. You can totally huddle in the corner, I promise."

"Kay!" Donnie followed like glue.

Donatello peeked around his book to get a look at the woman they'd come to see.

April's Grandmother didn't look particularly ancient. Her skin was still a healthy pink instead of looking faded or gray. Her hair was completely gray but steel gray instead of white, and it looked thick and very healthy. IF Donatello had to guesstimate, he'd have guessed she wasn't too much older than—than who? Someone. Shit. Okay, Donnie, make a mental note of this clue: You know someone who is slightly younger than April's Grandmother.

But there was this vacant look to this woman's eyes, like she wasn't actively using them. She looked like someone turned inward at the end of a very long day, or someone who was blind, or maybe even someone who was dead, but she still must have been passively processing whatever she saw,
because she was 'reacting' to their presence.

Kinda, um, weirdly, too.

When they'd first come in, she'd been silent and staring through a wall. She might as well have been a creepy mannequin. But now that they were inside, she'd started 'chattering' or... or 'howling,' that was the only way Donatello knew how to describe it. She kept exclaiming nonsense syllables, like "Puh puh puh puh puh!" very loudly as she squirmed from side to side in her bed.

"Hey Grandma," April greeted her anyway, looking as plucky and happy as if this were a normal day, and a normal way for a relative to be behaving. She came up and hugged the woman, to an alternating chorus of different sounds that, while loud and jarring, did seem comparatively happy. 'Grams' was, um, she was like a dog, Donnie registered. Like a puppy, who was joyously howling and wagging her tail, because someone had just come in through the front door to visit her.

Oxytocin, Donatello's brain informed him. The feel-good chemical, activated by physical interpersonal contact. Neurotransmitters for rational thought are blocked, and brain matter is dying, but emotional hormone receptors are still active. The patient can feel frustration, fear, affection, joy. Probably to a very strong extent, too, like a small child, because there is no regulatory thought to damper it.

"Hi Mom," Mr. O'Neil greeted more formally. Donnie could see he'd taken his hat off and was holding it against his chest. Was that the sort of thing one did for one's own mom, or for one's mother-in-law? How did people usually address their in-laws? Donnie didn't know. He didn't have a normal family. He didn't even have a moth-

Clue! Clue clue clue clue clue!

When they finally left the hospice, Donatello felt weirdly shaken, like he'd run a marathon.

April unlocked the car early so that he could get inside, buckle himself in, and hide in his book. She stayed outside talking to her dad for a bit, about family things that felt private and like Donatello shouldn't be snooping on them. He had, indeed, parked right beside them.

After about fifteen minutes, April said goodbye to her dad, arranged to meet up with him for dinner that evening, and then opened up her door and got in, and started up the ignition. There was a lot of waving and flashing of smiles between the two family members.

Donatello felt a pang of loss. A pang which was quickly replaced by reassurance when April pause briefly at a stop sign leading out of the parking lot, turned to him, slipped an arm around his shoulders, and squeezed him to her.

"You did great," she complemented. "You got in and out of there like a ninja!"

High on oxytocin, Donatello blushed and waved a hand at the flattery.

"So," April said as they started down the road. "I wish you could have met Gram even a year ago, when she still had her clear moments. She was a spitfire."

Donatello smiled but shuddered simultaneously. He thought back to the disabled and dying woman in the hospice. "How long did it take to get this bad?" he wondered.

"Awhile," April sighed wistfully. "She held on for a long time."
He looked over at her. "It's not your fault. You held on, too."

April didn't say anything for a bit. "Did you see how happy she was to see me?"

Donatello stiffened. Then he reached over the stick shift and placed a hand on her arm. "She's why you moved here, isn't it?" he asked. "You had to work, you had to go to school, and, on top of it, you had to take care of a dying person."

"I volunteered," April disagreed.

"Well okay, but most people would wonder how you even made it. The stress and pressure had to have been huge. And every time she got confused, it had to be heartbreaking."

"It was fine. I managed. I'm always very organized."

"Yeah but everyone has their limits, that's just natural," Donnie argued. "April, it's not your fault a day came when you couldn't take care of her anymore."

"Everyone tells me the same thing," April argued, terse and clipped. "That I've got my whole future to look forward to, and I need to think about that now. Well you know what? Gram only has a few years left, and I have plenty. Why couldn't I have traded one or two of my years for her now? After all the years she gave me? I have all the time in the world to go back to school."

Donatello withdrew his hand and thought about this. "I don't think she would have wanted that," he said. "I mean. I didn't know her... But I think she needed you for awhile, but there was a turning point... after which she would have wanted you to be free. If she could have looked down at herself and her own body, and talk to you right now, she'd tell you to get your butt out the door and get your degree. And your masters or PhD and then the Noble Peace prize, or... whatever it is normal people want their kids and grandkids to do! And you... you held out longer than that turning point already, April. You did everything right."

April's hands started shaking at the wheel.

Donnie hesitated.

She pulled over in a parking lot, threw the car into park, and busted out crying.

Alarmed, Donatello nervously reached across the car with both arms. He hugged her.

Maybe helping someone with temporary memory loss was more important for April's well being than Donnie had realized. He'd... he'd need to learn to calm down and be patient when the memories wouldn't come. For her sake. He'd have to focus on how much he could remember, instead of how much he couldn't. Cause no matter how frustrated he got, nobody would have to give up on him the way April had been forced to give up on her grandmother.
Raphael stepped quietly into the lab. He glanced out behind himself, and gingerly shut the door without a click. He passed Donatello’s desk, and ran a hand over the back of the empty computer chair.

Raphael pulled out the ultrasound on its little trolley. He’d seen Donatello use it once every month for over a year, now, and he knew the basics of how it worked: Turn it on, calibrate it, apply the gel, and then try to decipher noise from matter on its scratchy gray screen.

It took him a bit, fiddling with the usual settings, before two small little lumps came into view, right on schedule.

Raphael took in a long, slow breath through his nose, leaning an elbow on the monitor as he soaked up the news.

Ultrasounds were straightforward once you’d watch a person use them enough. But brewing up one of those oily cocktails Donatello had put together for him? Na, Raphael didn't have a clue where to start. Even if he was able to find a 'recipe' for it in Dee's things, and even if that recipe wasn't scattered piecemeal across a thousand different sticky notes, the assembly instructions would require threshold knowledge Raph just didn't have. Simple things in Don's mind, probably, like what 'distill' meant, or how to read chemical equations, or what the hell a '0.0017 isotonic solution' meant.

So what choices did that leave him with, exactly? He hadn’t wanted to think about it, the possibility they might not find Donnie for awhile, and what that would mean. The the side-effects of their missing brother were less important than the missing brother himself.

But now it was getting to the point that he had to be honest with himself, step back, and focus on all the other things Donnie used to do for them. The toaster needed to be fixed. The hot plate was on it's last legs. Two lights were burn out. And if Raphael pretended this egg-thing wasn't happening to him, he'd wind up useless in a fight, failing his brothers, and eventually dying of gangrene. That couldn't happen, not when one of his bros might badly need him in the near future.

The fuck was going to get these things outta himself?

The eggs would have to be cut out. That was just the simple truth of it. No, none of his bros were anywhere near qualified for real surgery, but Leo had steady hands and Dad had sewed up countless cuts, gashes, and worse for them in the past.

Recovery time'd be longer than Raphael like. And then they'd have to go in again, next month. Or, if his body took a rest, the month after that.

We'll find Donnie before it gets to three months. We will.

What if he's dead?
He ain't. He can't be.

Right, so the safest place to go in after the eggs was literally through his cloaca. That topped the list of a brother's anatomical regions that both Raphael and Lameonardo would strongly prefer nobody ever had to get up close and personal with, but it was the truth of things.

Fuck. Wasn't that a daffy-sounding request: 'Yo, Leo, I need ya ta cut eggs outta mah ass. Here's a scalpel and some forceps. Good luck, ya gonna need it. Be careful in there, don't hit my junk.' Maybe give him a Mario hat for good luck, something about plumbing, insert joke of Mike's choosing.

Raphael turned the ultrasound off and leaned back on his heels.

So quietly that it startled this shit out of Raph, Leo padded up beside him with this really weird little smile quirking at his lips.

"I guess you'll finally get to find out what turtle eggs taste like," he chirped in completely the wrong tone of voice, like he was Mikey checking himself out in a mirror with a wig on.

Creeped out beyond the point of starting a fight, Raphael didn't know what to do. "Are you feelin' okay?"

"You know, no matter how desperate this makes you," Leo didn't answer the question, "you still can't leave the Lair."

"The hell do you sound happy about that for? None of us can leave, not even ta-!"

"Because I expect you to try," he winked. "And I have some rope for when it happens."

Raphael's scales were prickling, and a warning sensation blared loudly along all his scalp and skin, telling him to get the fuck away from Leo because something was seriously wrong. For a second, Raphael wondered if he was dreaming. Then he swore the person smirking playfully back at him from just feet away was a complete stranger. A stranger who knew way, way, way too much about Raphael.

"Go on, Raphie," Leo cooed sweetly. "Go for a walk. Go clear your head. It's not like Sensei actually has any reason for any of his rules, it's not like any of really impacts our safety. It's alllll in our headdsss... And naturally I just never question it because I'm Teacher's Pet, my whollllee existence just revolves around whatever makes Dad happy. Right?"

Raphael got the fuck out out of that Lab, shot a baffled look behind himself, and was squicked out to find Leo watching him knowingly from the threshold.

The hell was going through his head?

Shut up with his brothers who both looked and sounded twitchy, shut up with his own temper and a completely overwhelming anger that boiled up from within whether he wanted it or not, Raphael had the very unfortunate feeling he was going to find out.

At about two AM, right before she ought to have gone to bed, April O'Neil exploded out of her shower wearing only a towel. "I've got it!" she announced to Donatello, who abandoned his programming, scrambled back against the couch and shielded his face with a pillow.

"Um," he mumbled feebly. "A-april? You're, uh, how do I say this..."
She ran across the room to where the hat and sai presently resided. "The newspaper. It's not turned to the funnies. Those are the classifieds!"

"I told you that you can't take out an ad!" he rebuked from behind his pillow. "If you say 'turtle found' someone terrible might find me, and if you say 'sai found' someone terrible is going to find you!"

"Ah, but we have three things he might want back!" she snatched up the fedora.

Donatello peeked out at the hat. "That?" He frowned. "It doesn't seem special. It's just a hat."

She turned to him with a fierce grin, her hair all straight and fiery and slicked against her shoulders, and looking quite like the Goddess Venus who had just stepped out of her ocean clam shell and onto land for the very first time, with animals, spirits, fey, and gods bowing down all around her. She pointed at him with the hat, and agreed: "Exactly."
Raphael was losing his mind.

Five days had gone by, and Master Splinter hadn't left the dojo. They brought him food and tea there, and usually left it beside him because he'd be deep in meditation.

Mike couldn't handle it. He started playing video games and he didn't stop. Just twenty-four-seven button mashing, till he needed to eat, use the bathroom, or simply passed out on the couch. Mikey ate a lot for someone who was supposed to be in charge of rationing. Raphael ate like a fucking bird.

There were no lessons in the dojo, at all. Usually, Leo would be the first one to organize training sessions for them four (three) of them if Sensei was, for some reason, indisposed. Not this time. This time, Leo sat in the corner of the kitchen, patiently peening and sharpening throwing stars. One after another, the whole set of them, all but the two Raphael had lost fighting Purple Dragons. He didn't intersperse it with meditation, or exercise. Leo sharpened every damn sharp thing in the whole goddamn house. He even went after the kitchen knives. He patiently sharpened every last tooth on the stake knives. Leo was gone.

Raphael had been frustrated, jealous, and angry while his bros were going topside on missions without him. He ought to have been a powder keg now. Shell, he could have written his own script: "FIVE FUCKIN DAYS—A WHOLE GODDAMN WORK WEEK—AND DONNIE'S LEFT OUT THERE IN LIMBO," (the all-caps was just Raphael being accurate about the matter), "AND WE AIN'T DOIN A GODDAMN THING TO FIND HIM! OH GIVE IT A REST LEO, HE'S SCARED FOR US. WELL I AIN'T SCARED! I'M LEAVIN—TONIGHT!"

Were they going to be down here for weeks? Months? Was he supposed to lift weights and attack punching bags, throwing himself into his only escapism, the way Mikey was with games? That would have made an ounce of sense if he hadn't already been doing that for nearly a month, trying to find some measure of calm.

He wasn't calm now. He wasn't angry either, and that was the weird thing. He felt fucking hunted, and it was freaking him out. Every day, every couple hours, regardless of where he was at, Raphael felt a chill run down his spine. He'd glance behind him to find Leo checking in on him, wearing a smirk and looking like he'd just stepped out of a ghost movie.

After a certain point, Raphael stopped looking behind himself.

He'd keep working, feeling the whole time like his shell might crawl right off of him and go hide somewhere.

The sight of his own exercise gear was making him feel ill, because that's where the sudden cold fronts were all usually happening.

Feeling contrary, inside-out, and lost, Raphael finally wandered into the lab, the domain of their
missing brother, whom everyone else seemed happy to escape from the absence off. Trembling, Raphael pawed through old boxes full of books Donatello no longer needed, finding earlier stuff, easier stuff, but still Donnie's stuff. He pulled out a few, and he sat down next to his unfinished motorcycle in the corner where no one could see or bother him, and he started to read.

His brother's handwriting always ended up all over every book he'd own. Arrows, notes, diagrams, verbatim dictionary definitions...

—a chill washed over him.

Raphael didn't look up. Didn't let the stalker know he felt him there.

And maybe it was all the leftover genius dust left in the atmosphere, but it suddenly dawned on Raphael, right then, right there, what he needed to do.

At dinner time Raphael slammed his free-weights onto the table, leaned across the them and flicked Mikey to get his attention. Mikey jumped up and nearly tried to start something with him.

"I'm leaving," Raphael said baldface. "Tomorrow afternoon. Dad won't expect it then."

"Dad said we have to stay here," Mikey grunted noncommittally. "You'll be grounded for years when you get back."

"Fine. Then I won't come back, not till I've got Donnie," Raphael said. "Sit here and play video games and meditate while our brother needs us. I've had enough of Dad flipping out over some humans I already know I can kill."

"Raphael," Leo asked. "Out of curiosity, how do expect to get past me at the door?"

Raphael shot a dismissive glance his way, and grabbed for his free-weights. "I outweigh you."

They didn't have a fight. Leo didn't argue with him. Didn't even put up the pretense of a fight. He just stared and smiled in knowing silence as Raphael sauntered leisurely back to his bedroom.

Not-Leo didn't know the script for this story as well as he thought he did.
Bargaining; One of the Stages Is

Chapter Notes

Patreon

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Someone waited until the early morning hours, when all those angry and frightened siblings had tuckered out their worried little heads. He waited a good hour past the last round of pacing, and then eased the lock picks into the door. Bit by bit, silent as dust, he worked the tumblers inside.

He could feel breathing someplace on the opposite side of the wall. It stayed low, suppressed, and steady; the breath of a sleeper.

Lock-picking wasn't his forte. He took his time. He had all the time in the world.

When the final tumbler slipped into place, he turned the lock in silence—not a click to signal his entry—and eased the latch out of the door jam. Therrrrre.... He opened the door with great care, but of course there were no additional barricades. He'd have heard them sliding into place. Brother dearest hadn't taken his warnings seriously.

(But bit by bit, inch by inch, he'd have gotten those out of the way with the same care.)

With the rope riding upon his shoulder and both katana drawn as an extra precaution, he slipped into the room. He ghosted along the wall towards the hammock. A tickle of realization crawled up him: The low sound of breath was coming from the wrong direction. Footsteps—!

He tried to spin with katana in hand, but a heavy shape plowed into him from the side, nailing him into the wall so hard the upper layer of concrete powdered and the sound of their shells clacking together vibrated his entire skeleton.

He held his katana braced against the darkness, against a wall of living heat, struggling until finally one blade came free.

He could see the arc of the sword in the dump, as it beheaded the man who knelt there. He could see the echoing arc of red, and the gracefulness of it, the simplicity of it. He'd watched it in the panels of a broken mirror across the yard of refuse. He could smell the blood as keenly as he smelled it now, dancing with the tip of a blade, filling his mouth. The grapple hit the floor. Bruising force, and sharp, sharp steel.

A wrench of intense pain and the sound of popping dislodged his grip on one katana. Something interesting also happened internally. It was as if Leo had been suffocating without cause, only to suddenly regain control of his breathing at the very last second. Or like he'd been dreaming, woken up into the brief panic of sleep paralysis, and then felt it subside.

He found himself on his shell, on the floor, with one foot up against Raphael's shoulder and the other pinned underneath them somewhere. His face and arms ached, and his nose was bloody. Raphael was on top of him, breathing raggedly, hands clenched in tight fists around both of Leo's wrists. "Leo," he was saying, repeating, and staring down at him with wide eyes. "Leo. Leo."
Drip.

Leo wrinkled his nose, startled to have been dripped upon. Was there a leak? He looked up, up, up, to where the tip of his remaining katana hovered far above them. He saw it was red.

He smelled the blood.

Quickly—as if lightning hit the blade and blackened every nerve—Leo dropped the katana. He heard the wet splatter of fluid as it hit the ground, and he looked back at Raphael's face. There was a slice there, right in front of his eyes, one he somehow hadn't seen. Blood was dripping from Raphael's cheek and brow. The katana had gone straight over his eye and even nicked the lid, and red was streaming down the cheek like tears. The eye was still open. It didn't look damaged.

"Leo?"

Ah. See, there were really two choices for how to answer that question:

One: Leo obviously had not caused that cut, so this was a dream and he might as well go back to sleep.

Two: Kidding, there is no option two, just do number one, trust me, it's easier.

Hehe. Hehehehe.

"Leo, where the fuck are you?" a younger brother begged, voice hoarse like he might start sobbing.

Here. I'm here! I am! Leo successfully twisted his arm free so he could touch Raphael's face. He stared wondrously at the red pigment which came off on his fingertips. He sniffed, and rubbed it between his fingers and thumb.

"Leo, talk to me," Raphael pleaded, hand following Leo's like he was ready to grab hold of it again in a heartbeat.

"Is this real?" Leo asked.

Raphael reached up to Leonardo's face, trying to tilt his head back. Leo looked up at him. His sibling's heart was hammering violently; he could feel it through where their plastrons were crushed together, sternum to sternum. They stank of sweat and exertion. Raphael huffed out a shaky breath. "There you are," he said.

"I'm not dreaming?" Leo whispered.

"Sure as fuck hurts like you aren't," Raphael grimaced. "I popped your wrist, don't you feel that?"

"I don't know," Leo mumbled, trying to decide, gaze sliding to the side.

"Look, I'm- No, no," hands chased his face. "Leo, look at me. Stay with me, do you understand? Leo!" He sounded scared.

Nothing about this lined up (when was Raphael ever frightened by anything?) which meant it had to be fictional, hehe. Seriously, Leo, if this was real, it'd mean you're cray-cray. Homicidal. You'd lose the way your whole family looks at you, the way they trust you—you'd not only have to forfeit your position as leader, they'd probably have to keep you away from sharp objects for the rest of your life. So it's not real. C'mon, you know it can't be real. Look at that blood-streaked face; would you have done that? No. Exactly. Now back to bed, back to-
A hand pet over his head.

—*shut up shut up Shut Up SHUT UP!* A voice, a real voice: Raphael was trying to talk to him. Leonardo floundered out of the sleep paralysis, grabbing to anchor himself to his sibling with an arm across his neck. Green eyes stared at him. Leo stared back.


"*Shit Leo,*" Raphael gushed like something miraculous had just happened. (That hand kept stroking over his head!) "Keep talking to me!"

That was a katana slice right there. "Did... Did I do this?" In an altered state of mind, maybe, but that didn't change it.

"Yeah," Raphael was brutally honest. "But I can forgive ya. Kay? Ya know where the bandages are, right?"

"In the lab." Leonardo's chest hurt, *ached*, like something had reached in, repeatedly grabbed hold of his lungs, and squeezed. "And some in the bathroom."

"Right, so it'll be fine." Raph was petting him, chafing gently over the side of his face and the back of his head. "Whatever you're thinkin, don't... don't go wherever you were, okay?"

"Was I somewhere?"

"Yeah. Been about five days."

"I'm..." Leo cupped a hand over the injured brow and cheek. Raphael briefly closed his eyes. "I'm insane. I attacked you. (It's not real) "It's real."

"And I'm a girl," Raphael snickered, looking back up at him. "Whoopdeefuckingdoo."

Leo's breath was running away from him, trying to cry, only this time it really was his breath. "Is this going to happen again?" he barely managed to articulate past the lump rising in his throat.

"It never happened before, so maybe not," Raphael shrugged quickly, never looking away. "You know you got solidly triggered back at the dump, s'far as shit like that goes, and you didn't let it out. Didn't talk ta anyone. We all been dealin' with Donnie bein' missin, n' when Splinter said we weren't leavin... It was like you just shut off."

The headless body.

Leo went somewhere else, but nobody else showed up as his brain-double. A hand kept petting up and down over his back, and it was proof the world was upside down, but yet it kept calling him on some kind of powerful anchoring frequency, tapping out the coordinates home in Morse, blinking like a lighthouse. Raphael usually never touched him, and definitely not in any friendly way. Hadn't for years.

"Can ya hear me? Hey. Stop goin' places I can't follow, ya jerk. I'll stop talkin' about it, will that help?"

"I-I'm sorry," Leo mouthed more than spoke.

"I know. I know you are." Raphael hugged him, and Leo tightened his arm around his neck in response, cleaving to him, needing every ounce of touch. Raphael sucked in a deep breath, shook his
head, and added: "Jesus, Leo. I sure as fuck know what it's like ta lose control."

"I can't." (What is Dad going to say? He's going to strip you of your rank. He's going to take away your swords. You have failed him in every conceivable way, both as one of his sons, and as his eldest. You've failed every piece of leadership conditioning you've received through your life. You, Leo, are nuts. Which is why-) "I can't have lost control. I can't lose control, ever."

"You're an uptight dumbass with unrealistic expectations on yaself, ya know that? Life don't always give you control," Raph said into his cheek, still hugging him, still petting him, rocking with him. "Ignorin' that ain't gonna make things better. Look. Leo. I know you. You bottle shit, and if anything did this, it was that. You gotta cry or somethin. Ya gotta do the emotions thing, gotta... shit, I dunno, freak out, but without trying ta run away from da sight of ya self."

His breathing was quick. (You've broken everything, Leo. Go back to sleep, you'll wake up later and it will all be a dream. I promise <3)

Leo held on. "Y-you won't leave?" His voice broke out of him in whimpers. "You won't... If I... I just..." Red was usually so angry.

"I'mma be right here, whole time, Leo. You're my brother, and shit's gonna be okay between us. Don't leave again, okay? I'm right here. I can handle watchin you fall apart."

(Brother, brother, brother) "I-I-" Floodgates were opening, broken down by one typically reticent person's sudden and unexplained willingness to touch him, to love on him at this exact moment in time. "I need to bite something."

"What?"

"I'm going to scream. I don't want to scream. I'll wake up Dad. I can't-" Fear, primitive, deep. "Are-are you going t-tell h-him th-that I-I'm-?" (insane unfit unworthy broken)

Raphael started to get up off of him. Leo hung on in terror. Raphael pulled him to his feet. Leo's knees buckled. Raphael—who was very slightly shorter than Leo even if he weighed much more—squatted and grabbed him around the waist, under the midshell, and picked him up like a child. He carried him out of the room, into the bathroom, sat him on the sink, and stuffed a towel in his face.

Leo bit into the muffle of it, gagging himself, and screamed out terror.

Raphael pulled him, towel and all, into a hug, absorbing all of it.

He screamed and screamed, and screaming, until his sides were aching and his chest hurt again. Nothing else would come, not grief, not despair, just fear.

"I've got ya," Raphael said. "I love ya, Leo. I've got ya."

The tears bubbled up, dripped, fell. The first shaking sobs made their way successfully out.

Chapter End Notes

Patreon
Mikey was worried.

Something had been Creepy Pasta about Leo the whole week, and now Mikey was sure it hadn't been his imagination. Of course, Mikey had been dead sure about lots of things that totally turned out to be his imagination. Uh.

But Raph not dragging his dumb butt out of bed for breakfast was weird, and Leo not being up at the crack of dawn was weirder, and the total lack of any Ninjitsu practice whatsoever had been great until it totally wasn't. Hadn't Raph said he'd planned on leaving? Was he packing? Mikey looked in both of their rooms. Leo's room was empty. Raph's room was empty. Why did Mikey smell blood!? Where was everyone, was Leo a zombie, had he eaten Raphael, were they coming for Mikey next!?

Mikey threw open every door of the house (even Donnie's bedroom, ooh, ow, seeing it empty hurt), and then threw open the bathroom door. He paused.

Raphael was sitting with his back against the bathtub, and Leo was just kinda collapsed or draped over him, but clinging really solidly around the shell. And Raph was totally hugging back. They were both in bandages.

Oh.

Mikey was relieved. They'd just had a fight! That was completely normal. Right?

Uh. With live steel this time? Where they apparently hadn't pulled punches, and had actually cut eachother?

Uh-oh.

But wait! They were hugging! Kinda? How bad had this fight been? Leo and Raph didn't hug. Raph didn't hug. Raph could sometimes be suckered into hugging someone, but only if no one talked and no one else was looking, and definitely not if Leo was involved at all. But on the other hand, Raph didn't cut his bros, either. Mikey had never seen either of them nick one another, not even when Raph was basically foaming at the mouth.

Michelangelo tiptoed forward.

His plan was to wake up Leo first, cause Leo was the reasonable one who would explain stuff, and Raph would just yell at him. But Mike hesitated, hand midair, as he realized Raph had bandages over his face. Dread hit Mikey's stomach. Positive certain things hadn't been part of his imagination, Michelangelo patted at Raphael's shoulder instead.

Raph grimaced and blinked awake.
"Did you guys fight?" Mikey blurted (but tried to keep things to a whisper).

Raphael focused on Mike for a long moment. Then he said, "You noticed Leo's been off lately?"

"Y-yeah, but..."

"Well it wasn't your imagination. Somethin's been wrong with him since we got back. Was literally not himself. Wasn't talking in the same vocal patterns. Yesterday it occurred to me to try and bait it out to confront it, which is why I told him I was leavin'. I ain't, by the way. Ain't leavin."

This was so weird, it was scaring Mikey out of his pants. And Mikey didn't wear pants. "B-but yo, what actually happened then?!"

"Leo was havin' some kinda fit. He tried to break into my room and tie me up."

Mikey recoiled. "What?"

"Yeah. Intercepted him and he tried to kill me, went right for the face and neck. I got him down and broke his wrist, and managed to call him out of it. Mike. Don't freak out."

"I'm freaking out. How can I not freak out? Why are you not freaked out?"

"Cause he's scared," Raph answered, crisp.

"I'm scared! Did aliens take over his brain?!!"

"No," Raph went and eased an arm protectively over their sleeping brother's head. "Either roll with it or get the fuck out, Mike. His whole fuckin' life of super-perfect-leaderhood's flashing in front of his eyes. Something's wrong with him, and if he can't accept it and calm down, it's gonna get worse. So you have to be calm, or get out."

Mikey blinked uncomprehendingly a moment. "Leo's crazy? Like actual crazy-person-hearing-voices-telling-him-to-kill-people level of crazy?"

"Shut up, Mike." Raph held onto their brother completely protectively, like he was shielding him. "Just go. Get out. I'll handle it."

"Sh-should I tell Dad?"

"No! For Fuck's sake, Mike!" Raph hissed, trying not to raise his voice. "Get out! Leave him alone!"

Michelangelo lingered there, face slack, rocked onto his heels. He turned and walked back to the bathroom door. He shut the door, and turned about, and came back to Raphael. He sat down quietly next to both of them. Leo must have been really out of it. He was normally a super light sleeper. Raphael was running a hand over the side of his face, checking his breathing and pulse. Leo stayed down. Didn't even stir.

"So... you calm?" Raphael growled eventually.

Michelangelo took in a deep breath and held it for a bit. "I'm sorry I never know how to be soft," he mumbled. "I always say the wrong things. All my questions are stupid. I try to make things better, and I only make them worse, cause I'm not careful enough, but it's not like I'm not trying; it's just like I magically don't know how to be careful."

"Mike..."
"But I'm not leaving. We're brothers. We have to figure everything out together. You can't leave me out, I-I have to help too. Please tell me what to do."

Raphael was silent.

Mikey leaked tears, unable to offer anything but solidarity.

"Could kinda use a hug right now," Raph said.

Mikey looked at him in disbelief.

"Ya know. So I don't freak out," Raph added. "Seein' as dis is apparently callin' on me to be da most emotionally stable person present, and we're all already fuckin' doomed from da start."

Mikey threw his arms around both of them, and squeezed. "Got your shell, bro," he mumbled. Raphael pulled him in tight, and Leo, poor Leo, he just slept.

Chapter End Notes

Check out My Patreon Account if you have the time!
Leo woke disoriented, drawing a blank on everything from where he lived to how old he was to what newest challenges faced him and his family. He was buried in a nest of blankets and limbs. This hadn't happened since the onset of puberty. The four of them had grown big enough to carry mismatched pavers, rebar, plastic, concrete mixers, and other salvaged supplies, and they'd built rooms out of a large hollow space in the tunnels. It had been the first time in their lives they had been able to carve out privacy and personal space away from one another, and they'd relished it.

Leo stared up at the blankets above him, trying to think of the date. He was aware things were off. He just could tell why. Maybe he didn't really want to know. Maybe he wanted a moment to enjoy being crushed by two heavier siblings, bathed in the scent of his family members, cued on every level that he was safe.

But the absence of one family member lit the grim path back to clarity: Donnie wasn't there, because Donnie had been hunted down and kidnapped at the dump. Father had killed a man at the dump, after reading in his eyes that he'd sell them out the second he was turned free. And Leo...

He breathed in shakily, hoarsely, loud against the blankets.

...Leo had lost his mind.

He lay there, swamped by his remaining siblings, held down on his shell with one of them rolled onto each set of his limbs, splayed out deliberately so that it would be impossible for him to move without waking one or both of them.

Leo didn't move. He breathed raggedly into the blankets, in and out, in and out, all his emotions kept confined to the inside of his lungs, like his shell was a small blast chamber which could contain everything and keep it from leaking out. (Don't lie to yourself.) His reactor casing was cracked. He'd leaked out poison already. Nothing that happened inside of him, within the field of his control, was actually controlled any longer. He might try to keep up that illusion, that delusion, but all of it, every ounce of it, might turn dangerous. He was a danger to his family.

(And that's exactly why you are pinned down, Leo.)

The tears brimmed with his breath. They trickled down the sides of his face. He tried not to make noise or move. He didn't want to disturb his brothers, on top of everything else.

"Hey Leo," Mikey murmured into his shoulder.

His breath caught hard and ragged.

Mikey scooted a bit in place, and propped himself up a little. The blankets sheltered them like a tent. "Raphie told me to talk to you one-on-one for a bit before waking him up. So, like, we didn't talk
over your head. So you didn't get overwhelmed."

Overwhelmed. Because he was now a delicate time-bomb who could go off spiraling down dark alleyways at any moment, and something unknown would take his place.

"He says we need to go out on a mission."

"A mission?" (Are you insane!?) Leo only managed to talk because the words exploded out like a fearful laugh. "I can't leave the Lair. I can't be trusted with a sword, or with your lives, and definitely not with Donnie's; I can't-!"

"No, no, no," Mikey put a hand briefly over his mouth.

Leo stared up at his sibling, tears dripping.

"We can't leave you behind, not inside your own head, not here; what's that going to fix? It's not. You're still our brother and we have to live with you for like, forever, so nobody has a choice, you have to get better."

"I don't think this is the kind of thing that gets 'better,' Mikey," Leo explained sadly, glancing over at Raphael. Raphael was a log.

"Bro, you're allowed to feel sorry for yourself, that makes sense, things are upside down," Mikey said, steering his face back. "But if you think you're allowed to park your shell there and give up, you musta forgotten you're the leader!"

"I can't possibly lead. This is torture to listen to. Why are you doing this to me? You know what's happened, don't you?"

"Then who gets to take over your job of making sure we come home alive: Me or Raphie? Butterfingers or Mr. Angry?"

Stop deliberately failing to understand when this hurts so badly! "I could be the one who gets you killed."

"Uh, dude that was always the case. You're like sixteen, yo. But even Raph knows you're the only one of us who even comes close to being leader material, and then you check off all the boxes, one right after the other. Tick tick tick tick tick! Don't you know it's like your natural inborn talent or something?"

Leo's hearing was malfunctioning. His siblings didn't compliment him. "What?" (They actually tend to hate you. Quite a bit. It's because you annoy them.)

"You think like Donnie does, yo! Only with scenarios instead of science. You can see where to put everybody for a plan to work, like twenty steps ahead of everyone. You worry about us all the time instead of focusing on what's just in front of you. You know when to run away. You're a good leader. None of that changed. You haven't lost that."

"My... my reliability really changed," he whispered. There's no hope, stop pretending there's hope, stop lying to me—"

"I dunno. Raph said not to jump to conclusions, which is hard, cause, yo, I'm me. But I don't think we know what's up with you yet," Mikey said, sitting back and rubbing thoughtfully at his neck and cheek. "Do we? Raph said he's got some ideas for how to figure out more about it, but he wants to run them by you first. The mission's part of that."
"Figure out more about it?" Never mind the unprecedented event that Raphael wanted to 'run ideas past him' and ask his opinion on something.

"Yeah like what caused or causes it or whatever? Mikey suddenly grinned. "Raph explained loads of stuff to me, he was trying so hard to be patient, it was adorable, you would have been sooooooo proud of him. You know Raph and words, right?"

Leo swallowed. "Th-they don't go together very well."

Mikey snickered and then laid back down right on top of Leo and half on top of Raphael. "He also said you need loads of hugs."

"Raphael said that?"

"Yup," Mikey yawned. "He also said if we just conveniently pinned you down at the same time, you'd chill out easier because at least you'd feel you couldn't hurt anybody."

"You don't think I'd actually hurt anyone? I tried. Mike, listen to me, I actually tried. I remember. I tried to."

"Pssh, Raphael tries to kill me cause of PMS all the time!" Yawn. "Maybe it's like that?"

"Raphael doesn't have PMS, Mikey." No answer; Michelangelo was nearly asleep again. Why won't you take this seriously? Leo stared at him, daring to sleep there, so close, trusting in him, trusting that things would turn out okay. Mourful and afraid, Leo leaned forward and pressed his face into Michelangelo's. Mikey nuzzled back.

"I love you," Little Brother murmured.

"I love you," Leonardo whispered back to them, both of them, one hand fastened tightly on Raphael's shell.
Leo woke with a start to the sensation of Raphael sitting down next to him, balancing two bowls of cereal.

"This is the last of the milk," he said. "Eat before Mike wakes up and steals it from you."

Leo tried to sit up, grimaced, and suddenly felt tremendously sick to his stomach. "I'm not hungry."

"You went down for about fourteen hours solid like you were half dead, and then slept a regular eight after that," Raphael said. "Eat. N'don't make me do your job naggin, cause I'll be half as nice about it."

Cowed, Leo slowly took the bowl. One of his wrists was stiff and achy. He had to balance it on his knees. "That long?" It still felt like introducing food to his mouth might induce a fit of nausea.

"I'm not sure ya was sleepin' right before that," Raphael grumbled, digging into his own cereal with a spoon. He'd clearly given Leo most of the remaining milk. "Ya were in the grip of it like five days. But it sure as fuck ended on a stressful note, so maybe that's it." Crunch crunch crunch went his first spoonful of insufficiently moistened cereal.

It was confusing how normal Raphael sounded in a situation which didn't feel normal at all. Something enormous had just happened, and the dynamics between the four (three?) of them might never again be the same. Instead of being temperamental, angry, or even just concerned, Raphael only sounded subdued, like this was a standard rainy Thursday with a good workout session behind him and a halfway decent show on TV.

"I'm a little freaked out by how you and Mikey are taking this," Leo blurted.

Raphael sniffed thoughtfully and finished crunching his cereal. "Eat before da heavy conversations. And, like... don't think while ya eatin'. Just eat."

Don't think; just eat.

It was good advice, because Leo had to muscle through those first few bites of his Mini-Wheats. He had to breath through his nose, hold down his gag reflex, and chew. It got easier, slowly. Focusing on the taste of milk. The tastes and textures of wheat and sugar. The chilled property of the meal. It was an unusual feeling to sit shoulder to shoulder with Raphael, both of them touching and no one getting irritated or moving away to have their own space. He put away the last few spoonfulls of sodden wheat and milk at the bottom of the bowl, and looked over at his brother.

The bandages were off today, and though the slice over his eye had needed two stitches, one on the brow and another on the cheek, the eye itself had gone unharmed. Miraculously. One centimeter of difference in any of their actions would have left them with an emergency they couldn't have possibly responded to without Donatello. Raphael would have lost the eye.
Ashamed, Leo looked back at his empty bowl. "What's... um, what's happened in the last twenty-two hours?" he asked, clearing his throat.

"Not much," Raphael reported through crunches. "Dad ain't been outside his room. Mikey and I played a few dozen rounds of Mario Carts and then took turns on Zelda. Might actually beat the damn game for once."

"And." Deep breath. "What happens now?"

"You and I gotta have a talk." Raphael looked over at him. "Ain't that funny?"

"I'm not laughing. What did I do, Raphael? I know I attacked you, but what happened before that?"

"Is it like cloudy or something? Wasn't sure how much you'd remember. You been stalking me around the base, goading me to defy Dad's orders. Pretty much talking in sing-song, by the way, you sounded high as a kite. I looked at ya and the dude who was lookin' back at me knew me, but I didn't have a clue who he was. And every couple hours, like clockwork, you'd like pop out of nowhere just to stare at me. And sorta smile knowingly while you was at it. Might as well have captioned a picture of you with, 'SOON,' left it described like that."

"Jesus that sounds so creepy," Leo covered his face with his good hand, breathing deep.

"It was definitely fuckin' creepy. Probably has ta do with why I'm so level right now. I've gone a month now being angry when I knew it wasn't helping anything, when it was putting stress on everyone. I was trying every single day to chill out and being unable to do it, and within twenty-four hours you had me chill as an ice skating rink, hiding from you with my tail between my legs, wondering if you was gonna skin me."

"Oh joy," Leo grieved. "You'll forgive me if your sudden temperance is no consolation at all."

"Maybe that's what helped set ya up ta crack," Raphael suggested. "Me having no fucking control, and you having too much. I was goin' out nearly every day addin' stress to everyone. I couldn't stop. If you're imagining' you're the only person feelin psycho this second, it ain't fucking so. I wanted to stay in the house, and I couldn't. Couldn't control myself at all."

Leonardo blinked, and looked slowly over at him. As much as they'd taken issue with Raphael's anger issues over the years, Leo couldn't recall once, ever, Raphael wishing to be any other way than exactly how he was. Raphael liked his own anger issues. "It was like that?"

Raph took a deep breath. "Look, everythin' about this," he gestured to Leo up and down, "Looked like the straw what broke the camel's back. Scept that weren't no straw, was a fuckin' anvil. What Dad did at the dump—killin that one guy and lettin the other go—that spooked all of us. Then he barred the door, put Donnie farther away instead of closer like it ought to of been, and told us the one thing we can't do's the thing I been doin' every single night. There was a distinct instant when you went bottoms up, and it almost made sense. I'm not sayin' ya ain't a little dangerous right now, but I got the distinct impression dat, if ya go, it's gonna be ovah something what actually happens. Not just," a snap of the fingers, "in the middle of making coffee one day, and suddenly ya tryin ta poison us. Ya read me?"

"If... if you're right, I... I guess that's some more than I had a second ago, isn't it?" Something to cling to, to be relieved about. "But it doesn't excuse it, that doesn't—" Leo took a deep breath. "You feel crazy right now?"

"Oh hell yeah," Raphael admitted with unprecedented candidness, finishing with his cereal and
pushing the bowl aside. "Thanks fah actually askin, though."

Chapter End Notes

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"Yeah, I'm a wreck," Raphael said bluntly as he returned from the kitchen holding two steaming cups. He handed one to Leo. Fresh tea. "I'm holdin in there as best as I can, same as you and Mike," Raphael sat down; his cup had coffee. "But the only thing which knocked me outta helixing through anger-guilt-more-anger was your marbles goin temporarily missin on us. Guess cause it was a relief to actually have an objective what actually helped one of my brothers instead of..." He shook his head.

"You aren't even angry with me," Leo realized.

"No." Raphael slurped his coffee. "We're gonna help ya figure out da borders of this thing what's wrong with you, so you can... I dunno, manage it I guess. Like, what, like an addiction or illness. When we find Donnie—and I realize that may take some time—and when things go back to normal, which I'm imagining might also take time... There's probably some kinda medicine which can whittle down ya chance of relapse to nothing. So. Don't freak out too hard. We need ya as bad today as we did yesterday."

"You need me?" Leo prodded him. "You? Raphael?"

"Yeah," Raphael looked right at him. "Sure as fuck do, and not just because you're the only one who's gonna be able ta convince Splinter to let us outside while I'm still of use ta anyone."

"Of use to-?" Leo blinked rapidly. "The eggs."

"I'm on a timer," Raphael admitted. "And by the way: Dad's got arthritis, his hands ain't steady anymore; Mikey just ain't responsible enough; and even if I wanted to pretend I was badass enough to cut myself open, I can't reach down there. Turtle, ya know. I don't want you freakin' out about it, but... I can last a couple weeks after they start hardenin. Then it's either we find Donnie or I need one hell of a favor, and you're the only one qualified. N' then I gotta heal up anyway. If there's no infection and nothing goes wrong, that's weeks recovering. And o'course this all knowin we ain't got the anesthetic to put me under, and we're running out of food."

Leo soaked in that.

"So. That's where we're at: Screwed. I've got a temper that comes and goes on its own goddamn free will. You're at risk of episodes. Mikey's probably at risk for clinical depression. And Dad... Dad's scared of losing all of us trying to get back just one. Well, that ain't gonna fly, 'cause you and I know that—"

"—we're not going to be whole till Don's back," Leo finished.

Raphael took a deep breath.

They were both silent for a bit. Leo sipped his tea.

Then Raph said, "I swear to god, Leo, I'll work together with you on this one. I'll... help you. And I ask for your help. I'll... talk to you, s'best I can, but you gotta do the same fuckin' thing and be honest with me the next couple o' weeks or however long it takes. You try hidin' in ya own head, shit's gonna go sideways fast."

Leo took a shaky breath, staring slate to lime, eye to eye. He was rallied. He wanted what he just been offered. But as Raphael slowly lifted a hand, as if to shake on it—
"Your recommendation is that we leave the Lair?" Leo prompted.

Raphael grimaced, looking somewhat betrayed. "If ya think I'm just bein' selfish again..."

"No. That's not what concerns me. Your loyalty to Donnie and your ability to think objectively are not what concern me."

"We've got a limited amount of time to do a lot of shit, and answering the question of how much stress you can take without flipping your shit's just one of like twenty problems right in front of us we can work on solvin."

"Dad is not going to let me out," Leo whispered, shaking his head.

"You in specific?" Raphael straightened. "Dad doesn't know, Leo."

"I have to tell him. How could I not tell him. I'm... Something is terribly wrong with me."

"You don't know what to tell him," Raphael said. "Neither do I, and ya ain't gonna know for awhile; and he ain't gonna know what to tell you. Used ta be Dad could fix our problems for us if we couldn't fix em ourselves. Well not this. S'up to us. Doesn't matter that we're too young or inexperienced to be handling shit like this alone."

Leo looked to the still offered hand. He reached up, and firmly clasped it. "We aren't alone," he told Raphael. "There's three of us. I lead and you'll follow?"

"Eh, no promises I won't complain," Raphael said, a smirk growing on his face as he squeezed back. "But yeah. I'll follow you, Leo. N' if ya have another attack," he got his other arm around Leo's neck, using the cradle of the elbow, "I'll catch ya."

For the first in a long time, Red and Blue butted foreheads together and shared a minute of each other's energy. In that minute, everything was tranquil, and fit, and made sense. The path forward had obstacles which could be planned around. The conversation with father was surmountable. Any number of secret laboratory or freelance headhunter could be scouted out in deadly silence and be summarily dealt with.

Leo took a deep, slow breath.

"Let's find Donnie," Blue Leader said.
Usually missions were planned out between Leonardo, Master Splinter, and Donatello.

That wasn't favoritism; Raphael and Michelangelo had never been extraordinarily good listeners. Michelangelo quickly grew overexcited or bored, depending on what the context was, which distracted everyone else. Raphael could handle planning for the first one or two passes, but then he swiftly got irritated. Raphael was a bit A-to-B, and if talking didn't turn to action fast enough, he became exponentially more likely to approach the mission by breaking down the front door.

With Donatello missing, things were different. Michelangelo was paying more attention. Raphael wanted to know all the details down to the fortieth rendition of a plan. And Leonardo and Splinter were missing something—something beyond technical knowledge and computer data—something like an extra bit of tiebreaker weight which could push heavy decisions one way or another.

Years out of practice, and accustomed to the way things had always been, maybe both Raphael and Michelangelo had felt unqualified to step up to the plate. Maybe they'd felt Master Splinter wouldn't listen to them, because they weren't as patient and well-behaved as Leo. Maybe they'd felt Leo was the only one their sensei would take seriously, the only one who could handle him. That would have explained why the two of them had taken up lingering just outside the shoji doors, hanging on every word but leaving those meetings (and every mitake) entirely to their 'leader.' That was natural, wasn't it? Leaders handling planning?

That wasn't what happened today.

Raphael entered the dojo first like the vanguard, but stepped off to the side so Leo could take the center. He leaned there, arms crossed, a darker but allied contrast. Michelangelo stayed rearguard in a supportive role. The two of them kept quiet. Leo apologized for interrupting their father, and requested the right to leave on a provisioning mission. Leo stated clearly that he hoped this mission would prove Splinter's sons could handle resuming the search for Donnie without getting overeager or distracted.

Dad said no.

Boss fight music started up in their heads.

This was how it went: Their father would firmly forbid, Leo would yield backwards only to begin verbally pacing, verbally circling, patient, never outright saying he'd disobey, never calling dad out. Master Splinter would be forced to yield a point. Leo circled closer, closer, close enough to start a minor skirmish he'd then immediately back off from, out of respect. He'd settle dad's fears, and start over again.

Whenever Splinter was acting extremely Japanese, Leo was there to be eldest boy.

Leo was still the leader.

Leo was good at it.

And when the tension was lowest, not highest, Leo asked Raphael and Michelangelo their opinions. Leo led them gracefully through the steps of Donnie's role: The voice of reason, the calm tie-breaker,
the matter-of-fact purveyor of facts. Just some potentially lethal eggs on their way, Dad, that's all. Probably best to schedule rests for later. Need to make the most of today.

Dad gave in.

Raphael donned his coat and new moth-bitten hat. Michelangelo got a baseball cap and hoodie. The last thing Splinter had said to Leo before unbarring the door was kinda unnecessary, barbed, and a bit hypocritical: "I worry that your judgement may be less than clear-headed, Leonardo, swayed by the desire to appease your brothers."

"I am not so weak-willed, father."

Hot Damn. Leo said it with a straight face. Took everything in Raph not to break into long, slow claps.

They got a solid mile between themselves and the door of their Lair before turning to their eldest brother and wordlessly signaling he should probably decompress. Leo would normally have flown impassive from the start of a mission to the end. Not today. Today he went from upright, focused, and aloof, to plopped on the ground, shaking, and clutching at his head and face. Leo didn't do lying very well. All that energy for sweaty palms, a dry mouth, and a thousand nervous tells had needed to be packed away somewhere.

"Yo, Mike," Raphael growled as he reached around and chafed up and down Leo's shell, roughing the carapace with his nails. "You're indefinitely posted on hug duty."

"No sweat, bros! I've been training all my life for hug duty!" Michelangelo hummed, draping himself over his victim to hug, snuggle, and squeeze. "Sssookaaaay Leeeooooo," he crooned. "You're okay, you handled that like a bosssssss. Dad is gonna be weirdly proud like two months down the line or whenever he learns how much you've been going through...!"

Leo let all his breath out in a shaky whimper, but he nodded repeatedly and rubbed at his face.


Leo nodded again, took slow deep breaths, and took his time in standing.

Raphael sized him up, attempting to determine if he was faking calm again.

Leo noticed and smirked a little. "Let's start climbing—Meathead."

"Oh-ho. After you, Lameonardo."

All three of them clasped hands and butted forearms and elbows together.

April flicked through her emails from Dr. Stockman—he was venting about someone he inexplicably viewed at his chief competitor, despite the fact that Stockman Labs specialized in robotics, not GMOs—and if she didn't do a thorough job speed-reading his grievances, he might bring one up later to 'test' her and become offended if she answered wrong.

Baxter Stockman had insecurity issues founded on faulty narcissism. He was also an absolute genius, and April found the trade-offs of managing his (slightly hilarious and really quite predictable) ego to be acceptable. The sheer amount of tacit knowledge she'd picked up working for him probably outweighed the entire rest of her college degree, and sometimes she swore she could feel her IQ++;

...
and then she'd quickly find a mirror and remind herself never to metamorphose into anybody anything at all like her employer.

She was about to call behind her to ask if Donatello was having trouble procuring their pita and hummus, when something hit her.

Hands, the thing which had hit her had been hands, arms, and then a man was pressing her back into the brick wall and his acrid breath was in her face.

"You're that thot from McKellen's class," her assailant hummed. "God you're hot. I've got something for you right here."

April spent way too long trying to determine why anyone would try to rape her right outside a food stand where security cameras could see her and people would quite obviously hear her calls for help. Was he banking on some kind of New Yorker Apathy? Did he think he could intimidate or coerce her into ambiguous consent?

Then something hard rubbed up against her groin, jean against polyester, and she snapped back to the present.

"Gonna be the biggest you ever had, thottie-"

"That's a myth," April interrupted.

Her assailant paused. "The heck you on about?"

"Size," April explained, valiantly refraining from staring at quiet boy in the hoodie who was approaching in uncanny silence. Stay out of this! I have pepper spray, it'll be fine! "It's perpetuated by male-staffed fitness rags and badly written pornography. Anything above average is just uncomfortable."

"You're gonna be singing a different tune when I'm plowing you into the-"

Donatello spun, grabbing the man's neck with the hook of elbow and sweeping out the legs, pulling the guy into a fall backward over one knee. If the crack of hitting the concrete hadn't been enough to keep the guy down for a spell, then Donatello's quick, targeted jab to the face did the job. Donnie stood up, took a stomp at the dude's genitals which left him mute and rolling about in pain, and turned to April.

"Are you okay?" the kid whispered up to her, brown eyes glittering and wide.

"Oh," it dawned on her. "You're all ninjas."

Chapter End Notes

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Speculate; Sleuth; Stumble

Chapter Notes

Dayum, look at the time! Time for another update, darn it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Donatello couldn't sleep.

The couch was actually quite comfortable, and he didn't mind the lack of proper bed. In-between juggling auxiliary ideas for April's newest project, he was being seized by fits of acute melancholy. He missed someone, but he didn't know who.

The moments when April sat down beside him and they worked shoulder to shoulder on a bit of code helped balm it, and he tried to extrapolate from that to figure out what sort of person he was missing. A parent? A sibling? A teammate? A trainer? He had to agree with April: Someone had clearly put a great deal of time and effort into teaching him how to fight, so that made for at least two Japanese-speaking teenage turtle monsters running around at night, one of whom had randomly leaped in to protect a woman from a well-known gang.

Why exactly had Donatello been kidnapped? Had he drawn attention of cryptozoologists? Run afoul of some mafia? People who had created him? Based on the informal vigilante rescue April had described, Donnie's 'family' wasn't some kind of secret underground super-soldier training corps. They were very much in hiding, but from what? Were they just hiding because being seen would cause trouble for them, or was there some specific adversary that might be hunting them down?

Donnie just didn't know.

But judging by how he let April dress and coddle him, he was missing someone who helped look after him, even if it was in an informal fashion, and there was some reassurance in that. Whoever was out there, whomever it was Donnie missed, it was someone who cared about him. Getting back to them was something to work towards and look forward to.

Unless they'd been captured when he had?

Was his family out there anymore at all?

Did they need him? Were they all prisoners in a lab somewhere? Being dissected, or brainwashed, or bred or—oh boy, Donnie's mind could come up with any one of a zillion possibilities.

He needed a bath. A long, long, long hot soak would help his thoughts.

Donatello didn't notice the light was on in the bathroom. He pushed the door open, and then stumbled to a halt. His host had had the same idea he did, only she'd gotten to the bath first. She was also completely naked, and just stepping into the tub. At the sound of the door opening, she whirled towards him. In fact, the sound of running water might have been what had put this idea in his head, if only he'd been paying attention.

Boobs, Donatello learned exactly then, required a great deal of support and immobilization to make it appear as though they defied gravity. They were not just cones which protected outward. They were
not orbs, or fruit, or basketballs. In fact they had a distinct teardrop shape, which in retrospect made
sense because they were essentially liquids—or liquid suspensions, such as pudding, for example—and that meant they had a weight and volume of their own which needed to be carried. Seeing this, evolution had quite sensibly draped them down from the the inside of the shoulder muscles. They essentially followed the pectoral tendinous junction downward, which kept them more in alignment with the shape of the armpit than the shape of the sternum, which one supposed meant that the entire concept of cleavage only existed because of tight-fitting cloth. Without that support, they swung, bobbed, bounced—

—Donatello's social and contextual brain finally caught up with his analytical one. He stumbled backwards. April, who'd been equally frozen, grabbed for a towel. Donnie got successfully out of the bathroom, slammed the door behind him, and leaned into it.

"I'm so sorry," he slurred.

"I just flashed a teenager," April lamented. "Who was recently kidnapped and touched inappropriately."

"Oh it wasn't like that, your bosom was really quite nice," his mouth said for him. He slapped a hand over it. DONNIE!

"Well." April moped, deciding to take this concession. "At least that."

Donatello colored up red, and couldn't stop the wide smile which crackled over his face. "I'm sorry," he repeated.

He heard her snicker, and then he started laughing, too.

Inventory had just finished, and a massive amount of canned and jarred food was transported out of the store right in front of them, and deposited all around the dumpsters. The employees were exhausted by the time they'd finished, and left with hi-fives and invitations to beer. When the coast was clear, three shapes left the shadows armed with duffel bags and backpacks.

Raphael picked up a rolled up newspaper and stuffed it in his pocket. Leo raised a brow at him.

A few days conducting supply missions above ground had done wonders for Leo's mental health. There wasn't a single sign of that altered state he'd been in. Whatever was wrong with him, it wasn't the kind of sickness a person cracked open the first time and then had to deal with every two to three days afterwards for the rest of forever.

"We need to keep an eye on what Dad says ta ya," Raphael mentioned as the three of them started back down into the sewers again.

"I don't think that's our biggest problem," Leo disagreed.

"Pfft, Leo," Mikey leaned an elbow on his shoulder the second Leo reached the ground. "Lemme Mikesplain this to you. Dad's mojo's out of balance because he's hurting like we're hurting. He's got all paranoid, and you and Raph getting along looks suspicious, so he'll put on his Ominous Wise Japanese Elder Voice and say something half-insightful but totally wrong which you'll internalize because you always take him so seriously, and you'll turn it over and over and over and over in your head until you're applying it to anything and everything and blah blah blah doubt doubt doubt—"

"Okay! Okay, Mikey, I get it. I keep the two of you in the loop right now so I don't... you know."
Mikey eased an arm around Leo, and squeezed.

The three of them were still nesting together in the living room together. It felt like if they didn't, they'd fall apart again. Raphael and Leo were like oil and water, you had to stir constantly to keep them mixed together.

"Soo..." Mikey said slowly as silence fell. Was Raph really reading that boring paper? "Should we, ya know, be sneaking past Dad and checking out that Sach's place?"

"Nah," Raphael muttered without looking up. "Ain't nobody showed up at the dump to snatch us, so I'm inclined ta believe da testimony of dat guy Master Splinter set free. They ain't got Donnie."

"So who does?" Mikey slumped. "Do we have any ideas?"

"Their competitors," Leo supplied.

"About dat," Raphael said, pausing at the front of their column. Then he smirked and flicked the paper over to Leo. "Think I might got a lead for ya, Fearless."

Surprised, Leo took the paper. Mikey raised a brow at the article. "'The Sophomoric PhD Tweeting War Continues.' What's it mean?"

"Apparently, there's dis robotics company whose founder keeps roasting his competition with tweets nobody understands because they use words with like six syllables, and everyone in the science community thinks its hilarious. People are trying to read them out loud on the radio and stuff, gigglin up a storm. Anyway. Most of the tweets are aimed at this guy named Eric Sachs, whom he thinks is a complete idiot."

"Dude..." Mikey looked up at him. "You read..."

Raphael flicked him in the forehead.

Chapter End Notes

*nervously wrings hands*

Are... are they getting closer...? That sounds like it might be Stockman...! Holy crap is this investigation stuff actually hard when you can't just magically hand-wave Donnie having all the intelligence they need! It's like watching two blindfolded people searching for needles in haystacks!
Before he'd allow them check out the rival laboratory, Dad had demanded prep work in scouring the internet for whatever information they could find on the place. That made perfect sense. And while not one of the remaining three turtles was 'a genius,' Donnie's prolonged absence was sure as hell giving their investigative skills a thorough workout. Trouble was, no one was sure if they were getting experience points fast enough for it to matter.

Raphael knew what was in the news, which was that the robotics facility had secured a large grant for bigger and better rat traps. Uh. Sorry Dad.

Leo printed out overhead maps of the complex and it's buildings, highlighting which ones were easy to get into, which ones were hard, and marking down a major sewer line they knew headed that way.

And Michelangelo—using just his phone browser, it had to be added—had managed to put together how many people the company employed, where they worked, when they worked, and he even put together dossiers for the top scientists.

So far, nothing and nobody in that lab had a relationship to anything in genetics. If they had 'stolen' Donnie, what might they have done with him? Killed him out of hand so Sachs' couldn't have him? Used him like a poker chip?

They needed to get their feet on the ground.

Or, well, technically they needed to get their feet on a nearby rooftop. Preferably at night when most humans weren't awake, security cameras functioned bad, license plates were hard to see, and shady business was exponentially more likely to go down. That would help them plan out where they'd set up if they needed to stake out the place during the day.

Dad sent them to case the external rim of the complex, all sixteen buildings of it, including the parts Leo had gotten rough blueprints for. Apparently ten of these buildings, the smaller ones, were historical buildings, what had belonged to an industrial-era shipwright or something of that nature.

Leo used Donatello's nightvision goggles. Raph and Mikey were shared binoculars and swapped lookout. The three of them were mapping night traffic, looking for which of the smaller buildings—with fewer potential witnesses—might have night workers at them.

If a mutant who defied everything humans knew about being the only upright, talking things on the planet was captive here, they didn't imagine many people would be in on that secret.

Dad sent them out again after an intense rest so they could get a picture of the complex at it's most active, which meant during the nine-to-five. They had to get back on the roof while it was dark, pick good vantage points for watching all in and out traffic, and keep low. They didn't have a third set of binoculars, but Raphael managed to figure out how to set up one of Donnie's battery-operated cameras on a different building. He didn't know how to review the feed remotely, so they'd need to scrub through it later.

"How are you holding up?" Leo said to Raphael as the two of them took their turn at lunch while
Mikey stood watch.

"Depends. What ya actually askin?"

"This is an extremely cautious, slow, layer by layer study of a place Donnie might not even be," Leo mentioned. "So how are your patience levels?"

"I'm focused. For now. Try ta let ya know if it changes."

The three of them were in some kind of psychological sweet spot right now. No one was charged. No one was arguing. Mike was working, Raphael was using words, and Leo was doing his doubts thing outside his head instead of in it. It might not last, but they were running like a well oiled machine, and it felt a deep form of good.

"Even if he ain't here," Raph said, "it seems smart of us to get up to date in company politics around the people who attacked our bro."

Leo nodded.

"Whoo-ooaaa! Helloooo pretty lady!" Mikey sang from at the roof edge.

"Mike," they both disapproved simultaneously. Pft! So much for well oiled machines, eh?

"Sorry guys, caught sight of this million scoville unit hot mama! Totally ghost chillies over here! Ow ow! She burns!"

Something pricked at the back of Raphael's neck. He crawled over to the parapet. "Lemme see."

"Raph!" Leo scolded in disbelief.

Mikey was all too happy to take a ten second break to point out the bright yellow ant down there, and Raphael focused the binoculars. Even from above, that shockingly red hair and bright Uma Thermon jumpsuit were obvious.

Raphael let all his breath out in a hot snort. "Fuck me. There you are."

"Isn't she hot? Boom chicka wow wow!"

"Guys," Leo moaned into a double face-palm.

"Leo, ya need ta take what I'm about to tell ya with an open mind," Raphael growled, waving him up.

"Is it about the two of you goofing off ogling women while we're on a mission?" Leo sassed as he joined him.

"That down there is the chick I saved the week before Donnie was taken."

Mikey cut off to dead silence. Leo paused in taking the binoculars, but Raph urged him with a jostle, and quickly pointed down to where the fiery dame with her excellent taste in Tarantino movies and long-legged strut would be getting into the building any time now, out of sight.

"You can't possibly remember one human's face you saw in bad lighting for just a second," Leo protested, but then his voice caught in his throat because he'd gotten her in the binocular's sights, and Raph knew he'd seen how distinctive she was. That wasn't a broad a guy forgot, not even a turtle guy who might otherwise get human chicks' faces crossed, on account of not seeing them up close
and personal all too often. "Oh, I see."

Chapter End Notes

*Ari4l is texting*
A: "Made it to office, D, can you make sure I successfully pushed to master branch on the codebase last night?"
D: "Last commit was 2:45 am, fair nightingale."
A: ????
D: Autocorrect, seriously. Why is 'fair nightingale' what you corrected 'fellow nightowl' to? Are you on a Shakespeare reading spree, Autocorrect? Is that is? It's not just some elaborate ploy to sabotage specifically me?
A: :D :D :D
D: T_T; I need a keyboard made for three fingers....
"What's it mean?" Mikey asked, hushed and hurt sounding. Raph knew the feeling. This chick had felt like some kind of distant, once-off ally. Finding her here said his gut intuition about her had been wrong.

"Got a confession." Raphael dug into his pocket and pulled out a piece of evidence he'd preserved by wrapping it up in a paper clip. "Ya see dat color? Don once told me that being intersex is as common as red hair."

Leo took it to inspect. "How did you end up with this?"

"Pulled that outta the edge of the lightin' fixture on the hunter's car."

Leo bristled, grabbing his arm. "And then hid it!?"

Raphael threw his hand off and whirled on him with a sharp snarl: "Thought you'd jump down my throat about bein selfish, wantin' ta get my sai back, wantin' ta get outta trouble with Dad!"

Leo raised his chin, jaw tightening shut.

Mikey scrambled around Raphael's shell to get a hand on both older brothers. "Dudes, how do we even know it's hers? Maybe it's a coincidence, yo!"

Raphael lowered his head with a grimace, and then gave it a vigorous shake. "Ain't no damn coincidence, and I shoulda just grown a pair and handed it over as soon as I found it."

"It's because I blamed you," Leo uttered.

Raphael flinched.

"I told you everything was your fault..." Leo reached out again, placing his hand gently back on Raphael's bicep.

"Yeah, well, looky here: You were right."

"That wouldn't matter. I was just trying to hurt you. It shouldn't have been said that way—"

"It sank in. Listen—"

"Raph. Please." Fingers tightened on his arm.

For about thirty seconds, all Raphael had were angry breaths in and out. Things managed to level out inside. He hung a hand on Leo's arm, and squeezed firmly. Then he looked up at his brother again, finally, and met his eyes. "Forgive ya. M'sorry, too."
"Yo, her car's def in employee parking." Mikey reported, looking back over the parapet. "What's it all mean?"

"It means we're in the right place," Leo announced, gesturing that they should pack up. "Let's get a picture of her license plate, and then report immediately back to Master Splinter. A quick decision made need to be made as to whether he wishes to have a chat with Ms. Ghost Chillies."

"W-whoa," Mikey turned back to them. "Have a chat with her? Like a mafia-style 'We're going to cut your—" (head) "—fingers off if you don't talk' kind of 'chat'?"

"She's now our prime suspect," Leo confirmed pragmatically, zipping up his portion of their gear. Raphael followed.

"B-but," Mikey followed them down the back alley. "She covered for Raphael with the police, yo, that makes her a good guy! Right?"

"Not if she didn't want police snoopin' around somethin' she wanted for her company," Raphael growled.

"Dudes, she could totally be innocent!" Mike slid down a rain gutter and hit the ground before they did. "Maybe she was just getting off her chest stuff about this crazy night where she nearly got murdered, yo, ever think of that? And someone overheard her?"

"She was in that car where they had Donnie, Mike," Raphael dropped beside him. "That ain't innocent. I say we wait till she leaves and bag her."

"O-M-G. Yoo-hoo!" Mikey waved a hand in front of both brother's faces. "Can you hear yourselves, scary-starer-grim-faces? Do you guys want a triggered Leo? Cause I think this is how we go about getting a triggered Leo!"

Leonardo flinched back. He closed his eyes in a tight grimace, and visibly held his breath. His nails were tight in his palms. Raphael twisted to eye both of them up and down. He hesitated before jadedness lifted off his shoulders, and he realized with a start: "Mike's right. Completely right. Gotta nix plans that could end up with us putting down a witness, even one with red hands. Gotta keep all fightin' anybody to a minimum unless it's on the final stretch to gettin' our brother free."

"God that doesn't sound like you." Leo took in a deep breath through his nose, and smirked a little. "Maybe that makes it perfect." He looked over at them. "Master Splinter won't suspicion I'm 'appeasing' Raphael if my proposals involve as little violence as possible, now will he?" Leo offered the red hair back for safe-keeping. "Mikey, look through those dossiers you compiled. See if anyone else noteworthy has red hair."

"Okay, but then what? Dude, can you imagine how messed up it would be if we kidnapped some hot chick who just thought Raph was a hero and didn't know anything? We'd be bad guys! I don't want to be a bad guy!"

"I don't know why I..." Leo waved a hand, dismissing his previous intensity. "If we 'bag' this woman, we'll wear heavy coats and throw something over her head to keep her blind, and we'll eventually release her where police will find her, tied up but otherwise unharmed. We'll interrogate her as if we were working for Sachs' company, so her testimony to the police or to her higher-ups—whatever she does—will bring suspicion down on the people who originally kidnapped our brother."

"Now dat sounds like a plan."
"Yeessss! That is *such* a better plan, bros!" Mikey hi-three-ed them both.

"Yo, guys?" Michelangelo interrupted nervously as the four of them—father and sons—were going over their findings, the preserved hair, and descriptions of the distinctive attire of the woman.

"Michelangelo?" Splinter put the conversation on hold, inviting the youngest son's participation.

"I'm checking out the pics we took of her car," Mikey said, "cause I was thinking if it doesn't have a door alarm, we might be able to break into the car and nose around, right?"

"Sure," Raph huffed. It was a good idea. Of course her car hadn't looked like the sort of vehicle to haul around captured animals in, and it hadn't just been sitting in impoundment for the last month, but there might have been a clue or scent left lingering.

"Well there's this sign that says 'temporary.' She's def in the employee lot, though! I think?"

Raphael turned swiftly back to him and had a look at that phone. Raphael mouthed a very bad cuss, and gave a violent shake of his head.

"Car's got a receipt stuffed up on the dash instead of a permit," Raphael reported as he turned back to the rest of their family. "She ain't full-time. Maybe ain't even a regular."

Chapter End Notes

I'm pulling my hair out! THIS IS LIKE JOUSTING WHILE BLIND!
I'd like to give a shout out to ALL my patrons and followers, without whom I might have gone on hiatus, especially after I got seriously ill earlier this month. The way you guys demonstrate your love for this story keeps me coming back to it, which is kinda important seeing as I've already written a significant part of Part 3 and I just need to fill in all the pathways to GETTING to each important scene.

To you who support me, I have a plan, there's a specific destination we're headed to, and I'm gonna make it there!

"The hell d'ya mean we ain't interceptin' her!?!"

Raphael's voice was a slow, rising tide. Michelangelo and Leonardo could practically hear warning bells: Raphael had just *cussed* at their father.

Father lifted his chin and studied Raphael, but did not address the slip. "It is not an absolute certainty that this woman was even involved in the kidnapping, much less that she knows your brother's present whereabouts. We have already been dangerously exposed to our enemies-"

"*What* enemies!?!" Raphael demanded, taking the front of the argument and shouldering Leo clear out of the way.

"Raph!" Leo tried to reassert control over the situation.

"NO," Raphael steamrolled him with volume, his whole persona a smoldering bed of coal slowly flickering to life at frightening heat. "I want to hear him say it! Tell us!" He whipped back around to glare at their father. "Tell who the *fuck* these people are, and why you left us in the dark about them! Tell us the truth! Tell us why you know their names, why you *locked* us down here with our brother missing!"

"Raphael!" Leonardo started to plead, but Dad raised a palm a few inches off the handle of his cane, and Leo froze.

"You left us *blind!*" Raphael accused their father, their master (the person whom he loved and trusted most in the world).

"Do you not listen, my son? I told you a great many times," Splinter intoned, "that you and your brothers were vulnerable, and would face danger on the surface."

"You think that's *telling* us anything?!" Raphael thundered, stalking forward to loom, all shoulders and shell. "We're giant rat and turtle people! We shouldn't exist! People shouldn't even be fucking believe us *if* they see us, and now we're learning there's some kind of *genetic research organization* out there deploying *fucking special ops units* at the mention of a green dude in the sewers! People you somehow know about and didn't tell us!"

Dad's voice darkened. "You were not ready. Yet you disobeyed me."
"KIDS DISOBEY!" Raphael detonated, full volume, full roar, full scream. "Donnie barely did anything wrong, and you didn't warn HIM! My little brother could be DEAD and DISSECTED by now and YOU are too fucking scared of GHOSTS to tell us what we need to know to SAVE HIM! That's MY FAULT!? Always MINE!? Never YOURS!!"

Crk-SNAP-clack!

A shell hit the floor so hard and fast that it felt like time had jumped. Raphael snorted out air, wide-eyed and trying to establish where he was, suddenly. He was on the floor. He'd been spun and thrown to the ground so hard his neck had whiplash, his nose was bloody, and there was a fresh red welt from a thick leather tail twisting up his leg. His brothers stood frozen, hands half outstretched. The rage was gone from his veins, but the anger wasn't. Raphael fumbled to push himself up, and looked shakily back at Master Splinter.

Splinter stood there, both hands still upon his cane, eyes narrowed with disappointment. Aged after raising four boys, and bent with arthritis, and he could still drop Raphael in a blink. He was ten thousand times the ninja any of them were. He was their dad.

"My son, always do you hear condemnation instead of grief or caution," Dad said. "You are the one who blames yourself, and you can save no one until you relinquish that hatred."

Raphael managed to reach up and wipe blood from his snout. He tried to push himself up, but was thrown off-balance when Leo pulled him to his feet.

"Dad," Leo was interceding where he never had before, "that's not completely-

You can save no one.

Raphael looked disbelievingly at the seriously ill brother whom Raphael had been dragging out at the risk of episodes; whom Raphael had advised needed to get out and away from the Lair (away from dad); whom Raphael had advised not to talk to Splinter; whom Raphael had gotten to go along with exactly what Raphael wanted to do under the pretense of it being for the best.

Raphael shoved Leo out of the way. He fled the room, ignoring the way Blue and Orange called his name. He went for his coat, and for his moth-eaten hat.

"Raphael!" Dad's voice chased him. "I forbid-!"

Raphael got out the door with a slam. He was going to go tear some Purple Dragons limb from limb, and this time he wasn't going to drag along the charade that he knew what was best for his brothers, or what was going to get Donatello back, or that all of this wasn't just about Raphael wanting to get to the problem as fast as possible so he could kill it.

Raphael didn't come home.

He'd cussed Dad out, and said awful things to him, but then he'd just fled, yo. The only thing Raph did right by the rest of them was he kept his phone on, which meant when Leo and Michelangelo managed to work out how to turn on Donatello's GPS tracking software again, they could see that little dot moving around on the city. Raph had been in Central Park most of the evening, and he was moving on foot along walkways, which meant he was topside and being a total delinquent asshole, yo. But... as it got about time for everyone to turn in for the day, Raphael holed up somewhere near the docks and...

...and just didn't come home.
He didn't answer their calls or texts, either, and Mikey begged they stop trying to reach him. They didn't want Raphael to get fed up and turn the phone off!

Mike also knew Dad was thinking about going up to get Raph. That probs would have led to a fight. Plus, Raph was the safest up there that any of them could be, right? He was used to going incognito!

But, then, the decision to give Raph space looked like it took a chunk out of Dad's soul. He went to pray and wouldn't even take his tea, and his stoop was worse than ever.

Michelangelo couldn't sleep. He thought about climbing in to Raphael's hammock because it would smell like Raphael. Then he remembered the duty Raphael had sworn him to!

Littlest Brother crept along to Leonardo's room and hesitantly opened the door.

Will I be able to tell if he's crazy again? There'd probably be lots of katana sharpening and evil giggles, right?

Neither was the case: Leo was leaned up against the foot of his own bed, where he could rest his shell against the wall, and his face looked drained of energy. Mikey scampered in beside him, and tried to see if he was still allowed to give those hugs. Aw. Leo let him near.

"So," Eldest Brother's voice was stony, "the team's down to two."

"Bro, don't say stuff like that..."

"Raph's finally AWOL," Leo intoned. "The way he's always wanted it."

Michelangelo shoved him. "Raph proved he can be a team player!"

But Leo looked defeated, hardened, and maybe sharpened, too. "Master Splinter has told me he'll be accompanying us on our next mission, and that we'll be checking out the rear warehouses in person."

Raph wasn't gone! Not permanently, right? "Leo," he protested, trying to put the puzzle (the family) back together. "Raph... Raph just blew up and scared himself, is all."

"I'm telling father about my problem."

Dismay sank in Mikey's gut. "Don't you remember the plan?"

Leo scoffed. "The plan where Raphael spends weeks telling me to talk to him, and then turns tail the second he's not getting his way?"

Mikey's fingers tightened on his brother's shell. "You're-you're lying, Leo." Maybe that wasn't the word for it, but it was the best Mikey had. "Family is worth more than sixty seconds of Raphael having a bad temper! He didn't give up on you when you needed him!"

Surprised and looking properly shaken, Leo came to attention.

"That wasn't about getting 'his way' and you're being stupid and emotional and you won't admit it! That was cause he loves and trusts you, and he listened to all your orders and we were a team! N... n'don't you love him?"

Leo's expression was cracking up, but he shut his eyes and looked away. "...maybe too much."
That didn't make sense. You couldn't love your own family members 'too much,' and definitely not over something like this. Mikey puffed up and jabbed Leo with a finger. "You went crazy with zero warning, and Raph jumped in and wrestled swords out of your hands! He could have died! And then Raph warned you ahead of time his emotions totally hijack him and said that's why he runs away, and what have you done to help him, huh!?"

Leo didn't look up at him.

Mikey bit his lips and dug his nails into his palm.

But then, bit by bit, Leo did look up at him, eyes round, footing unsteady, meek and lonely and scared.

*Oh Leo.* Mikey reached up and hugged him tight around the neck, tight as he'd ever hugged anybody. This time, Leo hugged him properly back.
Raphael came awake to whispers on pavement and sounds of rats scurrying. He teased his sai out into his hand, and curled slowly in a circle to get his feet under himself. Someone was trying to get the jump on him.

"Ya picked da wrong bum," he snarled preemptively.

"That label does a disservice to your usual work ethic."

Raphael stiffened and spun around in sneering disbelief. Leo dangled there off the edge of the overpass, one foot braced on the support beam, looking perky and clean as a laundry commercial. His present hoodie was white, somehow; fucking stainless and looking perfect despite the shell shape.

"Hey."

"Piss off," Raphael snarled, looking around for sign of Master Splinter or Michelangelo. Of course they'd waited till he was sleeping to come after him. What was the best way back up into the ghetto? Leo wouldn't be able to follow him if he could get on a roof; didn't have the practice for it.

"I brought you breakfast."

Raphael twisted back around. "What?"

Leo untucked a brown paper bag from his sash. It had a big golden 'M' on it. "Four double cheese burgers and a small fry," he announced, "with extra ketchup."

Anger boiled up: Festering, bubbling, choking. Raphael stood there, clenched in the grip of it, tighter than his hand on his lone remaining sai.

Leonardo dropped down in front of him, hurried up, and offered the bag out with both hands. "I know you're not Mike, but I don't actually know a better peace offering, so I stuck with as much beef as I could get for five dollars, three quarters, eight dimes, and four nickles."

"Peace offering?" Raphael spat, mouth curling and twitching in fits of loathing and cruel laughter. Raphael owed Leo, owed all of them, not the other way around.

"Yeah, and I rescued the fries from the garbage."

Paying for any of it was a feat; If the turtles wanted fast food, they usually had to dumpster dive half-eaten stuff.

"Please take it?"
There was no way to handle this. Raphael swung away, locking his gaze on the maintenance access way back up to ground level, moving at full clip.

Leo's voice hit him from behind, high-pitched and pleading: "I'm doing exactly what you did! I woke you up, interacted with you entirely one-on-one, presented you with food, and did not try to talk to you about anything serious prior to you eating! I can't do any better than that; I don't know how!"

Internal organs clenched and Raphael stopped walking and nearly stumbled. Leo hurried up beside him and was silent a few seconds.

"Raph?" the syllable was strained.

Raphael swiped the McDonald's bag. He turned away and found someplace less than disgusting under the bridge, and he sat down and dug out those sandwich. He devoured them, ravenously, and he didn't look up or over as Leo crept up and sat delicately down beside him. He got out the ketchup, and he doused the fries and one of the sandwiches in it. He shoveled them down. Through bites of food, he forced himself to ask: "How mad is the Master?"

"He's-he's not mad."

Raphael snorted. "Disappointed."

"Worried," Leo disagreed, touching his arm. "You were up here the whole day. He's-"

"I'm fine!" Raphael spat (along with a bit of burger), and threw Leo's arm off. "So why don't you leave me the fuck alone!? I don't need you, don't need your fuckin concern! I'm having a grand time shittin' on your plans, puttin' everyone else at risk, bein' psycho! S'a ball!"

Leo didn't answer him for a sec. Then he moved closer, and Raphael reflexively twisted to shove him back. He wasn't expecting Leo to fight him over the physical contact, and that was how he ended up with his older brother wormed up under his armpit, crushed into his ribs and plastron, elbows locked around the opposite side of his waist. Raphael stiffened in disbelief.

"I am not fine," Leo growled. "Get your hand out of my face, and your knee out of my side, and be not fine with me, you bitchy, angry, unfriendly bastard. You made me some kind of promise to be there through this, and I'm holding you to it."

Raphael released with a snap. Leo didn't stop hugging him; he just got out from under his arm, and hugged him more around the breastplate. Raphael shrank backwards. The angry shudders and thrills that had been creeping over his skin turned into something anxious and terrified. His food sagged forgotten into his lap. He reached shakily around his older brother, and Leo released just a second to guide his elbow closer and wordlessly encourage him. Raphael latched on, and squeezed. For the first time since childhood—for the first time since he could well and honest remember—he pushed his face into Leo and fell apart there.

He wept like big tough guys, boxing champs, and team strongmen totally did not weep: Loud, and raw, breathless and gasping for air, and with tears fucking everywhere; wept like a woman who'd lost her mind at a funeral. It was a complete embarrassment to be there like that, sagging into his brother's neck, kept upright entirely by the arms around him, crying because he'd had a ten second fight with daddy, gotten spanked, and then run away from home to go live under a bridge. Maturity level: Sky high on this one, all around! Shell. Might as well put him back in diapers, call the nearest daycare.

Except Leo sat there with him without lecturing, acting standoffish, or getting uncomfortable. Leo
squeezed him in place like he was afraid Raphael was about to fight free and run away, like every ounce of force might be necessary.

Somewhere in the middle there, Leo up and kissed his forehead, which ought to have been an ultimate insult, but all it actually did was start up a new round of loud and uncontrollable sobbing. The universe smelled like nothing but burger and sibling for a minute, and somehow that elbowed out everything else.

Eventually, the sobbing wound down to sighs, pants, and shudders.

And to the self-conscious fear of what would happen when he pulled back.

Raphael didn't want to talk about what had just happened. He didn't want to see his bro's face, or what was on it. Didn't even want time to resume flowing.

But Leo had rescued the rest of that McDonald's from the ground, and he wordlessly pushed it into Raphael now, coaxing him from a position of complete collapse and dependence back into a posture where he could eat.

Eating helped. Eating made talking unnecessary for a bit, n' then it gave him a topic:

"Four double cheeseburgers' six seventy-six," Raphael muttered.

"I scoured the parking lot for that last penny," Leo confessed, clothing still somehow fuckin' immaculate.

Chapter End Notes

Some turtles were born with genius intellect, boundless strength, or clouds of adorableness. Others are just followed by the omnipresent scent of oxyclean.
"Are you wearing purple?" Leo asked as he pulled out a bottle of soda to share with him.

Raphael paused in stuffing his face. "Yeah." He glanced down and adjusted his trench coat to hide the scarf again.

"It's Donnie's," Leo realized. "You keep it on you."

The Devil only knew why it was hard to admit to sentimentalism after bawling like an infant for the better part of fifteen minutes. Raphael polished off the last of his food instead of saying anything.

"Dad doesn't know I'm here," Leo segued. "He's not coming to haul you back underground. You're plenty big enough to put up a fight, and you're mad, and he wouldn't want to drive you into danger. He waited till we got the computer on and saw you hadn't made a B-Line for Stockman Labs, and then he wrung his hands and really... really slowly shuffled off to the altar to pray..."

Raphael winced at the grief he'd caused his single and elderly parent, but somehow couldn't withhold from being an asshole: "That's all he does. Pray. Like dead people are going to get Donnie back."

"I think Dad's going through something more complicated than we've realized," Leo said, and that was news to Raphael. "You're right. Whoever these people—Oroko Saki and Eric Sachs—he's known of them for a very, very long time. But there's pain there. It's in the lines of his face. Its in the way he touches the altar. Maybe he's lost someone to them before? Maybe part of him is trying to get ready to charge in and save the day all on his own, so we aren't put at risk. But... just because he can toss us on our tails doesn't mean one-man heroic rescues are still in his repertoire."

"Why did you come here?" Raphael blurted.

"...I was hoping you needed me to. I've needed you a lot, lately."

That statement sat there for awhile, too real for Raphael to laugh at, and way too real for him to own up to.

"Do I smell dried blood or something? Are-are you injured?"

Raph grimaced and bristled a little. "Not really. Might have busted a knuckle or two on a face last night."

"Of course you did."

"Fuck off."
Leo didn't scowl. Leo smirked.

Raph sniffed. "Also got knocked into the bushes by some joker in a hockey mask who was exercising unusually extreme prejudice against some kiddie purse thieves. By means of croquet mallet. That was weird, not gonna lie."

"What really?"

"Yeah, he was a complete blockhead too, like he tried to pun but he used the wrong word, so it just sounded completely retarded."

Leo coughed a laugh. "So. I left you alone for half a day and you ended up meeting and losing a fight to a dumb, vigilante hobo dressed up like a Halloween serial killer, armed with British sports equipment?"

"Yo look here, I didn't 'lose a fight,' I gave a hit, I took a hit, and then the fucker juked me by running away. I would have caught him, but I got hit by a cab and briefly disoriented. Didn't look both ways before crossin, that was my bad."

Leo grinned wide, snickered, and then threw an arm across his shell to hear the rest of this. "Hit by a cab."

"Eh, guess I sort of hit the cab more than the other way around, but then I rolled right over the hood, was fine."

They had matching grins now, no lectures in sight, but that couldn't last. There was serious shit wrong. "You probably don't know what to say to Dad, do you?" Leo asked.

Raphael's smirk failed. He looked down.

"We're headed out on a mission tonight," Leo said. "Him, me, and Mikey. We're going into one of the buildings."

Anger lapped back in. Raphael's fists tightened. "As soon as I wasn't there."

"Don't think like that," Leo admonished. "He's only coming because you aren't there. Look, I know you don't want to go back underground to twiddle your thumbs and wait for us. if you make me a promise, I won't throw a fit about whether you stay topside tonight to cool off. Tomorrow, meet me outside the Lair for breakfast, and I'll help you talk to Dad about the actual valid points you raised while blowing your top and cussing him out like an ill-bred gutter turtle. Maybe, together, we can get some answers while successfully delivering that lengthy apology you owe him."

Raphael shifted in place. "What's... what's the promise?"

"That you'll keep your phone on tonight," Leo said, and Raphael raised a brow. "Truth is I'm very uncomfortable about going through with this mission without you there. (What?) "And not just because you're my best fighter. I'm uncomfortable with Dad out on the field. I'm uncomfortable with my own potential for relapse. Still, I want you to relax and enjoy the night air so you can think about what happened yesterday with a clearer head and a more optimistic outlook... and I accept that you still probably need to punch a few more thugs who are trying to rape and/or rob innocent pedestrians to make that happen. It would just make me feel a lot better if I also knew you could get to us in an emergency."

Raphael stared for a bit. "Ya serious?"
Leo nodded.

Raphael had to put all those emotions in a safe box where they could be unwrapped later, and more slowly. "I, um, thought you were the biggest hater on the 'me going topside to punch faces in' thing."

"Well I am. It's stupid, dangerous, an unnecessary risk, and could make us even more enemies than we already have. But maybe I'm also a little jealous," Leo admitted, a smirk lifting his mouth again. "What scary green monster ninja doesn't secretly dream of being a super hero and saving pretty ladies, right?"

The very real part of Raphael's mind which had always replaced feelings of heroism with feelings of selfishness, faded a little. "Even the chicks what turn out ta be bad guys?"

"Well that just makes it good drama," Leo advised sagely.

Raphael coughed a laugh and rubbed his face. "I'll um... I'll take it easy t'night, waiting for you guys," he promised. "I really should sit out a mission for what I said, anyway."

"And for losing a fight," Leo quipped.

"You-!" Was that a joke? "Fuck you! Heh. Yeah, okay. For losin' a fight to Friday the Thirteenth. Need some time ta contemplate mah life choices if dat's what can kick mah tail, oi!"

Chapter End Notes

*Puts on 1990's like it's an old dress*
*What the hell was that!?*
"Looks like eehhh giant toytle in a trench coat."
*Moment of silence for the fact that the taxi driver does not find this strange. Also, 'toytle.'*
Chapter Notes

There is a large, square, marble tombstone, with "Writer's Block" written upon it. The ground under the edge of it ruptures, and out comes a hand. The author struggles out, wheezing, "I... Want... THIS. STORRRYYYY. TOOOO. LIVVVVVVEEEE!!!!!" *Triumphantly seizes pen!*

If you would like to help support this writing of this story, check out Patreon!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Raphael took a walk. A long walk, too, and not in a bad part of town.

He was feeling like... contemplative, or something; not the right mood for wailing on robbers. The hot-edged guilt that had driven him out of the Lair was gone. He was, if he was being pure honest with himself, touched Leo had come out lookin' for him and not just to drag him back in line.

Raphael soaked in the night air, noisy with normal people walking up and down the street, in pairs or in groups, gossiping, shopping, and bar hopping. He wanted to be near them, and felt strangely protective of them, and resented them all in one.

It was weird sharing—what to call it?—a 'cultural identity' with people who could justify crating you or loved ones up like animals and shipping you all off to some lab or government agency. New York had seen all the same movies as Raphael, and booed all the same politicians, and rooted for all the same sports. He spoke English, just like they did, stood on two legs, had two arms, knew how to use a phone, and loved the hell out of their pizza. Was it too much to ask they overlook the green?

But those movies had taught Raphael something else: Humans were scared of their own reaction to something alien. They were scared of it killing them, yeah, but they were almost equally scared of killing it. They were scared of destroying something innocent or irreparable. They were scared of their own worst nature, and what it might make them do.

So, no, humanity didn't want to be shit to the first green dude they found—but they expected to be, and they'd put that warning out there: If they didn't trust themselves, Raph ought'n't trust them either. Not one of them. Definitely not striking redheads, and not either just because they might have taken a leaf from Kill Bill when picking out their wardrobe the eve—

Raphael stopped walking, and lifted up his newspaper to stare at a small, unassuming little square of the classifieds right above his thumb, identical to every one of a hundred squares behind it.

"Found - Fedora and effects, to return to owner. For inquiries call (718) 680-1884."

It was Her.

It couldn't be anyone other than her; nobody in New York returned a hat; there was probably a whole Seinfeld episode on the topic! This was a honeypot trap, banking off him exactly knowing what 'and effects' meant: his sai. The point was to get him to call, to set up a 'meeting,' and to lead
him into an ambush. Little did she know Raphael had seen who she worked for: The very people his siblings and father were now infiltrating. Shit! Calling them right now would put them in danger. And Dad might not even do anything with the info!

*Think, Raph. What would your bros do if ya had em right beside ya?* He'd been burning neurons trying to think like Donnie all month. Leo would probably try to sneak into the news station to figure out who'd paid for this ad. But Mike? Mikey would... *Mike would Google the number.*

Raphael pulled out his phone. An internet industry of people-finding pages leaped out at him. He picked at random. There it was! The number was a landline, registered to one *Petunia O'Neil*. It had a concrete residential address listed for her in Brooklyn, but she was apparently sixty-eight.

That didn't fit. Was Raphael paranoid, connecting imaginary dots?

No, it wasn't time to give up just yet. What would Mike have done next? *Facebook it,* hoping the lady was tech savvy enough to enjoy the computer, but not enough to understand privacy settings.

---n-i-a- -O-n-e-i---

Raphael was greeted with a surprisingly well-protected Facebook page, but it's portrait and cover photo were clear as day, and the latter was a big family reunion picture, all red-heads. And there, right next to the old grandma, was a broad in a chic yellow jumpsuit Raphael sure as hell remembered.

Bingo. Tonight he'd get back more than his sai.

Tonight he'd get the next set of answers.

---

Two nerds had both developed a spontaneous and simultaneous hankering for Chinese takeout, it seemed! April waved a brief farewell and headed down to street level, debating whether to walk or drive. She paused at her car door, and then thought better of it and tucked the keys away. Two blocks would probably give her a clearer head for programming. Making her decision, she turned—

"C'mere."

She'd bumped into someone. He grabbed hold of her, spun her almost off her feet, and shoved her into the exterior wall of her own home. Dizzy and frightened, she still immediately recognized the squat, short, broad shape in front of her. The Sai Guy had replaced that fedora with a worn and stained cowboy hat and it didn’t complement his disguise half so fabulously.

"We need ta talk about a few things."

"You," she breathed.

"Yeah, me. First rule of this conversation is ya ain't getting out of it: If ya scream, I'm gonna throat punch ya and drag ya underground. Are we clear?"

She laughed!

He sank into a lower posture like he was expecting a tussle with someone behind him, and the point of a sharpened sai came up to lay against her belly. "Why ya smilin', Legs?"

"Because it's *you!*" she whispered, trying to contain her enthusiasm she didn't draw anyone's attention to them. "We've been trying to flag you down for over a month, and didn’t even know if
you really read that paper; we've been going on breadcrumbs-!

"About that: Where the hell is my brother? And try to keep on topic this time."

"On my couch!" she gushed. "He's okay!"

"What? The fuck he is, if he was okay-"

"He tried calling you!" she interrupted. "He can't remember your numbers, he can't remember your names; he can't remember what you look like or where he lived!"

Sai Guy jerked back an inch, enough she could see the line of his mouth under that hat brim. "What?" he asked her huskily.

Chapter End Notes

Incrediblectopus! HERE IS A SHOUT OUT YOU REALLY DESERVE!

I hit some kind of weird writer's block on this story, and I'm powering through it because of your support!!! Donatello thanks you, I thank you, and near as I can tell, all thirty-one of the people following this story are also thanking you. SO THANK YOU! <3

If anyone else would like to help support this writing of this story, check out Patreon!
"It's a type of amnesia," April indicated the area just behind her ear. "He had a concussion when I found him. The memory loss is supposed to be temporary, but 'temporary' can mean anything from hours to ye—"

"You were in that car what took him!" Sai Guy accused.

"I stole it!" She was still quite proud of that, but when a white-knuckled hand pressed hard steel into her sternum, and crushed most of the air out of her, she realized her new acquaintance was still upset and confused. "He's okay!" she insisted.

"Prove it," he ordered with a sneer. "Prove ya have him."

"He's just upstairs! I'll take you to-!" she tried to move, but was shoved roughly back into the wall.

"I ain't followin' you into an unknown building, Legs."

What? O-okay. Okay, so then... pictures!

"And don't you reach for your phone and try to call no one, neither; I came here expectin' an ambush."

Come ON! Why are you making this difficult when we've been waiting a month to find you and your brother is literally a stone's throw from—!? 

—Stop, April.

This isn't about you. It's not about what seems reasonable, or what is easiest, or what's rational.

This is about a scared and underaged boy, out looking for his missing brother. They were always separated by misinformation, not distance. You got them this far. You can get them the rest of the way. Stay patient.

"I'm waitin', Legs."

"His name is Donatello," she compiled calmly, "he can speak several East Asian languages, he can catch a carton of falling milk with his toes, and he knows martial arts. Since he's arrived, he's fixed my plumbing, my coffee maker, two separate computers, the high pitched whine from the ancient TV cable which was impacting my Twitch streams; and now he's helping me study for an advanced university level AI programming course which he just loves the textbook for. So clearly you're related, because neither of you do anything by halves?"

The sai left her breastbone. Her 'assailant' listed back on his heels, stunned, face blank. He did have green eyes; she'd remembered that perfectly. They were like lime green, or laser green; bright,
"And..." she wanted something to drive her proof home, "he likes his pizza with mushrooms, doesn't like soy on his sushi, just wasabi, and is probably the sweetest, dorkiest, most over-analytical, and... most well-meaning person I have ever met."

Ding! She hit her objective. "You weren't with the guys what kidnapped him," Sai Guy said vacantly, like he'd zoned out a bit on that description. "Any of em."

"No," she didn't straighten up from where he'd shoved her. She didn't make herself taller than him. "I actually ran over one of them."

He didn't say anything for a second. "Why?"

"I..." April sputtered, shrugged, and then smiled. "I had some good karma to pay back, didn't I?"

Something weird entered his expression then. Like he'd been hurt, startled, or like he'd heard something he didn't dare believe. He looked like he felt guilty.

April wondered how old he was. She thought about how surrounded and friendless a reptile boy must have felt knowing 'humans' had stolen away his sibling. Then she realized she ought to warn him that the upcoming reunion was still going to be tough:

"Hey, um, when you see him... try to take things slow, okay? He may not be able to recognize you..."

"...and that's going to be as frustrating for you to watch as it is for him to know his brain has failed him. Talking from experience: You're going to have to budget your own feelings."

Raphael focused back on her. Disbelief had faded. His insides felt quiet.

He withdrew his sai.

"You'll take me to my brother?" was the only thing left to ask.

Before she could respond, something hit Raphael across the back so hard it probably would have dropped him in a puddle—if he didn't happen to have a solid shell protecting his spine. As it was, he only lurched.

A sense of betrayal welled up in Raphael; hot, fast; but it floundered when he saw no orientation or victory on the chick's face. In this split second, she wasn't sure what was going on, either.

Was some random street bum trying to mug them or something? Here? Now? Raphael twisted about growling, "You just picked the wrong guy to jump—" at the same second his attacker yelled,

"April, are you—!"

Raphael stiffened, his stomach flipped, and his eyes widened. He stared at this familiar shape, all tall and gangly with an ovoid middle, brandishing what appeared to be a tire iron like it was a baton, and wearing a hat with pom poms on it. The voice clicked into his soul like a missing piece of himself.

"Donnie..." Red breathed.

The figure heard that and reacted. He straightened up from a combat pose instantly, and then clutched the tire iron nervously close, like a child wringing a toy.
"Donnie!" Miss O'Neil called over his head, confirming it, "I'm fine! Don't hit him! This is him, this is the guy who helped me!"

"O-o-oh? Um. Well, that's... But-but... but then why was he very obviously man-handling—?"

Raphael staggered towards him, towards that voice, reaching out with both hands. He gripped arms that didn't open up or respond to him, arms what were staying tense and guarded. Raph gripped and felt the shell under the hoodie. Red-brown eyes stared at him in wide, mute, passive alarm, and Raphael was close enough that no amount of scarf or hat could disguise that skin color.

A gush of hard air escaped his lungs, so hard it hurt—maybe it was a sob—and Raphael grabbed tightly hold of, and crushed into himself, an unwelcoming but unresisting little brother.

"Donnie."
"Um," Donatello squeaked, because his heart was hammering and every instinct in his body was screaming that a complete stranger had gotten way, way, way too close to him. "Did April happen to mention the memory thing?"

A huff of air answered him.

"Look, I realize from a reasoning standpoint that this sort of greeting must make perfect sense to you, but—!"

"I'm your brother, Dee."

Brother. The word flew past Donatello like a foul ball. All the material and contextual evidence suggested that it ought to be true. The guy hugging him was stout, shelled, green, and very simply had to be related to him; even if their shared origins had been at the bottom of a geneticist's beaker; and yet Donatello felt nothing, no recognition at all.

An instant before things could snowball into a panic attack, the newcomer—his brother, allegedly—pulled back and settled hands on his shoulders instead. The sustained physical contact wasn't exactly comfortable, but at least now it felt like he could breathe.

"Ring any bells?" this 'brother' growled.

Cognitive dissonance swelled. Donatello focused on a face he ought to have been able to recognize. Focusing didn't help. This person might as well have been randomly generated out of thin air, even if all the parts were turtle ones.

Replacing free-fall, fear, and frustration, a surge of viperous anger bloomed up in his stomach, and all at once Donatello was possessed by an overwhelming urgency to throw this person's hands off of him, scream at him, and drive him away. He rejected this. This couldn't be reality. He'd recognize reality, and he resented any false reality for trying to take it's place!

STOP! I couldn't even recognize I lived in New York! For God's sake, Dee, how many subterranean green turtle men do you think there are?! He's telling you the truth!

"I..." Donatello looked down the length and breadth of the newcomer, trying to stall for time, desperately trying to smother or at least throttle down how repulsed he felt because all logical reasoning pointed to this really being his brother. His visual survey led him to the sai.

The sai.

Donatello grabbed for it, and his 'brother' leaned backwards an inch, both likely out of confusion and to let him more easily have it. The fact that he'd allowed himself to be disarmed suggested a trust bond, but Donatello now had something more concrete to assess: He twisted the sai around so the light caught it, and there, on the blade, was the inscription he'd expected to see, in the language he'd expected to see it, saying exactly what he'd expected it to say: Peace is Found Within.

Euphoria crested over Donatello and he'd nearly swooned.
Something he'd remembered had matched. He'd successfully recalled something, reported it to April, and now—just now!—the memory had been proven factual. Both sai existed. They were real.

This moment was real.

Donatello realized he'd been holding his breath, maybe in some instinctive urge to resist hyperventilation or rage. He breathed out now, and looked back into the face of this other turtle boy. Those lime eyes felt like they ought to have been very distinctive and memorable, especially framed by red cloth, and that made the empty space in Donnie's memory banks all the more stark. But all sense of rejection, of being lied to by a false reality, all of that revulsion had disappeared in the illumination of single sentence carved on the length of a weapon.

In that moment, the only thing that made any sense was to save a new memory of this person, and to place it in the spot where all those other memories were supposed to be, so that he could not be forgotten a second time. Lime eyes. Red color. Sai. Shorter, but stocky. Tough. And apparently they were on a hugging basis?

"I have no idea who you are," Donnie told him very honestly, recording the flinch he received. "But I believe you."

The other turtle eyed him a long moment. The he stepped back, unexpectedly, hands falling from Donatello's shoulders to give him space. "Okay."

"Uh, guys?" April said. "Would it be better for us to talk inside?"

His 'brother' glanced at her, maybe wary to have her rounding his shell from behind. "You trust this chick, Dee?"

"Yes," Donatello blurted immediately. "Completely."

"A'right. Good enough for me."

His word was enough to get this person to drop his guard and follow him into the unknown, and Donatello didn't even know his name.

"I'm April, by the way."

It took Sai Guy a moment to take her offered handshake. When he did, his grip was firm. He might not have touched many humans before. "Raphael."

In the name of Thomas Edison, this was frustrating: They were both named after Renaissance Painters, and somehow that wasn't ringing any bells. April, bless her, asked the questions for him, allowing Donatello to watch and listen to them both as he followed them up the stairs and into the apartment.

"How old are you?"

"Sixteen. We hatched within days of each-other. All four of us."

"Four?" Donatello blurted.

"Yeah." Raphael glanced warily around the apartment, and then met his eyes. "Leo's the oldest, then me, then you, then Mike."

"I was just about to go pick up some Chinese takeout." April went past to pick back up the paper
menu. "But I think I'm going to upgrade that to delivery. How does Orange Chicken sound?"

"Eh, not ta be picky, and not sure I really want ta eat right now," Raphael said without looking her way, "but Orange Chicken's Leo. Ah'm more of a Kung Pao Chicken kinda guy."

"Got it!"

Donatello realized he was staring and still holding the tire iron. He put it awkwardly off to the side, an excuse not to look straight at this person who claimed to be his family member. The sounds of shed clothing snapped his attention back up.

Now sans a hat, Raphael was wearing a bandanna with eye-holes cut into it, and it was bright sanguine red. He shouldered off the coat. A dark purple knitted scarf briefly arrested Donatello's attention, but then the shell was visible, and... and the sight was surreal. It felt distinctive. Like something that ought to be admired about another a person, like one might admire hair, or an outfit, or how Raphael was built like some kind of middle-weight boxer.

Donatello's own body shape might as well have been effeminate. He pulled off the shark hat and mittens in a fluster.

Raphael raised a brow, and then his chin, and then he smirked broad enough to show off teeth.

Donatello blinked, feeling put on the spot.

"Right well ya don't see me over here reading Steven Hawkin, now do ya, Dee?"

Chapter End Notes

Why yes, Dee, this is your older brother, and yes he does know all your adorable facial expressions and what they mean and when you're feeling flustered and insecure. And by the way he loves you and is infodropping factoids left right and center around someone he's never met before so you can collect all the information. Because he knows you love information, too.

Somehow I always imagined Raphael taking this way, way, way worse than he's actually ended up taking it. At least so far. I'm proud. I wasn't sure he'd be able to deal with it—at all—and was worried he'd just throw himself out into tearing apart ex-kidnappers to try and cope.
"Here we go!" April returned to Raphael, sai and fedora in hand. At such a long-legged and direct approach, he tilted his head defensively, and his stare flicked her up and down.

Donatello's snickered, and got them both glancing his way. "Personal space bubbles, April," he indicated with his hands.

The O'Neils were some of those people who actually did turn red when embarrassed, lighting up like a splotchy skin condition all the way to the roots of their hair. April took one biiiiig, exaggerated step backwards, cleared her throat, and then awkwardly offered Raphael his missing things a second time. Donatello smothered more laughs. He was used to this, after being dragged around, doted on, and dressed by her for the last month.

Raphael twirled the sai like an old western pistol, thrust it into his sash, and then took the fedora.

"It's a good look on you," she blurted. "Classic Italian mobster. Ready to ask me whether I'm amused."

Raphael lightened up, a smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth. He seemed like someone a little set to resist change as opposed to be genuinely unfriendly. He tipped the hat up onto his head. "Thanks, doll. Ya done a nice job with the Kill Bill look, by the way."

"Thank you very much for noticing...! Everyone else seems to think I've stumbled upon it by accident!"

Apparently Mr. Grumpy Middleweight Boxer could talk fashion as long as it involved over-the-top bloody fight scenes. Donatello was bemused with both of them, and it took five or six notches off his stress levels to see them take almost immediately to one-antoher.

"Hey," April realized, "now I just need a katana and I'll match everyone else!"

"Well hold on there, I ain't sayin' nothin' about no katana..."

"Where 'xactly does ya memory cut off at?" Raphael asked over their Chinese take-out, talking like this was a logistics problem more than a crisis. It reminded Donatello of April, actually, and that likely made him more comfortable in answering:

"Somewhere in the middle of the kidnapping... It's really fuzzy for the first few days—I was under the influence of a lot of drugs."

"The way this type of amnesia works," April introduced, "is that he has all of his procedural
and some of his semantic memories, but none of his episodic memories."

"Mind puttin' tha difference in layman's terms, Missus Science Professor?"

"It means I woke up able to fix coffee makers and correctly identify the sitting President," Donatello elaborated, "but I couldn't tell April which city I was in. Couldn't even recognize it."

"So basically everything personal," Raphael mused. "Scept maybe a few factoids about yaself?"

"My name, my age, the fact I shouldn't go outside without a disguise..." Donnie sat back with some dismay. "I can logically deduce that other things must be true, from the evidence, but it always feels a little uncomfortable to accept things I have no instinctive attraction to, no familiarity, nothing."

Raphael frowned. "So I ain't even familiar."

Donatello bleakly shook his head, wishing he could somehow apologize for that.

"I asked him if there was anyone we should call, to let them know he was okay," April interjected, "and his first instinct was to say yes. He couldn't remember anything about his family, but his first implicit understanding was that it existed."

Raphael chewed over that. "Well. S'gonna be a few hours until it'll be safe ta call Leo. Dun wanna throw his game off the mission right now. But if we can get ya back ta ya own things, ya own computer, might help trigger a memory or two. At da very least, at least you'll be surrounded by 'skills' ya know how ta do."

"Mission?" Donatello frowned. "Is something wrong?"

"They're lookin' fah you genius," Raphael snarked, but one of his eyes drifted close in a languid wink to soften the bite of his tone. "We be lookin' fah ya since the day ya disappeared! Been wrackin' our brains, tappin' security cam footage, runnin' plates, trackin' down the car what took you..."

"You-you were doing all of that... for me?"

"Course we did!" Raphael straightened. "Fuck Dee, what'd ya think we been doin'?! Twiddlin' our thumbs, sittin at home, shruggin' our shoulders? Ya think ya that easy ta live without? Ta forget!? Been scared out of out goddamn minds! Leads have all been paper thin, but all our latest ones been pointin' at the company she works fah," he gestured to April. "No, uh, no offense, ma'am."

"None taken, you were technically almost right..." April realized. "That's some hardcore sleuthing... how did you manage to run plates?"

"Heh, well, can't just be tellin them secrets ta just anyone!"

"Why aren't you there?" Donatello wondered. "If this mission's supposedly dangerous?"


The sound of an air raid siren made them all jump. Raphael reached behind himself, drew out what appeared to be a thickly built and perhaps water-protected cell phone or walky-talky. A bright red indicator had lit up on the side, and, for a moment, Raphael just stared at it.

"Are you going to answer that?" Don asked.
His voice snapped Raphael out of it. "It's not a call." He depressed a button to silence it and grabbed his coat. "It's an emergency signal. Leo's the only one who can trigger one—after Mike kept using it for everything from being too lazy to get food for himself to wanting a video game buddy."

"An emergency?" April stood. "What's wrong?"

"Dunno." Raphael blew past through for the door.

"Wait!" Donatello exclaimed. "What do we do?"

"Nuthin'. Wait here."

"W-well what if something happens to you!? How would we get in contact with the others?!"

"I'm the one what's gonna be perfectly fine, so just—" Raphael froze in the threshold and looked back at him over his shoulder with the strangest expression on his face, like he wanted to say something profound, or deep, but didn't know the words. Then he tossed that phone back to Donatello. "If I ain't back in two hours," he said, "the turtle you need ta get ahold of is Leo. He'll know what's goin on, and who needs help, and whether it's safe ta come find us."

Chapter End Notes

If you'd like to help fund this story in particular, check out Patreon, and feel free to lobby me :D :D :D
Right Time; Wrong Place; Simultaneously

It was one of those weird hours in the middle of the night, but Raphael still managed to knock over a couple of punks doing graffiti as he took a corner hard. Barely broke his stride.

He was gonna hit the labs' complex from the southern side, and the ground entrance was at the north. But circling around would waste time and put him on a flat open parking lot. He took his chances with the fence instead, climbing up one and twisting barbed wire out of his way with the sai and blunting the razors. Nearly got frustrated twice with the damn stuff, but kept his cool. He knew Leo and the others were infiltrating one of the smaller buildings, the old restored brick warehouses in the back, but he wasn't sure which.

Turned out he didn't need to know.

People were in the road between the buildings, and they didn't look like the kind of people what worked at a lab. He saw airsoft rifles and what looked like livestock prods. Half of these dudes were in black, and the other half were wearing that kinda thick, burlap, camouflaged, outdoorsman clothing you'd expect on a soldier or hunter—somebody what needed to walk through heavy undergrowth without scratching up their knees. Most of them were wearing bandannas over their faces. Way back behind them, past a van, a utility truck, and a couple hella sleek black motorcycles, Raphael could see a hole in the perimeter fence.

These people didn't belong here any more than Raph or his brothers did. And whatever they'd come here for, they'd gotten it, and they were already packing up their shit.

A piece of gravel slid off the roof above him, and Raphael looked up. In the dark he saw a glimmer of infrared in the shape of a big rat tail. Dad. Master Splinter was signaling him to regroup and be stealthy about it. Raphael glanced around for the easiest way up—

—but slowed and stared at the hunters instead. They were now working together to pick up a heavy, black bag, feeding it from one person to another so they could pass it into the rear of that van. It was roughly the size of a person, that bag. Someone kneeling on the ground beside it was putting away needles and jars of liquid with medical labels. And right beside that guy's knees, on the ground, Raphael saw a lump of personal possessions: Things like knee pads, and shoes, and even the fine edge of a katana.

The hunting crew was ready to move. An engine revved as someone wiggled the stick shift.

Raphael looked up at the black bag as they got it into the rear of the van. People took up spots around it, or switched out to another vehicle.

The van was already moving when someone finally pulled the doors shut.

SLAM.

"C'mon, c'mon, c'mon, get up here," Michelangelo wheezed, smearing tiredness from his face. Stupid tranquilizer darts! "What's he doing? Why's he just staring!? We need to get ahead of them before they can—"

"Your brother's orders will be to get you safely home," Father said.

"Dad!" he squeaked, betrayed.
"Do not argue, my child. We need to—Oh... oh no." Dad leaned forward. "No, Raphael. Raphael! Please, not now!"

Dad’s panicked raise of voice felt like the end of the world. It meant Brother Number Three was now in trouble, and Dad was still stuck trying to protect Michelangelo, too scared to risk leaving him behind drugged like this. It meant Mikey was going to be left alone—all three of his brothers taken from him—and there was nothing he could do to save them because he’d been stupid and walked right into the line of fire. Mikey turned, numb and scared, to see what Raphie had done...

...and saw him rocket out of the shadows, trench coat flared out behind him. Raphael clothes-lined one of the remaining guys and sapped another, and then he leaped, and it was like something out of an action movie. He hit the rear of the van with both hands overhand on his sai, and he punched the tip of the weapon straight through the wheel well and into the van tire. The van instantly swerved like the driver had lost control of it. Rear-wheel drive?

Someone threw open the rear door and poked a cattle prod out, but Big Red and Angry grabbed it halfway up the shaft, pulled it, and pulled the whole guy out with it. He felt to the ground and got swatted with his own cattle prod, and Raphael didn’t even look at him, because he was busy grabbing for the next guy. A dart gun went off, and Mikey couldn’t tell what it had hit—maybe nothing. People were shouting! The other van was slowing down; a motorcycle was looping around.

Splinter picked Michelangelo off his feet, and the world spun upside down. Vertigo hit so fast Mikey was pretty sure he'd end up upchucking in Dad's fur. Then Splinter jumped with him, and Mikey realized they were in pursuit of Raphael. Raphael, who'd somehow gotten his hands on that black bag and was pulling it out of the van. He was shouting, "GIVE - ME - MY - BROTHER!" except instead of just being this hilariously temperamental five-foot-six older brother Mikey liked to torment, Raphael was an inhumanly strong monster tearing through he back of their van, and he was so loud and so unstoppable he must have scared the shit out of them.

Guys were falling out out of the van left and right, landing on their faces and bruising their shoulders on the asphalt. Then Raphael was on the ground, too, and so was the bag, and Raphael was clambering over it and tearing back zippers to get Leo out. Mikey wanted to cheer, but now the element of surprise was wearing off and Red and Blue were surrounded by bad guys, and obviously Mike could barely tell up from down and wasn't going to be the one to rescue them.

"I'll stay here!" Mikey begged his father, recognizing he somehow had to free up Dad so Dad would fight. "I'll hide!" Dad heard him and put him down, but Michelangelo didn't do very good at hiding. He dragged himself after him stare drunkenly down at his siblings. Anybody who'd looked up right then could have seen him. Where was Dad? Was he looping around? Trying to get the jump on someone?

One look at Leo reminded Mikey that Leo couldn't help anybody right now. His eyes were open but he didn't react to Raphael or anything else. Like he wasn't really conscious.

Someone stood up too close to them, and Raphael reacted, and Mikey heard them scream as a sai tore out their knee and made their leg bend sideways. Everyone around Raphael was either trying to close with him as fast as possible, or else run away, and the guys in the first category weren't having a fun time. Another hunter aimed a rifle at him and fired. Paf. DINK! The first dart skimmed off Raphael's shell. Paf! went another gun, but everyone was basically shooting into a fight with their own people, so one guy shot another guy. Paf! Raphael deliberately rocked his shell into the way of that next oncoming dart. One guy figured this meant Raphael was distracted and dove in with a catch pole, trying to get control of his head. Raphael bit the edge of the loop, flung his weight, and pulled the person off their feet. He smashed them across the head with the blunt of his sai—they didn't get
The dude in charge of all these hunters was on a black motorcycle and had a really distinctive helmet. She was also, apparently, a woman—if Mikey still remembered that plot point correctly. She'd looped back, and Mikey had a feeling Dad was after her, but if that was the case he was probably on the wrong side of the van. She threw down her kickstand and leveled a rifle Raphael's way. She never even got off her bike or took off her helmet; she was just that badass at aiming, and it totally wasn't fair.

Paf. TAK.

The dart struck Raphael in the side of the neck. He slapped a hand against it, and tore it away. It didn't matter. The drug was already inside him, and he was smart—smarter than Mikey, at least—so he definitely knew that. For a second, no one moved around him, like they were holding their breaths, or stunned, or waiting for some hidden signal.

Raphael had a couple minutes. He could try to rush the men standing around him, blow through them, and maybe escape. Right? But instead of doing that Raphael looked at the woman on the motorcycle, planted a hand on either side of Leo, and wormed himself down into place as if saying he'd be staying there. He breathed in deep, hot, and ferocious, and then he roared, and the sound of rattled Michelangelo's bones from four stories away.

"Come and get us, bitch," Raphael had scribbled onto this panel of their lives.

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