

Being Samantha Masters



an homage-sequel to Being Christina Chase

by Miriam Robern

This work is an homage to
Being Christina Chase,
which has amused and comforted
many a tran.

Thank you, Admiral Krunch!

Take What You Can Get, Babe

Sammy's parents drove him into the city and helped him carry his three cardboard boxes of belongings up to his new dorm room. He'd been assigned a single, in a different building than Rowan and Zoey and Agatha had been in last semester. It was a bare, grey, cold cube with a view of a brick wall. Maybe he'd decorate and liven it up; maybe it wasn't worth the effort for eight weeks.

It was hard summoning up much enthusiasm for anything; Sammy's mood was overshadowed by doubt and trepidation. Could he even do this? Most likely he was wasting everybody's time.

His father, by contrast, was all enthusiasm and excitement, pointing out and naming each building on campus and telling stories about his glory days at university. He eagerly suggested the family eat lunch at the dining commons, "for old time's sake." Sammy was going to be eating there every day for two months, but he agreed anyway, if only to share a little of his dad's energy.

And then his parents were hugging him and telling him they were proud of him and they were just a phonecall away and then, finally, in the car and driving away. He started unpacking his things into the built-in closet and drawers, but got distracted by his phone halfway through.

Rowan and his uncles knocked on his door an hour later. It was no coincidence that they hadn't come earlier; Rowan had texted to ask if his parental units were gone, and strongly implied that she was asking for Henry's sake.

More hugs all round, and when it was Rowan's turn she slipped a tiny little pill into his palm. Sammy hugged her even tighter. "Oh god, thank you so much," he whispered into her ear, and then tucked the pill under his tongue.

She gave him a warm conspiratorial smile as they parted, and then turned to take in his three cardboard boxes, half-unpacked. She cocked her head, put her hands on her hips, and asked, "Uh, Sammy, where are all your clothes?"

"You're looking at them?" he hedged.

She scowled at him, because he knew exactly what she was asking. "No, this is all grey hoodies and shit. Where are your real clothes?"

Sammy opened his mouth, closed it. This was supposed to be his last chance to tell them he'd detransitioned, the point he wasn't even supposed to get to because he should have told them already, but now he wasn't sure he could tell them at all. One pill from Rowan was not a two-month supply to last the whole program. He had to stay in her good graces, so he'd have to keep being Samantha Masters—but now he'd have to do it without Sydney's bag of clothes. If he even could.

He'd seen this coming and still didn't know what to say. He went with the occluded truth. "I, uh, don't have them any more."

Rowan lifted one incredulous eyebrow at him; Gideon gently asked, "What happened to them, honey?"

"Did your parents—" Uncle Henry started saying, already building himself up to thunderous indignation.

"Oh, god, no," he stammered quickly, holding out a hand to his uncle as if he could tamp down his building and misplaced rage. "They didn't do anything, they haven't, uh, found out." He gestured vaguely at the boxes. "I just... got rid of them." Which was still, technically, the truth.

Gideon placed a warm hand on Sammy's shoulder. "Are you comfortable telling us why?"

He looked from Gideon's open face to Henry's still-fuming expression, and in the latter found inspiration that he hoped didn't make him a terrible person. He spit it out before he could think about it too much: "My parents were, uh, getting close. To finding out. So I kind of... panicked." He flailed his limbs again. "And so I got rid of it all."

"Aw, we've all been there," Rowan sympathized, and stepped forward to wrap Sammy in a tight hug. "Even with a trans dad I had so many false starts. It's okay."

Sammy squeezed his cousin tight, telling himself that she'd interpret it as trans solidarity or something when in fact he was just relieved that she'd accepted the story. He was still in her good graces. His eyes itched, but he ignored them. He could do this. He could get through

the summer program.

“In the grand scheme of things,” Uncle Henry was saying, “it’s also an easy setback to fix.” He produced his wallet, slid out a credit card, and held it forward. “Rowan, I think you know what to do with this.”

The girl squealed and snatched the card out of her father’s hands.

Sammy blinked. “Um. What’s happening?”

Rowan turned back to him, eyes dancing. “I’m taking you shopping.”

“Oh, no, I couldn’t possibly—”

“Yes, you can,” Uncle Henry smiled genially. “We’re happy to help you along your path, Samantha.”

“But—” he stammered again, interrupted by Gideon’s hand on his shoulder.

“Samantha, if I may?” he asked, and then actually waited for his nephew to nod before continuing. “Honey, you are a queer trans woman of colour. This world is going to give you fewer opportunities than it gives almost anybody, and that’s when it’s not stomping on you directly.”

That sounded worrying, and not what Sammy was expecting, but before he could ask clarification, Gideon kept talking.

“So whenever you do get offered an opportunity, you take it, okay?” He nodded his head and Sammy could feel himself nodding in return. “It’s not greedy, it’s not grasping, it’s how you have to move through the world. Take what you can get, babe. Okay?”

Sammy had to admit, a new wardrobe would make it a lot easier to keep up the Samantha charade, and he was already nodding, so he just echoed, “Okay.”

And then Rowan was dragging him out of the room. She waved the card at her father. “Daddy, this is all paid off, right? I’ve got the whole credit limit to work with?”

“I’d say you can’t possibly spend that much on clothes, but I won’t tempt fate,” he answered with a bemused nod. “Just be sure to feed yourselves dinner tonight too, alright?”

“Don’t forget your keys, Sammy!” his other uncle laughed, scooping up the keyring from the desk and lobbing it to Sammy. “We’ll lock up.”

“That doesn’t look like a clothing store?” Sammy observed, looking over the strange little shop that Rowan had dragged him through three subway trains to get to. He squinted up at the sign over the awning,

“Transformations Boutique?”

“Oh, it’s not a clothing store,” Rowan told him confidently, and strode directly across the street, cars be damned.

“But I need clothes—” he started, and then had to scramble after her, looking fearfully up and down the busy street as he did so. “What are we getting here?”

“Oh, lots of stuff,” she grinned, and yanked open the door. “In you go.”

Sammy did as instructed and then stumbled to a halt immediately inside. There were actually clothes here, after a fashion: long sparkly sequined gowns and plasticky latex costumes. One wall was covered in shelves and shelves of wigs on faceless heads. But most of the shelves held tubs and jars and bottles and... dildos. Those were dildos.

“Is this a sex shop?” he asked incredulously. He’d never been in a sex shop; in fact he’d only ever seen one on a show once.

“Welcome to my sex shop,” answered the young woman behind the counter, deadpan, not even looking up from her magazine. She had short black hair, pale skin, and uncountable tattoos.

Rowan came in behind Sammy, grasped him by the shoulders, and shoved him deeper into the store, up towards the counter. “Hey, Gloria!”

The clerk—Gloria—finally looked up from her magazine and blinked. “Oh shit! Hey. Been a long time.” She looked Rowan up and down critically. “Damn, you filled out.”

His cousin preened. “Thanks. Hey, is Lucille in?”

But Gloria shook her head. “Mom’s in fucking Italy now. Painting lessons on the Riviera, can you believe it? So is your name still...?” She trailed off just long enough that the prompt became an admission that she’d forgotten whatever name she’d been given before.

“Still Rowan, yeah,” his cousin nodded, happy to play along. She patted her hands on Sammy’s shoulders. “And this is my cousin Samantha. She’s just getting started.”

“Pretty good start,” the clerk observed, and smiled. “Nice to meet you, Samantha.”

“Uh, thanks,” he stammered, and then sidestepped so he could see Rowan better. “So what are we getting here?”

“Well your eyebrows need help,” his cousin told him matter-of-factly, “and if we’re waxing your eyebrows we might as well do your legs while we’re here.” She nodded to Gloria as she spoke, and the

clerk nodded in response. Her magazine was quietly closed and tucked away. “We’ll also grab you a gaff, get you some proper adhesive this time around, and most importantly, your very own titties.”

Sammy wasn’t sure how to respond, or if he even could. He managed to blink.

“She had to borrow mine for a while,” Rowan explained to Gloria, and then tugged back Sammy’s hoodie sleeve so she could hold her bare forearm up against his. “Which, you know, did not really match, so her choice of tops was very limited.”

The clerk nodded and examined Sammy’s forearm and face carefully. “Yeah, we’ve got your colour in stock. What are you, Dominican?”

Sammy at least knew how to the answer to this one, from long practice. He shrugged. “Don’t even know. My birth mom surrendered me anonymously.”

“Don’t you worry, we’ll match you,” Gloria assured him with a wink. “But let’s get started on the waxing, yeah? This way.”

Between the wall of wigs and a wall of latex bodysuits —the wares of both walls in every imaginable colour—an overlookable corridor led deeper into the building. Gloria led them down its length and opened the third door on the right. The door was labelled with a placard that had once read “Salon #2” but had since been corrected with wedge-tipped sharpie to read “Torture Chamber,” followed by a happy face.

Inside was a sturdy padded massage table and a long sideboard counter filled with tubs and jars and what looked like small kitchen appliances. “Pants off,” Gloria directed, and patted the top of the table invitingly. Then she turned her back on them and started fiddling with the stuff on the sideboard.

Sammy dropped his sweatpants with trepidation, looking askance at Rowan. “This is going to hurt, right?”

His cousin only laughed. “Oh gosh, so much. But I promise it’s worth it.”

As he settled onto the massage table, Sammy contemplated saying no. He could; he could just say, “no thanks, let’s not do this part.” Rowan always told him that nothing was strictly necessary, and he was sure she’d accept his decision if he backed out. But he didn’t want to be a wet blanket. And he’d heard horror stories about waxing from his aunts since forever, which made him, honestly, more than a little curious. And it would all grow back, right?

Besides, his leg hair was not subtle, and if he was going to be wearing skirts for two months—short skirts, in the summer heat—he might as well look nice.

Right?

So he got stretched out on the table and got comfortable. Gloria appeared above his head, rolling around on a wheeled office chair, and inspected his brow. “All right, I’m going to draw out the lines I’m going to reinforce,” she explained, “and you can okay them before we get started. Okay?”

He nodded. “I don’t know what any of that means, but sure.”

Gloria demonstrated. She brought out a white pencil and drew long, sloping lines along his eyebrows. It tickled a little, but Sammy remained stoic. Finally she gave him a hand mirror with which to see what she had done.

He’d never realized how much of a wild tangle his eyebrows were. They’d always just... been there. But now there were little ghost lines swooping through the scattered hairs. With just a handful of graceful curves, they applied order to the chaos. He could see what his eyebrows could be, with some judicious editing.

“That look good?” asked Gloria.

He looked up off the mirror to see her eyebrows. They were thin, elegant, and perfectly shaped. “Ah,” said his brain. “That’s what eyebrows are supposed to look like.” Which was obviously nonsense, but he nodded nonetheless.

Gloria then applied goopy warm wax to his eyebrows. It was actually quite pleasant; a sort of bone-penetrating heat, as if just his forehead got a dip in a jacuzzi. Then she pressed little strips of gauze into the wax and let the wax cool. “Here we go,” she warned, and ripped the gauze off Sammy’s face.

It stung, sure, but calling it painful would be a stretch. He chuckled in relief. Okay. He could do this.

Gloria repeated the process three more times around his eyebrows and declared that part done. “Right now the skin around your brows is all red and angry,” she told him. “I’ll give you the mirror back when it calms down, then you can admire my handiwork.”

In the mean time, she wheeled herself around the table so she was facing his legs. There was no white pencil and guidelines now, but the rest of the process seemed the same. Warm goopy wax spread out along his legs. Then long strips of gauze pressed into the wax. Let the wax cool. Sammy readied himself for the little sting that came next.

"Here we go," she warned him, and ripped.

Sammy howled.

The process may have been the same, but there was no comparison between having his eyebrows waxed and having leg hairs ripped out of his body. His skin crawled; he fought down an impulse to leap off the table and run for the hills. He wasn't sure if he was whimpering.

Gloria started slathering more wax for the next round.

The next rip was no better, but nor was it worse. And the next one he steeled himself for and it was... just as painful. Rip after rip after rip, and each one left a wake of searing pain that took its own god damn time dissipating. Sammy focused on his breathing and eventually just floated away onto a sea of disassociation. At some point both girls guided him to turn over so that Gloria could savage the backs of his legs, too.

He wasn't sure how long it took, nor how long he was out of it after Gloria was finally done, but then the little mirror was pressed into his hand and he was looking at his reflection.

"Oh wow," he gasped. His eyebrows were sleek, arched, and exacting; somehow that detail redefined the rest of his face, which seemed sharper and more open. His eyes looked huge.

"Just wait till we get some makeup on top of that," Rowan told him with a grin. "Colours are gonna pop so much better. Speaking of which, pick a colour!"

He took the hunk of plastic she handed him, which had rows of sparkling studs in various shades.

"Whatever you pick, you'll be stuck with for two months," she advised. "So neutral's probably best. The silver, the white, the black."

"What are these?"

Rowan giggled. "Earrings, silly."

"My ears aren't pierced," he told her, giggling a little, too. Apparently he was still a little loopy from the pain.

"Yeah, that's the point," she laughed.

Ah, these must all be clip-ons, he thought, and pointed at the last studs in the line. "What about these? They're all, uh, iridescent? They're like, all the colours, so they'll match whatever else I'm wearing, right?"

Rowan grinned. "Yeah, that sounds awesome."

The next thing he knew, Gloria was fiddling with his ear and telling him to hold perfectly still. "Are you... clipping them on?" he asked uncertainly.

"Well, I'm certainly clipping something," she responded. And then his earlobe was suddenly very very cold.

"Is that ice?"

Gloria moved to the other ear. "Sort of. I deep-freeze the needles so they're super cold when I do the piercing." Before he could decipher her words, his other earlobe was hit with a spike of cold.

"Piercing?!" he repeated.

Rowan held the hand mirror in front of his face. "Yeah. Congrats, you got your ears pierced!"

He held the mirror steady so he could see better, and sure enough, each earlobe now had a little glint of iridescent sparkle on it. More than he'd intended, but he could always take them out, right? But then he remembered what Rowan had just been saying. "...wait, what did you mean I'm stuck with these for two months?"

"You've got to leave them in so the holes can heal around them," Gloria told him. "I'll give you a pamphlet, and some saline solution to flush the holes every night. But it'll take eight to twelve weeks to heal up."

"Eight.... to twelve?!" he repeated. "Rowan, I go home in eight weeks!"

His cousin laid a soothing hand on his shoulder. "It's okay, it's okay. You're young, so you heal faster, so you'll probably be fine at eight weeks. And even if you're not, all sorts of people get their ears pierced. Girls and boys."

"Boys don't get glittery rainbow studs!"

"I mean, gay boys do," she very nearly muttered.

"Rowan!"

"It's not a big deal, I promise," she half-insisted, half-plead with him. "Worst case, you take them out before you go home and the holes close up and you'll just have to get pierced again later, okay? You're okay."

Sammy rubbed the bridge of his nose—yes, the skin was still sensitive—and heaved a sigh. "Well it's already done, anyway."

She patted his belly affectionately. "Sorry if I sprang that on you, Sammy. I was just too excited. But you'll like the next part, I promise."

He hesitated to ask. "What's the next part?"

"Let's go pick out some titties!"

Gloria guided them into a different small back room where they sank

into a pair of armchairs facing a small dias surrounded by mirrors. "Shirt off," she declared, and Sammy grudgingly stood to comply. He'd just got his sweatpants back, and now he had to sacrifice his hoodie and undershirt. With a tailor's dispassion, Gloria wrapped a cloth measuring tape around his torso, just under the nipples. Then she produced a cardboard strip with a handful of skin tones, held it up to Sammy's chest, and squinted appraisingly. "Be right back," she declared, and left.

"So what are you thinking of going with?" Rowan asked from where she lounged in her armchair.

"What do you mean?" he asked, trying not to cover up his bare chest.

"What kind of boobs, of course," his cousin giggled. "Big, small? Wide, teardrop, pointy? Dark nips or roses?"

Sammy coughed to clear his suddenly tight throat. "I didn't realize it was going to be that complicated," he admitted. "I mean, I think I like whatever I borrowed from you last time." He looked uncertainly towards the door. "You think she'll bring some like those, just, you know, brown?"

Rowan grinned instead of answering. "Let's see what you end up liking."

Gloria came back with a precariously-balanced double stack of boxes, which she carefully set down on the lip of the dias. She also produced a bra, and tossed it at Sammy. "That'll do for most."

Sammy's struggle with the bra was almost embarrassingly short. Apparently he'd developed some muscle memory during Preview Days.

By the time he'd smoothed all the straps, Gloria was standing in front of him with two wobbling fake boobs in her hands. She deftly slid them into his bra cups while also guiding him up onto the dias. Suddenly he was confronted with his own reflection.

Boobs matching his skin tone made a big difference. Instead of something pale and plainly foreign tucked up against him, the matching boobs looked almost natural. He made a slight adjustment and sort of fuzzed his focus a bit and... it was like they were a part of him. His stomach fluttered.

Gloria noticed what he was doing. "With adhesive and a little foundation, you won't see the seam at all," she promised.

"Uh, great," he mumbled.

"Those are asymmetric," she went on. "So the left is always the left

and the right is always the right. These have a relatively low profile."

Sammy nodded, trying to focus. He should probably pay attention if he was going to be wearing these for the next two months. But a single pill had not magically brought him back to full power and focus. A large part of his brain really did not want to think about what was happening right now.

They looked disturbingly real.

"I dunno, I think you looked better with bigger," Rowan opined from her chair.

Sammy considered his reflection. "These are smaller than yours?" When his cousin hefted her actual tits and opened her mouth to comment, he added, "The ones I borrowed?"

Rowan squinted, nodded. "I mean, I think?"

"You'll be doing a bit of a balancing act," Gloria told him. "A lot of these are shaped for a completely flat chest, and you've already got a little curve."

Sammy sniggered at that. Sure he did. "Too many chips," he chuckled.

"Don't sell yourself short," Gloria smiled. "Pretty soon you'll give your cousin a run for her money."

Yeah, after he got a boob job like Rowan must have had years ago, and that wasn't going to happen because this was just for the summer. But he figured he should at least pretend like he hoped for exactly that, so he put a sappy smile on his face. "That's the dream."

"Anyway, we'll find a shape that takes your current topography into account, and will continue to do so as you develop," Gloria promised, although he was barely paying attention. She was already unboxing the next pair of fake tits.

They went through almost a dozen options in different shapes and sizes. Triangle forms projected out of his chest like torpedoes. Teardrop forms made him look dowdy somehow. He went back and forth, trying to find a match for how he remembered looking in Rowan's old forms, but nothing was exactly the same.

"Oh, they don't make that brand anymore," Gloria explained when he finally put words to what he was looking for. "I'm afraid you're going to have to pick something a little bit new."

And that was the problem. Being handed a pair of tits and wearing them for the weekend because that was the only option? That he could do. But actually picking out what he wanted? That was a bridge too far.

Because he didn't want tits. That was something twelve-year-old girls dreamed about. He wanted, what, like some strong pecs and washboard abs or something, right? That's what he was supposed to want.

He didn't really want that. Even if somebody could hand him that, like Rowan had handed him her old breast forms, he didn't think that he'd take them up on the offer. Because the guys who had bodies like that were insufferable, and he wasn't like that and didn't want to be like that. And it'd look weird, right, to look in the mirror and see some hardbody chiselled build. That wasn't him at all.

Nor did he want what he already had, though. Because face it: his body was doughy and shapeless and nothing to be proud of. If anything, fake tits put some fucking landmarks on him, imposed some sense onto the landscape, even if it was the wrong sense.

He scowled at the mirror, aiming for his doughy belly, except he'd forgotten that he'd slimmed down this spring and so he was just looking at... okay, they weren't washboard abs, but there was less belly than he remembered, and... yeah, the fake boobs did kind of complete the picture.

Wrong picture, he tried to tell himself, but the vehemence he reached for didn't manifest.

He didn't look half bad.

And if he was going to look something like this for the summer, he might as well look good, right? "What are these again?"

Gloria answered without looking up. "Those are ABC triangle mediums. Triangles look good on younger women; they look like, well, like teenager boobs, rather than matronly boobs."

"Do you have the same kind, a bit bigger?"

"We do," she nodded, and opened up one of the boxes. "Here you go." She looked up at him, considering the utilitarian bra she'd given him. "These might strain those bra cups, though."

What she handed him did indeed barely fit into the bra cups, and Sammy struggled between giggling at himself and seriously considering them. With his shoulders and his frame, they weren't completely ridiculous. Rowan pointed out that he'd be edging into a size that made blouses hard to find.

"Oh, I think I mixed up the boxes," Gloria groaned, apologetic. "Those are XLs. They've no business in that bra at all."

She rooted through the boxes scattered around their feet, coming up with one size down from what Sammy was wearing, one size up from

what he had been wearing. They swapped out the massive forms and replaced them with the merely large and...

“I like these,” he heard himself say out loud. A moment later the reflection of Rowan was nodding over his shoulder with approval.

They threw a tee shirt overtop the new boobs, then he tried on Rowan’s button-down, too. With or without clothes, they looked good. Proportional. Youthful. Curvy. Correct.

Next they had him doff the shirts again and strip off the bra and then it was time to apply adhesive—not too much, a little goes a long way, no it doesn’t go that far—and smash the jiggly tits into his chest. A little adjustment left-right, a little twist to make them hang (mostly) symmetrically... he took his hands away and they just stayed there, like they were a part of him.

Gloria sat him down in front of a salon mirror and showed him how to apply and blend foundation across the seam. He’d assumed that this would be complicated, but it was really just... makeup on a large scale, and you could be a bit sloppy.

And then he looked in the mirror and... yeah, there was his naked chest complete with round, perky tits.

“How long does the adhesive last?” he asked Gloria and Rowans’ reflections in the mirror.

“The bottle says sixteen hours,” the clerk answered, but her voice made it clear that that wasn’t half the story.

Rowan chimed in: “You can usually rely on sixteen hours. You can push your luck to like, a full day. It’ll probably get you through the walk of shame the next morning. Or as I prefer to call it: the walk of glory.”

Sammy sniggered into the mirror. “Of course you do.”

Rowan directed him to pull his undershirt on over his braless boobs. They’d be getting lingerie later, and he didn’t want a bra from Transformations Boutique. They had fetish wear and valentine’s day lingerie, but nothing that could reasonably be called comfortable. Even Gloria nodded in agreement at that one. Without a bra, his boobs bounced and jiggled underneath the shirt, which was all sorts of weird.

While Gloria packed up the rejected fake boobs, Rowan took Sammy through the rest of the store. “We should grab you a gaff,” she explained. “You don’t actually need one of these... right up until you do.”

A gaff turned out to be a pair of very tight, very thick underwear that flattened down his junk. He supposed that would be useful for

shorts that would otherwise show a bulge.

"A little bulge is nice on occasion, though," Rowan opined. "I kind of miss the look sometimes. There's a sort of honest lewdness to it. But then, I like a tight little bikini, too."

"You're not going to put me in one of those?" Sammy asked, almost fearfully pointing up at a latex apparatus on a mannequin. The thing promised to do all the same functions as the gaff in Sammy's hands, but also had a very detailed sculpt of labia and a clitoris on the outside.

Rowan looked up at it, then back to Sammy. "I mean, if you want —"

He shook his head vigorously. "That looks uncomfortable as hell."

"It is," Gloria agreed, coming up behind them. "I wore one for a few months. It helped quiet the gripey little voice, but... in the end I just got tired of struggling in and out of it."

They made their way to the cash register and Gloria started ringing up their purchases. As the register's glowing green total started skyrocketing, Rowan told Sammy to look away, if only for his own sanity. And then with a swipe of Uncle Henry's card, it was done.

As they climbed back up onto the street level, Sammy looked to Rowan's lead. "Okay, now we go get some clothes?"

But his cousin only snorted. "Makeover first."

Rowan took him to a fancy makeup place. He followed her inside, feeling like he was a little boy again, getting dragged along after his mother doing feminine errands. There was aisle upon aisle and row upon row of products in all sorts of colours, with the names of different manufacturers over each block of shelves.

He remembered Rowan showing him how to do his makeup and he was relatively sure he could do it again, but she'd only taught him by plucking items out of a single makeup caddy. Everything was all over everywhere in this store, and he had no idea where he'd even start. From where he stood, he could see half a dozen displays of eyeliner, all in different sections of the store.

Rowan pushed him towards a clerk again. "This is my cousin Samantha, she needs a full face demonstration and then we'll be buying everything you use on her."

The clerk looked bemused, quirking his perfectly accented eyebrow high over cheekbones that could cut glass. With a glance at the clock, he nodded. "Yeah sure, let's get started."

First they matched his colours, wandering through the shop piling

up a stack of foundation and contouring and blush and bronzer in his little basket. The clerk selected a eyeshadow palette that he promised would give Sammy a nice range, and plucked a bulbous mascara stick from another display. Then they sat down and got to work.

The clerk narrated as he went, explaining what each product was for, how it was applied, and how to shift things for different looks. Sammy watched in the mirror, nodding along and eventually even asking questions.

“So what prompted this?” the clerk asked, making conversation as he blended, blended, blended Sammy’s forehead. When his subject only grunted querulously, he elaborated: “Well you’re doing kind of a big buy-in here. In my experience when a butch girl ditches her existing look for something more... labor intensive, there’s usually a reason. New job, big wedding coming up, a boy you want to impress? Or girl.”

“Uh, new school,” Sammy answered uncertainly. “Starting at Columbia.”

“Ahhhh,” he nodded in understanding. “Leaving the casual days of high school behind, huh? What did you play, basketball? Soccer?”

Sammy wasn’t sure why he answered, “Soccer.” He liked the game and all, but it wasn’t like he’d been on a team or anything.

But the clerk grinned and kept nodding as if that made sense. “Yeah, you look like a soccer girl.”

“Hopefully less so once you’re done,” Sammy responded, leaning into the role. If this guy wanted to believe he was a jock girl trying make up for the first time, who was he to correct him? It certainly made a more comprehensible story than reality.

“No little grass stain as a sort of accent, then?” he chuckled, and put away the blending sponge. “No, you’re gonna look immaculate. Okay, let’s talk eyeshadow...”

By the time they were done, Sammy looked at his reflection with qualified awe. He looked so different than he usually did... but he’d seen every step performed, knew every product that had gone into the look, and was moderately sure he could replicate it, give or take. In fact, if he stared hard enough, he could mentally peel off the layers, going back in time to his un-made-up face, then turning around and running through the steps again.

This was his face, not somebody else’s, not some mask that he was wearing. This was just what he looked like in makeup.

He thanked the clerk and they checked out with his bag full of

cosmetics—Rowan made him hide his eyes again—and then they headed outside. “Okay, now clothes?” he asked.

But Rowan rolled her eyes. “You need a haircut.”

The hair salon was the opposite of the make up store. Nothing was explained. It wasn’t science, it wasn’t art, it was some sort of sorcery.

He sat down in the chair and said, as instructed by his cousin, “It’s been a long time since I had a cut.” (This was true; he’d gone shaggy all spring, too distracted by his application to go by Aunt Steph’s.) “I just need the loose ends trimmed and then... do what you think will work best with what I’ve got.”

The stylist considered him and his hair for a long moment. “Okay. A feminine cut?”

Sammy swallowed. “Um, yeah. Femme.”

She got to work, combing and snipping and spritzing. As curls and swirls of his dark hair collected atop the smock over his fake tits and across the floor, Sammy got lost in thought.

The make up guy had just assumed that Sammy was a girl. A girl athlete, sure, but a girl. But the stylist had to ask if he wanted a girl’s hair cut. What had worked then and didn’t work now? Had he somehow walked in like a boy? Was it the fact that his boobs were covered up by the smock? Or maybe the stylist just had to be more careful than the make up clerk; she was cutting his hair, which would take a long while to grow out, whereas the guy was just selling him stuff he could use or not use as he saw fit.

Or maybe the key difference was the stylist was a woman and the make up guy was a guy, and easily swayed by the presence of boobs.

It did not take long—he’d signed up for a “simple cut and style,” which was apparently the simple end of the services ladder, and something that they could squeeze into the rest of the salon’s schedule with zero notice. But when she was done the stylist still had to shake his shoulder slightly to pull him out of his reverie. He looked up at the mirror.

A girl in a hoodie stared back. In fact it took Sammy a moment to actually focus on his hair rather than the whole effect of which the hair was a part.

The hair wasn’t even that different. Or at least, it was still relatively short, but it was... fluffier, curled in a swirly nimbus around his scalp. He dipped his head side to side and the whole mess sort of... shimmied around, shifting and moving subtly in ways that he’d

never imagined hair could move and yet registered as unmistakably feminine to his brain.

Had he seen hair like this before? Certainly he had. Perhaps he'd just not thought about it, because it was girl hair. Or really, because it was just hair, which he'd never thought about very much. He just had Steph lop his off when the bangs started getting in his eyes.

This was different. Now his hair had a sort of organizing principle, an impression it gave, a look. It said, "This latina chick is too cool for you."

Sammy might have been slightly intimidated by his own hair.

Combined with his makeup, his head looked striking and increasingly out of place nestled atop his hoodie. He looked like he was slumming it, like he really should pull up the hood to hide his face and hair, because the only reason he'd be wearing this top would be to avoid notice. Whereas his makeup and hairstyle were clearly geared to attract notice, not avoid it.

Rowan paid and guided him out of the salon while his head was still spinning. She gave him a couple blocks before she asked, "You okay there, Sammy?"

He looked back at her from his reflection in a store window. "Yeah, I. Um. Is it weird that I feel like my head doesn't belong on my body right now?"

Rowan grinned. "Sometimes it feels like some parts of you are transitioning faster than other parts, and you get this sort of mismatched feeling. I can't imagine the crash course makeover today is helping much."

He nodded vaguely and looked at his reflection again. He looked like an action figure that had had its head popped off and swapped with a different character. "Yeah, this is weird."

His cousin took him by the arm. "Here, let's see if we can bring things into alignment. Because you know what time it is?"

Sammy answered for his squirming stomach. "Dinner?"

Rowan laughed. "Sure, yeah. Let's catch dinner and then it's finally time to go clothes shopping."

When they reached their next destination, Sammy stared with almost as much incredulity as the first. When Rowan looked askance at him, he explained, "I just kind of assumed you'd be taking me to some cool hipster hole-in-the-wall place for clothes. Not... you know... Target."

Rowan waved at the sprawling budget department store. "You

need a whole wardrobe, Sammy. You need underwear. You need socks. Bras. Camis. Leggings. We'll go hit some cool stores after this, but first let's get the basics covered, all right?"

He tipped his head side to side. It did make sense.

"Plus," she added as she walked through the automatic doors, "there's a Starbucks in here."

Rowan went through Target like a viking raider fleecing a defenseless village of all its valuables, filling their shopping cart with solid-colour everything and checking out no more than thirty minutes after walking in.

Rowan grabbed a seat in the Starbucks by the door and started fishing through the Target bag. She came up with a bra, a camisole, a pair of socks, and a pair of shorts. All of this she stacked in Sammy's hands and pointed him towards the bathroom. "Go change."

Which is how Sammy ended up standing in the Target bathroom, dressed in a cami and shorts, contemplating his reflection. Was it even his reflection?

He'd been dressed up by his cousin before. He knew what he looked like. In a word: unconvincing. Sure, sometimes he'd looked good, and he'd maybe even looked kinda almost hot in an alternative-culture punky sort of way. But he looked like a boy dressed up to be edgy and femme.

Except now he didn't.

His face was softer, his eyes huge and bright, his hair a carefully-sculpted frame for his features. His shoulders and chest gave way to cleavage, and no matter how much he reminded himself that was fake, it still soothed his brain into this weird false sense of surety that he was looking at a girl.

His head had been popped onto the matching body.

He had to pick out the details that didn't fit: his too-prominent nose, the thick-boned brow ridge hiding under the distractingly-shaped eyebrow, his tummy that was smaller than it used to be but still wasn't a girl's belly but a young man's gut. If he held onto these details, he could still see himself as a boy.

But if he stopped concentrating, it slipped away.

Makeup, a haircut, and clothes could not explain this. It was impossible. And yet here he was: made up, styled, and wardrobe-swapped, and all the proof he needed.

He still looked awkward—he assured himself—without any of the

carefree, put-together glamour that his cousin seemed to just exude. But that was to be expected; she was an actual trans girl, and he was just dressing up. Of course he'd look awkward like this.

Except when he didn't, like when he'd come out of the stalls and glanced at his oncoming reflection and swear to god he thought somebody else was in here with him. The mirror had just shown him a girl who was trying to find the mirror after changing her clothes.

He could undo this, right? In two months when he'd secured his admission to Columbia, he could turn it all off. Shave his head if need be. Stop using makeup (although the guy at the make up store did look pretty hot with that eyeliner and contouring). Leave the fake tits at home and just... be himself.

"Yeah, but who's 'himself?'" he muttered at the mirror's reflection. These clothes were comfortable in ways that his hoodies and sweatpants hadn't been for months. And his paltry little collection of shorts and tee shirts had only been a bandaid, a temporary stopgap. He had no idea what he'd rather be wearing. And if he didn't know what look he wanted, he couldn't very well "go back" to that look, could he?

If only he'd never got into the habit of thinking about "looks" and just stayed cocooned in sweatshirt material, where it was safe.

His phone buzzed; Rowan wondering if everything was okay. He tapped back a response that he was coming out shortly.

Because this had only been the first stop, and there were more clothing stores to hit up next, where the interesting clothes could be found. And Sammy would be shopping in those fancy clothing stores looking like this, like he belonged in them.

He refolded his old clothes into a tight bundle and headed out the door. The evening was just beginning.

They got back to his dorm room well past ten, which was later than he thought any clothing store might conceivably stay open, but this was New York and they took that "the city that never sleeps" thing seriously. Both of them were saddled down with a ridiculous number of bags, all of which went crashing into the corner opposite the bed.

The bed Sammy reserved for his own crash. He was wrung out, physically and emotionally.

Rowan refused to let him sleep, however, and instead insisted on his popping off his tits, storing them properly, and then cleansing and toning his face. She gave him a pill, tucked him in, made sure he had

an alarm set for the morning, and slipped out the door.

He slept like the dead.

He woke before his alarm even went off. Excitement and dread washed over him, but then he noticed a ziploc baggie on his desk, filled with little blue pills. Rowan had come through in more ways than one.

He could do this.

Sammy tongued a pill, showered, affixed his tits to his chest, and carefully applied his makeup. He had to go rooting through the bags on his dorm room floor to construct an outfit. He paired a houndstooth pencil skirt with a dark red cami, and then draped over both a white cardigan. He stepped into a pair of white sandals and checked his reflection in the mirror.

He looked like a competent young woman, ready to take on whatever challenge Columbia was going to sling at him. If he could avoid distractions—besides the whole pretending to be trans thing—he could do this.

Sammy hurried to the dining commons for a rushed breakfast and then crossed campus again to sit down in his first classroom with ten minutes to spare. Front row. No distractions. He could do this.

The professor called the class to order, introduced himself, and promised them that Remedial Biology was just as fascinating as any other BIO class he'd ever taught. Then the door swung open and Sammy's heart all but stopped at the sight of who stepped inside. No dis—

The professor shot the latecomer a frustrated look and then extended a hand. "Students, let me introduce you to my teaching assistant, Finley Aceves."

Finley stood up at the front of the class and waved, bright grin beaming through his bushy beard. "A pleasure to meet you all. I promise I'm not usually late." He looked out over the whole classroom with a benevolent, welcoming air, then made direct eye contact with Sammy, and winked.

Apologia

“Samantha!” Finley called out, ducking between foreign students as they flooded out of the classroom en masse.

Sammy had retained hardly anything from the hour-long class, distracted by the presence of the genderqueer at the front. Finley hadn’t made it any easier, trying to catch his eye and offering little smiles as if nobody else would notice. And now they were following him across campus, and their legs were a lot longer than his.

With a sigh, he turned to face them.

“Hey,” they panted, smiling, as they jogged up to him. Their eyes dipped down and back up. “You look fantastic.”

Sammy rolled his eyes. He knew how he looked: like a fake. Although he did have to admit he looked like a competent fake, so there was that. “Uh, thanks? You look nice, too.”

Finley looked downright respectable, which was a weird look on them. Tailored dress pants, a matching blazer over a creamy silk blouse, and fucking loafers. A pair of beaded necklaces dangled over their partially exposed chest. Sammy forced himself to make eye contact.

They grimaced down at their clothes. “Thanks, I... actually struggled with this outfit a lot more than I felt was necessary. It’s my first TA gig, so I wanted to look... reputable and approachable and still queer and—” But then they shook their head and shoulders like a dog shedding water. “All of that is besides the point. I wanted to apologize.”

Sammy scowled softly. He almost wished Finley wouldn’t apologize, wouldn’t ever say anything about the last night of Preview Days. This promised to be awkward; Sammy had probably done something wrong, Finley would call him out for it, and he’d feel like a

stupid child. “What for?” he asked with trepidation.

“For how I acted at the CQA mixer,” they said, face crumpling a bit. “I was just... I was really happy to see you and got... overly excited about it. Which isn’t an excuse. I trampled all over your bodily autonomy and didn’t check your boundaries and was just... an ass.”

Sammy found himself shaking his head. “You weren’t—” he started, then trailed off.

Finley gave him a look. “I know what ‘Jessica called, she needs our help’ means, Samantha. And I am... fucking mortified I made you feel like you needed a rescue.”

“I didn’t—” he started, and then stopped himself from denying that he had in fact felt like he’d needed a rescue because he’d asked for it, hadn’t he? “It was just... it was a lot. And I didn’t know any other way out.”

Finley folded their hands over their valise, a gesture plainly chosen to keep their hands from reaching out to him. “Yeah, and I should have given you ways out. And I’m sorry I didn’t. And I promise I’ll do better in the future. Not just with you, but with everybody. Which isn’t to assume you even want to talk to me again.”

“Well, you are my TA,” Sammy pointed out with a slight smile. “We’ll be seeing each other three times a week all summer.”

But their face crumpled again at the reminder. “Is that a problem? I should probably tell the prof...”

“It’s fine, it’s fine,” Sammy assured them in a rush, reaching out a little. He snatched his hand back when he realized what he was doing, folding it up against his belly. “And I like... talking with you, and I do want to talk to you again.”

“Yeah?” they asked with a shy little smile.

That smile was so delicate and tentative that Sammy suddenly wanted to leap forward and kiss all their nerves away. He blinked. Calm the fuck down, brain.

“Can I take you to dinner sometime as an apology?” Finley was asking. “I’m sure you’re not sick of the dining commons yet, but... trust me, you’ll get there, and a little variety goes a long way.”

“I’d like that,” Sammy answered, and sublimated his impulse to lean forward into a much safer friendly smile. “The next two months I’m going all-in on my classes for the program, but... I think I’m going to need some downtime, too.”

“Excellent. I’ll—” Finley started, and then fumbled into their pocket. “Can I get your number so we can text details?”

They handed over their phone; Sammy punched in his number and handed it back.

“Wait, hold on,” said Finley, brandishing their phone at him. “Can I take a picture to add to your contact?”

“...sure?” he answered, and pasted on his taking-a-photo smile.

“Hrm,” Finley muttered from behind the phone. “Hey do me a favour, just... don’t smile?”

What was wrong with his smile, thought Sammy, and relaxed his features. He took a deep breath and tried not to make any face or look at anything in particular. He figured he must look like he was spacing out. Why would Finley want a picture of that?

“Hey Samantha?” Finley said, face still hidden. When Sammy raised his eyebrows to show he was paying attention, the genderqueer simply said, “You’re beautiful.” A moment later the phone’s camera shutter clicked.

“What the—” Sammy started to say.

“It’s this cool trick, you get great pictures the moment after you give a girl a compliment.” Finley turned their phone around. “There, you see?”

There he was on the screen: a backdrop of green leaves and red brick behind him, white cardigan over his shoulders and deep crimson cami stretched across his fake cleavage. But on his face was this surprised little smile. The smile had just sparked into his eyes as the pic had been taken, and his raised eyebrows looked like they were floating on top of the undisguised joy that lit up his face.

He looked... well. He looked super cute.

“Kind of an underhanded trick,” he muttered, tamping down another smile, along with the impulse to ask Finley to send him the picture. “Warn a girl next time, would you?”

“Can’t give you warning, then it doesn’t work,” they answered with a little self-satisfied smirk. They tapped at their phone to save all the details. “But I’ll let you go. And text you later, yeah?”

“Go?” Sammy echoed vaguely.

“To your next class?”

“Fuck!” he shouted, and started running.

The program had six courses—Biology, Composition, History, Literature, Math, and Physics, helpfully abbreviated as BIO50, COMP50, HIS50, LIT50, MA50, PH50. The six classes would theoretically prepare the Marginalized Scholars for the six sections of

the final exam. Sammy had stared at the course list, trying to figure out which one he should be most intimidated by, but could never quite decide. They were all terrifying.

He dashed into the lecture hall for HIS50 with only a few minutes to spare and found the entire front row already filled by his rival overacheivers.

"Welcome to class, Samantha," called a familiar voice from up under the screen in front.

Sammy turned and was surprised to find Uncle Gideon, in slacks and sweater vest, looking very collegial. The boy in the skirt swallowed. "Uh, hi."

Gideon grinned as he stepped nearer. "Sorry I didn't say anything about teaching this course. I meant to, when we visited you in your dorm room, but then you guys had to skip out to deal with your wardrobe emergency." His eyes flicked over Sammy's outfit. "I see the emergency has been resolved, though. You look very put together."

Sammy still didn't know how to respond to compliments—aside from getting his picture taken, apparently—so he just smiled in response, cheeks hot. What the—was he actually blushing? He cleared his throat. "Uh. Sorry for being late."

"You're not late," his uncle assured him, but he did shoo him towards the seats. "And you're in college now," he added with a grin. "Nobody's going to call home and tell your parents you were tardy."

As Sammy sat, Gideon clapped his hands together. "Okay everybody, welcome to the History Crash Course! The architects of this program want this class to cram your heads full of all the names and dates that they think are most important for a good, compliant, All-American student ready to bend over backwards and participate in the project of Empire, but unfortunately they hired me to teach it."

Scattered chuckles trickled through the room, but most of the students seemed uncertain and a little bit scared at Gideon's opening salvo. Sammy counted himself among them. He was here to prepare for the final exam; he needed all those names and dates. And he was more than happy to participate in the project of Empire, whatever that was, if it meant he got to attend Columbia.

"My name is Gideon Roth-Masters, and it is my goal in this class to teach you to think historically," the rebel professor went on, tapping his temple with two fingers. "I promise you'll get to cramming all those names and dates in July when I skip out of here for a couple

weeks.” He gestured to a young woman seated at a table to the side of the lecture hall. “Speaking of which, this is Andi Górska, my longsuffering TA, who’ll be taking over for those two weeks. Be nice to her, she is not paid enough to do this job.”

She gave the class a diffident wave.

Gideon directed the whole class to clump up in little groups of four to six so they could introduce each other and where they were from. Sammy shortly found himself in a little circle of five.

“And so the first one is all, hi my name is Leon and I’m from Ukraine,” Sammy told his laptop screen. “And then the next one gives their name and explains that they’re from Gaza. And then the next one, she’s also from Ukraine, and says that her first choice school doesn’t exist anymore because it got bombed, and the other one from Ukraine and the guy from Gaza, they both nod and say ‘yeah me too.’ And then the last girl, she’s from Nicaragua and her family got run out of the country because her parents were journalists and pissed off the drug cartels, and her dad’s still fucking missing.”

“Jeeesus,” Rowan breathed, saucer-eyed, from the screen.

“That’s a lot,” Zoey agreed from the other panel of the vidchat.

“Yeah, and then they all turn to me,” Sammy continued on, “all expectant-like, and what the fuck am I supposed to say? Hey, my name is Sammy and I’m a kid from Jersey?”

“What did you say?”

He shrug-flopped. “Hey, my name is Sammy and I’m a kid from Jersey.”

“And their response?” Zoey wanted to know.

He deflated slightly where he sat on his dorm room bed. “They wanted me to tell them where I shopped for clothes.” Their reception of his personal background had seemed so petty Sammy hadn’t known how to respond—especially since he’d forgotten the names and locations of all the places to which Rowan had dragged him.

“Well yeah, you looked like that?” his cousin asked, eyebrow arched. “You didn’t come home and change clothes?”

He looked down—cleavage yawned open under his gaze; at some point he’d get used to that, right?—and then back up at the screen. “I mean. Yeah?”

“It’s a nice ‘fit,’ ” Rowan told him with a shrug. “So if by their standards you’re a local, and a well-dressed one at that, asking for shopping tips is understandable.”

"Yeah but—" he sighed, struggling to articulate his discomfort. "They're all fleeing persecution and fucking warzones, and all I bring to the table is where to get a cute skirt?"

"Well they're probably tired of being refugees all the time," Zoey pointed out, "and hope that maybe you can help them feel a little normal for a change."

He slumped against the wall and exhaled. "Makes sense, I guess."

"Or they're hitting on you," Rowan put in with a smirk.

"Nobody is hitting on me," Sammy insisted, even though he was pretty sure two guys in Pre-Calc and a girl in the Lit class had been feeling him out. They'd asked him "get to know you" questions with an almost disquieting intensity. He was here to study; he didn't want distractions.

As if on cue, his phone buzzed. He scooped it up to read a short text message from Finley asking if he liked seafood.

"Ooooooh, who's got you smiling like that?" teased Rowan.

"Wait, what happened?" asked Zoey, coming back into view from off-camera. "I missed it!"

"Nothing—" He tried to say, wiping his face clear, but he could feel his cheeks burning. He had absolutely been smiling at his phone like a goober.

"Somebody texted Sammy and her face lit up like a Christmas tree," his treacherous cousin giggled.

"It's not that, it's just Finley," he told them with a roll of his eyes. "They're the TA for Bio."

"And they were texting you the syllabus?" Rowan asked, skeptical eyebrow raised.

"No, they're just..." Sammy started, and then realized if he didn't volunteer the whole story now, Rowan would pry it out of him, anyway. "They came up to me after class to say sorry for moving too fast at that CQA event and then they asked me to dinner."

"So as part of Finn's apology for moving too fast, they asked you on a date?" his cousin attempted to summarize, now lifting both eyebrows. "And you said yes. Damn, they've got game!"

"It's not a date," he insisted. "It's an apology. They're taking me to dinner as an apology."

Both Rowan and Zoey just stared at him blankly, waiting.

He blinked first. "Fuck, is it a date?"

"Well, that would make something else make sense," Zoey said, and explained: "Earlier today Finn did kind of ask me if they could

ethically date somebody in a class they were the TA for."

"I mean, it is kind of sketchy," Rowan conceded.

"Right, but in this case, the final class grade, the part that they might have undue influence over, doesn't matter," she pointed out. "It's just the exam score at the end that matters, and that's impartial."

"So what did you tell them?" Sammy wanted to know.

Zoey shrugged. "I think they're in the clear. Ethically speaking. So they can date... somebody in the class they TA for. Which may or may not be you."

"But it probably is," said Rowan pragmatically. "And you said yes?"

"Yes," Sammy groaned, pressing himself against the cool brick wall. It counteracted the full-body flush he had going on. "I said yes. But I didn't think it was a date!"

"What else did they say?" Zoey asked, probing for clarification. "They were sorry, they asked you out, what else?"

Rowan cut through all the extraneous details that Sammy was considering mentioning as a smoke screen: "Did they compliment you?"

"Um," he mumbled, wondering if he could hedge. "I mean, sort of? When we started talking, they... said I looked fantastic."

"Well, you do," Zoey noted dispassionately.

"And?" his cousin demanded, eyeing him critically through the laptop. "I can tell you're holding out on us."

Casting his eyes to his popcorn ceiling, Sammy sighed. "And they called me beautiful."

"Awww!"

"No, it wasn't like that, it was a... a trick to get a good photo for..." Too late, he realized exactly where he was blundering. "...for my number in their phone."

"Samantha," Zoey said flatly, and waited until he was paying attention before continuing. "Find out if it's a date... before the date happens. Don't put it off, okay?"

"What, like over text?" he sputtered. "Or in class on Wednesday?" Both of those options sounded like trainwrecks.

"Better than over dinner," Rowan pointed out reasonably. "Get on the same page before the date starts or else one of you is guaranteed to be disappointed."

On Tuesdays and Thursdays he only had two classes, but they were

both two hours long: Composition in the morning and Physics in the afternoon.

“This is not a class about writing,” the Comp professor had declared. “This is a class about editing. We will be writing a 500-word essay every week. You will bring your first drafts in on Tuesday. You will exchange them with other students for editing. We will discuss in class. Then you’ll take it home and bring a revised draft on Thursday. Each Thursday we’ll have a handful of you read your essay aloud.” She nodded as if this was at all reasonable. “At the end of this eight-week course, you’ll have written 4,000 near-perfect words. I’m letting you off light! By the time you get to the final exam, tossing off a solid 500 words will be child’s play.”

Physics, by contrast, was taught by a scattered, spare little man who didn’t look much older than his students. He explained that they had an absurd amount of material to cover, especially since this “Physics” class was also supposed to cover basic chemistry, and then he immediately launched into a lecture on the four fundamental forces of nature. “Oh,” he added at the end as they were picking up their textbooks, binders, and bags, “we’ll have a quick quiz at the end of class Thursday—or maybe the start of class on Tuesday—going over what we’ve covered that week. Or the week prior. You understand what I mean.”

Sammy never quite got around to texting Finley about their maybe-date before it was time to show up to Biology on Wednesday morning, but the genderqueer just smiled at him across the room, and only the once. No further contact was made, and Sammy dashed out of the classroom before any could be made. He had three more classes that day and didn’t need any more distractions.

“Our key task,” intoned the literature professor Dr Ngawa, “as readers and as human beings, is that of interpretation. The interpretation not just of texts and of speech acts, but also of our phenomenological world.” Ngawa liked to pace as he lectured, roving up and down the steps of the room’s sparsely-occupied stadium seating. “That is to say: we are surrounded by signs and symbols, and we are thrust, every day, into interpreting what it all means.”

“Don’t have to tell me twice,” Sammy muttered under his breath, to the amusement of the dark-eyed girl sitting on his right.

“Grab a piece of paper,” directed the professor, “and write down a short description—just a sentence—of an encounter that you had with

an ambiguous sign. Some situation where you could not tell what was meant. You could not interpret. Speech act or text or situation," he elaborated while waving both hands around his head. "Just. Jot it down."

Sammy opened his notebook to a blank page and tried to think of a time when he didn't understand what was happening. It seemed like a regular occurrence for him, but nothing specific came to mind. Nothing besides the obvious and immediate situation he was mired in, of course, and as time stretched on and everyone else started putting down their pens, he frantically scribbled out: *Can't tell if I was asked out on a date.*

"Miss Masters," came Ngawa's baritone, sounding off right behind Sammy's seat. The professor had crept up while he'd dithered over what to write. "What have you written?"

Sammy felt all the blood drain out of his face. "Oh, I thought—" he stammered. "I mean, I thought this was just for... I didn't think we were sharing it."

Ngawa gave him a significant look, and then broadcast that look across the whole room. "Ah. So your interpretation of the instructions you were given included some biases and assumptions of your own."

Trying to laugh it off, Sammy nodded and prayed that that would appease the professor's inquiry. But Ngawa only watched him, eyebrows raised expectantly. Sammy opened his mouth, closed it, and finally just gave up. "I wrote down that I can't tell if I got asked out on a date."

A ripple of good-natured laughter pattered through the lecture hall, and Sammy took a little comfort from the response. A high school classroom would have immediately overflowed with braying mockery. This was different, like everybody sympathized. He felt the corners of his lips lifting slightly.

"A common lament," the professor intoned. "A nice boy asked you out, but you're not sure if he *asked you out* asked you out. Even the language we use to describe—"

"Oh, uh," Sammy half-objected impulsively, and Ngawa paused to lift his expectant eyebrows again. Sammy explained: "Finley's not a boy."

"Oh ho!" the professor chortled. "And here's where *my* biases and assumptions get in the way of my interpretation. My apologies to Miss Finley, she of the ambiguous scheduling practices."

This time Sammy didn't make a sound of correction, letting Ngawa

move on to pry into some other student's private life.

Is Friday night okay for dinner? Finley texted as class was breaking up, which only served to make Sammy apprehensive.

Friday night was a date night, right? A casual dinner on a random Tuesday, that wasn't likely to be a date. Dinner on Friday night, though? That was definitely date territory.

Sammy took a long, shaky breath. Interpreting ambiguous speech acts, indeed. Firley was almost certainly asking him out on a date.

I'm just thinking about how you said you wanted to go all-in on your classes, said the next text. Friday night seems like the least impact on your studies?

Well fuck, now he didn't know what to think. Sammy groaned audibly and shoved his phone into his backpack.

"That your maybe-date?" asked the dark-eyed girl with a twinkle in her eye. "Finley?"

Sammy heaved a sigh. "Yeah. Apparently we're going out on Friday. So I have two days to figure out if we're actually going out or if we're just... going out."

The girl closed her notebook. "I'd love to hear how it turns out for you," she giggled. "If it turns out to not be a date, there are always other options." She raked her eyes up and down his body, smirked, and stalked out of the classroom.

Sammy watched her go, bewilderment giving way to curiouosity. He pulled his phone back out, reversed the camera, and took as full-body a selfie as he could. He sent the result to Rowan.

Hot, she responded immediately.

Sammy rolled his eyes and then examined the photo he'd just sent her. The wispy blouse that he'd thought kind of conservative this morning had apparently started showing off an eyeful of cleavage while he wasn't looking. And the capris that had seemed like simple pants were hugging his hips and thighs and—he took a quick side-angle selfie to verify—yeah, they were doing something almost indecent to his ass.

How on earth did he have this much ass?

He texted his cousin: **why are all of the clothes we got me either tight or revealing or otherwise slutty in some secret surprise way?**

Why would you want clothes that aren't? came the reply. **The point of clothes is to look hot.**

Sammy didn't even know how to respond, and he had Pre-Calc in

fifteen minutes.

The next morning he went through his new wardrobe like a tornado, trying to put together an outfit that Rowan would not describe as 'hot.' It was difficult.

Which wasn't exactly true. He could throw together a bunch of mismatched garments, but then he just looked weird. Like he couldn't dress himself or couldn't see how this top and that skirt didn't go together, when they really obviously did not.

What he needed was not *hot* but also not *incompetent*.

For a half-second he considered his box of hoodies and sweats, but actually shuddered at the thought. Heavy and scratchy and hot and... frumpy.

When the hell had 'frumpy' invaded his vocabulary?

He tried again, without trying so hard as to create a jarring mismatch. This cami, that skirt that probably wasn't quite right, and then that weird little jacket-thing from that weird little boutique, where'd it go? He donned the questionable ensemble, smoothed down his lines, and turned to look in the mirror.

"Oh, huh," he said aloud, scrutinizing himself. "Hold on a minute..."

He doffed the jacket and swapped the cami for a ruffle-fronted blouse, then slipped the jacket back on and turned to look in the mirror.

"Okay," he told his reflection, "this looks really..." His shoulders slumped. "Hot. Fuck!" How easily he lost sight of what he was trying to accomplish and fell back into... whatever took over his brain in the morning and assembled almost-but-not-quite inappropriately hot outfits for class.

He considered changing again, but the outfit really did look good. And he was going to be late if he dithered any more. He shrugged at his reflection. "Might as well just wear it for the day."

By the end of class on Thursday, all six professors had made clear their expectations for how much reading the students would be doing, and most of the initial deadlines were next week. It was... a lot.

Even Math had reading to do, which Sammy felt was vaguely unfair. Math and reading were opposite poles on the academic globe; you shouldn't ever have to read in order to math.

But all of this was why Thursday evening found Sammy sitting at a

table in the back of the dining commons. Textbooks were spread out all around him; a tray of dinner sat half-eaten and forgotten at the periphery. He had so much reading to do.

The good news, though, was that he seemed to be getting his focus back. With four days' worth of a regular supply of pills in his system, the fog had cleared and he could read, he could discuss, he could think again. How did other people do college without these pills?

"Did you read all those poems yet?" asked a voice, bringing Sammy out of his reverie. He looked up to find the dark-eyed girl from Literature class. "There were so many."

"I think the idea was that they're all short?" he hazarded. "Kind of an easy way to get us started. And then we're supposed to read a whole novel by Monday, which... I hope it's not boring."

"Oh, it's some white girl who thinks she's poor because her family only has a maid and a cook taking care of their every need. So to avoid a life of such unfathomable poverty... she must date." She threw the back of her hand up against her forehead dramatically and giggled. "Speaking of which, have you figured out your little dating problem?"

Sammy heaved a sigh. "No. I've been avoiding it by digging into the reading."

"Can I ask you a question?" she asked with half a smile. When he nodded, she asked, "Are you hoping it's not a date, or that it is?"

"I mean—" he started, stalled, and then shrugged. "I don't even know. I definitely don't need any distractions right now. This program is my one shot for... everything, and I'm not going to fuck it up." He paused, considering. "But at the same time... it'd be nice if it was? I, uh, I've never been asked before."

The girl blinked, startled. "I don't believe that."

Sammy shrugged again. It was the simple truth.

"Maybe you're just really bad at telling when somebody's into you," she suggested. "Maybe you've been asked out tons and you've just never noticed." She considered him from under one arched eyebrow.

"Yeah, I don't think so," Sammy giggled, realized he'd just giggled, and blushed.

He wasn't oblivious (not when he'd taken his pills), and this girl had already made her interest clear. He just had trouble wrapping his head around the very concept that somebody was hitting on him. All he had to do was slap on some fake tits and a little makeup and suddenly he was popular? It seemed ludicrous.

"No, Samantha, you're... really pretty," she pressed. She blushed as

she said it. "If the girls weren't asking you out in high school, I guarantee they were pining for you across the room."

"Yeah, I... didn't always look like this," he protested weakly. There was something in this girl's voice that was edging towards the desperate, and suddenly Sammy wanted nothing more than to just turn off whatever was happening. The only problem was that he had no idea how to do that. He gestured down at himself. "All I wore through high school was hoodies and sweat pants. The... fashion is all new, and entirely my cousin's doing."

"Well tell your cousin thank you for providing the class with eye candy," she grinned, and leaned her rump up against the table beside him. He realized a beat later that she was ideally positioned to look straight down his shirt.

What was he supposed to do? Cover himself? Stand up? He realized he couldn't even remember this girl's name, and asking for it now might seem like he was expressing interest, when all he wanted to do was read.

Sudden inspiration struck, and he went with it before he could examine the impulse. "No, when I say I didn't look like this, I mean I didn't look like a girl. I'm transgender." There. Maybe that would scare her off.

But she only nodded. "I mean, I didn't want to assume, but I did kind of figure. You make a very pretty girl, Samantha. Good choice on chasing that dream."

She was, absolutely and unmistakably, looking down his shirt.

"Listen," he finally grimaced. "I've... got a lot of reading to do." He gestured to the array of books spread out before him. "I don't want to be rude. I just... I can't fall behind. I'll see you in class tomorrow?"

"Oh shit, sorry, yeah," the girl stammered, immediately straightening and wiping her palms on her thighs. "You even said and I... sorry. Yeah, I'll see you in class." She backpedaled a few steps, turned to go, and then turned back. "I hope your dating situation works out the way you want it to, Samantha."

He smiled and nodded. "Thanks."

Sammy turned back to his books, very intentionally not watching her go, except for the little peeks he took as she beelined for the door. She turned left once outside and walked along a bank of windows, staying within easy view. From the few glances he stole, she seemed to be talking to herself, and not kindly.

He groaned. All he wanted was to avoid distractions and absolutely

destroy the Marginalized Scholars' final exam. He'd worried that pretending to be trans, dressing up and doing his makeup every day, remembering his fake name and fake pronouns, would be one of those distractions. He'd accepted that as the cost of entry. But never had he even considered that dressing up and doing his makeup would bring him more distractions in the form of... amorous attention.

At the same time, complaining about it seemed spectacularly shitty. Oh no, people wanted to talk with him, get to know him, even date him. Walking across campus, people smiled at him for no discernible reason. And just because he couldn't understand it didn't mean he didn't like it. It felt like people wanted him to be there, wanted him to be in their shared space. Welcoming him. It was a heady feeling, and if he was honest with himself, he didn't want it to stop.

He just had to figure out how to get all this reading done, too.

Sammy's Friday classes ended at 3:30. Finley would pick him up in his dorm lobby at 6. By the time he reached his dorm room, Sammy was down to two hours and fifteen minutes to clarify what was happening before it happened.

So he took a shower.

It was almost 4:30 when Sammy returned to his room, steaming and clean and frustrated that the distraction of hot, streaming water had been used up.

He had to get dressed. He hadn't had time to unpack all the clothes he'd bought with Rowan; the bags were all still piled up in the corner.

He poured it all out onto his bed and started folding.

By the time 5 o'clock rolled around he'd sorted all his new clothes into the appropriate drawers and hangers. Then he pulled out the clothes he might wear that night. He had three options out of what was still clean.

Could he do laundry? No, he didn't have enough time for laundry. Finley would be there in less than an hour.

And before Finley got there, Sammy should text them to ask if they were going on a date, or if they were just going out to dinner as friends who were apologizing. For things that happened four months ago.

But he had options for what to wear. He couldn't just go as he was right now, which was naked.

Fuck, he had to re-affix his tits.

Now it was 5:35 and his fake boobs wobbled on his chest as he contemplated his three outfits. One set—a white skirt and an orange

frilly blouse—was boring and basic but that might be an advantage. The next was... well, it was club gear. Shimmery top and a flippy skirt. Classy club gear, but it was designed for dancing. Would there be dancing? At the restaurant? Was that a thing? And then the last was a skater dress, vibrant blue with black polka dots, which was very plainly date wear, and he was mildly frustrated that he didn't have a necklace that went with it.

Finally he realized that he couldn't decide what to wear if he didn't know if he was going on a date or not. He pulled out his phone and stared at it. It was 5:45. Finley was probably already on his way.

With a muttered curse, Sammy typed out a dozen different texts and deleted them, and finally settled for: **Is this a date?** Simple. Straightforward. To the point. There was no way Finley could misunderstand or mangle the query. Sammy would get a straight answer.

His phone buzzed, and he looked at the answer: **Do you want this to be a date?**

Sammy screamed at his phone.

What the fuck kind of answer was that? Surely when Finn had asked him, they'd either thought they were asking him on a date or they weren't. That was something you asked with intention. You couldn't do it accidentally, and if you were doing it on purpose, you sure as fuck knew what you were asking.

Sammy was about to shoot back something scathing but his phone displayed three little bouncing dots. He watched them bounce until they quieted and disappeared. His breath caught, but then they returned. Bounce bounce bounce, wobble wobble wobble.

He stared, transfixed, until the dots turned into words.

Here's the thing, said the text. **At the end of summer term, I'm leaving for med school in California. So while I am very open to this being a date, I can't do a relationship that doesn't have an expiration date. I'm also very open to this being a non-date dinner. I think you're cool and I'd like to share a meal, date or not.**

Sammy read the text through three times, and then it was followed by: **So?**

He grabbed the skater dress. "Date wear it is."

First Date First Date

Sammy had to make Finley wait downstairs while he put on his makeup, breathing very intentionally so he did not rush or mismatch his eyeliner. That done, he tousled his hair until it looked vaguely correct, and added a few little white clips to keep his bangs under control.

The hiccup came when he went to grab his backpack, which had his wallet and keys in it, and stilled. He couldn't very well take his backpack on a date. And the skater dress had no pockets. Reluctantly, he turned to his closet and pulled out the little white purse that Rowan had insisted he'd need. Wallet and keys inside, he looped it around his shoulder and scowled into his full-length mirror.

A girl with a purse scowled back at him.

He rolled his eyes at himself. He was wearing a polka-dotted dress, sporting flawless if simple makeup, and had two almost-embarrassingly-large tits pasted onto his chest. And the purse was the thing giving him pause?

He didn't have time to parse through these feelings. He added his lippy to the purse and hurried out the door.

Finley was waiting outside on the dorm's stoop, leaning against the railing and smiling up at the clear blue summer sky. The wrap dress they wore was bright green with swirls of tie-dye white reaching up from the skirt's hem. A few brightly-coloured, chunky necklaces dangled over their chest, under a beard that Sammy suspected had been recently trimmed. Vibrant green eyeshadow and a comparatively muted lipgloss completed their look.

Sammy took his time getting to the door. He couldn't help smiling through the window at them. At his date.

Eventually, though, Finley noticed his appraisal, so he had to push open the door and step outside. Their eyes went a little wide. "You look amazing, Samantha."

Sammy rolled his eyes and touched his collarbone. "It needs a necklace but I don't have anything that goes. And I... kind of ran out of time getting ready, worrying about if this was a date or not."

Finley grinned. Were they amused that Sammy had worried over the evening? "And the verdict is?" they asked. "You didn't actually give me an answer."

"Oh shit," Sammy laughed, and reached forward to squeeze their hand in sympathy. Which left him holding Finley's hand. Now what was he supposed to do? And where had that gesture come from in the first place? He looked from their joined hands to Finley's face. "Um. I'd... like it if this were a date."

He willed himself not to blush. He failed.

Finley turned their hand to squeeze his. "I'd like that, too." The two of them stood there smiling at each other for what felt like a full minute before the genderqueer tipped their head away from the door. "Shall we?"

Finley had made reservations at a restaurant at the north end of Battery Park, but they took the subway to the south end to have a leisurely walk before dinner. For most of the way down, the subway was crowded and even when it thinned out enough to permit conversation, they talked about nothing. Classes. Videos they'd seen. Pizza toppings, inspired by the passenger who boarded with a stack of three very aromatic pizzas.

And then the train reached the end of the line. They stepped out into the fresh air and the long leafy stretch of the park, and the lazily lapping water alongside it. And out beyond the water...

"Is that—" Sammy stammered, staring off at the horizon. "It is. Holy shit."

Finley looked where he was looking and chuckled. "The Statue of Liberty? Yeah, that's her. Have you... have you not seen her yet?"

Sammy shook his head and shot a sheepish grin back at them. "I guess I just haven't been where you could see her."

Finley gestured across the park to where they could get a slightly better view. The two of them ambled, with Sammy hardly looking at anything else. "You know she's trans, right?" Finley finally broke their silence to ask.

That got Sammy's attention, and he looked from the monolithic statue to Finley and back again, confused. "Wait, what?" They'd come up to the railing that separated the park from the Hudson river, and Sammy leaned up against it. "They had trans people back then?"

"Trans people have always been here," his date chuckled. "But yeah. Before she was Lady Liberty, she was Sol Invictus, the god of the unconquered sun. That's why her crown has sunrays around it."

Sammy slitted his eyes at Finley skeptically. "Seriously?"

The genderqueer shrugged. "So the story goes. And since she is a story, that's about as good as we get, right?"

Sammy smirked. "I should tell Rowan."

"Who do you think told me?" Finley laughed, leaning up against the railing, himself.

"It does sound like a Rowan factoid."

They looked out over the water. "If I'd had known you hadn't been out there yet," mused Finley, "I would have taken you. Distinguish myself with the most memorable first date you've ever been on."

"That's not exactly a high bar," Sammy snorted, tearing his eyes away from the statue. They were heading up the green length of the park, which was... this way. He started walking, glancing back towards Finley to make sure they were following.

They did so with alacrity. "What do you mean, not a high bar?"

"I um—" Sammy started, stopped, decided to press on. He confessed, "I've never been on a date before."

Finley's eyebrows jumped up their forehead. "Oh! Oh." They tried to compose their features, but couldn't completely banish the ghost of a smirk. "So this is a *first date* first date."

Sammy didn't think they were trying to be condescending, but he decided he wasn't going to allow it, even accidentally. He crooked an eyebrow at them. "I don't know, first date implies that there will be more dates after this one, and if you keep acting like that..."

Finley laughed and threw up their hands to demonstrate their innocence. "Understood. Understood. But I'm sure there will be. More dates. Somebody will ask you, or you'll ask them... emphasis on 'them.'" They leaned in to waggle their eyebrows.

Sammy shoved them playfully. "Only if you behave yourself," he grinned.

But instead of grinning back, Finley looked away and cleared their throat. "Well, I don't have the best track record on that."

"Okay, no." Sammy shook his head, and reached over to pull Finley

back from spiralling away. "I don't want to rehash that all over again. You apologized, I accepted, it's over." They both walked a few steps before he added, "And apparently I just need to get used to it."

"No," Finley leapt to argue so fast they might have sprained something. "Nobody should touch you without your—"

"Not the touching, just the... attention," Sammy clarified. "I'm not used to it. And like... I swear I'm not bragging, but you're not the only one."

Finley spread a hand across their collarbone. "I have rival suitors?!"

"Oh my god," Sammy rolled his eyes towards the sky. "This isn't fucking *Persuasion*."

"I would make a clever literary reference here, but I'm a bio major," his date admitted. "Honestly I'm kind of impressed with myself that I recognized the book title."

"Yeah well, we're reading it in Lit class," Sammy explained. The park scrolled past them, the sun swollen fat on the horizon painting everything orange. "And there's a girl there who I bet you money is going to give me moony eyes over it. She already told me if this date doesn't work out, she'd like to be next in line."

"I do have rival suitors!" They pumped their fist as if it was an accomplishment.

Sammy couldn't help but giggle, but his thoughts kept circling. A few quiet steps later, he sighed. "I'm worried about it being a distraction. I need to focus on my classes."

"Well, like you yourself said," Finley pointed out, "you're going to need some downtime, too. Blow off some steam with a little flirting and dating. Believe me, you can burn yourself out in eight weeks, and you don't want to do that just in time for the final."

Sammy made agreeable noises instead of answering and they kept walking. Dating to avoid burnout? That seemed even less plausible than people hitting on him in class in the first place.

Eventually he realized Finley had not spoken for a while and was in fact watching him. They smirked when he looked up. "It's not the distraction that's bothering you, though, is it?" they asked. "You seem, like, really frustrated about puzzle pieces that don't fit together."

Sammy rolled his eyes to pointedly ignore Finley's observation, but the genderqueer wasn't letting go. They just kept walking alongside him, waiting. Sammy told himself that he could ice out Finley right back until they gave up and struck up a different conversation. But they resolutely did no such thing, waiting while Sammy marinated in

his own thoughts. Finally his brain boiled over, and he gesticulated into the empty air before him. "I mean, I don't even pass!"

Finley quirked an eyebrow. "What's passing have to do with it?"

"Cause when they... pay attention to me, they pay attention to me like I'm—" He slapped his chest, a little harder than he meant to, and winced.

They treated him like a girl, even though he wasn't a girl, and yes he did a whole bunch of things to look more like a girl, but even then he didn't look all the way like a girl. He knew what he looked like, and it was not *girl*. Maybe at first glance, but not after any length of time. He had so many tells. But they still treated him like they were seeing a girl.

But how to put that into words, especially without admitting to Finley that he wasn't exactly trans? Fuck if he knew. "I mean... I just... I don't see what they see."

"Is it not enough that they like what they see?" his date asked gently.

Sammy shook his head. "They don't. They can't. People look at me and they... they know what they're looking at."

"I think they do, yeah," said Finley, not quite suppressing a chuckle. They reached out to grab Sammy's hands and pulled him to the side of the walk path, under a leafy tree. "Samantha, listen to me," they said, voice so earnest that Sammy couldn't help but look them in the eye. "Passing isn't important."

"But—"

But Finley cut them off. "Passing isn't important," they repeated, emphasizing each word.

Sammy frowned and looked away, would have scrubbed his face if his hands weren't trapped. "You think they're... what do you call them? Chasers?"

Finley burst out laughing and then scrambled to rein it in, not very successfully. They squeezed Sammy's hands before releasing them, and then wiped their own eyes. "I mean... they might be curious. But that's a far cry from a chaser."

Hands freed, Sammy went to rub the heck out of his face. He remembered just in time that he had makeup on that he didn't want to muss. Instead he flexed his hands and wrapped them both around the back of his neck. "Then... what?"

To their credit, Finley's eyes only dipped down into the cavern of cleavage Sammy was presenting for a moment. Then they made very

deliberate eye contact and said, “They just think you look hot, Samantha. I swear.”

He snorted, dismissive. But he also dropped his arms so his tits weren’t squished together on lewd display. He had to get better about that.

“You say they know what they’re looking at,” his date pressed, and gently guided the both of them back onto the path along the waterside. “I think you’re right; I think they do. They know they’re looking at a hot, femme-of-center queer chica. Further details irrelevant.” Before Sammy could object, they added, “Do they suspect you’re trans? Maybe. Embodying some flavor of queer or genderfuckery? Probably. But if they’re chatting you up, then they don’t care. Passing is not a prerequisite for hotness.”

This time Sammy managed to get out a “But—”

“You think I’m a chaser, Samantha?” asked Finley, eyes rhetorically wide. “I don’t just suspect you’re trans, I know you’re trans. I think that is just one beautiful piece of a much bigger, grander picture. Are my motives suspect?”

“No, of course not.” All the emotion sluiced out of Sammy, only to be replaced a moment later with panic. “Oh shit, you didn’t think I thought—”

Finley smirked, disarming Sammy’s rising anxiety in an instant. “I did not think you thought.”

“Because you’ve always...” he started to say, and then stumbled to a stop. Closed his eyes. His big stupid mouth.

When he finally looked back at Finley, their eyebrows bounced up, curious. “Out with it. Finish the sentence.”

Sammy rolled his eyes. Fine, fuck it. All the cards on the table. “Because you’ve always been into me. Even when I looked like I’d fallen backwards through Rowan’s backup closet and landed face-first on her makeup palettes.”

“First of all, that is not what you looked like then,” they retorted. “And secondly, and this may be a bit of a tangent but... fucking christ, you really have had a glow-up. I’m just saying. You went from noteable country girl visiting the big city to, like, fucking trans diva.”

“Rowan took me shopping,” he said weakly, fingering the hem of his dress.

“Yeah, it’s not just the clothes, Samantha,” Finley laughed. After only a moment, though, the laugh died on his lips. “Oh. You don’t see it, do you?”

Sammy shrugged. "It's a costume. It looks good, but it's..." Fuck it, he could say what he was thinking without giving away the whole thing. "It's all façade."

Finley considered him for some time before answering. "Samantha, it's not... allow me to revise myself. I don't think it's the clothes at all. Nor is it the... *very* on-point makeup. It's not the image you present. There is a light in your eyes, a fucking spring in your step. An ease in your shoulders that is... incredibly compelling."

Sammy scowled off across the water instead of responding. What was Finley seeing? Maybe his new sense of purpose? More likely his twice-daily microdose of party drugs.

"You were cute at Preview Days," Finley went on. "And also overwhelmed, awkward, and profoundly self-conscious—"

"Thanks."

"Don't mention it," they grinned. "But now you... it's like you've found your spine and you're standing up straight for the first time in your life. It's fucking glorious to watch."

Compliments on his appearance were one thing; Sammy didn't even know how to deal with whatever this overblown and patently wrong bullshit was. "I think you're getting fooled by my *Fake It Till You Make It* act."

"I think you're further along in that process than you think you are," Finley shot back immediately, a cheeky smirk on his face. But then he nodded across the street. They'd come to the end of the park. "We're here."

The restaurant served as the western anchor of what looked like a shopping mall, but also had its own exterior entrance. Finley led Sammy across the street—Andrei would be scandalized—and opened the door for him.

"Thanks," he said with a small smile. It was still new to have doors opened for him, even if it only happened a few times a day on campus. He was slowly accepting the fact that for the next couple months, he'd be smiling and thanking helpful men who—oh fuck.

There was another couple in front of them talking to the hostess, so Sammy cleared his throat and said, "So um. This is a dumb question, but like. You opened the door for me..."

When Sammy trailed off, Finley raised an eyebrow. "Is there a question part of your question?"

Sammy gave up trying to phrase it elegantly. "Men open doors for

women, for manners or whatever, but you're not a man, so... how's that work?"

His date grinned. "Yeah, non-hetero dating can get confusing sometimes. But for any given couple there's usually one half who likes having the door opened for them more than the other half. And in my experience, it's usually a safe bet that a newly-hatched trans girl will enjoy getting a little chivalry laid at her feet."

Sammy had to smile. "Are we that predictable?" He didn't even stumble on the 'we.'

"Follow me for more queer dating tips," Finley quipped, tapped the side of their nose, and then shrugged. "We can take turns opening doors for each other later, if you like."

And then the hostess asked for Finley's reservation and they were being led through the restaurant to a table by the window, overlooking the water. The sun had almost reached the horizon and the river was all golden sparkles.

"There's Jersey," Finley remarked, nodding past the water to the dark, blocky horizon beyond. "Your homeland, right?"

Sammy scoffed. "I mean, yeah, that's Jersey, but it's not my Jersey. Like that Real Housewives and Jersey Shore stuff? I don't even recognize it. The Jersey I know is all backwoods isolation and winding mountain roads."

Finley settled back in their seat. "Tell me about it?" they asked, but were immediately interrupted by the server.

There were a number of specials that the server rattled off from memory—the curse of a seafood place—and the two of them listened to the litany with only slightly strained politeness. Sammy realized he was slowly but inexorably getting in over his head.

"Um, what would you recommend?" he asked when the piscine diatribe drew to a close. "Imagine that I like fish in general but I've mysteriously forgotten what all their different names are."

Did the server flinch? Sammy knew his question was odd, but that seemed like an extreme reaction. But she recovered quickly to recommend the tuna steak. That sounded straightforward so he ordered that, along with a diet soda.

Finley put in his order, the server retreated, and they were alone. "That's an interesting mysterious ailment you have, forgetting the names of fish."

Sammy rolled his eyes at himself. "My mom makes fish all the time and I love it, but like. I say, 'hey Mom, what's for dinner?' and she tells

me the name of the fish, and I look at her confused and stuff and then she just says, 'Fish.' So I nod and then dinner is delicious."

Finley grinned. "Don't go out for seafood much in the Jersey backwoods?"

"No, Oak Grove has got, like... a diner, a chinese takeout place, a pizza place, and, um, this place that calls itself a 'grill' but it serves exactly the same stuff as the diner."

"What, no fast food?"

Sammy shrugged. "Not unless you want to drive all the way to Dover."

Finley whistled. "Wow, you really do live outside of civilization."

Sammy lifted a finger. "Used to live outside of civilization. Now I live in New York City."

"Never going back?"

He shook his head. "Not if I can help it. I mean, go back for visits and stuff, sure. But that's the people. I'll miss people. I won't miss Oak Grove."

Finley nodded. "I get that. I miss my family, definitely, but I gotta admit, sometimes I miss home, the place."

The server reappeared with their drinks and a basket of bread. Sammy thanked her and waited until she'd left to ask, "Where is home again? You said back during Preview Days but I was overwhelmed and awkward."

Finley stuck their tongue out before answering, "Nebraska." Sammy nodded. That sounded like something he'd been told months ago. "A sleepy little suburb called Waverly, outside of Lincoln. Flat as hell. Green in the summer, white in the winter."

"And you miss it?"

"I miss bits," they nodded. "Outdoor seating at the Runza that looked out over a field. The creek where my friends and I hung out. My favourite club down in Lincoln."

"What's a Runza?"

"Sandwich place," Finley clarified with a shrug. "Fast food, because Waverly sits within the bounds of proper civilization."

Sammy gestured with his buttered roll, plainly egging Finley on, because apparently he liked listening to the genderqueer talk. "So you miss a fast food sandwich with a view across a green field leading to a flat horizon."

Finley smirked. "Yeah. I do." They described a particularly memorable summer day with friends, hanging out at the sandwich

place, and Sammy just listened, smiling softly and making encouraging conversational noises every once in a while.

When their food came, Sammy's didn't look much like any fish his mother had ever served him. But he figured he was trying new experiences and dug in. The tuna steak was surprisingly good.

His date was less than enamored with their food. Despite trying to hide their disappointment, they finally admitted that the upscale restaurant's mojo isleño sauce paled in comparison to their mother's home cooking. "I had a little spark of hope when I saw Puerto Rican food on the menu, but I should have known better," they sighed.

Sammy made sympathetic noises and got two more bites into his own steak before his curiously piqued. "Are there a lot of Puerto Ricans in Nebraska?"

"Not really," Finley answered. "There's, like, almost a real Boricua community in Omaha, but not in Lincoln. Certainly not in Waverly."

"Boricuwhat?"

"Boricua," Finley grinned. "It's just what Puerto Ricans call ourselves. I should be able to tell you why but um. I really have no idea."

"Well there's no Boricua community in Nebraska," Sammy pointed out, dimly proud of himself when he didn't stumble over the new word. "Who would have taught you, right?"

His date guffawed at that. "I am, if you can believe it, third-generation Nebraskan Boricua. My great-grandparents moved there when they were discharged after World War Two."

"They were?" Sammy echoed, eyebrows raised, emphasis on the plural pronoun. "Not just him?"

"Women's Auxiliary," they answered with no small amount of pride. "She was a mechanic, he was a driver. They met in Italy, got secretly married in London a year before the war was over."

"Secretly married?"

They grinned. "You weren't supposed to get married, it would distract you from your important work fixing jeeps."

"That's so awesome," Sammy grinned. The back of his brain told him that the story might have been mildly amusing, but certainly didn't qualify as 'so awesome.' The rest of his brain, which was now sure it just liked listening to Finley talk, told the back to shut up. "And then they chose Nebraska."

"Nobody on the east coast was giving brown people mortgages under the G.I. Bill, so they had to go inland," they explained, wrinkling

their nose. “But it worked out, I guess. They opened a garage in Lincoln; my grandpa worked there his whole life. My mom worked there part-time through college. She’s an accountant, now. Terribly exciting.”

“And the garage?” Sammy asked, thinking about his family’s patchwork collection of small businesses in Oak Grove.

“It’s my uncle’s now. Mom moved out to Waverly to be closer to her clients. All agribusiness stuff. Taxes for farms are complicated, apparently. But it kept us housed and clothed and fed, so I’m not complaining.” They grinned. “My mom is complaining, but more about the farmers and their bookkeeping practices than the tax codes.”

Sammy hesitated only a moment before asking, “Single mom?”

“Sometimes, not always,” they answered without hesitation, and then smiled. “Had me when she was on her own; IVF. These days she’s shacked up with a girl named Tiff who’s like half her age. It’s kind of adorable. She asked me a couple months ago if it would be weird for me if they got married.”

“What did you say?”

Finley took a moment to chew, swallow, and wash down the disappointing fish sauce with a gulp of water. “I told her, ‘you’re not going to find another *lesbiana boricua* in Lincoln. You better lock that shit down while you can.’”

Sammy tried not to wince when Finley slipped into Spanish, which he didn’t speak, but the meaning was clear enough. He grinned to cover the sudden spike of unease.

Finley just asked, “What about your family, Samantha?”

“Oh, not as exciting,” he demurred. But then his brain railed against his own words: Now it’s your turn, now you have to be interesting to listen to, and tell a good story, and be engaging and clever. You’re on a *date*. So Sammy cleared his throat and said, “My dad’s side has been in Oak Grove since, like, time immemorial. They probably fought the British during the Revolution.”

Finley grinned at that, but the expression took a moment to hit their face, as if it wasn’t quite genuine.

Sammy suspected what was going through his date’s head, so he forced himself not to smirk as he set up a sort of conversational surprise. “My mom’s family... they’re more recent immigrants.”

At this, Finley nodded and the trace of hesitation in their face faded. “From where?”

“Russia,” he answered, and Finley visibly flinched. Sammy grinned.

“What, don’t I look like I’m half Sons of Liberty, half Pushkin heroine?” He only remembered to add the ‘-ine’ at the last moment and wasn’t even sure if there were Daughters of Liberty that he should have referenced, but Finley did not seem to notice.

“Respectfully, Samantha, you do not,” Finley laughed. “Is there a story there?”

“Not really,” he said, shrugged, and tamped down a rising tide of panic. He should have planned further ahead; now he was heading into fraught territory. “I’m adopted. A foundling left on the steps of a fire department in Jersey City.”

Finley hooked a thumb out the window, at the twinkling skyline across the water. “So you are from over there, after all.”

Sammy snorted softly. “Only technically. My parents adopted me as a baby; I only remember Oak Grove.” He looked down at the remnants of his tuna steak, picking the flake apart with his fork. The conversation lulled, and he felt compelled to fill the silence, even if it would bring down the mood. “It’s not like I was the only brown kid in Oak Grove, but... it was close. And none of the Martinezes or the Sozas had kids my age, so.”

Finley reached across the table to put their hand over his, and had the good sense not to say anything.

Eventually Sammy turned his hand over to clasp Finley’s, and they sat in silence—companionable, not stilted—as the red sun sank behind the Jersey City skyline.

After dinner, Finley suggested they walk to a nearby ice cream place. Sammy was more than eager to make the date last longer, so he grinned and said he was never going to turn down ice cream.

They left the restaurant by a different entrance, connecting into the mall. Finley held open the door to the brightly-lit thoroughfare.

Sammy hesitated. “I thought we were going to take turns opening doors for each other?”

His date grinned. “Yeah, but you like this.”

He considered protesting, but a beat later stepped through, cheeks burning. Sammy wasn’t about to admit anything out loud, but something deep within him blossomed warm and giddy. He did like it. Not because he was a newly-hatched trans girl, of course, because he wasn’t that. Finley had said one half of the couple usually liked that sort of thing, and maybe he was that half of this couple. He was okay with that.

It was probably presumptive to be thinking of himself and Finley as a couple, he realized, and flushed even more.

They ambled along the mall walkway without talking, but Sammy slowly became aware that Finley was less comfortable with the arrangement than he was. The genderqueer was tapping their fingers on their thighs, looking furtively at Sammy and then away. Were they actually nervous?

He leaned sideways to bump his shoulder against their upper arm. "Okay, now it's my turn. Out with it. Say the thing you keep not saying."

"You got me," they sighed, and then held their hand out, towards Sammy. "I'd like to slip my arm around your waist as we walk. But I don't want to presume, for obvious reasons, so I need to ask..."

"Oh my god," Sammy giggled, and stepped closer. Finley's hand slid across his back and settled against his far hip. He mirror imaged his own arm around Finley and squeezed. His head tipped against their shoulder, just for a moment, which felt wonderful. "This is nice," he murmured. "And thank you for asking."

"You didn't actually let me get to the asking part," his date pointed out, and added playfully, "Nor did you ask me—"

"Finley, shut up and enjoy this."

"Yes, ma'am."

They walked the length of the mall like that, talking only sporadically and about nothing of import. Sammy could get used to... whatever this was. A walking hug? And Finley was smart and funny and charming, and something about their arm around him made Sammy feel... safe wasn't the right word. Taken care of? Like Finley thought Sammy was worth holding onto—something special—and they weren't shy about demonstrating it to everybody they passed in the mall.

Sammy's musing was interrupted when Finley said, "Ooo!" and used their walking hug to steer them both into a hard ninety-degree turn, plunging directly into a store decorated in purple and pink.

"What's happening?" Sammy asked, just slightly panicked, as they were suddenly surrounded by plastic teenybopper jewelry on all sides. "Where are we?"

"Claire's," Finley answered cheerfully, and disengaged their arm from Sammy's side. He tried not to pout. "I'm going to go out on a limb and guess that Rowan didn't bring you here during your shopping spree."

"Uh, no. Isn't this place for, like, twelve-year-olds?"

"Twelve-year-olds and working class queers," Finley corrected with a smirk. They grabbed Sammy's hand and dragged him between the display racks. "It's not that Rowan has no appreciation for trash fashion, she just prefers designer trash fashion."

"So we're shopping, now?" Sammy asked, bemusedly allowing himself to be pulled through the claustrophobic store.

"Just for one quick thing," Finley promised. "I thought I saw it through the window—ah, here." They plucked something off a rack and tore its cardboard holder apart. Sammy could mostly see wide black ribbon. "Turn around?"

More than a little unsure, Sammy turned his back on Finley. A moment later, their hands passed over his shoulders and exposed collarbones, fiddled for a heartbeat, and then laid the cool, plasticky necklace against his skin. Fingertips brushed the side of Sammy's neck, and then they were fastening the clasp behind him.

"There," Finley said proudly, and with their hands on Sammy's shoulders, turned him to face a mirror. "Now your outfit is complete."

Sammy's immediate "oh, that's right, I look like a girl" reaction blossomed as he took in his reflection, but over the last week it had been worn down to little more than half a second. So he focused on the necklace that Finley had put on him. It was simple—a wide black ribbon supporting an oversized white plastic cameo—and if he looked close as he was now, it was plainly cheap. But this last week had also shown him that most of humanity did little more than glance at their fellows, and he doubted anyone would think really think poorly about him wearing a plastic pendant.

And it did complete the outfit rather nicely.

...even if it did draw attention down into his fake cleavage.

"It looks good, yeah," he told Finley, and put on a smile. Something tugged at his memory, though, and he scrutinized his reflection for a little longer, and finally laughed. In his blue skater dress, black hair in a swishy bob, and now this necklace... "I look like Betty Rubble."

"Like a hot Betty Rubble, sure," Finley grinned back through the mirror. A trace of uncertainty flickered across their features. "You like it, though?"

Sammy touched the generic figure on the cameo and nodded. "I do, actually."

Finley waved the cardboard backing the necklace had come from. "Okay, let me go pay for it."

"You're buying me jewelry on our first date?" Sammy smirked through the mirror, raising one arch eyebrow.

Finley checked the back of the cardboard. "I mean, I'm spending eight dollars, here," they grinned, and disappeared behind the displays.

Sammy looked back at his reflection. The necklace might be cheap plastic and ribbon, but it worked with everything else perfectly. He stepped back, fitting his reflection into the thin display mirror. Leaving his dorm room, he'd felt thrown together and rushed. Now he looked poised and put together. Was it the addition of the necklace, or just fewer nerves?

Sammy really wanted it to be the latter option, because Finley had been careful, sweet, and gentle. He was having such a good time, and he was a lot less worried about how the date might go, now that it was mostly over.

But if he was being honest with himself, he was pretty sure the outfit was the larger part of his looking better. If only he could swap out these little earring studs he was stuck with for something that properly complemented the necklace...

Finley returned, slipping a thin billfold into the pocket of their dress. Sammy tamped down a sharp flash of envy; where had they got a sleek dress with pockets? The genderqueer met Sammy's eyes in the mirror and held their hands out over his hips, question plain on their face. Sammy smiled, and Finley's hands settled over his hips comfortably. He leaned back against them.

His date dropped their chin onto Sammy's shoulder. "Ice cream?"

Sammy placed his hands over Finley's, squeezing softly in the hopes of silently communicating how the contact had been nice and his date should do it again. With actual spoken words, he said, "Oooo, ice cream."

The ice cream place was out the far end of the mall and a half-block down the street beyond that. Despite the sun setting almost an hour ago, it was still warm out and Sammy had been happy that they'd exploited the mall's air conditioning. It was also, somehow, less crowded in the mall. Now they had to dodge pedestrians on the last leg to the creamery, and holding hands was off the table. Sammy contented himself with frequent shoulder bumps.

"It's not the most prestigious medical school," Finley was saying, "and not even the most prestigious school that I got accepted to. They

just put together a better financial aid package for me. I'll still be in debt for decades, but you know... one decade fewer sounds nice."

"Finley in sunny California," Sammy grinned. "When do you go?"

"I move out of my apartment August 12th," came the answer. "Lease is up then, so it's convenient. I'll head home for a bit... Mom wants me there till the last minute, like three weeks, but I think I need some time to settle in before things start getting hectic."

"That sounds like a good idea, yeah," Sammy grinned. "Home in small doses, even if it has a Runza with a view."

"What about you, what are your plans?"

Sammy shrugged. "I mean, I go home after the final exam, and then hopefully I'm back here a month later."

"You will be," Finley nodded encouragingly. "You're gonna crush it. But I mean in broader strokes. Major? Grad school plans?"

"Oh gosh, that's so many steps ahead," he said, shaking his head. "I don't have any plans beyond 'get into Columbia.' Anything more concrete seems like setting myself up for disappointment."

"There's no rush," his date insisted. "And honestly, I think spending some time figuring out what you want to study and what you want to do after school... that's a good thing. Or maybe I just hang out with too many pre-meds who are super focused on—"

"Hey Tranny!" The shout cut through the humid, acrid air from across the street. Finley rolled their eyes.

Sammy moved to turn, but Finley grabbed his arm to still him. "Don't even turn around. Come on."

He didn't turn, so he scowled at his date instead. "If somebody's gonna shout slurs at me on the street, I want to flip him off at least."

The man shouted across the street again, this time backed by other voices laughing.

"He's not shouting at you, Samantha," Finley told him with a wan smile. With their arm around Sammy, they hastened their pace down the street. "His idea of a tranny is somebody wearing a beard and a dress at the same time."

"Hey chica!" came the next shout. "Ditch the tranny and come on over here. I'll show you what a real man is like!"

Finley tipped their head slightly. "Okay, now he's shouting at you."

"Does that mean I can flip him off?"

"I wouldn't recommend it," they answered, pulled open a storefront door, and guided Sammy inside. "They're probably harmless, but you never know."

In the process of turning and stepping into the ice cream shop, Sammy cast a hasty glance back down the street. The view was complicated by a tide of moving vehicles and a wash of pedestrians on the sidewalk opposite. But the culprit was most likely the scruffy-looking man in tattered clothing, leaning on a lightpost and leering across the street at them. If whoever had laughed along with him had stuck around, Sammy couldn't spot them.

"He looks homeless," he reported to Finley in a whisper. The ice cream shop was tightly packed with display refrigerators blasting hot air out along the floor. A rainbow of colours beckoned to them, but another couple was ahead of them, being helped by the sole worker.

"Might be," his date said with a shrug. "Not getting my sympathy today, though."

"Yeah," he answered weakly. The couple ahead of them were taking their time. "Seems weird, though, that he thinks a trans girl would wear a beard."

"I mean, some do," Finley shrugged. "But it's more that... he saw something different than he expected, it had something to do with gender presentation, and he's only got one word to apply to that situation."

Sammy made an agreeable sound, and then it was their turn to pick flavours.

Later, hunched around one of the two tiny little tables in the front of the store and halfway through their dessert, Sammy said, "Hey um. Can I ask a question about... I mean it's not really about the guy outside, but it's sort of... tangentially related?"

His date made a show of calculated deliberation, and then pointed their spoon at Sammy's ice cream. "Only if you give me a bite of that lemon curd swirl."

Sammy scooped out a generous spoonful and held it out to Finley, who grinned before slurping it up. "Good, right?" he smiled, and then switched tack. "He thought you were transgender, yeah, but... I don't know how to ask this right but... are you?"

"You mean, do I self-identify as transgender," his date rephrased for him, and bobbed their head. "It's a good question. Wish I had a good answer."

"Well if you're not going to give me the answer I paid for," Sammy smirked, "it seems like you owe me a bite of ice cream." He leaned forward slightly and watched Finley's eyes wobble down and snap back up, not quite taking the bait of cleavage that Sammy had put on

display.

"This is good chocolate," Finley said, and scooped out a bite of theirs to hold forward. "Not as good as your lemon curd, though."

After sampling the bite, Sammy tipped his head side to side. "I'm not sure I agree with your ranking, there."

"You want to swap?"

"No," Sammy smiled. "But I think I do need another bite, just to make sure."

"That so?"

"I can make it worth your while," he proposed in a soft, tempting drawl that surprised even him. Then he dangled his spoon, lumped high with yellow ice cream, between them.

"Well," Finley smirked, and prepared their own spoonful. "In the interest of rigorous testing."

The two of them traded bites back and forth for a few minutes, which inevitably resulted in melted ice cream on the tips of both of their noses. And then as both their paper bowls neared empty, Finley said, "So like, definitionally, I am transgender. My realized gender does not match the gender I was assigned at birth. So yeah, I'm trans. Technically."

Sammy nodded, accepting the belated answer and sudden return to the previous topic because, well, he wanted to know.

"But, like, colloquially?" Finley grimaced. "There's a picture of what people think of when they think of transgender people, and I share... only some of those characteristics and experiences, you know? I will never pass. In fact I am trying, every day, not to pass. As either binary gender. So I don't know if it's a useful label in most contexts. I'm happy just claiming genderqueer and leaving it at that."

Sammy bobbed his head and held forward his spoon with the last of the lemon curd. "That's a good answer."

"I'm glad we got to do this," Finley said as the two of them approached Sammy's dorm, steps slowing to prolong the tail end of the date. The long summer day had finally surrendered to darkness, not that the humid heat had gone anywhere. Campus was lit up around them, floodlights spilling across red brick and up alabaster columns.

"Me too," Sammy murmured, and leaned his head against their shoulder. He'd maneuvered them into a walking hug when the dorm came into view, savoring the contact.

"I really enjoyed getting to know you better," they continued, and then grinned down at him. "And I'm glad you decided to make it a date."

"I didn't decide that!" Sammy recoiled, a little more affronted than he wanted to be. "I decided that I'd like it to be a date." He poked Finley's shoulder. "You decided it was a date when you asked me out on a date."

"Is that what I did?" they asked, all skepticism and cheek.

"You may have played it cool when I asked if it was a date," Sammy argued, trying to play it off as funny. Why did this suddenly matter so much? "But we both know what you were doing."

They came to the foot of the stairs up to the dorm's front door, and their steps came to a halt. "Plausible. Certainly sounds like something I'd do," Finley said, and then their performative musing cracked into a devilish smirk. "So. Since this is and always was a date... may I kiss you goodnight?"

Sammy turned to face his date, slipped his arms around their waist, and smiled up at them. "Please."

Finley mirrored his smile, then slid one hand up his back until their fingers nestled into the hairs at the nape of Sammy's neck. They drew him close and gently pressed their lips together. Soft and warm.

Sammy felt his eyes flutter closed more than he shut them with any intention. Finley was taking their time, with slow, light kisses along his lips. He pulled the genderqueer closer and might have made a little quavering sound he'd feel ashamed of if he wasn't presently consumed by sensation.

And then Finley was pulling away gently, which brought out of Sammy a frustrated little squeal. This wasn't over, not yet! He stood up on tip-toes to push his face into theirs, parting his lips to plant a little, inviting lick on Finley's lower lip.

The movement unbalanced him and he wobbled slightly—damn sandals—but his date caught him with the simple expedience of their free hand cupped under his butt, holding him close. Sammy giggled into the kiss; he could feel Finley's lips curl into a responding smile. Lips parted; tongues darted; Sammy started to run out of breath. He didn't particularly care.

Eventually, though, Finley set him back down on solid ground. They pulled back, and this time Sammy's head was spinning too fast to mount a bodily counter-argument. His date nodded up the short stack of stairs behind Sammy. "It's slightly more pragmatic chivalry than

holding restaurant doors open, but I'd like to see you safely through your front door before I head home."

Sammy nodded absently; that made sense. He staggered up the steps, fished keys out of his purse, and managed to get onto the other side of the glass door. It latched and locked with an audible kerthunk.

Through the glass, Finley waved; without thinking, Sammy blew them a kiss. He watched them turn and go, heart pounding. At some point, after Finley was long out of sight, he rested his forehead against the door. "Oh, this is bad," he sighed to himself. "So much for no distractions."

Distractions

Sammy, you have to text me when you get home from a date! Rowan's message was waiting on his phone when Sammy woke up the next morning.

How do you know if it was really a date? he texted back, bleary-eyed. I never told you how that shook out.

It was always a fucking date.

The only question was if you'd realize it.

Before you were like a dozen 'apology dinners' in and they fucking proposed or something.

Sammy wasn't particularly happy with how accurate that sounded. I'm home, I'm safe, he texted back. Finn was a perfect gentlething.

Did you put out? she shot back, followed after a moment with a winky face.

Sammy rolled his eyes and did not dignify his cousin's question with any response. Instead he pushed himself out of bed. He needed to get up and moving. He had so much reading to do this weekend. But a moment later, smirking in sudden perverse inspiration, he dove back to grab his phone and texted Rowan: Good girls don't kiss and tell.

Who the fuck wants to be a good girl? was the—in retrospect—inevitable reply.

Grinning, Sammy shook his head as he packed his bag to straining with all the books he needed for the day. The dining commons was a short walk away, and held the promise of waffles and bacon to wake him up and endless soda refills to keep him that way. Twenty minutes later—he was getting quick at simple makeup looks—his study materials were spread out across a table towards the back of the room,

along with a tray bearing two plates of food.

He took his time with breakfast, but his eyes kept wandering to the stacks of books around him. He'd like to start with something light, but... he wasn't sure any of it qualified. The same went for "something he was comfortable with." Everything in this program was a push for him. Everything was uphill. Everything was so much effort.

Why couldn't it be easy just once, he sighed... like the date last night. Sure, he'd had butterflies like whoa and the start had been a little rocky, but once he got over himself—and really, that had mostly been him making it harder than it ever had to be, right?—the rest of the evening had been... effortless. Comfortable. Finn had really gone out of their way to put Sammy at ease, and that was, apparently, exactly what he'd needed.

His eggs had gone cold. Sammy realized with a start that he'd been sitting there, picking at his breakfast and staring off into space, running back and forth through the date. He rolled his shoulders, set aside his half-eaten food, and picked up whatever book was on top. He had reading to do. He was going to read.

Sir Walter Elliot, of Kellnyc Hall, in Somersetshire, was a man who, for his own amusement, never took up any book but the Baronetage; there he found... wow, that was a lot of commas. And what the heck was the Baronetage? Scowling, Sammy pulled out his phone and searched. Apparently it was... a bunch of English nobles? But this seemed to think it was some sort of book. He pressed on—the opening sentence just kept going on and on, taking up almost the whole first paragraph—and apparently, okay. It was a book that listed out all the English nobles? Maybe.

Sammy sighed and settled back into his seat, reading about this dude and his daughters and his dead wife and his big house in England. He was just about to get sick of it all, and especially this rich fucker, when he hit *Vanity was the beginning and the end of Sir Walter Elliot's character*, and he actually snorted out loud. Okay. So he wasn't actually supposed to respect this guy. He could do that.

But then the book started going on about his dead wife, and Sammy struggled to keep his attention on the details. By the time he got to the dead wife's friend and the noble guy's daughter that nobody liked except the dead wife's friend, Sammy realized that he was thinking as much about sharing bites of ice cream with Finley than he was about this girl who was apparently exceedingly boring. He closed his eyes

for a moment. He set the book down.

Okay. This was just not the best choice for a good start. He traded *Persuasion* for *Intro to Biological Systems* and dug into the third chapter (the class had skipped the first chapter and covered the second already). But no sooner had he hit something that he remembered from class—radial symmetry—than Sammy also remembered how Finley had laughed when the professor had made a joke about octopuses telling left from right. And then he was thinking about Finley laughing on their date, and how Finley’s laugh was low and warm and—

Fuck.

He set *Biological Systems* aside and picked up something else. And then something else. And another thing. No matter what the subject matter was, all Sammy could think about, apparently, was his date last night and how Finley had... wanted him to be there, wanted to be there with him. And how they were so pretty, especially when they smiled.

And when Finley smiled at Sammy, and it was like Sammy was the only thing in the world, and—

Finally Sammy pushed a book titled—no lie—*Feminism is for Everybody* to the side and picked up his phone. His text history with Rowan was still at the top of his screen. Hey advice? he tapped out. I’m supposed to wait, right, before like talking to Finn? After the date? Don’t want to come on too strong or whatever.

Rowan didn’t respond for almost half an hour, and Sammy was pushing himself through covalent bonds when his phone finally chimed with her advice. That’s cishet bullshit. Do what feels right, Sammy.

She went on, at length, in a series of texts that read a lot like the History reading that Sammy wasn’t doing, which wasn’t a surprise since it was her father that had assigned said reading. A whole lot about the precarity of heterosexual courtship customs and negotiating through unequal power dynamics and so on. With a healthy dollop of Rowan on top: those poor cishet girls, trapped in a situation where they couldn’t just be themselves and be loved for being themselves.

Sammy sent back short, agreeable texts as she ranted, and then switched over to his text chain with Finley.

I really enjoyed last night. He smiled down at his phone as he hit Send. It felt silly how happy it made him just saying how he was

feeling, but then that was how the whole date had gone last night, too. Easy and comfortable.

It was only a few minutes before Finley replied. Sammy had tried to go back to his reading, which wasn't working, but he smiled again when he saw the response: *I did, too. <3*

He picked up his phone and settled back in his chair. I'm sitting here trying to study but my brain keeps going back to last night and your smile

And that kiss, he added, with a touch more honesty, a moment later.

And your butt, he thought but did not commit to SMS. Holding back a little might be a good idea, actually.

Sounds like I did a good job, then, Finley responded, along with a two-second video of Bugs Bunny bowing on a stage while getting showered with roses from the audience. Good first date?

Good first date, he confirmed. He stared at the short, bare text for a long moment. That wasn't enough. Sammy screwed up his lips and tapped out: But practice makes perfect, right?

I have heard this, came back Finley's reply, which seemed... curiously cagey. When no bouncing dots followed, Sammy frowned down at his phone. Now what? Had they been distracted by some other thing? Was there nothing else to say?

Notifications of Rowan's continuing tirade kept trying to distract him from the suddenly anemic-feeling exchange with Finn. Do what feels right, she'd said.

You wanna do it again? he typed out, but then frowned. Too passive, too indirect. Too much... implying that he'd be amenable to them asking him out. And hadn't Finn suggested, early on yesterday, that Sammy might do the asking for next date? Sammy deleted his unsent text, and instead typed out May I take you out sometime? and hit Send before he could think better of it.

The response was immediate: I'd like that a lot. :D

The timing strongly implied that they hadn't been distracted by some other thing. Sammy imagined for a moment Finley hunched suspensefully over their phone, just like he was with his.

Friday? he asked.

It's a date.

They didn't text any further, and Sammy turned back to his stack of

books, head a little clearer. Just touching base with Finn and setting up another date alleviated the pressure of what had happened yesterday and the question if it would ever happen again. It *would* happen again. On Friday. And as much as he was looking forward to it, Sammy felt a growing sense of peace. Before he knew it, Sammy was almost a quarter of the way into *Persuasion* and it was 11 o'clock.

Eleven meant the grill was open, so Sammy finished a chapter, set down his book, and wandered over to his new and neverending source of cheeseburgers.

Sammy waited his turn behind a couple frat boys, poking at his phone to catch up on Rowan's diatribe on cishet dating practices. She'd apparently wound down eventually, and he felt a little bad about ignoring her in favour of texting Finley and then—worse—schoolwork. He threw in a few laugh reacts and a silly joke to show that he had read what she'd texted.

"What can I get you, *chica*?" asked the guy behind the grill, with the sort of tone that told Sammy that he'd been staring at his phone instead of ordering for a bit too long. The frat boys ahead of him were walking away with their food. But the grill guy was smiling, with a little conspiratorial gleam to his eye.

There were two possible explanations for that look, and Sammy wasn't sure which it was. The guy was brown, too, and so maybe it was a look of camaraderie here among all the white folks. Or possibly he liked how Sammy looked. The casual ribbed tank that Sammy had pulled on this morning did display a whole bunch of fake cleavage. Or there was the distinct possibility it was both.

Sammy struggled to parse the many connotations and inflections of "*chica*" here in the City. It's not like he ever got called that back at home.

But he had to order, so he lowered his phone and stepped forward. "Sorry, uh, just a cheeseburger, please. Oh, um. With bacon." Because you could just do that here, and it didn't even cost extra. College was awesome.

But the grill guy only blinked, dumbfounded, in response. A beat later, he nodded forcefully. "Yeah, of course. Coming right up." And he busied himself with the grill, not looking up.

The fuck was that?

"Oh hey. Samantha, right?" The student next in line had stepped up to put in his order and spotted Sammy.

"And you're Leon," he said with a nod, pulling his attention away

from the grill guy's weird reaction. "From Ukraine."

"That's me. One cheeseburger, please," he sent over the grill counter with a curt smile and nod. Then they both sidestepped along the curve of the grill station to wait for their orders to be prepared. "How is your Saturday treating you?" asked Leon. "Finally the weekend. No classes."

"No classes, but a lot of reading," Sammy chuckled mirthlessly. He tipped his head to the back of the room. "I've sort of taken over a table to just power through it all."

"Ah yes, Jane Austen and bell hooks," the Ukrainian nodded. "Quite a combination. Do you ever wonder if the teachers think about how the books they assign contrast with each other?"

"Bilateral symmetry and covalent bonds," Sammy joked, and tried to demonstrate both with the same gesture, the fingers of each hand splayed and wiggling at each other.

"Ta!" Leon chortled. "Yes, exactly."

Sammy leaned against the counter, back to the grill. Leon was tall, and tipping himself back a little to increase the difference in their heights gave Sammy a little flutter in his belly. Silly, but still fun. "What's giving you the most trouble? I can't even decide, between all six."

"Oh, the Austen," the young man from Ukraine answered readily. "And I am reticent about the Composition work. I am not so comfortable with the vagaries of the English language, you know?"

Sammy nodded, pretending that he, a native English speaker, absolutely knew what 'vagaries' meant. "Not the science and math stuff?"

Leon waved a hand. "Science is science, math is math. The hardest part about the Bio and Physics classes is learning the new names for things. Otherwise, it is all the same phenomena under the surface."

"Yeah, I can see how that could be for you," Sammy responded awkwardly, thinking: did the Marginalized Scholars program just import foreign geniuses and then lumped him in with them?

"Your cheeseburger, sir," said the grill guy as he desposited a plate on the edge of the counter beside Sammy.

Leon frowned softly as he lifted the top bun of the burger, and then shook his head. "This is not mine. It has bacon on it."

Sammy turned just in time to see grill guy point at him with his spatula. "No, it's his." The emphasis he put on the last word made clear how intentional the word choice was. His eyes flicked towards

Sammy but wouldn't meet his eye.

Leon drew himself up to his full height, expression stormy. "Sir, my friend Samantha's pronouns are she and her."

Grill guy put up his hands as if to say, "How was I to know?" And then busied himself plating Leon's burger with no bacon.

For his part, Sammy collected his bacon cheeseburger and left the grill behind, not rushing but not not rushing, either. He wasn't upset like he imagined Rowan or a real trans girl might be upset, but the barb still rankled. He hadn't been misidentified, after all. But he had put effort into how he looked, even for a study day in the dining commons, and having all of that ignored was... frustrating.

And the curl of the guy's lip when he said what he said was so plainly hostile, and over so little. Because, what, he thought "I'll low-key flirt with this chica," and then discovered his own homophobia? What a dick.

Leon caught up halfway to Sammy's table. "That man is... augh," he growled, and said something in Ukrainian, with significant emphasis. "I cannot remember the English."

Despite his own frustration at the grill guy, Sammy couldn't help but smirk at Leon's considerably more valuable anger. "There are so many options in English. Easiest is just to say he was being a dick."

"Ah, yes. 'Dick.'" Leon nodded, and then coughed, coloured, and looked sidelong at Sammy. "Sorry if that is inappropriate language for... men speaking to girls."

"Maybe in *Persuasion*, but it's okay here," he told Leon, and then his table and all his books was in front of them both. He paused only a moment before inviting Leon to join. "I'm kind of dug in for the day, but I can move some things if you want to sit?"

"Thank you," he responded, sat down, and tucked in. They talked sporadically about the reading—it was all spread out before them, after all—and their classes and professors, but neither mentioned the grill guy again.

He had been thinking about it ever since he saw it. He'd gone back and forth on the idea all week. He was hesitant to spend the money, and he wasn't sure it would be all that useful, but the thought of it, the idea of it, the promise of it, ate away at his brain. What if it helped? There was so much happening in his brain right now and maybe this was the thing that would make all of it settle down and form up into rows or whatever was inside the heads of people better put together

than he was. And if it didn't do anything for him, well then, it wasn't that much of a waste, right? He was here to try new things, after all. So maybe, possibly, he should give it a try?

But when he went to go take one more look, he got ambushed by the stupidest consideration yet.

Here he was in the campus gift shop, standing before the display of day planners. He knew which format he wanted, with the six sections of graph paper and the integrated calendar. The problem, the stupidest consideration, the hiccup that he couldn't believe was actually stalling him, was that they only had two colours: a very sickly-looking olive green and a bright magenta.

No, it wasn't magenta. It was pink. Dark pink, but... pink.

"You have half a dozen pieces of clothing that are that exact colour," he growled at himself. "And the green is... terrible. There's a reason there's a dozen of those left over after the real school year, because nobody in their right mind could want to see that every day. And there's one pink one left because the rest of them were snatched up, because it's..."

He couldn't bring himself to say, "it's a nice colour" even under his breath. And that, in turn, pissed him off even more.

It wasn't even a contest. He wanted the pink day planner. So why couldn't he pick it up?

He wore that colour all the time—and the thought of his day planner matching his outfit was appealing, too—but the pink clothes were part of his costume, the act, the ridiculous farce that he'd fallen into backwards, pretending to be a trans girl so that he could go to school in the City. That was all necessary (if absurd).

Picking out a pink day planner for himself was a whole different thing.

"Boys can like pink, too," he admonished himself, low enough that nobody could hear, because how would he explain that?

Oh fuck, did he like pink?

His traitorous brain immediately supplied him a list of colours he liked: pink and white and mint green, scarlet but not burgundy; sometimes blue but only very specific blues, and black when used as an accent colour.

He very nearly swore aloud at his brain in the gift store aisle.

Sammy forced himself to pick up the olive green planner. He opened it: six sections, graph paper, the clever calendar. This was what he needed. The question was utility, not looks, and he'd be looking at

it open more often than closed, anyway. He snapped it shut and immediately flinched at the cover.

"It's like vomit," he despaired. He wanted to put it down. He didn't want to even touch this thing. Which would, some corner of his brain chimed in, make it hard to use the thing as much as he wanted to. With a sigh, he put it back on the shelf and looked over at the pink one.

He knew if he picked it up, he wouldn't put it down. There wasn't going to be a decision process after it was in his hand. The decision was right now.

Someone was coming up the aisle. Was she looking at the pink planner? Sammy snapped it up before she could get close. She walked right past.

He looked down at the pink planner. Yeah. He'd been right. Now that it was in his hand, he knew he'd be buying it. "What am I going to do next, go buy some pens with pink ink?" he grumbled at himself, and studiously ignored the part of his brain that perked up at the suggestion. "Just the planner. I'm only getting the planner. I already have pens."

Fuming, he took the planner to the front of the store and set it down on the checkout counter. And there, in front of the cash register, was a display of Columbia-branded pens. Most of them were blue; a handful of them were baby pink. Behind those was a hand-lettered sign reading "Yes, we write pink!" The letters were, predictably, inked in pink, and a rather fetching shade, too. It was like the world was conspiring against him.

He grabbed two pink pens and slapped them on top of the planner.

It was late Sunday afternoon when Sammy, freshly showered and shaved, dressed and made up, received a video call request from his mother. He looked from his phone to the vanity mirror affixed to his chest of drawers. "Fuck," he muttered at his femme-as-hell reflection.

He thumbed Audio Only. "Hey mom!"

"Is your video camera not working, honey?" was his mother's first question.

"No, it's working fine," he squawked, scrambling for something plausible. "I'm just... uh, you caught me just as I got back from the shower." He looked in the mirror at his outfit. "I'm naked."

"Well that's nothing I haven't seen before!"

He lifted an eyebrow at his reflection and did not say, "Trust me,

you've never seen this." Instead he made a strangled, awkward sound. "Mom..."

"Okay, okay," she relented. "I can press my phone up against my head like it's 2007 or something." She huffed a mock-aggreived sigh and said, "I just wanted to check up on you. See your face, but I can make do with hearing your voice."

"It's good to hear your voice, too," he said, a little too automatically. "That is. Sorry, I've been super busy. I should have called earlier."

"Honey, it's only been a week."

He laughed out loud. "Has it really? Holy shit, you're right. Like I said, I've been... super busy."

"I'd love to hear about it, honey."

He couldn't help smiling a little at his mother's voice. "And I'd love to tell you."

So they talked about his classes and his dorm room, about if he'd seen any of the city—"not much, I've mostly stayed on campus"—and the Roth-Masters, who his mother had never even met face-to-face. When all the basics were covered, his mother asked, "Well, anything else exciting to report, honey?"

There were so many ways to answer that question, he mused, looking down into his cleavage. Before he'd actually decided how to hedge, he heard himself saying, "Okay, so don't freak out about this, but... I went on a date."

"Oh!" she gasped, more than a little surprised. "That's excellent. I mean, I hope it was excellent. What's your date's name?"

"Finley," he said, intently aware of how his giddy smile was plainly audible.

"And Finley is...?" she asked, trailing off expentantly.

"A pre-med student," Sammy answered immediately. He couldn't help but grin at his mother's leading question. He knew exactly what she was angling for: is 'Finley' a boy or a girl, child of mine who started attending GSA meetings and never gave your loving, supportive parents the honor of coming out to them. He decided to toy with her.

"Oh, that wasn't exactly what I—"

"Oh, right, of course," Sammy nodded, even though she couldn't see him. "Finley is—" Half a beat. "—Puerto Rican. Finley Aceves. From Nebraska, of all places."

"Oh wow, a real out-of-towner," she laughed, the sound coming across a little frayed. Was it the connection or maternal frustration?

“But Finley is...”

“...really fun,” he finished for her, and couldn’t help but giggle.

“Okay, now you’re just fucking with me,” she laughed, and he laughed along with her. It felt good; suddenly he missed her fiercely. They used to laugh like this all the time.

“Finley is genderqueer,” he finally relented. “Pronouns they and them. And they are... amazing, and they make me feel amazing.” He found himself plopping down on his bed. “And yeah, the date was excellent.”

“What did you do?” she wanted to know, and so he told her. Or at least he told her a very carefully edited version, without any of the discussion about the importance of passing or shouted transphobia on the street.

To her credit, his mother only stumbled on Finley’s pronouns once, and didn’t seem even vaguely discomfitted at the idea of her son dating a genderqueer. “I’m so glad you got such a good first date experience,” she enthused. “Mine was... less so.”

Sammy’s eyebrows rose. His mom had always been cagey about her past, which he’d chalked up to her being Not From Around Here in Oak Grove, and not having the same bank of shared stories as all the natives. “What was yours like?”

“Oh gosh, it was so pedestrian,” his mother laughed. “Dinner and a movie. But I was trying so hard. I overdressed and looked ridiculous for what should have been a very casual thing. And the movie I picked was nothing she was actually interested in.”

The pronoun did not escape Sammy’s notice. She? Mom’s first date was with a girl? Watching family movies together, his mother always talked about how beautiful and sexy the female stars were, but he’d always thought she was doing it to wind up his father. But she’d been queer this whole time?

“Sounds extremely awkward,” he said, just to keep her going.

“Oh, it was. I still cringe when I think about it,” his mother laughed down the line. “But somehow, despite all that, Amy agreed to go on a second date with me, and a third. We were together for a little more than a year. Ancient history, now. I met your father the next year, and that was that.”

“...is Dad home?”

“No, he’s in Dover,” she answered with a sigh. “I hate when he works weekends, but apparently this client couldn’t meet any other time, so. It is what it is.”

“Next time, then,” he shrugged. “Actually. Why don’t we set aside a day and a time to call every week? Sundays work for me, I’ll enjoy a break from studying all weekend.” And if he knew when the call was going to happen, he could scrub off his makeup beforehand and throw on a hoodie.

“That sounds like a fabulous idea,” she responded eagerly. “Same time I called today, like three pm?”

The time did strike Sammy as a little odd, given his mother’s usually industrious weekend schedule. And then he realized what must have happened. “After church with your parents?” he smirked.

“Guilty as charged,” his mother laughed. “Or redeemed as charged, maybe. But yes, I went to church today, because Richard left for Dover early and the house was too damn quiet. So I called your grandparents and tagged along like old times.”

“Gramma must have been ecstatic.”

“Oh, she was,” she answered ruefully. “Gave me the hard sell on making it a regular thing again.”

“Will you?” he asked. His father had never been big on church attendance, which had given Sammy cover to opt out, excepting of course for Christmas and Easter and the odd First Communion of a cousin. He’d never understood the Levchenko attraction to their little mountain church, or his mother’s ambivalence. When he was small, she’d taken him to Sunday school every week. He’d played and listened to stories in the Little Kids classroom; she taught in the Big Kids class. And then they didn’t anymore. He never went to Big Kids Sunday school. That must have been when he’d been old enough to opt out.

“I don’t know,” she demurred. “That place is full of memories, good and bad. Lots of good ones, though.” Sammy mouthed the words even as she said them over the phone: “Your father and I got married there.” It was what she always said about the church.

“One day you’ll have to show me pictures,” he teased. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen photographic evidence.” He had, in fact, lost count of the number of times they’d gone through her wedding album on the couch.

“Just for that, I’m going to start texting you a new photo every hour,” she mock-warped, and then her voice shifted to musing. “You know, I keep meaning to digitize that album...”

“Yeah, you have fun with that, mom,” he told her, standing up off his bed. He’d spotted the time on his laptop screen; it was an hour

later than he'd thought it was. "I actually have to run. The Roth-Masters invited me over for dinner. Everybody keeps warning me that I'll realize the dining commons is crap and then they try to lure me away with food from elsewhere."

"Is the dining commons crap?" she asked, suddenly concerned.

"No, it's good. I can get a bacon cheeseburger fresh off the grill every day for lunch and for dinner," he bragged, knowing she'd be cringing on the other end of the line. Before she could tell him to eat a more balanced diet, he added, "But I don't. There's loads of steamed veggies all the time, and a salad bar that's... honestly pretty good."

He crossed the room to step into his flats while his mother expressed her relief and then still admonished him to eat better. He unhooked his little white purse from its hook by the door and wandered around the room, collecting his wallet and keys and lippy. "Mom, mom. Mom, I really do need to go."

"Okay, fine," she pouted. "You get dressed and go. I am mollified only because we're going talk next week, with video, yeah?"

"With video," he agreed indulgently. "I love you, mom."

"Love you too, pumpkin."

Finley texted Sammy while he was on the subway to the Roth-Masters, asking **Do I get to know what we're doing on Friday?**

It's a surprise, Sammy texted back, since he had no idea what, exactly, he was going to do for the date.

Finley sent back a gif of Frodo Baggins telling Gandalf to keep his secrets. Sammy giggled and sat back in his seat as the subway train rumbled along.

He really should figure out where he could take Finley. He'd never taken anybody on a date before, so he didn't know where to begin. He certainly didn't want to make it something boring, the dinner-and-a-movie that his mom regretted doing.

Although, he mused, the fact that Finley had put an expiration date on whatever they were doing might have some advantages. It was going nowhere, at the end of the day. Or the end of the summer, as it were. Finley would fly off to California and Sammy would stay in New York (whether he made it into Columbia or not; he'd work retail and share an apartment six ways if he had to). So in a lot of ways, if (and when) Sammy screwed up, he wouldn't have to deal with the consequences.

He scowled across the subway car. That sounded callous. He certainly didn't want to do anything that would hurt Finley. He wasn't going to be an asshole. But he could... experiment a little? Try things out. Which is what he was going to have to do anyway, since this was his first... he balked at calling whatever they had 'a relationship' but whatever word you were supposed to use before it was a relationship, that thing.

This was his first whatever-this-is, and therefore he was going to have to experiment and try things out and feel his way through how it worked. But whatever he knocked over in his fumbling around in the dark, whatever mistakes he made, would all fly away to California in seven weeks.

He didn't have to worry, like all the kids in high school always worried, about what if this was the relationship that they settled down with for the rest of their lives, or what if they broke up but then neither of them left Oak Grove and they ended up neighbours and attending PTA meetings together, and wouldn't that be awkward.

It was kind of liberating.

He didn't want to call this a practice relationship, but let's be honest, it kind of was going to end up being a practice relationship, anyway. Assuming it became an actual relationship. He should ask Rowan where the dividing line on that one was; he was pretty sure neither he nor Finley even owned a letterman jacket that they other could wear around campus to make things official.

And after Finley flew off to the rest of their life, Sammy's "detransition" wouldn't upset them, at least not directly. One less person's feelings to worry about, since he was certain by now that Rowan was going to take it hard. She'd say she wasn't disappointed and she'd try and be supportive, but it was going to be an act, and a painful one at that.

Sammy shook his head. He didn't like to think about that, even if it was inevitable. What would happen would happen.

And with Finley, what would happen would happen *in California*, which took a load off Sammy's mind. He could throw caution to the wind, practice having a relationship, and just enjoy what time he and Finley got to have together.

It was perfect.

"Samantha!" cried Gideon as he opened the front door. "It's been so long!"

"Friday," he corrected needlessly as he stepped inside and hugged his uncle. "We had class on Friday."

"Yes, but I don't get hugs in class, so this is plainly superior." He offered to take Sammy's cardigan, which had been doffed and folded over Sammy's forearm almost immediately after coming up out of the subway. The city was hot and muggy; Sammy wasn't sure why he'd worn it at all, outside of how it completed the outfit. He was only too glad to hand it over. Gideon opened the hall closet and gestured him further inside. "Henry and Rowan are eager to see you."

He didn't even make it to the dining room before Rowan crash-hugged into him. "Oooo, Sammy, it's so good seeing you not on a screen!" She held him out at arm's length for scrutiny. "And you're looking good, bitch!"

He couldn't help but smile at the compliment. He had been embarrassed to realize this afternoon that he had dressed for Rowan's approval. Having now secured it, he blushed. "Thanks. There was a cardigan, too, but it was just too damn hot."

"You're too damn hot," she teased, and took his hand to drag him into the dining room. "Summer's hard to dress for, because mostly it's just skin, and there's all sorts of emotions tied up with that."

"Are we talking about how high we can make the midriffs go?" Henry asked from across the kitchen island, where he was chopping vegetables. When he turned, his eyebrows drifted upwards. "I take it back, Sammy, you're dressed very nicely."

"That was a dig," Rowan informed Sammy in an unsubtle stage whisper, and patted her exposed belly. The girl wore a cropped white tank that did not cover so much as complement the flowered bra underneath, along with daisy duke shorts. She did have a whole lot of skin on display. "But I have to dress so fucking boring for the lab, I have to balance it out somehow."

"So sorry your internship is such a poor fashion venue," Henry mock-sympathized he brought a big bowl of salad to the table. "But if you do want to make endo your career, honey, all your fresh, hot looks will be swallowed up by lab coats most of your days."

Sitting down across the table, Rowan mouthed "fresh, hot looks" at Sammy with a roll of her eyes.

Henry sat next to Rowan and shot a smile across the table. "How is the Marginalized Scholars Program treating you, Sammy?"

"It's good," he answered automatically and immediately, and then nodded to assemble his thoughts. "It is a challenge. There's... a lot of

work. A lot of reading. Labs start up this week, for bio and... well, it's called Physics but we're doing chemistry in the labs."

"Sounds like you've got a lot on your plate," Gideon said as he settled into his seat next to Sammy. Then he added with a smirk: "He says, being responsible for one-sixth of that courseload."

"Oh, you're more than one-sixth," Sammy jibed back. "You had us reading three different books just to start off!"

Gideon shrugged. "Contrasting opinions, multiple perspectives. History's a complex field." He served himself some salad and passed the bowl along to Sammy.

"Is it too much?" Henry wanted to know, suddenly serious. The man's emotions and facial expressions seemed to turn on a dime.

But Sammy shook his head. "No sir, I um. This sounds silly, but I got a day planner? And I wrote out all my assignments and figured out when I'm doing what so that it all gets done by the time it's due. And it's—" he chuckled, or giggled, and it had just a hint of the manic to it. "I mean, I've scheduled my every waking hour for the next two weeks. So yeah, it's... intense, but I think I've got a handle on it."

"What about dating?" Rowan asked, all innocence.

He shared a secret smile across the table. "I have kept my Friday nights free. Just in case."

"Do you have any free time on Sunday evenings?" Gideon asked, with a surprising amount of hesitation. He nodded across the table to Henry. "We were kind of hoping to make this a weekly thing. Have you over for a home-cooked meal, have some family downtime. If that's something you'd want."

Sammy leaned over to bump shoulders against his uncle. "I kind of got the impression you would, so I set aside Sunday dinners, too. Plus travel time."

"Wow, you really are organized," Rowan grinned across the table.

"Well, we'll see if it holds up," Sammy laughed.

"How are the classes?" Henry asked, cutting apart his chicken breast into little cubes, all exactly the same size. "Remedial education is difficult to execute, especially in an accelerated format. It's so easy to lose students by moving too fast."

"Well my history class hasn't even started on the actual history," Sammy said, with a sidelong smirk at Gideon. "It's all theory and feminism and economic justice."

"Oh, don't worry, we'll get to the names and dates soon enough," Gideon promised. "Gotta lay the foundation first."

Henry nodded. "College works differently than high school. It's new ways of looking at old material. When it's not actually doing the work, rather than reviewing others' work."

Sammy frowned softly at his green beans. It took him a beat before he screwd up the courage to say, "I'm not sure I know what you mean."

"In high school, you learn the biology that other people figured out," Henry explained, gesturing with his fork. "In college, and especially in university, you do the biology yourself. You do labs, you do experiments, sometimes you help with research."

"You titrate samples," Rowan put in, "and then you titrate more samples, and after that, you guessed it, you titrate samples again."

"You were just telling me how exciting the work was," Gideon laughed at his daughter. "Are you bored already?"

"No," she sighed, drawing out the vowel. "It's just the data analysis is more interesting than the data collection."

"Ain't that the truth," her other father sympathized. "That's the real reason why everyone wants to claw their way to the top of the academic pyramid, you know: because then you get other people to do the collection, and you can just sit at a desk and poke at the numbers."

Gideon leaned towards Sammy, conspiratorially. "It's only like that over in the STEM side of things. Over in the humanities, the data collection is the fun stuff, because then you're talking with people. Or reading new sources. Or hunting through records, unlocking stories. That's the fun stuff."

"Looking foward to it," he grinned back.

But Gideon made a face. "Sadly, I don't think we'll have time to actually *do* history this summer. Not that I'd really know how to do it, anyway. It's not properly my field."

"So how is it that you're teaching it?"

Gideon twirled his half-eaten roll in the air. "Vagaries of academic politics and scheduling."

Sammy made a mental note to figure out what 'vagaries' meant.

Gideon went on: "The course was supposed to be taught by Christchurch—old departmental battleaxe, she's awesome—but she had a medical emergency at the last minute. Everybody else in the department was already out of town or committed to other projects, so they had nobody. But Henry was paying attention to the program because you were in it, caught wind of their little scheduling crisis, and told them I was available."

“Daddy got one person into the program, why not two?” Rowan giggled.

“I was supposed to be starting my sabbatical,” Gideon sighed theatrically, “but I’m not going to pass on opportunities to do favours for prestigious academic departments, either.”

But Sammy hadn’t missed what Rowan had said. “Who else did you get into the program, Uncle Henry?” he asked, eyebrows lifted.

“You, of course,” Rowan answered for him, laughing. Henry glowered gently at her, and she rolled her eyes. “What? I’m very proud of your bureaucratic wrangling, Daddy, and you should be, too.”

“I was kind of wondering how I got in,” Sammy admitted slowly. “My best guess was that I’d applied to it accidentally. There were so many scholarship applications and grant forms, I sort of lost track.”

“There isn’t an application process, *per se*,” Henry explained gruffly. “It’s a vetting process that admissions does, typically with their international applications. Students who look promising but who haven’t had all the educational advantages that they might have.”

“But I’m not an international student.”

His uncle shrugged his shoulders, minimizing the distinction and his own interference. “I had lunch with the admissions director and gently pointed out that MSP made no provisions for queer marginalization.”

“He’s softballing,” Rowan put in.

Uncle Henry shot daggers at his daughter, but then admitted: “I may have described my own childhood and adolescence in Oak Grove, and how being a weird queer kid meant that there were fewer opportunities for me growing up. And I happened to know that another queer kid from Oak Grove, trans and closeted, had just applied.” He put up his hands. “I made it quite clear from the outset that you were my niece. I didn’t want any favours.”

Rowan rolled her eyes at that.

Henry apparently didn’t see. “I just suggested that he might consider queer domestic applications,” he went on, but then he couldn’t keep a victorious smile from his lips. “And the next thing I knew, you’d got in.”

Sammy put a smile on his lips. “Well. Thank you,” he managed, thoughts and emotions roiling. His uncle was a big deal, and it wasn’t implausible that admissions had invited Sammy into the program just to mollify him. But if Henry was to be believed, his application had

still been considered, had still been part of their decision. With a sinking feeling he realized that the distinction between his own merit and his family's nepotism was always going to be murky.

Gideon's warm hand gently covered Sammy's, and his uncle gave him a gentle squeeze. Sammy glanced over at him, and something about his expression brought his words from a week ago back to Sammy: *Take what you can get, babe.*

He nodded, mostly to himself. "It's an amazing opportunity," he rallied, "and I'm going to make the most of it."

Dinner conversation shifted to local politics, in which both Gideon and Henry were active and with which both of them were presently annoyed. From there they talked about nothing: the weather, a recent movie, even sports for a few moments (Henry was a Yankees fan). Eager to stop talking about baseball, Rowan let drop that Sammy had been on a date, and so he had to recount all those details all over again, ears and cheeks burning.

Gideon, at least, steered the conversation away once the basic details had been covered. "Who wants cookies? From Levain Bakery. Not homemade, cause nobody in this house is *that* domestic."

"I can make cookies," protested Henry, affronted. "Cookies aren't hard."

Gideon gave him a pitying look as he returned with a branded paper bag. "Can you make cookies like Levain's?"

"No," Henry grumped, allowing the point with a short nod.

The cookies were distributed and they were, indeed, amazing. Nothing like the cookies his mom or Gramma would make, not that theirs were inferior. Just different. These were light and fluffy and somehow also full of nuts and chocolate. Almost more like cake than chewy cookies. And they were huge: each one the size of Sammy's hand. He wasn't sure he could eat more than one.

Sammy's uncles fell into a conversation about different local bakeries which neither Rowan nor Sammy were interested or qualified to participate in, so they just smiled across the table at each other and enjoyed their cookies. This was, Sammy reflected, rather nice. He'd have to be sure to thank his uncles for getting him out of his school routine. He knew he'd be looking forward to Sunday evenings.

"Oh, Sammy," said Rowan, leaning forward to dig into her back pocket. "I got you a present." She slid a small envelope across the table.

"Oh, thank you," he answered automatically, picking up the unmarked envelope and opening it up.

Inside was a hand-made card; the outside read "Gift Certificate" in swooping letters, surrounded by flowers. The colours had the look of being hand stamped, and not amateurishly. He smiled; it was pretty. Inside was calligraphy reading: "This certificate entitles the bearer to Ten Weeks of Voice Training Lessons."

Sammy looked to Rowan, confused.

"It's with my old voice coach," she told him, beaming with excitement. "She's trans, and specializes in transfemme voice training. She's really really good."

"Oh, Vanessa?" Gideon smiled, apparently as surprised at the gift as Sammy. "How is she doing?"

Rowan made an unhappy face. "Struggling, unfortunately. The problem with serving the trans community is that most of us are broke, can't afford to pay her what would amount to a living wage, and she keeps taking on clients who pay her half-rate, so... she's broke, too." She sighed. "And she just lost her roommate."

Both uncles made sympathetic noises. Even Sammy knew how calamitous the rent was in the City, and he might have chimed in with a vaguely supportive noise. But mostly he was staring at the card.

He looked up at Rowan. "What is... what's voice training?" he managed to ask, although he had a growing suspicion.

Rowan placed two fingers on the top of her sternum. "It teaches you how to speak like this, soft and light and girly," she said, eyes fluttering in overacted pride. "Or however else you want to sound. But you can't just... put on your best girly voice, Sammy, it doesn't work that way."

"I hadn't... really even tried to do that," he admitted. His mind's eye flashed to the restaurant on Friday, to the grill in the dining commons.

Rowan snorted. "Yeah, I know."

"Is there... something wrong with how I sound?" he asked uncertainly. Despite his best effort, he couldn't keep the barest trace of hurt out of his voice.

"Oh no," Rowan responded immediately, eyes suddenly wide in panic. "Sammy, I didn't mean to— fuck, I'm going about this all wrong."

Gideon placed a hand on Sammy's shoulder. "You don't have to do voice training to be trans," he counseled gently. "And a ton of

transgender people never do. They're happy with how they sound, and that works for them."

He looked over at his uncle. "Did you?"

His uncle coloured slightly. "I didn't, but testosterone did a number on my voice all by itself. Unfortunately, transfemmes don't get the same. If they want to sound feminine, they have to train their voices to sound that way."

"Like everything else, it's optional," Rowan insisted from across the table, desperate to fix her overstep. "But I can tell you that I got a lot out of it, and right now... listen, your voice isn't wrong, but it's kind of..."

"It's a tell," Sammy finished for her. The server on Friday, flinching when he asked about fish. Or the grill guy, who was all smiles until Sammy opened his mouth.

"Yeah, if you like," Rowan bobbed her head. "And there's nothing wrong with being visibly trans, Sammy, but it's also good to have options, and learn what you can do, you know?"

He looked down at the card, trying and mostly succeeding at not scowling at the inoffensive piece of cardstock. His voice was giving him away, making it clear to everybody that he was just pretending to be a girl. But did he care? He could be visibly trans for seven more weeks, and then tell them all he was detransitioning.

Seven weeks was a long time for people to be staring at him.

He almost asked "Is it permanent? Can I go back afterwards?" but stopped himself just in time. He didn't want to tip his hand on his detransition plans.

Instead he said, "But I'm so busy. I mean, I've got every waking hour scheduled."

"She has a weekly appointment on Tuesday evenings open," Rowan said, as if she were confessing a sin. "I asked her to pencil you in, because I knew that wouldn't conflict with your classes."

Tuesday evenings he was... reading something, he forgot what. This was why he'd bought a day planner.

"And it would really help out Vanessa," his cousin sighed. "She's too proud to just take money to tide her over till she finds a roommate, so I just thought... two birds, one stone, you know?" She looked from Sammy to her dads, hoping for some validation. "She just doesn't want to have to move back to Wisconsin."

"It was a nice thought," Gideon told her soothingly. "But if Sammy's too busy—"

Being Samantha Masters

"I'll do it," Sammy heard himself saying. Hearing that Vanessa would have to move out of the City had twisted like a knife in his gut. Even if he didn't understand anything else, he understood that. "It's just an hour a week, right?"

The Immune System of Patriarchy

Finley was waiting outside the building when Sammy arrived for Biology. They pushed themselves off the wall to amble over to him. Sammy couldn't help but smile, and lifted his chin just slightly, hoping for a kiss.

But Finley looked left and right awkwardly. "Hey. So. I mean. Good morning."

A tendril of dread curled around Sammy's heart. "Uh. Good morning," he managed.

"Listen, I'm... pretty sure that it's perfectly ethical for me to date you," they said, voice kept low enough not to carry and with the measured cadence of rehearsed wording. "But I'm not sure that the professor would see it that way."

Sammy looked from Finley to the door into the building, as if the professor in question would be standing there, glowering in disappointment at them both. But it was just a flow of students heading into the building for morning classes. He said something intelligent, like "Oh, okay."

"You all right?" they asked, tipping their chin down to scrutinize his face.

He nodded, smiled, lied. "Yeah, I'm fine."

Finley gestured at their own eyes. "It just looked like you got kind of teary all the sudden."

"Wind, I guess?" he shrugged. He did not ask, "Are you breaking up with me?" Because they weren't even together, right? They'd been on one date.

"The university code of ethics for TAs is really strident about dating students," Finley was saying, "but that was negotiated with the TA Union, and I'm not allowed to join the TA Union for the summer

program, so I'm not sure if their code of ethics even applies to me."

"Yeah, totally," Sammy said, bobbing his head.

"Anyway," Finley sighed, and slipped their hands into the back pockets of their jeans. "We just have to keep things quiet, okay?"

"Yeah, I—I won't tell anybody about last Friday," Sammy promised, and forced himself to smirk. "It was just an apology dinner anyway, right?" That's it, he thought to himself: deny everything, pretend it meant nothing, because then it won't hurt to lose it. It wasn't a strategy that had ever worked well for him, but one of these days, it might.

"I seem to remember you wanting it to be a date," they smirked back.

Sammy's smile grew wan as he answered automatically. "You asked me on a date," he corrected, keeping his voice quiet. But his heart was thudding and he knew he had to cut this whole thing loose from his life. He heard himself saying, "We can just call it a misunderstanding."

Finley stepped a little closer. "Well this Friday is definitely a date, right?" they asked, elbows cocked behind them, hands kept rigidly in their pockets.

Sammy's brain ground to a halt. He blinked. His heart lurched against the inside of his ribcage. "I thought... I thought you just said you couldn't—"

"I'm just not sure about what is and isn't allowed," Finley said with an elaborate roll of their shoulders, approximating a shrug. "So we'll need to keep things quiet. No flirting in class, or right outside of class. That sort of thing." They wagged their elbows behind their back. "And I'll keep my hands safely in my pockets, to resist temptation."

Sammy's lips refused to put words together for a full thirty seconds. Finally he managed, "...but keep dating."

Finley bobbed their head, grinning. "Secret dating. Kinda sexy, yeah?"

Relief flooded through Sammy and he could feel his cheeks burning red. "Oh, yeah. That's um. That's totally cool. Secret dating."

Finley threw him a wink and hooked a thumb behind themselves. "Okay. Well I've got to get in there, I promised the class I wouldn't be late again."

"Yeah, see you in there," Sammy heard himself say. "But I won't, you know, flirt across the classroom or whatever." But Finley was already bounding to the door and didn't hear a word.

He'd shuffled and reshuffled his schedule, compacting a few blocks of reading and streamlining his essay-writing, to free up some time. He'd managed to open up Tuesday evening, from seven to eight. But he was still reading, sitting in front of his laptop, while the video chat service told him to wait to be admitted to the meeting. He needed every scrap of time he could get.

He was still dressed up, not that he really stripped off his daily costume until it was time for bed most nights. But when he'd got back from the dining commons, he'd touched up his make up and gave himself a once-over in the mirror. Just a cami-and-cardi set, striped white and mint green, with matching hair clips to bring it all together. It was basically casualwear. Especially since his black skirt with the lace edging was going to be out of frame, anyway. But he wanted to look at least presentable for Rowan's friend.

Rowan's friend, who needed work and refused to accept charity, who helped Rowan back when she needed it, and now Sammy could help her. He'd been hoovering up privileges and opportunities—on Uncle Gideon's advice to "take what you can get, babe,"—and if he could help somebody by spending an hour a week pretending to take voice lessons, well then, he was all for it. It was a dumb way to give back, he'd told himself at lunch, but it was what was available to him.

The video conference lurched into activity with a tin-can bwong and the video pane lighting up with a smiling woman's face. Somewhere in her mid-thirties, Black, and wearing makeup that had probably been striking when she'd put it on earlier that day. She smiled out of Sammy's laptop. "Samantha, right?"

"That's me," Sammy nodded, suddenly more self-conscious of his voice than he'd ever been in his life. He put the biology textbook aside with shaky hands.

"And I'm Vanessa," she smiled welcomingly. She glanced down and shuffling paper came over the audio. Checking her notes. "Oh, you're Rowan's cousin, right? How's she doing?"

"Kicking ass and taking names," Sammy said with a weird laugh, and then wondered why he'd said that. Why was he so nervous? But he decided to cover whatever nervousness he had by adding, "At full volume, of course."

Vanessa laughed along as if any of that had made sense. "Yeah, she's become quite outgoing. It's been so good to see her coming into herself on social media, but you should have seen her back when I was

coaching her. Timid little thing, afraid of her own shadow.”

Wait, what? Sammy shook his head in disbelief. “I uh, only met her a few months ago,” he explained after a stunned moment. “I can’t even imagine her as ‘timid.’”

The voice coach cackled. “She was, she was. Which only goes to show how dangerous voice training is: it’ll unlock things that nobody thought was inside you.” And at this she winked at him, as if he was in on the joke.

But Sammy’s heart thudded. This was supposed to be learning some parlour tricks so he could make his voice sound girly when he needed it to. But now this was going to *unlock things*?

Vanessa was settling into her office chair and smiling. She’d just asked a question. What had she said?

“Sorry, you broke up,” he lied. “What was that?”

She smiled again, with the practiced confidence that knew exactly how bright and welcoming that smile was. “I asked you what you’d like to get out of voice training with me.”

“Oh, uh...” he stammered. “I just want to... sound like a girl?”

Vanessa gave him a look through the video chat. “Okay so first, honey, you already sound like a girl, because you are a girl, yeah?” She speared him with eye contact until he nodded mutely. “But leaving that aside. There’s lots of ways to sound like a girl. There’s lots of girls to sound like. Have you given any thought to your options?”

Sammy tried not to squirm in his desk chair. “Um. Can you... I’m not sure what the options are?”

“Well,” she said with an indulgent smile. “You can go perky,” she said like a helium-infused cheerleader, and then switched to “...or smokey and sultry. Or more... girl next door.” That she delivered in a voice Sammy was sure he’d heard in a thousand teen drama shows. “There is,” she went on, shifting her voice up and down and sideways to suit, “clipped, confident businesswoman or friendly midwestern housewife or hard-talking urbanite from the streets or bubbly ditz, tee hee.”

Sammy boggled as Vanessa’s voice leapt and danced and changed, over and over again. But beneath his amazement was a growing disquiet. This was the breast forms all over again. Getting handed the proper way to be a girl was one thing; picking out the kind of girl he wanted to be was... daunting. Probably impossible. Because he didn’t want any of this, any which way, right?

Except.

“Sometimes people give me... funny looks?” he heard himself say.
“When I talk, I mean.”

Vanessa bobbed her head, her face a picture of sympathy. “Yeah. People can be shit, huh?”

“Yeah. And I uh. I’m not out, back home? And in a few weeks I go back home for about a month, and I don’t want to...” he trailed off, unable to articulate the nightmare scenario blossoming in his head. Him slouching off the bus in hoodie and sweatpants, no tits and no bra even, greeting his parents in a bright, lilting falsetto that he couldn’t stop.

The voice coach saved him from spiralling. “Nothing we do is permanent,” she promised. “And you can retain your masculine voice as long as you like. Switch back and forth as you need.”

He nodded slowly, slightly mollified. A thought occurred to him, and he looked up at the screen. Rowan had said Vanessa was trans, didn’t she? Which meant— “Does that mean that you can...?”

The woman’s lips twisted slightly. “You can lose your masculine voice,” she admitted, “if you don’t ever use it. But that takes months. And that is what I did, years ago now, before I knew I wanted to do this. So I had to go searching for my old masc voice, or something close to it, and... I’m afraid I sound like a woman making fun of how a man talks, now.” She smirked and cleared her throat, and when she spoke it came out deep and rough, and just slightly laughable: “But it’s good enough to demonstrate the fundamentals.”

Sammy snorted in surprise, hands flying up to cover his lips. “I’m sorry, I just—”

“No apologies necessary, I know how I sound,” Vanessa replied, back in her normal voice. Face still full of sympathy, she added, “But we’ve gone the long way around to dodge the original question.”

Deflating a little, Sammy nodded. “Yeah, I uh. I don’t really know what I want to sound like.”

“That’s fine, honey,” she responded gently. “We don’t need to have a destination in mind. What we can do is work on expanding your range, in both pitch and resonance. And probably do a little breath work and shake up your cadences a little bit. Later we’ll worry about fine-tuning with creak and breathiness. And I know I’m throwing a ton of new terminology at you—”

“That’s kind of my life right now,” Sammy cut in with a smirk. “So don’t worry about it.”

Vanessa hit him with the smile again. “Okay. But the point is: we can go looking for a voice that suits you. Kind of explore the territory, see what we can find, see what you’re comfortable with. In my experience, most girls find something that just clicks for them, and then we’re off to the races. Sound good?”

Sammy nodded slowly. This was sounding more like what he’d hoped for: some tricks to learn that he could bring out when needed. He didn’t need to unlock anything. “Yeah, let’s do it.”

“Great,” she smiled, and he realized that it wouldn’t be long at all before he’d do his best just to make her smile at him like that. “Well, we’ve still got a chunk of time left in the hour, so let’s start on some exercises. How do you feel about making a bunch of funny sounds?”

“I take it back,” declared Leon a moment after his tray clattered onto the table next to Sammy. “I dread the Literature class and the Composition class and also the History class.” His bag hit the floor and he slumped into his chair.

Sammy looked up from his reading. His own lunch, half-eaten, had been pushed to the side a while ago. He still had three chapters of *Persuasion* to polish off before class tomorrow, but he slid a finger into the book to hold his place. He lifted his eyebrows to show he was listening.

“In Ukraine, history is names and dates and nations and movements...” Leon griped, and put extra emphasis on “...and *events*. History is the story of what happened, yes?”

“Gid— er, Doctor Roth-Masters said we’d get to all the names and dates eventually,” Sammy pointed out. “We’re just not starting there.”

“But what are we starting with?” Leon responded rhetorically, and shoved half of his burger into his face. He went on with a full mouth, which Sammy tried not to look at directly. “Patriarchy? Homophobia? Feminism? Theories and theories and theories, nothing—” He waved his burger, which dripped ketchup onto his fries, and swallowed. “—nothing substantial. Nothing concrete. Not like Ukraine.”

Sammy shrugged. “But that’s the point of the Marginalized Scholars Program, right? To teach you how to do academic stuff the American way. Although,” he stumbled, and then confessed: “I didn’t really pay much attention in high school history, so I can’t really tell you if that’s what I missed in the US version of history class.”

“Pretty sure your high school,” Leon said, emphasizing ‘high school’ like it was a bizarre, alien concept, which Sammy supposed it

was, to him. “They didn’t teach you that, what, homophobia is the immune system of patriarchy and used to quash dissent within the state. And the state is, of course, a patriarchal structure in and of itself. Everything is patriarchy. Everything bad, at least. And this is history?”

Sammy considered the young man from Ukraine for a long moment. “So just... to be clear, you’re straight, right?”

Leon’s eyes slitted slightly. “Yes. But that shouldn’t matter to the ideas. The ideas should be true no matter what my sexuality.”

Sammy waved his hands to quash Leon’s preemptive response, and sat up a little in his chair. “But it does matter to how you hear the ideas. Where you’re coming from, the experiences that you’ve had in your life so far, they have an effect on how new ideas sound to you.”

Leon frowned softly, nodded reluctantly, and consoled himself by making the rest of his burger disappear.

“Because like, I’m queer, right?” Sammy went on, patting his collarbone (his fingertips touched skin and not fabric and he really should be used to that by now, right?). “And so from where I’m standing? Based on what I’ve experienced in the world? Homophobia being the thing that keeps everybody in line? That makes perfect fucking sense to me.”

Leon shook his head. “But homophobia is just the fear of gay people,” Leon protested, gesturing with a french fry.

“It’s not fear of, like individual gay people; it’s the fear of *gayness*,” Sammy corrected, and then clarified: “Of queerness. It’s the fear that, at any time, for any number of random-ass reasons, somebody might think you’re queer. That you’re not measuring up, that you’re not acting your part, that you’re less worthy of respect.”

Leon’s face placed him somewhere between skeptical and uncomfortable.

“Cause me? That’s my every day,” he pressed on. “Because I am queer, so when I get clocked as queer, I know what’s happening, cause I’m always hyper-aware of it. And when somebody decides that they think you’re queer, you can *see* them respect you less.”

Leon wasn’t convinced. “I’m sorry, that does sound terrible, but it only explains the oppression of queer people. It’s not the... foundation of empire that the professor made it out to be.”

Sammy waved his hands in frustration. This had been so clear to him in class; why couldn’t he explain it now? “You’re looking at it like it’s something that happens to just me, but it’s happening to

everybody, all the time. Homophobia means that everybody's constantly watching everybody else to make sure they don't act queer. And that makes everybody a little bit scared, a little bit easier to control. Easier to take advantage of by the, uh—" He struggled to remember the right word, and then it popped into his brain and he snapped his fingers. "The elites, right? When everybody else is scared of getting called queer, or not manly enough, or not fulfilling their womanly duties or whatever, and they go along with all that bullshit to avoid it, then they're more likely to go along with other bullshit, too. That's what Gid— that's what Doctor Roth-Masters was after in class today."

Leon scrunched up his face, considering. "Is conditioning, then, yeah? Hm," he finally said, nodding slightly, which seemed to be, if not agreement, at least understanding. He ate a few more fries and Sammy was about to go back to his book, when Leon asked, "So you are queer?"

"Uh, yeah."

"So you like girls?" he asked, speculatively. "I am unsure if transgender counts as queer or is something separate."

"Oh, uh," Sammy stammered. Right. He was a trans girl, at least for the purposes of this conversation. "I mean, it's... complicated. Trans people are queers, but some are straight, but they're still queers."

"That makes no sense," Leon told him flatly, and then pointed a french fry at Sammy. "But you. You are transgender, sure. But you like boys, so you are a straight queer? Or you like girls, and then you are a queer queer?"

Sammy tried not to laugh at Leon's earnestly-delivered question. "I like... both? And nonbinary people, too. I mean. All that doesn't really matter to me. At least," he added hastily, "for, uh, romantic partners."

"Are you seeing anybody now?" Leon asked, entirely too casually, not making eye contact.

Urk. Leon was nice and all, but Sammy was less than interested in his romantic attention. He and Finn were supposed to be keeping things quiet; could he even say yes, he was already spoken for? Maybe if he was very stingy with details. "Um. I am, actually," he said carefully. "Not a student here." Technically true, since Finley had graduated a month ago. "And with my class load, we just see each other on weekends."

The boy from Ukraine nodded for a moment, and when he looked

up he smiled. "Good for you. I hope he makes you happy."

"They," Sammy corrected after a moment of consideration. There were lots of nonbinary people, right? He could be dating any of them. "They make me happy."

'Eeee eeee eeee eeee," chirped Sammy at higher and higher pitches. He had his phone up in front of his face like some boomer on a video call, watching the numbers rating his pitch wobble higher and then lower again. The concrete blocks of his dorm room surrounded him, hopefully affording enough sound insulation that his neighbours wouldn't hear... whatever this was.

Voice training wasn't just one hour of video conference a week, it was that plus exercises every day, exercises that Vanessa had said he could plow through in fifteen minutes but if he did he'd be robbing himself of any progress. So here he was, taking his time to make funny sounds into his phone, filling up the hour he'd somehow managed to scrape out of his already-jam-packed schedule.

"Eeee eeee eeee, eeeeeeee!" he squeaked, and then coughed. That last one had crossed over into falsetto, maybe, which he was supposed to avoid. The only problem was that he couldn't really tell the difference between the top of his normal range and the forbidden zone above that. But falsetto or not, that 'eeee' had set something in his nasal passages quivering in a very unpleasant way, so he was happy to call it falsetto and not do it again.

He lifted his phone to start again and a text message popped onto the screen. Finley, saying: **Hey**.

Frowning softly, Sammy wiped the text message away. He'd respond after he was done eeee-eeee-eeeeing. But he'd only got two 'eee's in when another text came in.

Finley again: **Whatcha up to?**

The cheap freebie app that measured pitch didn't know what to do with the phone vibration brought on by the text message and simply stalled out. Sammy's precarious flow on the awkward task of tweaking his voice had been thrown off, too. He decided to take a short break, and collapsed backwards into his desk chair.

Studying, of course, he texted back. Voice training was a kind of studying, right? He didn't want to explain that he was doing voice training on top of everything else, or why. He felt foolish devoting so much time to this thing he didn't really want, but he also couldn't not

do the thing he'd told both Rowan and Vanessa that he'd do. All I do is study.

I could fix that for you. Finley texted back, with a winky face.

Sammy couldn't help smiling. Oh?

Finley responded with a photo, two pints of ice cream in one of their hands (the green nail polish gave their identity away), plus a pair of spoons sticking out from underneath.

Rolling his eyes, Sammy tapped out: You're sweet but I'm not getting on a subway to come eat ice cream.

Okay, first of all, came Finley's immediate response, you are on record as saying you would never say no to ice cream.

Sammy smirked, but didn't answer because the dots were already bouncing, heralding another text.

Secondly, they went on, I'm downstairs. Just buzz me in.

"What?" muttered Sammy. He enlarged the ice cream photo and, sure enough, he recognized the concrete stoop in the background. That was his dorm's porch.

He was supposed to do fifteen more minutes of voice exercises, and then he had an essay revision for Comp in the morning. He'd also scheduled a review of the week's Physics material for the quiz that may or may not happen on Friday.

But he rolled across the room to jam his finger on the button to let Finley into the dorm.

"And then what happened?" Rowan wanted to know.

Sammy smiled at the video chat, trying not to blush. "We ate ice cream and cuddled a little as we watched a movie."

His cousin lifted one eyebrow. "Cuddled a little?"

"Do I have to define cuddling for you?"

"In this instance, yes," Rowan nodded emphatically. "Were clothes involved?"

"Of course clothes were— Jesus, Rowan!"

"Cuddling is better without clothes," opined Zoey. "That's just science."

Sammy groaned at the ceiling. "We kissed, we made out a bit, there was some... light petting."

Rowan looked confused. "I've heard of heavy petting, but is light petting even a thing?"

Zoey shrugged theatrically.

"Okay fuck you," he told the screen lovingly. "All I'm saying is my gentlethem caller brought me ice cream last night and I thought it was sweet of them."

Zoey tilted her head quizzically, "A bit early in the relationship to attempt a booty call, isn't it?"

"It wasn't a booty call," he all but howled, "because there wasn't any sex."

Rowan smirked, and Sammy could tell the look was meant for Rowan, not him. "I mean, most attempted booty calls don't result in sex."

"You guys are terrible and I have a study group to get to," he told the screen. "Chat again tomorrow?"

Sammy felt self-conscious the whole way there, clutching his silly little picnic basket and fretting that making the date he'd planned "a surprise" was sort of silly, since he was literally lugging a picnic basket onto the subway. All he'd divulged was that they'd be active, so wear some sensible shoes. Which Finley had taken to mean dress casual: a band tee shirt, jeans shorts, and tennis shoes. That meant Sammy, in tight light jeans and a flowy pale pink blouse plus still-pristine frat shoes, looked just a bit overdressed in comparison.

Worse, he realized: standing next to each other, they looked like a straight couple.

They made small talk on the subway, with Sammy's attention split between Finley talking about their roommates' hijinx and the automated subway announcements. He didn't want to miss their stop.

And then he led them into Central Park. The day was warm and clear, perfect weather for picnicking. Given it was a Friday afternoon in the summer, the green landscape was dotted with people taking advantage of the massive park.

Frustratingly, he had to drop Finley's hand to check the map on his phone, but then he set it down on the flat top of the picnic basket so he could glance down at it. His free hand found its way back to Finley's. He was surprised how soon they came up on their destination: a scenic pond with a fake castle rising up on the opposite side.

There were a few other people scattered about, some of them on their own picnic blankets. Sammy led his date to an open spot and turned to face them, both hands clutching the basket handles. "It's a picnic," he explained. "I packed us a picnic. And it's... pretty here. And afterwards, I made us reservations at the Metropolitan Museum

of Art."

Finley grinned. "I love the Met! And a picnic sounds great. Where'd you get the basket?"

"My uncles," he said with a shrug. "So you've been before? To the Met?" He'd told himself that his date idea probably wasn't terribly original, and the museum wasn't going to be anything Finley hadn't already done before, but he'd still held out some stupid hope that it would all be new and exciting.

"I mean, yeah, I've lived here for four years, I've been," they said with a gentle smile. "But not for ages. I'm excited to go!"

Sammy set the basket down to open it. Finley had clearly noticed his anxiety over the date and was trying to mollify his fears. He wasn't sure if he liked that they'd noticed and that they cared or if it only made him more self-conscious. He'd never planned a date before, and he wanted so much for this to go well that he knew he'd start flailing if he thought about it too much. "I, uh, I looked online for date ideas. Picnicking at the Turtle Pond seemed nice, and with the Metrop—I mean, the Met, right there..."

Finley reached out to take the other side of the thin picnic blanket and help stretch it out across the grass. "Absolutely. Samantha, this is great."

Sammy unpacked the picnic lunch, which was mostly just sandwiches and fruit and a sort of half-assed charcuterie board, minus the board. Finley laid across the opposite side of the blanket, watching with a bemused little smile on their face. When he looked up to explain what he'd packed for their picnic—which was all obvious, really, but still—his date just smiled and said, "You're adorable."

Whatever Sammy was about to say was lost under his sudden full-body flush. "It's just a picnic."

"And you care a whole lot about making it just right," his date pointed out. "Which is nice. It makes me feel good that you care about the details."

Sammy sniggered, and when Finley raised an eyebrow at the odd reaction, he explained: "Me caring makes you feel good, but you telling me about me caring is just you caring about me feeling anxious, and it's just like... a big echo chamber or something."

"Exactly," his date smiled, and picked up one of the soda bottles that had rolled out onto the blanket. They held it out in toast. "Here's to echo chambers of caring."

Sammy scooped up the other soda bottle and tapped its neck against

Finley's. "I'm not sure we're supposed to be this sappy on Date Number Two."

"Is it Date Number Two, though?"

Sammy handed Finley a sandwich and then levelled a warning finger at them. "You asked me out first. Last week was a date."

They lifted their hands as if they were being held up at gunpoint instead of fingerpoint, trying to look innocent. "I wasn't saying this was Date Number One. I was just thinking after Wednesday, maybe this counts as Date Number Three." They unwrapped the sandwich and made appreciative noises at the contents: his mother's chicken salad. "Maybe even Date Number Four if we count our first kiss."

"Okay, now you're reaching," Sammy laughed, settling more comfortably on his side of the blanket. "May I remind you that I kissed three other people that night, too—at your direction. Kind of weird."

"Kind of sexy," Finley shot back, grinning.

Sammy busied himself with his food, ignoring Finley's eyes on him until it became unbearable. Finally, he allowed, quietly, talking almost directly into his sandwich, "Yeah, it was."

They ate in companionable silence for a little while, enjoying the simply made food and artfully constructed view. Sammy regretted sitting opposite Finley; he wanted to cuddle, but he also wasn't quite sure how cuddling would work with picnicking at the same time. There had been a lot of juggling with the ice cream on Wednesday.

He snorted in sudden amusement, and told Finley, "I told Rowan and Zoey about you showing up with ice cream, and they thought it was a booty call."

Finley quickly took a pull of their soda, covering for something. "... ha ha, yeah, that's funny."

Sammy looked across the picnic blanket, eyebrows raised. "Okay, that was a lot of hesitation and not the quick denial I was expecting."

Finley collapsed onto their back instead of making eye contact. "Um."

Sammy leaned a little closer. Was Finley... actually blushing under their beard?

They looked up into Sammy's face, smiling faintly and apologetically. "It wasn't a... booty call booty call, but it was... the same impulse, I guess?" When Sammy only lifted his eyebrows, Finley tried to explain: "When you're in a relationship—"

"We're in a relationship, now?" he asked in mock surprise.

Finley covered their face with their hands. “I swear to god, Samantha, half of your transition is just you getting sassier. Shut up, let me finish.”

Sammy gave them an expansively sassy gesture to continue.

They repeated, “When you’re in a relationship,” and then cleared their throat. “Sometimes you just... want to see your person.” They tried to shrug into the ground, which only bunched up the blanket underneath them. “And sure, if it’s a sexual relationship, that maybe-probably involves sex, but if it’s not a sexual relationship yet, maybe it just means... making out while you watch a movie.”

While Finley was focused on explaining themself, Sammy had taken the opportunity to creep a little closer. He wasn’t quite looming, but he was smiling down into Finley’s face. The genderqueer’s features were all twisted up, uncertain how their explanation would be received. “That’s sweet,” Sammy told them. “And I totally get what you’re saying, I accept your explanation, and I’d like to go back to the part where we’re in a relationship.”

Finley heaved a relieved exhale while also rolling their eyes. “Not going to let that go, are you?”

Sammy leaned down slowly, descending until Finley’s lips puckered for a kiss, and then he stopped, smirking, withholding. “Nope.” He could feel Finley’s breath on his face.

“I feel like I need to reiterate that I’m leaving in five weeks,” Finley said soberly, and then smiled ever so softly. “But until then, I think I would like to call this a relationship.”

Giggling in unabashed delight, Sammy closed the remaining distance between their lips and kissed them, hard. He broke off long enough to breathe, “Yes, please.” And then for a little while they were both a tangle of limbs on top of smooshed sandwiches and tumbled tupperware.

When they separated, Sammy back lay on the grass (the blanket sat in a tangled heap three feet away) to catch his breath. His body still seemed to be fizzing and popping, heart hammering, head spinning. Finley lay beside him, their only contact two of the genderqueer’s fingers lightly stroking the side of Sammy’s thigh.

After a long moment of fingertip caresses and watching the clouds gather in the sunset lighting, Finley spoke up: “Okay, because it’s always a thing at this point? I prefer enbyfriend.”

“What?” Sammy couldn’t help asking the sky.

Finley propped themself up on an elbow to make eye contact.

“‘Datemate’ always sounds weird to me. The rhyming, I think. And ‘theyfriend’ and ‘themfriend’ are just... this whole thing with confusing pronouns for genders? Pet peeve of mine. So. You can call me your enbyfriend.”

Sammy smiled up at them. “This is Finley Aceves,” he said, gesturing with one hand as if he were introducing people, even though he was laying on the ground and didn’t quite have the right range of motion. “My enbyfriend.”

They definitely blushed, this time. “Yeah.” Sammy’s enbyfriend laid a hand on his belly, warm through the thin fabric of his blouse. “And I take it you’d like to be my girlfriend?”

His heart skipped a beat. Fuck. Why had this not occurred to him? “Yeah,” he heard himself say in a smiling exhale. That was not the right answer, nor was it the right word, but it was the best he was going to get, wasn’t it? It’s not like he could confess everything to Finley here and now, tell them that he wasn’t really a girl, he just pretended for... reasons even he was having trouble articulating, anymore. It was just too much to explain right now, in this moment, and the last thing he wanted was to ruin this moment. So he smiled again and said, “I’m your girlfriend.”

The Metropolitan Museum of Art was a blur. He rented a locker for the picnic basket and they walked, hand in hand, through exhibit after exhibit. Egyptian art, Roman art, European art, American art, Japanese art. But Sammy barely saw any of it.

He was Finley’s girlfriend.

There was a room full of instruments, for some reason. You could push buttons to make them make noises.

He was Finley’s girlfriend.

There were suits of armor, for people and for horses, and Finley made a joke about codpieces that Sammy just barely realized wasn’t serious commentary before he nodded along with it.

He was the girlfriend.

There was a whole stone temple, transplanted from wherever the colonizers had uprooted it from.

Girlfriend.

He couldn’t even translate it in his head. For a little while—through the whole Impressionists section, in fact—he wondered if, when Finley or somebody else said “girlfriend,” his brain could just find-replace into something more appropriate, so inside his head he could be

Finley's—well, boyfriend. But that fantasy dissolved as soon as Finn asked one of the docents for directions, saying "my girlfriend and I," and his brain didn't find-replace, it didn't come up with anything more appropriate, it just sort of sat there in his skull and drooled.

He was back at that CQA meeting, on Finley's arm again, everybody looking at them. Everyone seeing Finley and their girlfriend, the trans girl, which meant that they must—

Finley asked if Sammy would mind if they bought a cinnamon roll from the cafe for them to share. He said no, of course not, why would he mind, and it wasn't until they were sitting down at the table that he remembered that this was his date and maybe he should have done that, or planned for it, or something.

Which was when Finley gave him a piercing look across the table. "Samantha, are you okay? You've been kind of... not all here."

Oh, fuck, now he really was ruining the date. Sammy blinked rapidly, shook his head. Pushed through the cobwebs when they didn't clear on their own. "No, I'm good. I'm good. I just." A thought struck him, made him laugh, and then he had to say it out loud. "I never thought I'd be somebody's girlfriend." It was, after all, the truth.

Finley made a satisfied little sound and held out a forkful of steaming cinnamon roll. "Well you're mine," they purred. "Until you get tired of me."

"Or until five weeks is up."

They rolled their eyes. "Put this in your mouth and stop talking."

Sammy did as he was told.

"Sometimes I forget this really is your first rodeo," Finley said while he chewed. "There's a whole lot of feelings. This isn't even my first time and I've got lots of feelings. But the first time, it's huge and intimidating—"

Sammy opened his mouth to say something and had it stuffed with cinnamon roll, instead. Finley gave him a warning look, so he chewed.

"You're my girlfriend," they said insistently, and then couldn't help smiling at the statement. "And none of your feelings are too big or too much for me, okay? I look forward to hearing all about all your feelings... that means all your fears and all your misgivings, too." They reached forward to wipe a dribble of syrup off his chin. "You never have to hold back with me."

He waved a hand around and around over his head, and Finley's fork stilled, tacitly allowing him to speak. "Its all kind of spiralling around in here," he admitted.

"Not too surprising." His enbyfriend mirrored the twirling gesture with the bit of cinnamon roll on their fork, and then popped it in their own mouth.

Sammy looked left and right; the museum was emptying out, the end of the day approaching, with fewer and fewer people around. One woman walked purposefully from some half-hidden exhibit and across the interior plaza, and for a moment their eyes met. She looked from Sammy to Finley and back, smiled, and went on her way.

They looked like a couple. He looked like Finley's girlfriend. He also looked trans, which meant, when the lights were out and the making out escalated to something more...

Suddenly he was reminded of Uncle Gideon lecturing, and Leon complaining about Uncle Gideon lecturing, and Sammy himself explaining to Leon about what Gideon had been lecturing about, and that was it. That was exactly it. Sammy could feel the eyes on him. He was being watched, he was being evaluated, he was being judged.

And for some reason he was going along with it.

He opened his mouth to speak and had to wave off another bite of cinnamon roll. "No, um. If you really do want to hear some of the... stuff in my head—"

"I do," they nodded, and fed themself the lingering bite.

He dithered again, and then chided himself. Even if this was a real relationship now, it still had its expiration date; it was still, essentially, Sammy's practice relationship. He could throw caution to the wind, right? He could say anything.

"I'm anxious about butt sex," he said, and Finley nearly choked. "Sorry, too much?"

"No, no," his enbyfriend assured him as they spared a glance around to make sure nobody was sitting nearby. The museum really was emptying out. "Just surprising."

"That was what freaked me out, back at the CQA mixer," Sammy confessed. "That people would think that you were..." He rolled his eyes at himself. "That you were fucking me like that. Which is stupid, even if I didn't know it then, and I know it now and I feel foolish for worrying about it then but I also still worry about it now, a little. Not that people will think that—well, not entirely that people will think that—but also just because... I don't really know how it even works? And if I... if I am your girlfriend—"

"Okay, let me stop you there," they cut in, and supplemented the interruption by feeding him a bite of cinnamon roll. They'd reached

the center, and everything was especially gooey, now. “You being my girlfriend does not require or even imply anything about anal sex.”

Sammy was slightly relieved that even Finley dropped their volume at ‘anal sex.’ He nodded slowly, swallowed. Finley quickly replaced the bite to keep him quiet.

“I am in no rush, okay?” his enbyfriend assured him. “Maybe we get there, maybe we don’t. I’d much rather enjoy the journey than worry about any particular destination along the way. Which means I would, if it’s all right with you, really like to make out before this date is over. And nothing more than making out. Okay?”

Sammy nodded, smiled. “Okay.”

The problem with that plan, however, was that just a few minutes into making out in his dorm room, Sammy had his hands down Finley’s shorts and they had theirs up his blouse, and ‘just making out’ didn’t just seem needlessly limiting but rather increasingly impossible.

Sammy’s hips had started grinding on Finley’s leg in a way that he didn’t think he could willfully stop. He had a handful of their ass and wanted nothing more than to pull them into himself... somehow. The actual details of geometry involved weren’t especially clear.

It was Finley who finally broke off, panting, planting hands on top of Sammy’s shoulders and pushing to separate them. “I should probably go.”

“You should stop being so considerate,” Sammy told them in between gasps, smiling wide and biting his lip and yes, Finley’s eyes went right to the intersection of his teeth and bottom lip. He was going to have to remember that trick. “And stay.”

Finley backpedalled in the half-dark room, smiling like a kid presented with a pile of candy. “I want to save some of this—” and here he gestured vaguely up and down Sammy’s body, and also the space between them “—for later, to savour. I don’t want to rush.”

“I kinda do.”

That got a laugh out of Finley, and the heat of the moment seemed to dissipate. “Yeah, I can tell. You are a very tempting... temptress. Oof. It’s late, and I’m tired, and that alone is a pretty good reason not to jump into our first time.”

Sammy rolled his eyes but settled down to sit on his bed, arms folded. “That probably makes sense.”

“Now.” They looked Sammy up and down again, this time like he was a trap that might spring on them. “Can I kiss you goodnight

without you dragging me back into your bed, temptress?"

"No promises," he answered, but planted his hands at his sides and leaned forward, lips puckered.

They shared a long but mostly chaste kiss, and then Finley hurried out the door. Walking a little funny, Sammy noted with satisfaction.

He threw himself backwards onto the bed with a sigh. He could feel that too-many-emotions exhaustion creeping up on him, and grudgingly acknowledged that perhaps Finley had been right, after all. If he had kept pushing and overloaded himself, who knows where he'd have ended up. Probably crying into Finley's lap. Or their naked crotch.

Well that was an interesting image to consider.

He pulled his little purse out of the picnic basket on the floor, and then pulled his phone out of that. 10:20. He nodded to himself and opened up the texting app.

Home safe after picnic date, he told Rowan.

Early bird! she responded almost immediately. I'm just about to head out. How'd it go?

There were so many ways to answer that question, but he finally settled on, I'm Finley's girlfriend.

Rowan responded with a gleeful torrent of emojis and gifs.

Sammy set the phone on his desk and shifted his butt over to sit in the chair. The images kept coming on his phone while he woke up his laptop, checked his calendar, and opened the rough draft for his LIT50 essay. He looked tiredly at the long series of paragraphs, fixed a misplaced comma, then leaned back in his chair and picked up his finally quiescent phone.

Is it sad that I scheduled study time for after my date? he texted.

No that's good, his cousin replied. You should get as far ahead as you can. It's not like you're getting anything done next week.

He frowned softly at his phone and texted a single question mark.

It's PRIDE, Sammy! came the response. Next week is Pride!

Isn't that just like... a parade?

Rowan reply was only: Oh, Country Mouse.

It's Pride, Sammy!

When Rowan had said “Next week is Pride,” she meant she had a whole slate of events planned out for Sammy, starting just two days later. She shoved a multi-appointment calendar invite into his inbox, and without thinking, he just clicked Accept All. First his week of orderly coloured blocks were invaded by more, overlapping blocks, and then the stream of notifications about conflicts made his phone and laptop start dinging repeatedly, in chorus.

Rowan had made at least a token gesture of avoiding Sammy’s actual classes—mostly—as well as his voice training lesson. But she apparently thought any other scrap of time, especially through the evenings, was fair game. Time that Sammy had set aside for reading, for revising essays, for preparing for quizzes—all of it—got bulldozed under Rowan’s plans.

Sammy considered begging off a few of these—what was a Drag Brunch, anyway?—but by the way Rowan’s stream of excited texts kept making his phone buzz long after the tide of schedule conflicts receded, he knew it would be a futile effort. He let her burble away, scowled at his schedule, and started shifting things around.

There were some things that were more precautionary review than they were deadline-driven projects, and he could skip those for a week. Everything else he shuffled around to make space. He could also wake up early on Saturday, tomorrow, to get stuff done before Pride took over everything.

Okay, I'm really excited about all of this, he told her once her tour guide monologue had ground to a halt. He'd barely registered any of the specifics, but he had cleared the time, theoretically. **But if you're gonna drag me all over the City all next week, I've got an essay to write and reading to do.**

Aren't you an adorably diligent little school girl, she responded, and he could hear her laughter.

See you Sunday.

As a final parting shot, she told him: Wear something skimpy!

Rowan led him down the street towards the noise and the gathering crowd, then leapt up onto a concrete planter at the corner to throw out her hands across the whole scene. "Our people, Sammy!"

Long rows of square canopies lined either side of the street, with a vast mob of colorfully-dressed people flowing between them. The result was basically a sluice of rainbow polyester, bared skin, and sweat. Music pounded from somewhere down the way; the smell of beer and fried food filled the air.

The Brooklyn Pride Multicultural Festival looked a whole lot like the Hunterdon County Fair that he'd volunteered at every year, except three or four times as big and infinitely more queer. Couples wandered up and down the stalls—two men, two women, various gender rebels, even apparent straight people—all holding hands, all laughing companionably at each other, a whole lot of them kissing or just straight-up making out in public.

He'd had a complicated relationship with the County Fair. It had once been exciting, when he was little and easily impressed; but in later years it had grown... intimidating, with too many people giving him too many appraising looks. Trying to figure him out, how he fit into everything else, and usually how hard they could dismiss him for being so patently out of place. He still went, still did his part for the scout troop and the mini golf course they ran, but he hardly ever ventured far from the course, and went home immediately once his shift was done.

At the first look at the sea of people, Sammy's heart leapt up into his chest, and for a moment he thought he'd have to tamp down the familiar almost-panic that the Fair crowd had triggered in him. But he breathed, and looked, and realized that the looming vibe of intimidation was missing. He wasn't here to Have Fun or Else, he wasn't here to fulfill the role of Dutiful Boy Scout Performing Community Service.

Rowan stepped down off the planter, grinning and holding out her hand to pull him in. He was invited. He was welcome. There were so many people here just like him.

He took her hand and dove into the crowd.

"So don't say it out loud," Rowan told him a little while later, leaning conspiratorially close, "but this is like... baby pride. Neighbourhood pride. It's cute, and they do their parade in the evening, which is, seriously, so obviously sensible I don't know why everybody else doesn't do the same. No heat stroke, what a revelation!"

But Sammy was hung up on 'baby pride,' looking around at the sea of rainbowed humanity that they swam through. "This is small?"

"Compared to the real deal? This is tiny," she nodded. "But it's also, you know, comfy and homey. Even if you don't actually live in Brooklyn."

They hit up the food trucks and came away with their hands full of fried food, then meandered their way through the stalls. About half presented local organizations with ties to the queer community—some, like the Queer Street Opera, more significant than others, like the Brooklyn Credit Union. The other half sold merchandise, mostly clothes and hand-made art.

It was in the latter half that they spent the most time, poring through racks of brightly-coloured clothing and tables spread with wind chimes, blown-glass bongs, and incense holders. Rowan kept showing him items bearing the trans pride colours, insisting that he needed some "trans bling." He begged off each time. What would he do with trans pride stuff once he detransitioned, anyway?

But he was absolutely surrounded by people decked out in rainbows or bearing other pride flag colour schemes—when they weren't just trailing a pride flag off their shoulders like a cape—and he found he was not immune to the ambient peer pressure. He started looking at rainbow things, and for the much more rarer pink-yellow-blue of the pansexual pride flag. He was still a little shaky on which labels he qualified for or wanted to claim, but maybe if he found just the right thing, it would tip him over the threshold.

He held up a likely cardigan—featuring chunky bands of pink, yellow, and blue, even if they weren't quite the right pink, yellow, and blue—and wrinkled his nose into a tall, thin mirror propped up on the clothing rack. He was pretty sure it would stretch across his tits rather nicely, but was that enough if the colours were off?

"You'd look awesome in that," came a voice to his right, and he glanced over to answer with a polite little smile. He'd assumed it was the owner of the stall, but this girl looked like she'd just walked in

from the thoroughfare. Her eyes dipped down and back up, appraising, and licked her lips. “But I bet you look awesome in most things.”

“Oh, um, thanks,” he stammered, and could feel his ears burning. The girl was hot and, as if that weren’t enough, wasn’t wearing very much at all. “I, um, er—”

Before he could fumble for any more words, Rowan interposed herself between Sammy and the newcomer. “Sorry, she’s taken,” she declared with a wide grin. “Happy Pride!”

The girl took a moment to size up Rowan, and stepped back with a smirk. “Can’t blame a girl for trying,” she said, and then nodded farewell to the both of them. “Happy Pride.”

Rowan waited until she was out of earshot before giggling. “I forgot to mention: the lesbians will be on the hunt.” She gestured out across the festival. “Target-rich environment. Safe bet most girls here are into girls.” She poked him in the side. “You coupled up a week too early.”

“I’ll take notes for next year,” he giggled.

“Actually, I just assumed, but are you guys exclusive?” Rowan asked, pawing through a basket full of bangles in various primary colours.

Sammy paused in his perusal of the maybe-pansexual top. “I don’t actually know. Back home, girlfriend just *means* exclusive, but that’s probably not a good assumption here.”

“Or with Finn,” Rowan bobbed her head.

Sammy decided that, colours slight off or no, the sweater’s long sleeves were going to be impossible in the summer heat, so he didn’t need it. He returned it to the rack. “I don’t think I’d mind too much if we weren’t,” he was surprised to hear himself say. “It’s a temporary thing, anyway. They’re destined to find somebody else in California, and I’ll be happy for them when that happens.”

“Just as long as they smooch you a lot now,” Rowan grinned. He smiled back, with a little self-conscious nod. Spying his vulnerability and her opportunity, she then added, “...and give you a good fucking every few days.”

He rolled his eyes and left the stall, primarily to hide what felt like the fire-engine-red blush taking over his face.

At the end of the block, the festival terminated with another circle of food trucks, so they grabbed a “bouquet” of pickles to share. Rowan made a joke about trans girls and pickles that Sammy didn’t quite understand, but let slide unexplained. He was too focused on

watching the crowd, and watching the crowd watch him, and marvelling.

Rowan had gleefully informed two more girls that Sammy was taken, and then when one of the girls mistook Rowan for Sammy's girlfriend and suggested all three of them have some fun together, turned that offer down, too. And that was both funny and kind of awesome, but it was also just the tip of the iceberg. Lesbians on the hunt or no, when people looked at Sammy here, it seemed to work differently than other places and other times.

They didn't see some awkward brown kid who stuck out. They didn't have questions about who he was or what he was doing there. He was just another queer, in a sea of queers, and there was a delight in most everyone's eyes, of seeing another queer, maybe saying Happy Pride or that's a fabulous skirt you're wearing, and it was all permitted. It was all so normal. It was like a parallel reality, a private little world just for queers, carved out of a Brooklyn street.

Pride was special. He got it now. It made perfect sense to set aside a whole week for this every year for the rest of his life.

"Our people," he murmured to himself, a little hesitantly, and couldn't help smiling. "My people."

The next evening, Sammy looked left and right as they stepped into the hotel lobby. "This is a Pride thing?" he asked Rowan uncertainly. There were no flamboyant costumes, no acres of skin on display, no melange of body odour, sunscreen, and cannabis wafting through the aggressively-conditioned air. It was just a scrupulously clean hotel lobby.

"This is a Pride thing," his cousin confirmed, striding across the lobby to jam an elevator call button.

He read the logo over the elevator doors. "What the fuck is a skylawn?"

"It's a very ostentatious name for a roof that's only three stories above street level," she responded with a roll of her eyes. The doors opened and they stepped inside; once the doors closed, she rooted around in her purse. "Oh, you'll need this."

He took the proffered card from her hand. "Why do I need some rando's New York driver's licence?"

"That's your New York driver's license," she corrected him with a laugh.

He snorted. "Rowan, this doesn't even look like me."

She shrugged. "Don't worry, your cleavage will make up the difference."

"And it says I'm 24!" he blurted as the elevator chimed and the doors opened.

Rowan leaned closer to whisper as she pulled him out of the elevator and into the evening air. "That is the purpose of a fake ID, Sammy."

"Good evening, ladies," called a smiling attendant behind a kiosk. The rooftop was festooned with fairy lights and little potted shrubberies, the latter of which had been positioned to create a little foyer area, complete with hostess kiosk. "Tickets and IDs, please."

Rowan strode up to the kiosk, presenting her phone with a barcode showing and then her own fake ID. With his own already in hand, Sammy mutely held out the card to the attendant. Unable to make eye contact with her, he instead looked over at the array of chairs that took up most of the roof.

"Thank you very much," the attendant smiled and gestured them through. "Welcome to the Rooftop Cinema Club."

It was only then that Sammy spied the movie screen stretched out across the next building over, and the fat outdoor speakers mounted along the sides of the grid of chairs. The chairs which all faced the screen, and were all, obviously, audience seating. It was a movie theatre, except on a rooftop. "Holy shit," he breathed.

"Innit cool?" Rowan grinned, and then grabbed his hand to pull him across the space, past the seating area. "Ah, there's the bar."

They both ordered cocktails with a side of popcorn, a juxtaposition which made Sammy giggle. He tried to present his ID again, but that was unnecessary, apparently. "You can put that away," she told him quietly as they navigated to their seats. "Only show it when you need to. You don't want somebody to look too hard and get you tossed out."

So not as foolproof as all that, he noted absently. Popcorn tucked into his elbow and cocktail held awkwardly in hand, he dropped the card into his purse. He was amazed he hadn't spilled booze all over some unsuspecting, already-seated moviegoer, and took a deep pull to make that less likely in the future. He blinked; the drink was strong. "Wow, that's—" he almost coughed, and then covered, "um, tasty."

"They make great drinks here," Rowan agreed, settling into her seat. "So you've never seen this?"

He sat gingerly, succeeding in spilling neither alcohol nor popcorn.

"Um. I didn't really watch a lot of cheerleader movies in Oak Grove."

"It's not a cheerleader movie," she giggled. "That's just kind of tangential. Or I dunno, not really. It's part of the main character's thing, and—oh, but I don't want to spoil anything for you. It's great."

"What is the whole title, again?" he asked as the lights dimmed and the screen flickered on.

"But I'm a Cheerleader!" Rowan stage-whispered, eyes sparkling in the half-light.

"She didn't know," he was telling Rowan as the lights came back up. He was dimly aware that he was slurring his words, and more than a little. Rowan had kept fetching them more cocktails throughout the movie. "She didn't know. Everybody around her knew, but she didn't. She thought she was just... doing what everybody expected of her, so therefore she had to be, or I mean she thought she had to be, what everybody expected of her. But she wasn't." He looked up at the dead screen. "She never was."

Rowan lolled, loose-limbed, in her own chair, smiling beautifully. "Right? And then she figures it out."

"She figures it out, and then they're happy." Sammy's thoughts skipped like a stone across a pond. "That place they went to, though, was so silly. Are there places like that, really?"

"Conversion camps or gay bars?" Rowan snorted. "Doesn't matter. Yes, they both exist, but they're a lot less silly than in the movie."

He snorted, which made his nose feel funny. "I know gay bars exist. We're going to one tomorrow, right?"

Rowan stood up—carefully—and looked down at him with a grin. "Assuming your hangover doesn't fucking kill you in the morning."

"Are we sure this is necessary?" he asked again while they shuffled along in the slow-moving line. His head was pounding, and the cute little round sunglasses he had on barely cut the morning light that was trying to stab out his eyeballs.

"Necessary? No," answered Uncle Henry. "Fun? Yes."

"It's also kind of a family tradition," Uncle Gideon put in from further up the line. "We're so happy to have you with us this year, Samantha." From the poorly-hidden smirks his uncles shared with each other, his condition was not lost on either of them.

"We'll get you a little hair of the dog once we're inside," Rowan promised, patting his elbow gently. "That'll help, I promise."

It was an age before they got to the front of the line and Gideon brandished their tickets, each one printed on a separate piece of printer paper. The ticket-taker, dressed in a sequined dress and wearing a very bad wig, gave them all a manic grin. "Welcome home, fam. Grab whichever table you like."

It was a gay bar, attested by the rainbow lights everywhere that looked like they'd been up for years, not thrown onto the walls last week like every other bar in New York right now. It was not large, and for all the twinkle lights, neither was it well-lit. Tables and chairs were scattered across the room, with a few wide aisles striking through the tumult. An empty stage took up pride of place against the wall opposite the bar, and above it was spread a banner that read: Stonewall Inn.

Sammy squinted at the banner as they sat down. Rowan ordered a round of mimosas and then a pitcher of the same to follow, and still he couldn't resolve the tickle in the back of his brain. "Okay," he finally hazarded, waving up at the wall. "I feel like I should be recognizing the name, but... I'm not exactly firing on all cylinders right now."

His uncles and cousin blinked at him as one. Finally Henry stammered, "The— the Stonewall Inn. You don't... recognize. Stonewall."

Gideon put a gentle hand on his husband's shoulder. "Did you know what Stonewall was when you were living in Oak Grove, honey?"

Luckily the mimosas arrived then, and Rowan passed one to Sammy insistently. "This is the Stonewall Inn, Sammy. It's where everything began for queerdom."

"Not everything—" Gideon tried to interrupt.

But Rowan waved a hand in his face. "Spare me your historical precision for a minute." Turning back to Sammy, she said, "This is where the first Pride happened, and it was a riot." She grinned. "Like, a literal riot. Queers fighting cops."

Sammy downed his mimosa and slowly poured another from the pitcher. Both the fructose and the alcohol hit his bloodstream almost immediately, and it was like his whole body groaned in gratitude. "Wait, what? How did Pride go from that to..."—he waved at the door, indicating the whole of New York and the rainbows vomitted all over it—"what it is now?"

"A lot of hard work by a lot of activists," answered Gideon. "But the spirit of the first Pride—that riot, where queers fought back against

oppression—was what inspired a whole lot of it. And arguably kicked off the modern queer rights movement.” He tapped the table with splayed fingers. “It all started here.”

Uncle Henry nodded. “Which is why our family comes every year, for—”

“It’s Drag Brunch, bitches!” shouted an announcer as she mounted the stage. She held a bedazzled microphone in front of a face that had... a whole lot of makeup on it. Sammy wasn’t even sure what, exactly, he was looking at. Eye shadow spiked out to her ears, contouring gone absolutely mad, lipstick so vibrant it seemed to glow, and false eyelashes that he was pretty sure would kick up a breeze if she blinked.

She was wearing a wig—it had to be a wig, right?—that was easily twice the size of her head. Her golden sequinned gown shimmered under the stage lights, wrapped around curves so generous they had to be exaggerated. Nor did Sammy miss her nails—not that she allowed anyone to miss her nails, the way she waved her hands around—which extended at least two inches from the tips of her fingers and were painted cheeto orange, with sparkles.

For one brief moment, Sammy wondered if the mimosas had been spiked and he was experiencing a drug-induced hallucination.

But the show went on, the announcer kept braying into the microphone, and the Roth-Masters all smiled and cheered like this was all perfectly normal. The woman on stage, who identified herself as Merri Mountains with a shake of her very solid bosom, promised a string of performances, encouraging the audience to cheer, to sing along, to tip generously, and to stay out of the aisles while the performers strutted their stuff around the room.

“That reminds me,” grunted Uncle Henry, leaning forward to dig his wallet out of his back pocket. He then unceremoniously dropped a stack of twenties on the table. When Sammy boggled—it had to be a few hundred dollars—his uncle gestured up at Miss Mountains. “For tips, like she said.”

And then the announcer in question completed her schpiel, waved, and strutted off stage. The coloured lights winked off, and the room dropped back into silverware-clicking muttering. A server materialized beside the table. “What can I get you?” she asked, and the Roth-Masters all studiously consulted the menus that Sammy hadn’t even noticed on the table.

He reached a hesitant hand out to his cousin’s elbow. “R—Rowan.

Ro. What the fuck is happening?"

She didn't look up from the menu. "They don't have the waffles this year," she told him as if that was an answer. "They used to make them with rainbow sprinkles; they were my favourite. But I think the bennies are pretty good. I forget who supplies the menu; it's obviously not Stonewall's kitchen doing the brunch."

"No, I mean—" he stammered, but then it was Rowan's turn to order, and he didn't want to interrupt. He numbly opened his menu.

"And for you, miss?" the server asked him not even thirty seconds later.

"Um. The eggs benedict?" he answered, having spied the first item on the list and connected it with Rowan's vague recommendation. "With bacon." The last was muscle memory, really, but you couldn't go wrong with bacon.

"I'll have that out for you in a few minutes," the server promised, collected the menus, and then the stage lights spun up.

Spears of light in every colour of the rainbow danced across the stage and the wall behind it. A pop song started blaring through the room. Another woman, in a costume just as colorful, curvy, and eye-gougingly sparkly, spun onto the stage and began lip-syncing to the lyrics.

The performer was, Sammy was pretty sure, trans. The announcer, too, and almost certainly the ticket-taking hostess at the door. His eye for spotting tells had sharpened in recent weeks, but the women also didn't seem to be avoiding them. Instead they seemed to call attention to each and every clocky tell they could by overdoing it: mammoth wigs, exaggerated makeup, generously padded underwear. Their prancing was ludicrously swishy; their flirting—with literally everyone—full of farcically overblown mannerisms.

The Roth-Masters hooted and cheered along with the rest of the crowd. When the performer came down off the stage and into the crowd, still prancing and lip-syncing, all three of them scrambled to grab a twenty and wave it at her. When she came by, they stuffed the money into her fake cleavage and under her garter belts. All three of them were clearly having the time of their lives.

Sammy profoundly didn't get it.

The first song drew to a close and in the brief respite following, their food was brought to the table. The eggs benedict were rather good, but before he could get even halfway into them, new music started blaring, the announcer crowed a new silly name into the microphone,

and another dancer strutted her way up onto the stage, shaking her ass and winking at everyone she passed by.

He weathered the second performance, even picking up a twenty to wave at the dancer and slide into her garter belt, but it wasn't pleasant. At first he thought it was the too-loud music and his hangover, but as the performer broke out of her lip sync to catcall one of the customers eating brunch, he realized it was something else.

Sammy looked sidelong at Rowan, thinking that she must be feeling what he was feeling, but his cousin was grinning and cheering and banging on the table. He looked from her to the dancer and back. The difference was night and day. Rowan was made up carefully, dressed immaculately, seamless and inarguably a young woman. The dancer, by contrast, was all seams, all exaggeration, playing up her man-in-a-dress schtick for laughs and tips. It was grotesque.

When the music died down, Sammy tried to excuse himself to use the restroom, but Rowan invited herself along.

The bathrooms were small—no surprise there—but Sammy pushed his way directly into a stall. Rowan hung by the sinks, checking her hair and lipstick. “What do you think, Sammy?” she asked, all excitement.

He sat on the toilet, skirt bunched up around his hips, not knowing what to say. “I shouldn’t be here.”

“Oh come on, Sammy, you can miss one class,” she chided, good-naturedly. “It’s only, what, Physics?”

“It’s not that,” he told her through the partition, although now that he’d been reminded, he could worry about that, too. “I just... I’m not really enjoying the show. I don’t think it’s my thing.”

What he didn’t say was: I feel like each drag performer is mocking me, and worse, mocking you. Prancing around on display, laughing at the seams in their presentation, just in general doing really shitty job at being trans. It was as if they were declaring that this was the best any trans girl could hope for, that every effort to look like a girl was doomed to ludicrous failure. The drag queens seemed to be inviting the whole world to laugh at them, and at Rowan, and at Sammy.

“It doesn’t have to be your thing,” his cousin assured him. “It’s kind of a queer culture thing, but you don’t have to enjoy every single thing about queer culture, you know? You’ll never see me wearing fucking rainbows. Pick a damn colour and commit, already.”

That drew a chuckle out of Sammy, which brought back the ghost of his headache. “I might need more mimosa,” he grumbled. “Hey wait.

We just... drunk a bunch of mimosas in front of your dads."

He could hear her shrug in her voice. "We're adults, the venue didn't card us, it's not the dads' responsibility to police our behaviour. Besides, mimosas are hardly even drinking." A moment later asked, "Are you actually peeing in there or just hiding from the drag show?"

He thumped his head back against the wall. "Hiding. Or at least just catching my breath."

"You should have said, silly," she laughed. "You want some time alone?"

"No, I feel silly enough already," he told her with a sigh, and stood up. "How many more songs do you think there will be?"

The answer was four: another new performer, then the ticket-taker hostess in her debut performance, followed by the announcer taking a turn, and lastly a duet-trio-quartet blowout finale. There was glitter in the last one, thrown by hand, which got absolutely everywhere.

Afterwards the performers lined up by the door so the audience could gush about the performances and take pictures. Sammy's family was the last group in the long line-up. Some of the performers recognized the Roth-Masters from prior years, and his uncles insisted on taking pictures with everyone. Sammy let himself be roped in, not wanting to dampen their annual ritual. He could still feel his shoulders slumping a little, though.

The uncles were chatting up the ticket-taker, saying encouraging things about her number, leaving Sammy trapped behind them, standing next to Merri Mountains. Feeling awkward, he raised a fist and said, "Trans pride solidarity."

But Merri laughed it off. "Oh honey, I'm not trans."

Sammy scowled, checked that the rest of his family was still engrossed in conversation. "You're not?"

She—or maybe he?—shook her head, paired with a quiet smile. "No honey, I'm a cis gay man." She splayed a hand across her very-obviously-fake-up-close cleavage. "Merri Mountains is a performance. It's camp. It's all the things that we're not supposed to do, according to the world of the straights, piled together into a disco dance number. It's raising a middle finger at expectations. Which is half of what Pride is about, you know?"

"Yeah, but..." he protested, verbally staggering until he waved a hand at her whole get-up, and the rest of the performers, for good measure. "It sure looks trans."

"I mean, some of us are," the drag queen allowed with a shrug. "At

least for a little while. Clarice over there, in the red?" She nodded down the line to one of the other performers. "She performed for years before she realized she was a woman, and started transitioning a few months ago. This will be her last performance."

"She's quitting? Why?"

Merri laughed. "Because it's not drag, anymore. Sure, she could maybe do a drag king routine, drag celebrities or something, or just shift over into burlesque, but... once she figured herself out, I think performing lost some of its lustre for her." She smiled. "She's so much happier, now, though."

The uncles were saying what sounded like the beginnings of actual goodbyes. "This was my first drag show," he told Merri. "And I... didn't really get it." She only nodded. "But maybe I'll understand it better next time."

"That's the spirit!" She clapped him on the shoulder like Andrei liked to. He staggered, chuckled at the thought that Merri was betraying a little of her buried masculinity, and then caught her eye. She gave him a look, and he realized: the gesture had been just as much a part of her performance as any shimmy to the beat or lilting flirt with an audience member. She peaked one eyebrow: she saw that he saw, and she winked. "See you then, honey."

"I told you that you'd eventually need an evening gown," Rowan grinned, unzipping the garment bag and then clapping her hands as tulle spilled out everywhere. The two of them were in her bedroom, getting ready.

He stood behind her in a comparatively simple outfit: just a cami and a skirt, with some strappy sandals. He was planning on wearing the sandals with the gown and had just worn them over to Rowan's, which she chided him for, even if she couldn't really explain why he should have needlessly switched shoes, too.

Rowan seemed intent on making this an event, even more than the rest of the Pride festivities she'd lined up for them. Sammy was just going with the flow.

They'd found the evening gown—three weeks back, now—in a second-hand boutique that still had prices larger than anything Sammy had ever seen in Abby's little clothing store back home. The strapless bodice and skirt were a deep shimmery red, scarlet at the bustline but brightening to cardinal at the bottom hem, with coils of white tulle studded with little red sequins. It seemed to Sammy to be a bit much,

and by a bit, his brain meant a whole lot.

It also didn't have pockets.

On the other hand, Sammy had found some pearlescent hair clips that would set off nicely.

Rowan insisted that they both do a full face. She'd wheeled Gideon's office chair into her bedroom and propped her full-length mirror sideways on her computer desk so they could work side-by-side. Sammy sat down to humor her, but once they were underway he found himself enjoying the process, doing makeup alongside his cousin, each step sprinkled with light chit-chat, compliments, and pointers.

When they were both near done, Gideon rapped on the door and stuck his head in. "Your dates are here. So are Agatha and Zoey."

"Well tell the girls to come up," Rowan told her father as if that were obvious. "Are you or Daddy going to do the shotgun talk?" Here she waggled her arms, elbows out, to poorly imitate a masculine swagger while still seated. "'You'd better treat my daughter and niece proper if you know what's good for you' and all that?"

Gideon snorted. "I'm more worried what the two of you will do to them, poor things." He smiled. "Samantha, you look stunning, and once you're in that dress? You're going to knock their socks off."

Their faces were finished by the time Aggie and Zoey got to the room, and then there was another round of compliments. The couple had gone with simple sheath dresses, Aggie in white and Zoey in black, with chunky necklaces in the opposite color. They looked adorable, and plainly a couple, and not at all overdressed, which is what Sammy knew he was going to be momentarily.

Rowan and Zoey helped him step into his gown while Agatha righted the full-length mirror. He zipped up his side, smoothed the lines over his hips, and turned to face his reflection.

"Holy fuck," he breathed in wonder.

The full-length mirror showed a girl decked out to the nines, looking a little shocked but otherwise... good. He looked good; that was as much as he would allow. He'd been expecting the worst, and it wasn't that, and he was just surprised, was all, that he didn't look like a shimmery trainwreck.

The girls wouldn't stop cooing over him, so he declared he was going downstairs.

"He's a doctor," Gideon was saying, voice wobbling on the brink of laughter. "He knows how to dispose of bodies."

“Which is good, because I don’t think we even own a shovel,” Henry rejoined with a guffaw, “Can’t bury you, so the only option, really, is to disarticulate all your joints and dissolve you in hydrochloric acid.”

“This is what passed for humour throughout my childhood,” Rowan commented drily, coming down the stairs behind Sammy. “If you ever wondered what’s wrong with me.”

That was enough to announce their presence, and both Finley and Vikram stood up from where they were sitting. Vikram was in a trim suit jacket and slacks, with a black tie over an electric blue shirt. Finley wore a tuxedo jacket, ruffled shirt, and a black knee-length skirt, pleated like a school girl’s. Fading smiles creased both of their faces; they’d been laughing along with the Roth-Masters’ jokes about their own murders and dismemberments. As they took in Sammy and Rowan (and Aggie and Zoey behind them), the looks of merriment were replaced by admiration.

“You look amazing,” Vikram said, at the same time that Finley said, “Wow, Samantha, you look incredible.”

They accepted the compliments and then the corsages that their dates had brought with them. As Finley slipped the collection of button red roses onto Sammy’s wrist, he spotted the boutonnière on their lapel, also composed of little red roses. He touched it gently with his free hand and giggled, “We match.”

“That’s the whole point,” said Vikram, and turned Rowan gently to display her corsage of blue orchids, held close to his boutonnière of the same. The flowers matched his blue shirt and Rowan’s dress, which was a deep sapphire blue on top, fading gracefully to white at her feet. (Upstairs, she’d crowed: “I’m Elsa, bitch!” and made pew-pew noises while flinging her hands out at the walls.)

“Oh, I didn’t know,” Sammy admitted, colouring slightly. “I’ve, uh. Never done this before.”

Rowan had her eye on the clock on the wall. “Okay, pictures! The limo will be here in fifteen.”

Vikram laughed. “You rented a limo?”

She scoffed in mock affront. “It’s Pride Prom, Vikram, of course I rented a limo. You’ve gotta do these things properly.”

Pride Prom was weird and fun and weird and frustrating and weird. It was held at a hotel event center, in a mammoth box of a ballroom decorated with streamers and balloons. The walls and floor would

probably have been various shades of beige under the house lights, but pinwheeling rainbow floor lights splayed colour all over everything, instead.

The center of the room was dominated by a wide dance floor before a stage from which a DJ shouted at the crowd in between tracks. Around the other three sides of the dance floor were tables and chairs; against the walls were circles and horseshoes of couches.

The seats were half-full when they arrived. The attendees ranged from teenagers to hipsters to doughy middle-aged folks to white-haired boomers; most of them looked a little dazed.

They'd checked coats and bags and then found a little circle of couches around a coffee table festooned with crepe paper. In the center of the table was a fishbowl filled with tea lights and glass beads, topped with a plastic groom-and-groom cake topper. It sat at an angle, and throughout the night they'd try to right the poor gentlemen, but they never stayed straight for long.

Which was kind of appropriate, Sammy figured.

The event was dry, for which Rowan had accommodated by stocking the limo generously. They had pregamed hard and arrived at the venue on the far side of tipsy. But as their buzzes wore off, the energy seemed to curve the wrong way for an evening of partying.

Once they were situated, Rowan and Zoey dashed across the room to the refreshments table and came back with arms full of punch in clear plastic cups. Once these were passed out, Rowan raised hers high. "A toast," she crowed, "to queers getting to party together, as is our right and our solemn duty."

Everyone cheered merrily, at least at first. With a chuckle, Vikram put out a hand and clarified: "As I am not a queer—sadly, I know; grown men have wept over it—I am happy to see you all get to celebrate in ways you might not have in high school. And so I am here in solidarity with you." He raised his glass towards his date. "As a favour to Rowan, to even out the numbers."

The rest of their little party was quiet for just a moment too long, and then lurched into lifting their glasses, cheering gamefully, and sipping at their punch.

His date smiled sweetly. "Vik, it doesn't matter under what auspices you come tonight. I'll make sure you have a good time."

For once in his life, Sammy caught the innuendo—and he was pretty sure Vikram had not. In any case, for the rest of the evening it seemed like Vikram's presence had an asterisk over it. He was here as a

favour.

But Sammy couldn't pay too much attention to Rowan's pursuit of Vikram and his apparent tone-deaf ignorance of what was happening. He had his own awkwardness to deal with.

It was Sammy and Finley's first time out as a couple with friends. Nestling into the crook of Finley's arm, which Sammy had only ever experienced as comfortable and familiar, took on a distinctly performative cast. More than once he spotted one of the girls making moony eyes at him. He felt put on display, at least until he solved that problem by closing his eyes.

"You two are such a cute couple," Rowan gushed at him when all four of them decamped to the bathroom.

"She speaks the truth," Zoey chimed in. "The way they look at you? Amazing."

Agatha only shot him a smile, but even that felt a little patronizing.

The best defense, he figured, was a strong offense. "Don't think we've missed the two of you making eyes at each other," he said, waving his fingers at Agatha and Zoey. "I think you've mentally undressed each other a dozen times each."

Agatha shrugged. "It's like a fun minigame. At this point, I'm really good at it."

They passed by the refreshments table on the way back, returning to the table laden with glasses of punch, plates of chips and dip, and a few cups filled with candy. Finley laughed at their approach, and it didn't take long to see why. They and Vikram had had the same idea while the girls were in the bathroom, and had already provisioned their little coffee table. Soon it was filled to overflowing, and they all tucked into the feast of junk food. It was surprisingly comfortable, even if it did feel a bit like a high school party.

Which Sammy figured was also kind of appropriate: nothing said 'high school' like prom, after all.

Sammy sat down next to Finley and was about to burrow into them, then thought better of it. He leaned back, tapping his collarbone invitingly, and Finley leaned into him with a contented sigh. Like taking turns opening doors, he thought to himself.

"I'm so glad you guys came down into the city for the weekend," Rowan was telling Aggie and Zoey. She was cuddled up against Vikram, looking exceedingly content.

"I was all set to do our local Prides in Hartford and New Haven, compare and contrast, see whose was better, but this one"—and here

she rolled her eyes over at Zoey—"insisted that nothing beats New York Pride."

"She's right," Rowan said with a diffident shrug.

"Like you've ever done any other Pride in your life, bitch," Agatha smirked. "Anyway, it's not like either of us actually have vacation days, but we can take a couple days off to come to the City."

Sammy had to adjust how he was sitting to take into account the weight of his enbyfriend pressed up against him. He forced a little giggle as he did so, jostling Finley but bending over to brush a kiss across their forehead while he had the opportunity. He settled into seated position; Finley settled into him. It still wasn't quite right, but Sammy would figure it out.

"Did you fly or train?" asked Vikram.

"Train," Agatha answered. "It was actually kind of nice."

He nodded and then made a face. "I'm on a plane next week."

"Me, too," said Rowan, bobbing her head, but with a calculating look in her eye. Not one that Vikram would be able to see, given his vantage.

Instead he scoffed. "Yeah, my flight is fifteen hours long."

"Mine's eighteen," she countered sourly.

He craned his neck to look at her. "Where are you going, girl? My parents are roping me into the annual pilgrimage to fucking New Delhi."

"What?!" Rowan gasped, just a touch theatrically. She planted her hand on his chest as she turned around to face him. "We're going to New Delhi. What the fuck! That's such a weird coincidence."

Sammy strongly suspected that it was not a coincidence at all.

Vikram, by contrast, did not appear to suspect anything. "Holy shit, you'll have to visit," he insisted with a bright smile. "Come save me from all my cousins."

"I would love that," she gushed, grinning from ear to ear. "Tate's doing some research stuff and Daddy's got colleagues he wants to see, so I'll be at loose ends a bunch—"

"I can show you the city," he suggested. "All the good food. You can't miss the food. I bitch about the place, but it has some bright spots."

"I love this plan," his cousin enthused, and turned around to lean up against her date again. She smiled like the cat who ate the canary.

Sammy looked from Rowan to Zoey, who caught his eye and rolled hers.

They danced, they took silly photos at the selfie booth, they kept making trips back to the refreshments table to refill their inconveniently small plastic cups. But by ten o'clock, their pregaming had dissipated completely and everyone was distressingly sober.

"It feels strangely offputting to get less drunk as the night grows long," Vikram observed. "Remind me why there's no alcohol at this thing?"

Zoey rolled her eyes. "Vik, there are teenagers present."

When he looked immediately at Sammy, Rowan laughed. "No. Hun. Real teenagers, like fucking fourteen-year-olds. They're not going to give vodka tonics to fourteen-year-olds."

"Nobody wants to see that," Agatha concurred with a solemn nod.

"And there are other things to do than drink," Rowan pointed out, grabbing Vikram's hand and pulling him to his feet. "Come dance!"

With an arm under the small of Sammy's back, Finley scooped him off the couch, onto his feet, and out onto the dance floor. Sammy clutched at their shoulders, giggling. The music had been a truly unholy mish-mash of styles and eras as the DJ tried to cater to the vast breadth of ages among the attendees. By now they were inured to it. "Tainted Love" had just segued into "Pink Pony Club" without so much as a raised eyebrow. They just danced.

An indeterminate number of songs later, the tempo had shifted downward and Sammy was curled up against Finley as they did little more than sway. Who needed booze when you had exhaustion? "This was a weird night," he told them, stifling a yawn, "but I'm glad I got to spend it with you."

"I'm glad, too," Finley replied, their chest vibrating against his cheek, and one corner of Sammy's brain noted that that's what he was learning not to do when he spoke. He giggled at the thought. And then Finley curled a finger under his chin to lift his face so he was looking up at them. "And I don't think I've said it explicitly yet, but you look beautiful tonight."

A slow smile spread over Sammy's face. "You gonna take my picture, now?"

Finley shook their head. "No," their voice was soft, tender; Sammy wasn't sure how he could hear it over the music. "I just wanted you to know. You're beautiful."

Sammy couldn't bring himself to deflect or dodge, so instead he pressed his cheek against Finley's lapel again. Buried his nose in ruffles. He didn't want to deflect or dodge. He wanted, just for a

moment, to believe what Finley was saying. “Thank you,” he managed after a moment, unsure if his enbyfriend could even hear him.

The DJ announced the last song of the night, and they spent more of it kissing than dancing. They were hardly the only couple on the dance floor so occupied. Then they returned to their group’s corner, where Vikram and Rowan were waiting, tapping on their phones. Aggie and Zoey fell into the couches a moment later, only to stand up again as the party emptied out.

The limo rental had only been for dropoff, so the six of them shuffled their way to the subway station along with at least a hundred other tired queers. There most of them parted; Finn offered to escort Sammy all the way to his dorm room, but doubling back would cost them almost an hour, and Sammy was too exhausted, anyway, to take advantage of the close proximity of Finn and his bed. He demurred, and Rowan promised to get her sleepy cousin home safe. Vikram was taking a different train, anyway.

Finley kissed him once more on the platform, and then Sammy dozed on Rowan’s shoulder as the train rattled homewards.

On Thursday morning, he awoke to a text from Rowan: **Rest up today for the big push!**

So Sammy rested. And went to class. And caught up on reading. But as he traced a simple, tight triangle between dorm, class room, and dining hall, never once leaving campus, it felt like resting.

He even got his voice exercises done, and went to bed at what felt like the decadent hour of ten p.m.

“Why is it called Bliss Days?” he asked. The four of them—Rowan, Agatha, Zoey, and Sammy—had just cleared the front desk of the venue and were crossing a rather sedate dining room towards the stairs. The thumping of bass along with shouts and cheers coming through the ceiling made encouraging promises about the party awaiting them. “Nothing about that name says it’s an event for queer women.”

“They used to call it *Femme Fatale*,” explained Zoey. “Which was a pretty clever name. But, you know, not all women are femmes, I guess?”

“Or they didn’t want ‘fatal’ to be part of their event name,”

observed Agatha.

"Regardless, we're going to drink and dance and maybe-probably drool over all the eye candy on display," Rowan declared, heading up the stairs. "I dunno about you girls, but I kind of need this."

The second floor of the club was a maelstrom of flashing lights, upbeat music, and dancing bodies, nearly all of them women. No windows, here, not that natural light would have had any chance against the flashing, actinic glare that permeated the room.

Rowan's hips started bouncing as she came up the final steps, and she reached backwards to grab Sammy and pull him into the fray. The crowd parted for them easily, half of the dancers lost in their own groove and the other half plainly checking out the four new femmes who'd joined the party. The dress code mirrored the crowd at Brooklyn Pride—rainbows and skin—just with, somehow, shorter skirts.

Not that Sammy had much room to criticize: the girls had picked him up at his dorm room and decreed that his first outfit just wasn't slutty enough, and had made him change. He'd protested that he was spoken for, that he didn't have the least interest in getting picked up that night, but they insisted right back that it was the principle of the thing.

Zoey and Agatha had simply recycled their prom wear from Wednesday, the hypocrites. "Have LBD, will travel," Zoey had said with a shrug, and then they'd all tried to explain to Sammy what an LBD was, and he had to roll his eyes and insist that he already knew, he had a Little Black Dress in his closet, and why couldn't he wear that? But he'd been overruled.

"They're living out of suitcases; you've got access to your full closet, so you can go way skimpier," Rowan admonished him. A woman of convictions, she herself was wearing a red triangle bikini top and daisy dukes so short the bottoms of the pockets poked out under the frayed bottom hems. "Think of all the lesbians, Sammy. They're going to this event to see some skin; are you going to be the one to disappoint them?"

So here he was in the shortest, flippiest little skirt he owned, plus fishnets, and an iridescent top that he'd only ever considered as something that would be supplemented with other layers—significantly longer layers—but was tonight making its solo debut, and doing a poor job of covering his bra.

But as Sammy danced alongside Rowan, surrounded by skin and

laughter, he found a certain sense of peace. Sure, he was nearly naked, but he was dancing, too, and dancing was about bodies, and the joy of how they moved and how they looked while moving. So maybe wearing something that showed a little more of his body made some sense.

It certainly made sense for the girls and the bodies around him, who were grinding and jiggling and swaying to the beat. Rowan had been right: there was a lot of eye candy on display, set out to be drooled over. But Sammy's appreciation of individual parts—a shapely leg, a perfectly-rounded belly, the soft gradient of squished cleavage—faded away if he didn't focus. He found himself enjoying the whole picture, like one of those massive oil paintings in the Met, where the details added up to something greater than the parts.

And if Sammy felt like he was contributing, that he and his body were part of that beautiful picture, then maybe he could let go a little. Just dance. Just join in. Just be one of the...

"Drinks!" Rowan shouted in his ear, and started tugging him towards the stairs. Aggie and Zoey were leading the way, striking through the crowd so that he and Rowan could follow after.

The next floor was full of leafy trees and fairy lights, a greenhouse that took up the whole third floor, with a retractable roof presently open to the stars. Tables and couches curled around the trees, all of them mobbed with women and femmes. The bar—massive, rectangular, and polished until the wood shone—stood out from the sea of organic shapes and textures, bright backlit bottles beckoning with the promise of inebriation.

Rowan and Zoey bellied up to the bar to order their drinks while Agatha and Sammy scouted for seating. He almost despaired at the slim pickings until a knot of women all stood up right in front of him and beelined for the stairs down to the dance floor. He threw himself at the little circle of seats and then waved frantically for Agatha.

"Well done, Sammy!" crowed Rowan when they regrouped. "I got doubles," she explained, hands full of drinks, "because who knows how long it'll take to get the next round."

They settled in, with both Agatha and Zoey groaning happily as they got off their feet. "We've been walking all over the City for two days straight," Zoey sighed. "I wish I had a pedometer, just to see how far we've gone."

"Wait, was there Pride stuff that Rowan didn't drag me into?" Sammy laughed.

"Not Pride events, just the quixotic farce that is looking for an affordable apartment in New York City," Agatha groused.

"Good luck with that," Rowan put in.

"I know I'll probably be in the dorm with you," Zoey sighed at her roommate. "And Agatha can train in on weekends. But it just... would have been nice to get a place together."

"Insert U-Haul joke here," smirked Rowan.

"We've been together six months next week," Zoey retorted with faux hauteur. "We do not qualify for U-Haul second-date punchlines, thank you very much."

Sammy blinked; things didn't add up in his brain. Not the U-Haul lesbian thing; the other thing. "Wait, why will you be training into the City?" he asked Agatha.

"Because I graduated?" she laughed in response. "They don't let you live in the dorms if you're not a student. And I'm taking a year off before med school, because... I really need a year off before med school."

"Oh, I just... assumed you were all sophomores like Rowan," he admitted, and shook his head as if to clear it of misconceptions.

"I'm a year ahead of Rowan," explained Zoey, "and Aggie was a year ahead of me, along with Finley."

"And Vik's my year," Rowan added, just a touch sourly.

Nobody responded immediately; finally Zoey just said, "Yeah."

His cousin flopped her hands onto the plush arms of her chair, sloshing but not spilling her vodka tonic. "Seriously, should I just go back to dating girls?" she asked.

"Yes," Agatha answered without a second of hesitation.

Zoey was a little more diplomatic. "Or maybe just... not fixate on the one boy who... doesn't seem interested."

"He's interested," Rowan maintained truculently, and slurped the last of her drink out from the ice. "I've sat on his lap enough to know: there is—ahem—*pointed* interest, there. He's just... being difficult."

"Honey, you're hot," her roommate tried to explain, "and I'm sure you... inspire a reaction in him, especially with the way you flirt, but there's... other aspects to consider when dating."

Rowan scowled into her empty glass and stood up. "I'm getting another. Anybody else?"

The other girls had barely put a dent in theirs; Sammy reluctantly asked for a second—his first wasn't even half gone—just so his cousin wouldn't feel awkward. She stormed off, back to the bar.

"What is with her and Vikram?" he asked Zoey once Rowan was out of earshot.

"He told her no," the girl replied, shrugged, and sank into her chair. "Which only makes her want it more. Just to show him."

"If he wanted to be rid of her, all he'd need to do is take her on one medicore date," Agatha sighed. "Then she'd lose interest."

Sammy looked back to where his cousin had gone, caught one glimpse of her shoulderblade, waiting by the bar, and turned back to the girls. "So like... why doesn't he? I mean." He struggled to put together the question he actually wanted to ask. "She's told me that he said he can't date a white girl, but also that he has dated white girls before. And he likes her, right? He's all jazzed to see her in India."

Zoey rolled her eyes. "Don't even get me started on that nonsense."

Sammy nodded and waved his hands sideways, as if he could brush the largest democracy in the world back out of the conversation. "Yeah, that's... that's a whole nother thing. But. He seems to like her company, he's attracted to her... what other, uh, aspects is he considering that's holding him back?"

"What do you think?" Agatha all but spat, and focused on her drink.

Zoey saw that he wasn't jumping to the conclusion that she and her girlfriend found obvious, and she gave him a soft, almost apologetic smile. "Cause she's trans, honey."

"Really?" he asked incredulously. "Vikram?"

She shrugged. "He's a decent guy—as guys go—but for some guys, that's just a non-starter."

"You can bet he's under pressure from his parents to produce grandchildren," Agatha added sourly, "and that's not gonna happen with Rowan."

But he kissed me, Sammy thought but did not say. Because so had Agatha and Zoey, that same night, and it had meant nothing. And because if Vikram had kissed Sammy as a lark, but wouldn't date Rowan because she was trans... the memory of that kiss curdled in Sammy's mind. That kiss, performed right in front of his cousin, had meant less than nothing. It had been something cynical, something for show, something to push Rowan away. To hurt her, just a little, and get her to back off. He felt a little sick.

But then Rowan was back with drinks, and he polished off his first so that he could accept the next one, and the girls talked about something else for a while. They abandoned their lucky seats to go downstairs and dance some more, and later when they came back up

for more drinks, they had to sip while standing around and fending off propositions from hopeful single lesbians. Then they went dancing some more, everything blurring together into a wash of lights and beats and bodies again. They stumbled home in the early hours, when the City was as quiet as it ever got.

Rowan didn't mention Vikram again for the rest of the night.

"Okay, so what is the difference between a March and a Parade?" asked Sammy as they plodded along Fifth Avenue. The four of them had reconvened Saturday afternoon, first at a barbecue place to fuel up on tacos and beer, and then across the street in Bryant Park, for the start of the Dyke March.

Now they were walking down the middle of the street with a whole bunch of lesbians. There were so many, in fact, that they stopped traffic; teams of volunteer marshalls linked arms at every cross street to hold back the cars so everybody else could pass by. A lot of the marchers were waving signs or carrying banners, which bore slogans from the straightforward—"My Body My Choice"—to the arcane: "Even When Her Shackles Are Different Than Mine." Sammy wasn't complaining, exactly, but being in a throng of lesbians had been more fun the night before, when there was dancing involved.

"A march advocates for change," explained Zoey. "It's an expression of how things are not okay, that we are organized to take action, and those in power ought to take notice."

"Whereas a parade," put in Rowan, "is a reminder to ourselves and everybody else, that—" She inflated her lungs and then shouted across the assembled heads: "WE OWN THESE STREETS!"

A moment later a dozen voices echoed back, "WE OWN THESE STREETS!" Rowan repeated the phrase again, and this time even more voices took up the chant.

She kept it up long enough until it had a life of its own, and she didn't need to cheerlead. She turned to Sammy with a grin. "New York isn't New York without us."

"Yeah, but..." Sammy protested weakly. "This is a march, not a parade, so... chanting that we own the streets seems... contrary to your point?"

But Rowan shrugged off his confusion. "There's overlap."

"The Parade has a city permit," Agatha pointed out laconically. "Dyke March does not. This is, technically, an act of civil disobedience. Walking in the Parade is participating in an event condoned by the

government." She waggled her hand. "Kind of a different vibe."

Different vibe or no, it was a lot of walking: more than thirty blocks of slow steps. The only entertainment was spotting clever new signs and occasionally shouting call-and-response chants. Sammy was... less than enamoured of this particular event. And perhaps part of that was just simple exhaustion on his part: it had been a long week. Now he was walking two miles in the thick summer air, for obscure political reasons.

Thinking about politics prompted Sammy to ask Rowan, "Why aren't your dads in the march?"

"Because it's only open to dykes," she answered easily enough. "Self-identified, of course."

Ah. So this was another thing that Sammy probably shouldn't be involved with that Rowan had just swept him into.

He looked around him, at all the dykes shouting and chanting and smiling at each other. Everyone cared so much. You could see it in their faces; you could hear it in their voices.

Thanks to Gideon's reading list, Sammy had a tenuous grasp of activism—collective action, solidarity, exposing and addressing inequalities and oppression—but until now, his understanding had been entirely theoretical. But looking up and down the thronged street, he was surprised to see all those parts in evidence right in front of him.

He could see how all these dykes had gathered, agreed that many things in the world had gone wrong, and so they stood up and made a scene.

Suddenly, it was amazing to witness. There were so many people in this march, so many people who'd taken time out of their lives, who'd come out to flout the laws and stall the traffic and shout to the rooftops until they were heard.

He wished he could be a part of it. But here he was, merely walking while they marched. Stealing a little of that glory.

Because that's all he was doing: pretending to be something he wasn't so he could get into a good school. *Take what you can get, babe*, except Gideon's advice had been predicated on a marginalized identity that Sammy had no right to claim. Selfish.

Selfish, and now witness to such community, such solidarity, such vision, that it shamed him to his core.

It was as if the circumstances which had wrapped him up in this ridiculous ruse had also brought him closer to all this, dangled him

here where he could witness this marvelous, beautiful, powerful community.

A community to which he did not belong.

A community that he was mocking and denigrating just by being here.

A community to which he was an outsider at best and an imposter at worst.

The pace of the march wavered; squeals and shouts sounded from up ahead. Sammy craned his neck to see what the commotion might be. On the horizon were trees and a plume of water arcing up against the afternoon sky.

"You can't call this the best part of the march," Rowan appeared at his elbow to confide, "but this is the best part of the march." And without any further explanation, she peeled off her shirt. No bra underneath. His cousin ran giggling under the great stone arch that served as the Fifth Avenue entrance to Washington Square Park.

Sammy followed uncertainly, his eyes widening to saucers as the scene before him came into view. Sunk into the center of the park's plaza and surrounded by thick stone steps was a massive fountain. Water shot six stories into the air before falling down into a broad, shallow pool.

The pool was full of dykes, in various states of undress, all sopping wet.

Zoey went streaking past him a moment later, and then Agatha came up to stand beside him. She was still clothed, and holding Zoey's shirt and shorts. She gave Sammy and his astonishment a short smile. "This is how the Dyke March always ends," she told him.

"You're not... joining?"

Agatha shook her head. "I don't get naked for everybody. No judgement, it's just not my style." She paused a beat. "I'd be happy to hold your clothes for you, if you like."

Sammy looked down into what was becoming a party in the fountain. People of all shapes and sizes waded and splashed, laughing. Almost all were topless; a smattering were completely nude. A few couples kissed under the spray.

Sammy did a double take to confirm that, yes, one of the naked dykes was, well, trans and hadn't had bottom surgery. Her little girldick flopped around merrily as she danced in the fountain.

"You not going in?" asked Agatha, voice neutral.

Sammy shook his head. He didn't belong in there. He might have

marched with the dykes today, he might have partied and danced with them last night, but he shouldn't have. He didn't understand then, but he understood now: he'd been trespassing. He'd taken the wonderful world that they'd painstakingly created and defended, and he'd smeared himself all over it. Not that he could say any of that to Aggie. So instead he joked: "I think my tits would fall off."

Agatha nodded. "That would be awkward."

So they stood and watched as a few hundred dykes splashed and laughed and danced in the water, insisting on being seen in all their glory. Sammy's heart thumped in his chest with longing. Eventually he turned away, and told Aggie he'd catch the subway home on his own.

"Rowan, I'm not sure how much Pride I've got left in me," he tried telling her the next day. They were coming up out of the subway station, meeting Aggie and Zoey and Finley for the parade. "After yesterday? And the night before? You didn't tell me Pride is an endurance trial."

She turned and walked backwards so she could grin at him. "The best endurance trial ever, though. You've had fun, yeah?" A flicker of uncertainty squeezed the corners of her eyes.

"I have," he nodded, and only after answering actually thought about it. He wasn't lying, at least not in part. There'd been a lot that he had enjoyed, even if there'd been some rocky bits, too. At least the parade today was actually for queers like him, and he wouldn't end up frustrated at himself for infiltrating events he had no business at.

He'd worn a rainbow tie-dye crop top that he'd picked up at Brooklyn Pride, because the rainbow thing was for all queers, and he qualified for that. He'd also managed to find yellow, pink, and blue bangles for his wrists, so he had a little pan bling, too. He was wearing entirely too many different colours (remembering Rowan's bathroom admonishment about picking a colour and sticking with it had almost prompted him to ditch the whole outfit), but he was resolved not to care. He was here to have fun and be with his people.

"So where are we sitting?" he asked Rowan's back. In Brooklyn, she'd insisted they go claim good seats more than an hour before the parade even started.

"Oh, we're not sitting," she laughed back at him. She grabbed his hand and pulled him up the street. Fifth Avenue was closed, this time with police barricades, but each street leading east and west was

crowded with masses of people, trucks covered in glittery tinsel, and actual parade floats. It was to the one of the floats that she directed him. "We're riding in style!"

The float was essentially a very flamboyant flatbed trailer: all rainbow glitter shimmering in the morning light. A railing snaked around the outside edge, defining a little walkway around the float's centerpiece: a massive papier mâché recreation of The Thinker. The real sculpture sat outside Philosophy Hall back on campus; this one had been embellished with a thought bubble above his head. It read: "I Think, Therefore Gay."

Columbia's name and logo were emblazoned across the sides of the trailer, along with the names and logos of CQA and GendeRev. Rowan pulled Sammy over to the short ladder at the back corner of the flatbed, all but hidden under the reflective tassles of tinsel. "I'm on the float?" he asked needlessly, even as he climbed aboard. "Is that even allowed?"

Rowan pulled herself up after him and shrugged. "You're a Columbia student, so sure, why not?"

"Yeah, but not... really."

"You take classes at Columbia, that makes you a Columbia student," she told him, rolling her eyes. "And besides, it's stupid hard getting volunteers to ride this thing outside of the school year."

"They even let me on, and I don't even go there anymore," said Finley, coming around the walkway from behind The Gay Thinker. Smiling wide, they slid their arms around Sammy's waist; he leaned in eagerly for a good morning kiss.

"You work there," Rowan pointed out with good-natured exasperation. "This is as much about Columbia as a queer-friendly workplace as about Columbia as a queer-friendly school."

Finley had settled their arm onto Sammy's far hip. They snorted. "Queer friendly because we drag them there, kicking and screaming every time."

"Exactly." Rowan returned with a large cardboard box, and shoved it into Finley's belly, under his free hand. "And now we celebrate our victories on a sparkly parade float in front of millions of people."

Sammy reached into the box. Inside sloshed little rainbow foil squares, each one bearing the school's logo. He pulled one out and squinted at it. "We're celebrating with condoms?"

"Damn straight," Rowan nodded. "Safer sex for everybody!" She hustled away to talk to some of the other volunteers, having an earnest

conversation about something-or-other and directing them all to space out the little cardboard boxes all around the base of the central statue. Rainbow condoms within reach no matter where you were on the float.

"We're going to throw these out to the people watching the parade," Finley tried to explain to Sammy.

"Oh, I assumed as much," he nodded. "Some floats did that at Brooklyn Pride last weekend. I thought about making a little collection out of the ones I caught."

Finley passed him one with a grin. "Well here, add to your collection."

Not having pockets, Sammy took the foil packet and slipped it into his bra.

"Oh my god, could you two be any more disgustingly adorable?" asked Zoey as she pulled herself up the ladder behind them. When Sammy detached from Finley self-consciously, she waved her hands. "No no, you were doing a good job. Be disgustingly, publicly adorable. It's Pride!"

Sammy chuckled at that and looked sidelong at his enbyfriend. They were wearing the sparkly green dress they'd worn at the club when Sammy had first met them, and makeup even bolder than the look they'd been sporting that night. It was probably their most gender-bendy outfit, and also had the benefit of being skimpy and therefore cool for the hot summer day. Standing beside Sammy, who was decked out in rainbows and all his obvious transness, they were very clearly a queer couple.

And now they'd be on a float in front of—Rowan had said—millions of people. Held up as... what, exemplars of queer life on Columbia's campus? So many people, so many pairs of eyes, all of them seeing him... like this? Was he really comfortable with that?

Sammy was surprised to realize he was.

It was Pride, after all. The streets were lined with queers and allies, and they'd all be smiling and waving and cheering. He had nothing to worry about. It was a big, queer love fest, and they were all there to cheer each other on.

Agatha had climbed aboard after Zoey and was now poking at one of the cardboard boxes. "Ah, the good ol' rainbow condoms, eh? Good to see we're continuing our tradition of erasing cis lesbians dating cis lesbians."

Rowan came around the corner of the float with another box, this one labelled: Open In Case of Agatha Bitching. She thrust it into her

friend's hands and then patted her cheek.

Agatha pried open the box. "Ooo, rainbow dental dams!"

They waited for nearly an hour before it was their float's turn to rumble to life and creep onto the parade route. And then they spent the better part of three hours smiling and waving and throwing condoms and dental dams into the crowd.

There was a sound system buried underneath The Gay Thinker, so they blasted queer music as they went, singing along when they knew the words, shaking their hips when they didn't. Sometimes the crowd joined in, which seemed a little like magic.

And sure, it got tiring, and towards the end Sammy's smile and wave were both getting a little strained, but how could he stop? These were his people, who were happy to see him, and he was happy to see them. There were families and little kids, and he wanted to show them, beam into their little brains, that it was okay to be who you were, that being queer was totally normal. Teenagers, too, with fierce grins and who may or may not be here with their parents or their knowledge, taking a chance to see what was possible in this big wide world. So he waved, and smiled, and threw rainbowed prophylactics until the boxes were empty.

The float pulled past the end of the parade route and onto a side street, rumbling to a stop next to the curb. They disembarked sloppily, bending and flexing their legs after having stood and braced on a moving float for hours on end.

Rowan's fellow organizers had to push her off the float, reminding her that she'd signed up for setup, not teardown, and she was done for the day. She turned to her friends with a sheepish smile. "Something something avoid burnout, you stupid bitch," she paraphrased, and then clapped her hands. "And the next step of that is beer, right?"

PrideFest was only a few blocks away, the same kind of square-canopies-lining-the-street sort of affair as Brooklyn Pride had been, only bigger and louder. A beer garden had been set up in an adjacent park; after filing past the bored-looking attendant checking IDs, they bought overpriced beer and settled into a spot of grassy shade.

Rowan pointed at Sammy around her tall plastic cup. "See what I meant about last weekend being baby Pride?"

"Yeah, this is huge," he agreed, and leaned sideways, up against Finley's shoulder. "Seems too big to see it all."

"Oh, absolutely," his enbyfriend laughed. "Especially after the

parade."

But Rowan was intent on at least giving it a good try. They roved up and down the streets, poking their heads into every stall they passed, picking up pamphlets for weird community organizations, colourful souvenier condoms for Sammy's new collection, even fridge magnets from the City explaining how to properly recycle your motor oil (why did they even have a booth?). Aggie and Zoey bailed after they completed the first street, citing their tired feet. Rowan, Sammy, and Finley pressed on. It felt like half the stalls they visited they'd already seen at Brooklyn Pride, or maybe they were all just blurring together.

"Oh my god!" shouted Rowan, and went squealing towards the next stall, a double-wide pavillion filled to bursting with sequins and technicolour wigs and sex toys. The Transformations Boutique had made an appearance at Pride, and staffing the booth was not just Gloria but also Lucille herself, in the flesh. "The Riviera's too hot this time of year," she confided to Rowan after introductions had been made. "And besides, I couldn't miss Pride."

Sammy's cousin dove into chatting with Lucille, catching up what sounded like years of backlogged life stories. He chimed in a few times, but it quickly became clear that the conversation was between the two ladies, with Finley listening in.

Finally he took a step back, made sure nobody had noticed his quiet withdrawl, and stalked across the booth to the register counter and Gloria. Along the way he scooped a cardboard box off the display table and quietly set it down next to the register. "Can I get this, please?" he asked the tattooed clerk. "In a, um, in a bag?"

The sales girl smirked, first bagging the box before ringing it up. "Nothing to be ashamed of, Samantha."

"Not ashamed," he told her, and managed a smile that was equal parts genuine and embarrassed. "It's just a surprise."

Gloria's eyes darted from Sammy to Finley, across the stall. "They're cute. Hope you two have fun."

He handed over money; she gave him his change and a receipt. "Not returnable if it's opened, obviously," she advised him.

"Jeez, I hope not," he laughed, and then turned around to walk right into Rowan, done chatting with Lucille.

She made a show of trying to look down into his bag. "Whatcha got there, Sammy?"

"You don't want to know what this is," he told her, and couldn't

help giggling.

She lifted one eyebrow.

“It’s just more rainbow shit,” he admitted, or half-admitted. It was, indeed, rainbow-coloured. She slitted her eyes theatrically and then turned away.

The bag burned in his hand, alternately weighty or as light as air. He couldn’t believe that he’d bought the thing, and he was also so immensely relieved that he had. He simply didn’t have time to go across town to the actual Transformations Boutique, and he didn’t know the first thing about ordering this sort of thing online. He tried not to think about it, but his attention kept wandering back to the bag and its contents.

It was only when he volunteered to stand in line for lemonade while both Finley and Rowan ran off to the restroom that he could peek again at his purchase. He had to be careful, though, lest the people ahead and behind him in line saw what he had. Not that they were paying much attention; ahead, a gaggle of teens were laughing with their friends, and behind him two bare-chested men were passing the time making out.

Sammy tipped the bag so he could peer down at the box inside. Yep. He’d actually bought it. The top edge was labelled Training Dildo with Flared Base. The name, and the product itself, were indeed rainbow coloured.

It was the rainbow part that caught up with him, and not the thing-to-stick-in-your-butt part.

Knowing that he’d bought yet another rainbow pride thing and still hadn’t picked up some proper trans bling seemed to incense Rowan. She started pointing out every iteration of baby blue and pink (sometimes white got in there, but not often) that she spotted, waggling her eyebrows in an unintentional caricature of a used car salesman.

Trans pride hoodie.

Trans pride incense holder.

Trans pride skirt.

“Programmer socks” with bands of the three colours all up and down their length, without any explanation what they had to do with programmers.

A trans pride flag made out of coloured glass to hang in his window.

A trans pride flag sticker to go on his laptop.

By the time Rowan held up the seventh trans pride coloured item

for Sammy's consideration—this time it was a pink-blue-and-white knit beanie with a cartoon animal patch on the front—her desperation was starting to show.

"Don't you think I'm a little old for Pokémon?" he tried to laugh it off.

"Sylveon is eternal," she insisted, and then looked down at the hat with a slight smile. "Honestly, I might... nah." And then it went back on the hat rack, but the conversation topic itself was not so easily discarded. She followed him out of the booth. "Really, Sammy, I don't get it. Do you just not like the baby colours?"

"It's not that," he hedged. Finley was in the next booth, talking animatedly with the vendor about windchimes. Maybe he could slide into that conversation to get out of this one.

"It's because you're embarrassed," his cousin said, half-accusingly, half-despondent, and stopped dead in the middle of the flow of people. "You don't want to wear the colours, you don't want to... advertise that you're trans."

He turned around, already shaking his head. "No, it's not that at all."

"It's not something to be ashamed of, Sammy," she told him, far more earnestly and desperately than he was comfortable with her acting. "Even if some people don't understand. Can't understand. It's wonderful and amazing and... and it's Pride, Sammy. Samantha. This week of all weeks, we get to be proud of who we are." Fuck, did she have tears in her eyes?

He wrapped her up in a hug. "Rowan, I am proud, I am so proud," he said, his lips to her ear. "You have no idea. This week has been... it's been magical." He pulled back so he could look her in the face. A few tears had fallen down her cheeks during the hug. "My first Pride, Ro, and it's been amazing. And you made it amazing."

"Really?"

He nodded his head so hard it felt like it might fall off. "Really. Really-really." He hazarded a weak smile and considered just going back and buying the damn Sylveon beanie.

As if he wasn't wearing enough pride bling already.

Maybe that was an angle that could work. He nodded Rowan's attention down to his rainbow crop top, gestured with his pan pride bangles. "But Ro, it's my first Pride," he told her. "I've never been with so many of my people before. Our people. It's amazing, and it's a lot, and... I just want to kind of savour it? Let me just celebrate being

queer this year, okay? Next Pride I can focus on being trans.” He immediately felt a little shitty about the disingenuity—next Pride he’d be detransitioned, and he was pretty sure there wasn’t a detransition pride flag—but pushed the thought away.

She considered him for a long moment and then heaved a sigh. “I mean, I guess, even if it means you’re wearing fucking rainbows.” She giggled, then wrapped her arms around him. “I’m glad you’re having a good Pride, Sammy.”

And at least for a little while, Sammy thought he’d fixed things.

Five hours later, Rowan was slumped across the table and also melting onto Sammy, cheek pressed against the tabletop as she explained to him, slurring: “It’s no use, Sammy, it’s stupid, I’m stupid, none of this is gonna work but also I can’t stop. I’ve never been able to stop, Sammy, not with anything, and I’m always this runaway train car which is also on fire. You know? You know.”

Sammy did know, or at least he knew that his cousin had started drinking at PrideFest and then indeed had not seemed able to stop. Finley had said goodnight and headed home before she’d got sloppy. Now it was well past midnight and the two of them were in their third club of the night. Rowan had just drained her last cocktail before deciding to take a burbling nap on the table. “Maybe we should go home?” he suggested.

She glared at him as if he had suggested admitting defeat, inflated her lungs, and pushed herself up to sitting straight. “No. No, I just need to go to the bathroom.”

“That’s not going to—”

Rowan flailed her hand at him. “Just help me to the bathroom, dammit.”

If Rowan never could stop, Sammy never could tell her no. So he pulled her up to standing and then braced his shoulder under her armpit. He was not particularly steady nor sober, himself. A moment later he remembered to turn around and collect their purses and bags of pride bling, and then they lurched off to the bathrooms.

Pressed up against his cousin, Sammy could feel her diaphragm lurch, and worried that she’d puke before they even got there. She held it down valiantly all the way to the door to the ladies’, which they kicked open only to find a five-person line waiting for a stall.

The woman at the head of the line took one look at them and beckoned. “Oh wow, sweetie, come with me. I’ve got you.” And she

lifted Rowan off of Sammy's shoulder and conducted her directly into the next open stall. A moment later the sound of Rowan retching echoed through the room.

Sammy looked worriedly back at the rest of the line, but nobody seemed upset about Rowan skipping to the front. If anything, they looked concerned. He supposed waiting another minute or two was better than somebody puking in the middle of the floor in here. He crossed the room to park his butt against the baby changing station. It was nice and stable, and didn't require him to do difficult things like stand without drifting to the side.

"That your friend?" asked a plump redhead girl at the adjacent sink. Her eyes went to the not-quite-closed stall door and back to Sammy, her pupils moving in the laconic slide of the thoroughly inebriated.

He nodded, slowly and carefully. "My cousin."

"Is she alright?"

He shook his head, also slowly and carefully. "I don't think so."

The redhead reached over to pat his elbow. "It's okay, we'll fix her up."

A few minutes later, Rowan staggered back out of the stall and to the sink, looking disconsolably at her reflection. "I'm so ugly," she pouted.

Sammy's stomach lurched in surprise and sudden fear. Rowan calling herself ugly? What was happening? The very foundations of his world were trembling.

The redhead shushed her, digging into her purse. "Oh hush, your mascara's running, that's all." She produced a little crinkly packet of makeup wipes, pulled out the last one, and went to work on Rowan's cheeks.

"That's why nothing works, because I'm hideous, look at me." Rowan told the room, gesturing at her reflection. "Why would he even want this?"

"If he doesn't, he's blind or stupid," answered the woman who had helped Rowan into her stall. She crossed the room to share a sink with another woman, quickly washing her hands and fluffing her curly brown hair. "Which: par for the course. You should try playing for the other team sometime."

"Girls are just fucked up in different ways," Rowan slurred, watching her reflection lose its raccoon face.

"True that," agreed the girl cleaning her up. "You got a lipstick,

honey? Cause this is smeared real good and it'd be best if we just started over."

"Oh, that's in... here," Sammy muttered, digging into Rowan's purse. He found the blocky lipstick inside and passed it over.

The brunette leaned towards the mirror to make eye contact with Rowan. "If he doesn't appreciate all this," she said, gesturing up and down Rowan's reflection, "that's a him problem, honey, not a you problem." She jabbed her pointer finger at Rowan though the mirror. "You're gorgeous."

Rowan's shoulders slumped. "No I'm not."

"Do you know how hard I would be hitting on you right now if you weren't completely wasted?" the woman laughed, sloppily, and Sammy realized that she was just as drunk as everyone else here, just better at hiding it. "I'd scoop you up and take you home under my elbow."

"But *he* won't," Rowan insisted, sniffing. "No matter how much he wants to. I know he wants to."

"That doesn't mean he knows how much he wants to." The redhead had shifted to sit on the counter, facing Rowan, as she deftly worked the twisted-up end of the wipe around the girl's eyes. Dribbles of mascara and stray smudges of eyeliner were carefully erased, leaving behind a surprisingly intact wing. "Always remember: boys are dense and slow. It takes them forever to see the pretty girl standing right in front of them." She leaned left so Rowan was facing herself in the mirror.

Rowan's lip wobbled as she took in her amended reflection, like she was fighting to actually look at herself, actually see what she looked like, and not what her brain told her she looked like. Finally, she said, "I am pretty cute, huh?"

"Yes you are," smiled the redhead, and held her arms out, weaving slightly on top of the counter. "Do you hug?"

Rowan collapsed forward into the girl. "I love hugs. Specially with pretty girls," she sighed, squeezing. The redhead squeezed back, and the two of them just kind of tipped back and forth for a little while—long enough that Sammy looked away.

The brunette was frowning at her own reflection. "I should have brought clips," she sighed. "I'm gonna chop this all back tomorrow, it's ridiculous."

"I have clips," Sammy heard himself say, and pulled out of his purse a trio of purple ones, clipped onto each other in a little bundle. He

held them forward.

"You sure?" the brunette asked with a trace of doubt.

He shrugged. "They came in a pack of other colours I actually wanted. These are just my emergency backup clips. Take em."

She did, and slid them into her hair, squinting at her reflection. "I dunno if these are big enough for all this," she said doubtfully.

"No, you've just got to—" Sammy started, and then pushed himself forward, reaching. "May I?"

The brunette nodded, cocking her head towards Sammy. He made quick work of pinning back her hair into something that looked more like a style and less like a tangled mess. She looked back into the mirror, eyes popping wide. "Oh wow, that's amazing. Those little clips can hold, like, a lot."

"I wear them most every day," he explained. "I've learned some tricks." He smiled into the mirror at her; she smiled back.

"Oh gosh, you are not too fat," Rowan was half-whispering at the redhead girl. "You are hot as hell, girl. Seriously. You should go for it."

His cousin stepped back from the hug that had apparently gone on the whole time he'd been fixing the other woman's hair. She dropped a hand on Sammy's shoulder and gave him a bleary smile. "You need anything, Samantha? Touch up? Relationship advice? Hair care?" His cousin's spine was straight again, her face immaculate and poised. She'd been completely put back together.

"Um. I'm good," he answered, and giggled. He looked around the cramped little bathroom. At the other end of the line of sinks, two tipsy girls were fixing each other's eyeliner and trading fierce compliments. Over by the door, three people waiting for stalls were engaged in a fervent if slightly slurred conversation about how one of them—it wasn't clear who—should dump their bigotted boyfriend. He looked back to Rowan. "But if I ever need any of that, I know where to get it."

"Thank the goddess for drunk girls in the club bathroom," Rowan crowed. With a final wave to the brunette and redhead, Rowan hooked her elbow into Sammy's and guided them toward the door. Just at the threshold, though, she spun them both around to look back.

The redhead was still seated on the counter, but she'd drawn the brunette over to stand before her. Her head tilted back, her eyes flashed, and her full lips curved into a victorious smile; the brunette leaned forward and they kissed.

“Oh wow,” Sammy cooed. “Good for them.”

Rowan sighed contentedly, and whirled the two of them around again. As the bathroom door closed behind them, she giggled. “God, I love being a girl.”

“Me, too,” Sammy giggled, stumbling merrily along the dimly-lit hall.

It wasn’t until they were on the subway home that Sammy’s sluggish and still half-drunk brain caught up. While Rowan rested her head against his shoulder and talked about nothing whatsoever, Sammy grew quiet. His heart started hammering in his chest. His vision blurred, and it wasn’t the alcohol.

He’d agreed with Rowan without thinking, but also without lying and without a trace of deception. He’d just blurted it out, in drunken honesty.

Sammy loved being a girl.

Fuck.

Back on the Horse

Sammy delivered Rowan to her family home late enough that Gideon was already up doing yoga in the front room. He ambled out into the foyer to observe their entrance, trying and failing to keep his amusement off of his face.

“Morning, Tate,” Rowan slurred, gave him a clumsy kiss on the cheek, and clomped up the stairs.

He watched her go. “And a happy Pride was had by all,” he observed, and then pumped his eyebrows at Sammy. “For you, too?”

“Yeah,” Sammy nodded, distracted, watching Rowan mount the steps with a tinge of concern. She was still quite drunk; even the magic of the women’s restroom couldn’t flush the alcohol from her veins. He heard himself ask: “Will she be all right?”

Uncle Gideon spared her a glance to make sure she got up and over the last step of the stairs. “She’ll be fine. She’s...” He turned back to Sammy, lips working, trying to find the right words. “Transitioning in high school was... rough. She was basically ostracized, through what are some key socialization years. And then she got to college, where she was just suddenly and blithely accepted as a hot girl.”

Sammy lifted an eyebrow at his uncle’s choice of words; Gideon snorted. “I may be her father and gay, but I have eyes.”

Upstairs, there was a creak of bedsprings and a whoof of air exiting Rowan’s lungs. She’d landed in bed.

“Anyway, she never got to be a reckless youth in high school,” Gideon went on. “And now she’s kind of making up for lost time. But for all that, she’s.... still our girl.” He smiled softly, and Sammy could see memories flashing behind his uncle’s eyes. “At root she’s always been mindful and diligent about everything she does, whether that’s keeping up her grades or her, ahem, extracurricular activities.”

Sammy couldn't help but snort. "She made a whole schedule for Pride."

"Sounds like her," Gideon nodded. "But you don't have to worry, Samantha. Henry and I still keep an eye on her. She steers clear of dangerous scenes and drugs. She knows her limits."

Sammy took a deep breath rather than ask Rowan's dad about her popping her little blue pills twice a day and her having gifted him some, too. And if Rowan knew her limits, was chasing Vikram halfway around the world within them? "So you're going to India, I hear," he said instead.

Gideon brightened. "We are! Rowan actually suggested it a few months back. I have some interviews already lined up in some hijra communities to talk about what detransition looks like for them." He chuckled. "So it's a bit of a working vacation, but I'm no less excited. Today's my last class—oh." He checked his watch and looked uncertainly at Sammy. "There's only four hours until classes start for you. You wanna crash on the couch here?"

Sammy shook his head. "No, thanks. I need a shower, and I'd like my own soap and shampoo and towel and then my bed, even if it'll be more nap than a full night's sleep."

"Give me five minutes," Gideon said, holding out one finger before he wheeled himself around the banister and up the stairs. "And I can walk you."

"Oh, you don't have to—"

"Samantha," he half-laughed as he pounded up the stairs, "I'm not letting a brown trans girl walk home alone at four in the morning. Just let me change and grab my briefcase."

Monday's classes passed in a blur for Sammy, but he was relatively certain that he took decent notes to kickstart his memory later. He went back to his dorm room the moment they were over and collapsed unconscious into his bed.

He woke up at 11pm remembering that he had a 500-word rough draft essay due the next morning, which he hadn't started. What was the prompt? He blearily found his day planner and flipped pages until he found it: "autobiography: describe an aspect of yourself that you love."

He flinched at the words.

What could he write about? His upbringing in stultifying New Jersey?! He didn't exactly love that. And not being brown, because he

didn't even know what kind of brown he was or where his family was from or what Spanish-named food delicacy he was supposed to long for like Finley wanted that fish sauce their mom makes.

And he certainly couldn't write about—

Nope.

That thing—the thing he'd told Rowan on accident exiting the women's restroom—was a live wire in his brain, a realization that was way too new and way too powerful and way too dangerous for him to incorporate into a school assignment. Especially not one he'd have to share with somebody else in the class, maybe everybody else in the class. He was already the queer trans weirdo to everybody—oh wait.

He could write about being queer, right? Not the other thing. Just the queer part. Like the pride bling that he brought home this morning, he could pick and choose which parts of Pride he wanted to remember.

He scrambled out of bed and woke up his laptop, spilling words onto the page before he could think too much about it. Pride memories were fresh and he could just channel the sense that he'd had, of community and of belonging, into 500 words. Of people smiling at him (not the lesbians hitting on him), the feel of being part of the parade (not the dyke march), of the pervasive welcome everywhere (not in the club bathroom, but before).

There was as much he didn't want to write as there was stuff that he wanted to write. He kept starting sentences and then deleting them because they strayed too close to forbidden territory. Then he'd try a different tack and get a little progress... and then start talking about—fuck. Delete again, find a new direction, strike out again for new territory... until that struck out, too. But it was progress, of a sort: halting and self-contradictory sometimes, and very plainly missing half the story, but fuck it. This was just a rough draft.

"What I don't understand," said Leon as he lowered Sammy's rough draft, "is how you talk about being queer but not talk about being transgender." Tuesday morning, and Sammy had got almost a full night of sleep, and he didn't really need Leon to be dragging him out into the light like this.

Sammy heaved a sigh. "I'm just... tired of talking about being transgender, you know?" He leaned forward, gestured at the page. "And being queer is more approachable, yeah? There's more queers than there are transes. And there's so much you have to explain when

you talk about being trans, and less so when you talk about being queer.”

His editing partner squinted, tipped his head to the side. “I can not help but feel like this would be a stronger essay if you talked about being a girl, and realizing you were a girl, and what you enjoy about being a girl. Or—no wait, what you love about being a girl. That is the prompt.”

“Isn’t being queer enough?”

The boy from Ukraine splayed his fingers over the page and intoned, “There is a girl-shaped hole in this essay.”

“I don’t want to write about that,” Sammy grated, and then pasted on a smile. But by Leon’s paling face, it had come too late. He’d utterly failed to hide his real emotions. He waved at the paper. “Just. Set that suggestion aside. Did you find any typos?”

Sammy wasn’t behind, exactly, but he was closer to behind than he liked to be, than he had planned to be. Pride had eaten up time that he would have otherwise sunk into reading ahead and reviewing what he’d learned. He felt unprepared and frantic, scrambling to get back to where he’d been ten days ago, when his fresh new day planner was spitting out fresh new days for him, when everything was proceeding at a stately and orderly pace.

He’d plowed through the first third of *Absalom, Absalom* in the dining commons and felt like he’d absorbed none of it. Now he was back in his dorm room, planning to do the voice exercises whose proper time slot he’d slept through yesterday afternoon. The actual lesson with Vanessa was later that evening, and he didn’t want to tell her that he’d skipped practicing.

...but he also had a sheet of names and dates that he was supposed to commit to memory before HIS50 tomorrow morning, and he wasn’t sure he could do both.

...especially if he wanted to get a full night’s sleep tonight, because if Sammy was sure of anything, it was that he was operating under a heavy sleep debt.

...and there was the training dildo, which he’d busted out of its packaging but hadn’t quite got around to actually experimenting with. The internet said he needed to take things slow, which meant he should get started sooner rather than later.

Why couldn’t he do the voice exercises while studying at the same time? It was just making funny sounds, swooping his voice up and

down and back and forth. Surely he could do that while he read the list over and over again. But that wasn't how it worked, like at all, because he tried that—page in one hand, phone open to the pitch tracker in the other, not awkward at all—and he'd somehow lost all track of where his pitch was while also not remembering a single name or date from the page.

At least he hadn't tried to incorporate the dildo, too.

Finally he set down the study page and walked over to his window with his phone. Voice exercises first, because he'd be on vidchat with Vanessa in a few hours; he wouldn't face down Andi Górska, Gideon's T.A., until the morning. So he stared at the brick wall across the ventilation shaft while he pitched his voice higher but not too higher, trying to feel where his resonance vibrated.

Once he settled into the routine of it, it was actually kind of relaxing.

On Wednesday, Finley texted Sammy in class, which he didn't notice until lunch when he pulled his phone out of his purse. He kept meaning to move the essential stuff from his purse back into his backpack, but never seemed to have time. Carrying a purse and a backpack wasn't terrible, though. And besides, the purse was small enough that it could go inside the backpack, and as much as the bags-within-bags thing kind of seemed silly to Sammy, it was also kind of easier this way, even if he didn't catch text messages until later.

What are you doing tonight? Finley had asked.

Studying, he responded, and then elaborated: I'm so behind after Pride.

What if I just came over for some ice cream?

Sammy rolled his eyes even as his stomach fluttered. The last time you came over for ice cream you stayed for three hours and it was lovely but if that happened tonight I would have an anxiety attack.

Ok, came Finley's initial response, and Sammy wondered if that was it, if they were upset or something, before they added: I really want you to do well in the program and want to be supportive, however you need me to be supportive. So if you need time and space to study, I can respect that. Please let me know if you need anything that I can provide.

Sammy read the text with eyebrows slowly drifting northwards.

Finally he responded: Wow, that's a lot of words for "I'm trying to be respectful but I want to make out with you so much."

So much, they responded immediately, with a string of lipstick kiss emojis.

Giggling, he sent back: I don't know if I'll be caught up by Friday night, but I'm pretty sure I'll need a break by then. A moment later he added: And it's your turn to ask me out.

We don't have to take turns, they responded, but yes I would like to take you out on Friday.

I'm looking forward to it, he told them, but I need to scarf down this cheeseburger and then get back to the books. See you Friday.

Sammy's workload had officially hit 'gruelling' which, to be fair, he'd been expecting. He knew from the start that he'd be spending hours every day in class and then hours every day reading (he had originally thought he'd be reading in Butler, but reading in the dining commons meant endless refills of soda). He'd known there'd be essays and flashcards and reviewing terms. And he'd known that all of that would be complicated by having to pretend that he was trans the whole time.

...except the pretending-to-be-trans part, it turned out, wasn't a drain on him at all. Sure, he spent a lot more time in the morning getting ready for his day, but it was kind of nice? Showering and haircare and picking out an outfit and doing his face was like a little morning meditation, preparing for his day by crafting an appropriate look. By the time he pulled open his door to walk out into the world, he felt organized and confident, ready for anything.

And sure, it was weird that all that was becoming important to him, but at the same time, there was no denying that it worked. Through his morning classes he had laser focus: paid attention, asked questions, participated in discussions. Leon said he gave good edits in COMP50. Dr Ngawa had been impressed at Sammy's grasp of iambic pentameter.

It didn't last, though. By noon he was flagging. Math and Physics, both after lunch, were easily his worst subjects, and he couldn't help thinking it was because by that time of the day the costume that he'd

applied that morning was wearing a little thin.

It didn't help that if he wanted his bacon cheeseburger lunch, he had to face down the grill guy (who now carefully and obnoxiously refrained from using any gendered language to refer to Sammy at all). There were other summer classes in session outside the Marginalized Scholars Program, and the students from those classes didn't know Sammy and sometimes flinched or took double-takes when he opened his mouth.

Which is why he threw himself into his voice exercises, even though they often made him feel worse. There was nothing quite like facing straight-on the reason that he stuck out, forcing himself to confront it directly by listening to his terribly croaky, creaky voice straining to be better, unsure which way to go except 'up' and 'forward,' which only made sense part of the time.

He fit in when he looked like a girl, was even comfortable looking like a girl—more comfortable than he wanted to think about. But then his voice shattered the illusion every time. So now he had to do some new, awkward, difficult thing, practicing weird sounds and feeling where his voice vibrated inside his body—and who even did that, really? it was *weird*—all so he could fit in a little better, a little more, except that all this work was to fit in as something that he wasn't.

He really wasn't.

Girl.

Sure, the girl costume had become... comfortable. But as much as he "loved being a girl"—by his own stupid admission—it wasn't him. He was stealing it. He should be ashamed.

And he would be, eventually. He just didn't have time until the summer program was over.

There is no such thing as too much lube, said the website, which Sammy figured was probably an exaggeration, but he wasn't taking any chances. Better to adjust downward next time than discover that he should have adjusted upward this time.

Then he squeezed a little too hard and shot the dildo across the bathroom. On the bright side, it was single-occupancy and the door was locked; on the less-bright side, there was now a massive splatter of lube staining the wall above the mirror. He couldn't even reach it to clean it up.

Dildo retrieved and washed, lube reapplied, and Sammy... squatted, and twisted, and arched his back.

It was surprisingly awkward and fiddly. The topography back there was far more complicated than he expected, and it kept changing whenever he shifted his body. Half the time he wasn't even sure if he was pressing the slippery head into the right part of his rear.

For a brief moment, he wondered if he even had an anus, because let's be honest, he'd never actually seen it himself. Maybe all the family members who had changed his diapers when he was a baby had been keeping the terrible secret of his no-asshole mutation this entire time.

And then it slipped in a little and, excited and over-eager, Sammy drove it home and—

Searing, splitting pain lanced through him in exactly the last part of his body that he ever wanted to experience searing, splitting pain. And it wasn't a flash of pain, either, because it was still jammed in there, and his ass was trying to stretch around it, and it was way too much.

He grabbed at the base, but the lubed hunk of silicone slipped out of his hands, plunging deeper and... that wasn't as bad? It was still too much, and his body was not at all happy with Sammy's life choices right now, but. Apparently once the thicker head was through the narrowest part, things got a little better.

Of course, to get the damn thing out, he'd have to work the thicker head back out through the narrowest part.

He really hoped this was worth it.

The dark-eyed girl's name was Farah, which Sammy discovered by the expert sleuthing technique of waiting until she started off her presentation in LIT50 by introducing herself.

He got to put that knowledge to use when he found her in the bathroom after class, staring morosely at her reflection. "Farah, are you okay?"

"You saw my presentation," she bit back sourly, shaking her head. She only maintained eye contact with herself in the mirror. "No. No, Samantha, I am not okay. I'm going to bomb out of this program, and then I'll have to go back home, and... I don't know, get married to some smelly dude or something."

He stepped up next to her, planted his backpack on the counter, and looked at her in the mirror. "That sounds terrible."

She shook her head again, this time like she was shaking off a shroud of emotions, and rolled her eyes at herself. "I'm exaggerating.

Although my parents would love me to go home and marry some smelly man, it's like the sum total of their aspirations for me." She heaved a sigh. "They're humouring me, now. They don't think I'll be able to cut it, here. Which... they might be right about. And then when I go back home, tail between my legs... that's when they'll pounce. They think I'll be malleable."

Sammy frowned softly for a moment, watching her face in the mirror. "Okay, so. Do you want help, or a hug, or both?"

She finally looked over to him, eyes uncertain. "I think maybe I could use a hug," she admitted.

He stepped closer and carefully wrapped his arms around her shoulders, like she was a small injured bird that might freak out and injure herself further. But she leaned into him, cheek against his shoulder. A moment later she loosed a long exhale, as if she hadn't breathed out in weeks.

It was a few minutes before she pulled back and he let go, one hand shifting to touch her elbow. "Look, one class presentation is nothing."

She squinted at him. "So you did see how shit I was."

He shrugged. "I saw how Ngawa raked you over the coals. I think that was one of his favourite books, and you kind of eviscerated it in front of everybody."

"You think he'll hold a grudge when he grades the final?" she asked uncertainly.

He nearly said something immediately placating, but thought better of it. Considered. "I think you've got four more weeks of this program to build a reputation with him that's not going to make him see your name at the top of your final essay and steel himself for an attack."

That at least got a snigger from her. "I'll work on that," she promised. The dark-eyed girl looked down, into the sink, and then back up at Sammy's reflection. "Thanks."

"Anytime," he nodded. "And I mean that, okay?" He hoisted his backpack off the counter and stepped back towards a stall. "Actually, I'm heading to lunch next, if you wanna join me."

Farah's smile was more than a little delicate. "Thanks, I think I will."

Friday afternoon, Sammy went through the week in his day planner, checked off what he'd finished and made a list of each item he still needed to do. He went down the list and made sure each one had a

time slot in the next week, and only then did he let himself think about how short the list was. He set the planner down with a small, triumphant smile. He was no longer behind.

Not that he'd ever *really* been behind. More like he was close to falling behind. Worried that he might fall behind.

And it felt good to get back on the horse after the week-long party that had been Pride, to dig in and do the work that didn't require him to think about—

The gears in his brain jammed, and he winced down at his planner.

"Me, too," he muttered, shaking his head. He could still hear and smell the club hallway, could still feel Rowan's damp shoulder bumping against his as they giggled their way out of the bathroom. "Why would you say that, you stupid fucking dolt?!"

Impulse gripped him, and he looked back down at his planner. Surely there was something he could do, something he needed to read, some flashcards he could review. Something, anything, to...

He'd been using his studies to avoid thinking about it, hadn't he?

Because he'd never been behind. He'd just been afraid, and somewhere along the line studying had become comforting to him. What had Rowan had called him? A diligent little schoolgirl. And wasn't that just—

He wasn't. He wasn't, he wasn't.

But he'd said it, hadn't he?

Sammy shook his head. He couldn't have actually meant what he'd said, not exactly. He said all sorts of shit he didn't actually mean. So he didn't love being a girl. What had he actually meant?

Maybe it was: he loved pretending to be a girl. It was a game, a joke, a daily challenge. How many people could he get to call him "her." How many men would open a door for him that day? How many people could he fool, get that little frission of triumph, even if it made him feel a little guilty, too. More than a little guilty about it, really. There were nights where he just stared at the ceiling and worried about how he was lying to literally everyone in his life. He didn't like pretending. If he was being honest with himself, he hated pretending. Hated it so much he...

...didn't want to think about that.

Maybe he loved being accepted as a girl. That was probably more it, right? Being welcomed by the drunk girls in the club bathroom, getting swallowed up by the crowd of lesbians at Bliss Night, even getting invited to that sleepover way back during Preview Days.

People going out of their way to make him feel accepted and welcome, like he belonged. He'd never belonged anywhere before, but now he did—as long as he wore his fake tits. Because he didn't belong, not really, and every time somebody welcomed him in, he knew it was based on a lie. The bottom of his gut churned and he wished he could just...

...he still didn't want to think about that.

Maybe he just liked the clothes. It was, after all, a fun costume. There were so many options: skirts and makeup and even his silly little purse. Blouses that wrapped around more interesting topography than his boring flat chest. And in a month or so, he could wear different earrings. Except he'd be home by then, so he couldn't. Because then he'd have to drop the pretense and go back to being... Samuel, son, boy. Young man. Enjoying his daily dress-up had an expiration date and always had. Unless, of course, he...

...didn't *want* to think about *that*.

He was saved from further introspection by his phone buzzing with a text from Finn, confirming when they would pick him up. And if that was when they were leaving, Sammy had to start getting ready now.

Finley had got them tickets to roller derby, the primary feature of which was that it took place in a big room full of queer people. Sammy never quite understood what was happening on the track as girls, women, and other femmes went racing around and around, linking hands and dodging around each other and only very occasionally colliding and tumbling to the floor.

What was far more important was sitting next to Finley, thighs pressed up against each other, cuddling and kissing without a single thought about how the crowd around them might react. They ate hot dogs and drank canned cocktails (“...because it’s roller derby, but it’s still New York,” explained Finley) and simply enjoyed each other’s company.

Later, Sammy all but dragged Finley home. Dildo training was still very much in progress, and Sammy knew he wasn’t ready for *that* (or even talking about *that*). But he also knew he wanted Finley in his bed, naked, and as soon as possible.

When he told them as much, Finley asked, “Are you sure?” with a funny look on their face, like they didn’t want to overstep.

Sammy grabbed the bottom hem of their tee shirt and started hiking

it up. "Finley honey, stop being so fucking chivalrous. I'm not going to break."

They raised their arms to help, but not without giving Sammy a look that said they weren't entirely convinced. But then Finley was shirtless and Sammy got to run his hands across their chest and he no longer cared in the least what expression was on his enbyfriend's face.

Eventually his hands drifted downward, digging under the waistband of Finley's jeans shorts. Between kisses, he declared, "These need to come off now."

"They have a fly," Finley giggled, and undid it so that the garment came scudding off their hips. When Sammy started pulling down their briefs, too, they strangled a little noise in the back of their throat but made no further objection.

Finally they stood naked before Sammy, and he took his time admiring the view before pushing Finn backwards onto the bed.

They sprawled bouncing on the narrow twin bed, looking up at Sammy. "So I'm not complaining in any way, shape, or form, here," they grinned like a wolf, "but am I the only one getting naked tonight?"

With a roll of his eyes, Sammy unzipped his skirt and stepped out of it, then wrestled his tube top up over his head. Halfway through it occurred to him that he ought to be making a bit of a show out of things, but how he was supposed to do that with a tight tube top was a complete mystery.

Finley's hands settled over Sammy's hips. The touch raised delicious goosebumps up his sides, but then his enbyfriend looked up at him with entirely too much compassion. "It's okay if you want to stop here."

"Stop?" he all but gasped. It took him a minute to realize that Finley meant the underwear over which their hands rested. Which, once removed, would expose bits that an actual trans girl might have complicated feelings about. That overabundance of chivalry, again. Sammy pressed his hips forward into their grip. "You can take them off," he said, and then forced himself to clarify: "I'd like you to take them off."

His enbyfriend smiled up at him and then dragged the panties down—grabbing a handful of Sammy's ass on the way—and then his fingers drifted back up the insides of Sammy's thighs, eliciting a surprised gasp out of him. Finley made eye contact again and then leaned forward, pressing their lips up against Sammy's thighs, his

belly, and down into his pubes. His arms pinwheeled for balance as his knees turned to jello.

After entirely too much and entirely too little of that treatment, Finley leaned back, hands cupping Sammy's butt, and pulled him onto the bed. Sammy walked on his knees into the tangle of sheets on his mattress; Finley's hands slid up his sides. When they reached the bottom of Sammy's bra, they lifted their eyebrows in query.

"Um," Sammy said intelligently.

"You don't have to wear your breast forms," his enbyfriend told him gently. Like it was a secret that Sammy wore breast forms in the first place, and they were apologizing for even mentioning that fact that they weren't supposed to know, but did. Because of course they knew; Sammy himself complained about them often enough. Finn gave him a hesitant little smile, halfway to saucy. "If you wanted, say, more exposed skin and all that."

"Yeah," he nodded. That was reasonable. He only wore the fake tits so that his tops would fit right, after all. If he was going to be naked with Finley, they should go. So he reached back and unclipped his bra, letting it fall down his arms. He grabbed his right breast form and grimaced. "I don't know how sexy this is going to be," he warned.

They only smiled up at him, leaning back against the painted brick wall. "Samantha, nothing you could do right now could avoid being sexy."

"Hold my beer," he giggled. Then he pulled, practiced and constant, until the adhesive peeled away and the breast form popped off in his hand. He set it down on the nearby desk.

When he started on the left breast form, however, Finley's fingers slid up his right side to flick his nipple.

"Careful," he hissed. "They're sensitive. They've been having glue pulled off of them every day for weeks, now. I worry they're getting irritated." The second fake tit popped off, and he looked down at his much flatter chest uncertainly. Everything seemed puffy and inflamed; his nipples poked out like he'd just jumped into the creek when it wasn't quite summer. "See what I mean? Skin problems aren't sexy."

"I don't see any problems, babe," Finley whispered, hands on either side of Sammy's ribcage, pulling him down into the bed.

He tumbled down on top of them, and the world became a landscape of skin and the fingers stroking over it, thudding hearts, and escalating breath. Finley's hands stroked over his hip; he closed his hand gently around their cock. The two of them moved and twisted,

mewling and gasping, trembling as something grew inside and between them.

Except not between them, or not quite; Sammy found himself pressing his chest up against Finley, closing the gap between them, expecting... something, but not finding it. When their talented fingers danced their way up his ribs to stroke his chest, he found himself pulling away. He giggled to cover his reaction, virginal and silly. Chiding himself, he pushed back into Finley's touch. But at the flick of a nipple, his whole body recoiled, outside his conscious control.

"Too sensitive?" his enbyfriend murmured, smiling, and pressed a soothing palm up against Sammy's chest.

With a strangled cry, he shoved himself backwards. Too far: he tumbled off the edge of the twin bed, landing in a heap of blankets and panicking, naked boy. When Finley reached forward to help him up, solicitiously asking if he was okay, Sammy slapped their hand away. "Don't touch me!" he hissed.

Finley shrank back, their face a picture of hurt and uncertainty, not that Sammy even saw it. He was too busy pulling the covers around his torso. Something was... something was wrong, was missing, was broken, but it wasn't even any of those things, because those were words and Sammy's whole being was suffused with things that were more primitive than words. He wrapped his hands around his chest, hugging himself, pressing his wrists up against his nipples, fingers tucked under his armpits.

Everything was wrong.

He wasn't sure how long it was before he heard Finley: "Samantha? Honey? You okay? You didn't... hit your head or anything?"

"I didn't hit my head," he answered dully, staring off at the far corner of the half-lit room. "I'm. Um. I'm not okay," was all he managed before dissolving into sobs. He pulled the blankets and sheets around himself tighter. He couldn't tell if he was hyperventilating.

"Okay, um," Finley stammered, and thank god they didn't try to hug him, because if they had, he might have literally come apart, skin peeling and bursting and blood and guts everywhere, and that didn't make any sense, but it was still absolutely true. His enbyfriend asked: "What can I do, Samantha?"

Sammy squeezed his eyes closed, tight. Bumped the back of his head against his desk. Focused on his breathing. He apparently took too long in answering, because Finley said that stupid name again.

"Just—" he hissed, "Can you just go? I'm sorry, I just. I'm not going to be—I just need to be alone, I think."

They asked if he was sure, but got dressed and headed for the door. And then with one last worried look, they were gone.

The dam inside him broke. The torrent of sobs that had been held back by his enbyfriend's presence were suddenly loosed and pouring out of him, bunching up behind his teeth and up into his sinuses, too much to exit him all at once, pushing spit and snot and tears out of his face. It hurt: his head rang with the pressure of everything forcing itself up and out.

His tits had been missing.

He'd pressed himself up against Finley and it was supposed to feel good and instead it felt empty and hollow and wrong. And when they touched him there, it was like their fingers passed through the skin that should have been there, into his flesh; they should have come away bloody. He shuddered at the memory and seriously considered if he had to vomit.

And all of this was doubly stupid, because they were fake! He'd taken them off to give Finley more skin to touch, so he could feel it for real and not some weird fabricated sensations his brain made up to compensate for the fact that he'd glued balls of silicone to himself.

Before tonight, he'd fantasized about being Finley's boyfriend, but he could never be that, could he, if he couldn't be intimate with them without his fucking tits glued onto his chest.

Because apparently he loved being a girl. Stupid. Some corner of his brain had latched onto this ridiculous pretense he'd been backed into, and now he couldn't even fuck his partner without putting on the damn costume.

He'd ruined the whole night.

At some point, he pulled himself up into his bed, cried a little more, and finally drifted off into fitful sleep.

By Saturday afternoon, Sammy had put himself mostly back together, mostly against his will. He'd promised Farah a late-breakfast study session, and he'd considered cancelling it, but for less than a moment. She'd been so distressed and he wanted to help.

It would also be a welcome distraction from his own stupid-ass thoughts.

But it also meant he had to get dressed, and after last night, that also meant he needed to shower. He was disgusting: snot crusted

everywhere. Shortly thereafter he found himself almost vindictively femming himself up: shaved close, moisturized, tits re-affixed, dressed in one of his cuter outfits, and his makeup done with an absolutely unnecessary amount of flair.

He thought he'd overdone it, but Farah had not so much as blinked at his presentation. And then they sat down over waffles and bacon and studied for four hours. Distressingly normal.

Now Sammy was back in his dorm room, trudging through the last chapter of *Absalom, Absalom* and studiously ignoring texts from Finley—he couldn't manage any response beyond the one non-committal answer he'd given before breakfast—when his phone rang. He flipped the phone over, expecting Finley's name on the screen, but found his mother's name instead.

He had a moment of panic: he was still done up for his study session that morning. But this incoming call was audio-only. A flutter of worry stirred in his belly as he accepted the call. "Hey, Mom. Everything okay?"

"Hey honey, I'm so sorry to interrupt your studies," came his mother's voice, a little frazzled. "I know we're not due for our video call till tomorrow—"

"It's okay," he assured her, "what is it?"

"I need to ask a pretty big favour," she started, far more hesitantly than he was used to her sounding.

"Okay," he said automatically, and winced when a strident knock sounded through his dorm room door. "Wait, hold on, there's somebody at the door. Sorry, it's probably just Finley."

"Actually—" was all his mother managed to say before he swung the door open.

The young man on the other side of the door was sporting a crew cut, a well-worn denim jacket, and a black eye. He looked Sammy up and down before a look of recognition struck him like a thunderbolt.

Sammy had the same reaction. "Mitch," he breathed, surprised. Because no matter what Mitch had last told him about preferring to be called Barbara and she and her, it was undeniably Mitch who stood before him.

It took Mitch a little longer to say "Sammy," with a distinctly more provisional undertone to it.

"I hope it's okay," came the voice of Sammy's mom over the phone. "He needed a place to cool his heels, and I just gave him your address without thinking, and then there were so many details to manage here

before we left, and I completely forgot to actually call you until now.”

“Uh, come on in,” he told Mitch, and stepped back to let him do so. Into the phone, he said, “Before you left? Do you have a trade show?”

“No honey,” she laughed. “Left for the City. Your father and I will be at your place in about an hour.”

Sammy’s eyes flicked to his closet, to the array of makeup scattered across his desk, to his freaking hot pink day planner. His heart leapt into his throat. “Oh. Um. Looking forward to it.”

When Worlds Collide

“I am fucked,” groaned Sammy.

“You’re a girl,” observed Mitch, stepping past Sammy and into his dorm room.

“No,” he denied immediately, and gestured down the length of his body. “This is just... really complicated.”

Mitch theatrically cast his one good eye over the same things that Sammy had just worriedly inventoried throughout his dorm room: a closet full of skirts and dresses, a vanity piled with cosmetics and then more of the same scattered across his desk, a line of stuffed animals on the shelf (Roar-E had started looking lonely). “I mean, it looks pretty straightforward to me,” he said, and dropped onto Sammy’s bed, wincing slightly as he did so. His beat-up backpack dropped to the floor at his feet.

“Okay, look,” Sammy stammered, snapping closed his day planner and stuffing it into his backpack. “My parents cannot find out about this.”

“Alright,” said his guest, without much conviction. “Good luck with that.”

Sammy scooped together the bottles and tubes of makeup scattered across his desk and opened the top drawer, intending to just sweep them all in there. But a cursory glance told him that it simply wouldn’t all fit. “What happened to you, anyway?” he asked, and slapped the top drawer closed to yank open the bottom. He dug through the tumbled contents to the box of trash can liners in the back and tugged one out.

“Got jumped,” Mitch answered, unable to hold back a grin on his lips. “Gave as good as I got, though.”

“Uh, go you?” Sammy said, eyebrow lifted. He started shoving

makeup into the trash bag. Make up from the desk, make up from the vanity shelf in front of the mirror, make up from the window sill. He really should get a make up case.

“It was my first fist fight,” the boy on the bed grinned. “They wanted my phone, I didn’t give it to them. One of them had a knife! But I knocked it out of his hand. It was so cool.”

Sammy spun the little trash bag and tied off the top. “If you say so. Doesn’t look like you won the fight, though.”

“You should see the other guy,” Mitch said, and laughed, and then coughed painfully. He rubbed his ribs. “Anyway. They didn’t get my phone. I held them off till some other people came running, and the muggers ran off, and the new people called 911.”

Sammy now had a trash bag full of makeup. What was he supposed to do with this? He shoved it into the bottom of his closet. “So you’ve had an eventful day.”

“That was yesterday,” Mitch corrected. “Last night. Was in the ER most of the morning, then they discharged me, then I called Christina.”

Sammy dragged the cardboard boxes full of hoodies and sweatpants out of his closet. “And like, no offense, but why the hell did you call *my* mom?”

“Mine’s not taking my calls right now,” Mitch answered sourly. “And Christina’s kept in touch. Since scouts. And when she heard what happened, she started texting me. At first I ignored them, but...”

“Wait, how did she hear you got jumped in the City?” Sammy broke in, arms full of stuffies.

Mitch waved a hand. “No, she started texting after what happened back home.”

“What happened back home?”

Mitch raised his eyebrows. “Disconnected from the Oak Grove gossip network, are we?”

“Mom usually catches me up on Sundays, so until tomorrow I’m a little behind,” he explained, and then sighed. Lined up on the shelf, the stuffies had looked little. Compact. In a pile on his closet floor, they took up entirely too much space. He could stuff them into trash bags, but the ones he had were just for wastebaskets: too little.

“Oh it’s Saturday?” Mitch asked uncertainly, and then nodded. “But that makes sense. What happened back home all went down last Sunday, so she wouldn’t have heard till later.” He shifted a little, trying to get comfortable, without much success. “Anyway. After church, I went into town and, uh—” He gestured to his head. “Got a

haircut."

"From my Aunt Steph?"

"Yeah, I thought she'd push back a lot more than she did," he nodded. "But I told her I wanted it cut masc as fuck, and she was just like, 'Okay. Nothing more masc than a crew cut.' And here we are."

"That's what happened?"

Mitch laughed and then winced. "Yeah, no. That was just... lead-up. I took my new haircut home. Snuck in the back and went upstairs, changed out of my church dress, because fuck that shit." His eyes slid to Sammy's closet. "No offense."

"None taken," he sighed. "You think it'll work if I just close the closet and pile up these boxes in front of it? They're not gonna open my closet, right?"

Mitch raised one eyebrow. "If your mom sees all the clothes she thinks you're wearing every day sitting in boxes in front of a perfectly good closet, is she going to try and hang everything up?"

Sammy's shoulders slumped. "Point taken. Fuck." He waved at Mitch. "Go on. Changed out of your dress."

The boy from home nodded. "Put on jeans and a tee shirt, you know, and went downstairs. Just in time for Sunday dinner." He chuckled at the memory. "So my parents, my grandma, my sisters, they're all sitting at the table, and I tell them that I'm going to transition, for real, this time."

"Retransition."

But he only shrugged. "I guess. The first time, my parents just wanted— well, no. They *said* they wanted me to just put it on pause, to think things over. But I don't think that's what they really wanted, you know? They wanted me to stop. But I told them I had thought things over, and I was going forward with it. And I'm an adult now, so it's my decision, and all that."

Sammy had paused in his frantic cleaning, three cardigans over his forearm. "And what did they say?"

Mitch snorted. "They kicked me the fuck out." His face distorted, trying to maintain a mask of indifference, but the hurt was plainly seeping through. "After all, I'm adult now," he said, voice thick, "so I'm not their problem any more."

"I'm so sorry, Mitch," Sammy breathed, and dropped the cardigans on the floor to step forward. "You want a hug?"

"Fuck no," he chortled, winced, and explained: "You hug me I'm gonna really fucking lose it." He gestured at the clothes on the floor.

"And you're running out of time."

With a curse, Sammy scooped up the sweaters and threw them all onto a single hanger, one on top of the other.

"Anyway, there was a lot of yelling," Mitch went on after blowing his nose. "I'd already packed my backpack, you know, just in case. So I grabbed that and went out the front door, and..." He rolled his eyes. "My dad followed me out, shouting at me the whole way. 'We did so much for you, now you're throwing it all back in our faces, all your perverted desires, not under my roof, blah blah blah.' Everybody on our street heard." He wrapped his arms around his knees. "I don't know why that's the part that hurts the most, but. Fuck."

"And you came here?" Sammy asked incredulously.

"I mean, maybe in the City, I can figure out how to transition on my own," Mitch said with significant look at Sammy. "I'm not the first person to come up with the idea."

Sammy rolled his eyes. "That's not what I did, I swear. Hold on." He grabbed his phone from the desk and started a call. "Hey, Farah? Sorry to call with no notice, but this is kind of an emergency. Are you possibly in your dorm room right now and can I borrow some space in your closet for the night? My parents are inbound and I need to get all these girl clothes out of sight—oh my god, thank you."

"Who's Farah?"

Sammy gestured vaguely through the wall. "Girl in my program, she lives down the hall."

Mitch nodded. "Anyway, I hitched to Dover, spent most of my cash on a bus ticket into the city, and here I am."

Sammy looked skeptically at Mitch. "There's, like, four days missing in that story."

His guest just shrugged. "I've been, uh, living rough, I think is the cool way to say it? Trying to find, like, I dunno, some place that'll let me work with no references, some place to live with no income. There's some shelters and like, soup kitchens and stuff."

Before Sammy could respond, a knock sounded through the door behind him. He glanced at the mirror on the way to answer it. "I really hope this is Farah and not my parents."

It was Farah, holding a broom, of all things. When he didn't move, she said, "Time is of the essence, yeah?"

He stepped aside to let her in. "It is, I was just confused about the broom."

"Oh, it's just—hello there," she said, looking Mitch up and down.

Her voice jumped up an octave when she said, "I'm Farah."

"Mitch," he responded with a nod.

"Ooo, very butch," she giggled.

He twisted his lips. "I'm not butch, I'm trans."

Farah didn't miss a beat. "Well I'm very lesbian, but not so lesbian that I can't make the occasional exception."

"Farah," groaned Sammy, and scrubbed his face. "The broom?"

"Oh right," she smiled, and held it out, parallel to the ground. "Hold it like this."

Sammy compiled uncertainly, and then the girl started transferring hangers out of his closet and onto the broom handle. "All of it?" she asked without slowing down.

"Um, yeah," he verified. "Do you even have this much space in your closet?"

She scoffed. "Hell no, but I have a bed it can all can live on for a bit. What matters is getting them out of here as soon as possible, right?"

"Right," he nodded. "This is, um, getting heavy."

Mitch put up his hands. "Don't look at me, I'm not supposed to lift anything heavier than ten pounds until my ribs heal." Sammy had his back to him, but he could hear the smirk when he told Farah, "Got into a fight last night."

"You can tell me all about it later," Farah said as she dropped the last handful of hangers onto the broom and took the weight of one end out of Sammy's hand. With a gentle tug, she pulled him and his entire femme wardrobe towards the door. "Sammy can give you my number!" she called back to Mitch.

Farah's room was on the far end of the hallway, and they dumped the broom and the mess of clothes onto her bed. He thanked her and apologized that he had to run and she shooed him out the door.

Mitch started back awake when Sammy came back into his room. Ignoring the beat-up trans man on his bed, he pulled sweatshirts out of boxes and slung them onto the few empty hangers remaining in the closet. That, plus a few more hoodies thrown over the pile of stuffed animals, completed the picture of what Sammy expected to see in a mostly-neglected boy's closet.

Finally, he stepped back, hands on hips, and nodded. The closet looked good. His desk looked good. The little vanity shelf in front of the mirror looked good. The drawers were still full of panties and camis, but nobody was going to look in there, right? "I think that's all good, right?" he said, mostly to himself. "Finished."

"Um," said Mitch, and when Sammy looked over at him, he gestured at his own face. "You're still all girled up, dude."

"Fuck!" Sammy hissed, and then repeated himself when he realized that his makeup remover wipes had been swept into a mini trash bag and shoved into the back corner of his closet. He went diving for it, digging through artfully discarded hoodies and then a layer of stuffed animals and finally to the plastic bag, which he tore open to get inside.

He stood back up, already scrubbing, and his phone buzzed against the surface of the desk. "Is that them? Did they text?"

"Just parked," Mitch read off of the phone's lock screen.

"Fuuuuuuuccckkk," Sammy moaned, leaning over to get his face as close to the inset mirror as he could, checking for stray bits of eyeliner that he hadn't scrubbed off.

"So how long does it take to get from parking to here?"

"I don't drive in the City, so I don't know. And without knowing which lot or which street, who the fuck knows," Sammy shrugged frantically. He turned that enervated energy into pulling off his top and kicking off his skirt.

"Whoa, should I, uh, avert my eyes?"

"Don't see why," Sammy panted, struggling because today of all days he was having trouble with his bra clasp. "We're all boys, here."

The corner of Mitch's lip twitched upwards, but he said, "Well, that's kind of debatable."

Sammy peeled a fake tit off his chest—too fast; it stung—and pointed the wobbling thing at Mitch. "Don't even."

Mitch put up his hands in a show of innocence, but he couldn't stay silent for long. "Sammy, I really don't think you have anything to worry about. You could tell your parents you're trans."

"But I'm not," he insisted, shoving skirt and blouse and bra and tits into his pajama drawer. "It's... it's more complicated than that," he tried to explain as he pulled on a hoodie from the pile. "When the program's over and it's time to go home, I'm going to detransition."

"That doesn't exactly have a 100% success rate," warned Mitch, halfway between concerned and amused. "At least in my experience."

But Sammy shook his head. "Not the same situation." He grabbed a pair of sweatpants but realized at the last minute that they didn't go with the sweatshirt he'd just thrown on.

Mitch tipped his head to the side. "How, exactly?"

Sammy finally found a pair of pants that would go with his hoodie about the same time he realized that he'd never once considered how

any of his sweats went with any of his hoodies, and he was being ridiculous. They were sweats. Boy clothes. They were all interchangeable.

He pulled them on anyway. "Okay, look, I like dressing up like a girl," he told Mitch, and his breath finally slowed down now that his boy costume was complete. "I like having doors opened for me. I like getting welcomed into the women's restroom and I like being treated like I'm safe to be around and that women can trust me. I like the way my enbyfriend looks at me." It was all true, and it was also all lies, because he knew that none of this was the actual meat of the problem. But it might make for enough of an explanation to get Mitch to shut up.

It almost worked. The young man's eyebrows were nearly up into his hairline. Finally, he said, "I imagine there's a 'but' coming, but I have no idea how."

"But it's not me," Sammy supplied him. "I'm not transgender. All of this... girl stuff that I like, it's not for me, and it's not mine, and I don't deserve it, and there's... stupid reasons why I can't stop right now, but as soon as I can stop, I will stop. Because it's... it's not fair what I take. I don't deserve any of it."

"That's really fucked up, Sammy."

He sank into his desk chair, hands curled up in his lap. "Yeah. It is fucked up. But it's also just... not real. It's just a stupid game that I play."

"Well, you play it really well," sighed Mitch. "Almost like it's more than a game. Almost like you really are a—"

"I swear to you, Mitch, I'm just not a girl," Sammy lifted his hands in a rhetorical shrug that he realized, too late, was not in any way masculine.

Mitch guffawed. "You realize you're still coming across way more femme than me and all I've got going on right now is a haircut and a binder."

A flash of concern penetrated Sammy's mood. "Should you be wearing that over bruised ribs?"

"No, but I didn't exactly pack a bra, either."

"What size are you?" Sammy asked, leaping up to open a drawer. "You wanna borrow—"

"No."

And then there was a knock at the door, and Sammy slammed the drawer closed.

* * *

His parents burst into the room as soon as he opened the door, crushing him with hugs and kisses as they passed so that they could examine Mitch and ask how he was feeling and squeeze his hand. Sammy exhaled. He hadn't merited a second glance. He'd never been more grateful to be unremarkable.

Mitch had consented to a hug with Sammy's mom, and as she released him, she chided, "You didn't need to run all the way to the City, you know. You could have come to our house. You'll always be welcome there, okay?"

He nodded sheepishly, wiping his eyes. "Thanks, but. I just needed to get out of there, you know? No reason to stay—no school, no job—and I damn sure didn't want to cross paths with my parents on main street."

"I understand completely," she sympathized, and then got down to priorities. "Have you eaten?"

"Um. Some," he hedged, and then confessed, "They fed me breakfast at the hospital."

Sammy glanced at the clock on his phone. It was nearly five. He hadn't even thought of offering Mitch something to eat. He could have taken him to the dining commons... not that he'd had time. But he could have offered the yogurt and granola in his mini fridge, if nothing else.

His mom produced a foil-wrapped sandwich from her purse. "Here. Chicken salad. Don't hold back on our account. You must be starving."

"Little bit," Mitch agreed, and wasted no time in unwrapping it.

"We brought you some clothes, not anything exciting," she went on while he ate, and turned to take the paper grocery bag out of her husband's hand.

"I'm a bit taller than you," said Sammy's father, with that jocular tilt to his voice he used when he was making the best out of an awkward situation. "But a belt and a good tuck does wonders."

Sammy forced himself not to snort.

Christina placed the bag beside Mitch and patted it. "Needle and thread in there, too. You can hem the cuffs, right?"

Mitch nodded, chewing.

She went on: "Two pairs of pants, four button-downs. No offense, but more respectable adult wear than I think you stuffed into your backpack. You'll need that."

Sammy glanced over at his own, hastily-reconstructed closet. Maybe he should give some of his hoodies to Mitch. It wasn't like he was using them... not for the next month, at least.

"There's also an envelope in there," Sammy's dad added. "With name and gender change paperwork for you, already filled out. Although I didn't know your middle name, so add that before you submit. It's New Jersey paperwork, so you'll have to go to Jersey City to file it, but in the end that will be easier than filing here and then changing records in Jersey."

"Oh, um, thanks," Mitch mumbled. "That's really kind of you, but. I'm sure there's, like, fees and stuff?"

Richard nodded. "There is. And there's a money order for the necessary amount in the packet."

Mitch blinked. "Oh. Thanks."

"There's also a little cash," he added, in the tone of voice that said there was actually quite a lot of cash, so much that he had been a little pained at pulling it out of the savings account, and he expected Mitch to be pleasantly surprised when he opened the envelope later. Not that Sammy expected the boy on the bed to interpret all that from the way some other kid's dad talked.

His dad then surreptitiously pulled his phone out of his pocket and scowled down at it. Mitch didn't see, too busy talking with Christina, apparently his bff since scouts or something. Dad shot Sammy a tight smile and clapped his hands. "So I know you just had that sandwich, but I'm starving. What do you say we go grab some real dinner?"

Mitch grinned and shrugged. "I can always eat."

Sammy's stomach dropped. Go out with his parents? As he was dressed now? Where other students might see him, and come say hi, and ask why he was dressed like that, and then probably use the wrong pronouns in front of his parents? Desperate to forestall calamity, he said, cleverly: "Um."

Everyone in the room looked at him.

"Um," he reprised, and then forced words out of his mouth: "I know you're all sentimental about the dining commons, Dad, but can we go somewhere else?" He shoved his hands into the kangaroo pocket of his hoodie. "Everybody kept telling me I'd get tired of the dining commons and I didn't believe them, but it finally happened." There. Yeah. Get them all off campus.

"Sure," his dad nodded. "Oh, is Arts and Crafts still open, down on Amsterdam?"

A bar across the street from campus wasn't any use at all to Sammy. The probability of running into another student who knew him was probably even higher there. "Uh, there's a... fish place just off of Battery Park," he suggested, scrambling. "Finley took me. It's good."

"Oh, I see how it is," his dad smirked. "The parents come to visit and you milk them for a fancy dinner."

"Worth a shot," he said, pasting on a cheeky grin. Oh, less cheeky, that was not masculine at all. "And there's a parking garage right there. Convenient." Yes. Walk them to wherever their car was parked and then not see anybody on the subway, either. Good plan, Sammy. Maybe they could all just say good night at the restaurant, his parents could drive home from there, and he could take the subway, alone.

His mom had stood up and now crossed the room to set a maternal hand on his shoulder. "Honey, your room is so bare! You've been living here for a month, and you've got no personal touches. It's like..."

"...like a dorm room for a short summer program?" he tried finishing for her. "The program's already half over, Mom, what's the sense in decorating?"

She snapped her fingers. "No, I've got it. Your room reminds me of my old apartment." She squeezed his shoulder sympathetically. "The last time I was in it... heh. I'd just scrubbed it of everything I owned, in uh." She actually blushed; Sammy lifted an eyebrow. "In preparation for moving out," she finished, which he was pretty damn sure was not the whole story.

Mitch chuckled from the bed. "Yeah, I was just telling him—right before you guys got here—what he really needs is some stuffed animals." Sammy shot him a look, but he only smirked back.

His mom looked around the room again. "Where is Roar-E? He's been your little mascot the past few months."

"He's not in my room at home?" Sammy countered, thinking fast. "I didn't think I brought him."

"I don't think so," she said uncertainly. "But I've only been in there to dust and vacuum a couple times."

"Sammy, what's the name of this fish place?" his father asked, poking at his phone for directions. Sammy gratefully accepted the change of subject.

His father had somehow scored street parking, three blocks off of campus. The four of them ambled down the pedestrian walkway that

bisected the university and then down the street, while Sammy tried to remember how to walk like a boy. Back hunched forward, hips immobile, leading with his shoulders and letting his arms swing like an ape.

Was he doing this right? He glanced sidelong at Mitch to check. The young man returned his gaze with a look that clearly said “why are you walking like that, you buffoon?” But he was doing the same, just not as much. Sammy was probably overcompensating. It also made his back hurt like hell.

His parents were leading the way, arms entwined and talking between themselves. Probably checking in on how well they thought their little mission of mercy had gone, and flirting while they were at it. Sammy had seen the same little scene play out many times before, but this time he didn’t find it half as cringey as he used to. His parents looked kind of cute, in fact.

And apparently Sammy wasn’t the only one who thought so. People walking the opposite way gave his parents little smiles. Must be nice, he thought, for random strangers to think you’re adorable and not hurl transphobic slurs at you across the street.

It was still light out, with brownstones glowing in the afternoon sun on their left and Morningside Park to their right a tumult of bright green leaves. Sammy couldn’t help thinking about how the street would look later, after the sun had set and the streetlights came on. When shadows pooled in the corners and pedestrian traffic thinned out.

He looked sidelong at the trans man from home as he ambled along the street. How dark had it been, he wondered, when Mitch had been jumped last night? How well could his attackers see him?

Because while the hair cut did wonders, and Mitch’s body language was so perfectly masculine Sammy couldn’t help but feel a little reverse jealousy, it wasn’t enough. In certain lights, in certain poses, all of Mitch’s own tells became frightfully apparent.

This was not a young man who’d been raised as a boy.

This was a young man who could be a target at the drop of a hat. Somebody whose phone and wallet could be yours, probably, once you softened them up with a little violence.

And no, that hadn’t been true for Mitch, but it would absolutely be true for Sammy. And Sammy most definitely looked like an acceptable target, probably even more than Mitch did.

How had he not been jumped yet? Besides the fact that he lived in

Morningside Heights and not whatever corner of the City that Mitch had been in last night. But it's not like Sammy never went to less-affluent neighbourhoods, especially with half-drunk friends, even later at night, and god, they had to have been so vulnerable so many times.

He'd felt safe, blithely assumed himself to be safe, but he wasn't, and he'd never been.

Because as much as he'd insisted to Mitch that he wasn't trans, he sure looked like it. And that meant he was in danger. Being trans got you into trouble.

And it wasn't just Mitch and the threat of assault and robbery. Look at Rowan! She was trans and a mess because of it. What had she said? A runaway train car which is also on fire. Ostracized through high school, apparently, and desperately trying to catch up in college, drinking herself to sloppy oblivion over a boy who wouldn't date her because—and here it was again—she was trans.

Being trans had turned both of their lives into an impossible, violent nightmare. And here he was, cosplaying as one of them. He might as well wear a Kick Me sign on his back.

He had to get the hell out of this funhouse mirror trans nonsense as soon as he was able. Before he got himself hurt.

"Here we are," called his mother cheerily, mostly for Mitch's benefit. The family Lexus sat at the curb, lights clicking on as his father unlocked it with the key fob. Thoughts still roiling, Sammy climbed into the back seat opposite Mitch.

"I feel a little underdressed for this place," said Sammy's mom as they waited to be seated. She wasn't looking at her own clothes so much as frowning at the hoodie and sweatpants he was wearing. His hasty recollection of the place—the frantic result of asking his memory "where can we eat that is as far away from campus as possible"—had been more about sitting across from Finley and holding their hand. Now that he was back here, it was rather fancy, and what he was wearing was... not.

He shrugged. "It's New York. No matter where you go, you're underdressed."

His father chuckled, completely at ease in his standard-issue blazer and slacks. "It's good to hear the City hasn't changed you, Sam."

Sammy smiled wanly. "Nothing about me needs changing."

"I'm perfectly comfortable being the hick in the City," Mitch chuckled, hands thrust into his jeans jacket pockets.

"Sorry, but it's worse than that," Sammy informed him gravely. He then waited for the young man's eyebrows to pop up in askance before explaining: "You're a Jersey kid."

Without pulling his hands out of his pockets, Mitch shrugged and grinned.

Thankfully, they were seated on the other side of the dining room from where Sammy had sat with Finley on their first date. Their windows overlooked Battery Park and, if you craned your neck a little, you could spot the Statue of Liberty. "She's trans, you know," he almost volunteered, and then realized that he should have no reason to share, let alone know, that story.

Their server stepped up to the table and was about to take their orders when she pointed directly at Sammy. "You look familiar," she said with a friendly customer service smile.

"I was here with my enbyfriend a couple weeks ago," he said, desperately trying to keep his voice casual. At the same time, he silently prayed that she didn't follow up with "you were wearing a dress."

She snapped her fingers and said something even worse. "You didn't know what fish was." Everyone else at the table looked at him funny.

"I couldn't remember the names of different fish," he corrected, colouring slightly. He glanced around the table, hoping that his clarification would placate his parents' confusion, too. "But the tuna steak was really good."

It wasn't until after she'd taken their orders and gone that his father, with the mildly infuriating air of an aw-shucks country lawyer, went back to something Sammy had said in passing before. "Your... enbyfriend." The phrase was full of questions.

His son nodded, and explained things carefully. "Finley is non-binary, and if you take the initials of that and you kind of smoosh it together into a word, that makes 'enby,' so. Instead of a girlfriend or a boyfriend, they're my enbyfriend."

Richard Chase just shook his head in wonder. "Cockney's got nothing on your generation. I barely followed that. But your mother told me you were dating, and that sh— they make you happy. Which is good. I'd like to meet... them sometime."

"It'll have to be in the next month, because after that they're going to med school in California," Sammy said breezily, and then realized that he'd essentially invited his parents to come visit him in the City again,

and soon. "But, um. It's gonna be a really busy month, for both of us, so—"

His mother patted his hand. "Maybe they can join you on a Sunday call sometime. Just so we can all say hi."

The thought of Finley seeing him with all the girl scraped off of him brought a shudder up Sammy's spine. His brain decided to helpfully rerun the memory of him huddled on the floor by his bed, clutching his chest, and he had to beat back the sudden wave of panic. He cleared his throat. "Yeah, maybe."

The four of them talked about nothing, by silent mutual agreement avoiding Oak Grove gossip, until their food arrived and they tucked in. Sammy had tried something different—parents in town, milk them for a fancy dinner, indeed—and was pleasantly surprised with his fish curry. He also couldn't help noticing that his father had set his phone face-down on the table and kept checking its face—and his mother wasn't chiding him for doing so.

Finally whatever was displayed on Dad's phone made his face light up. He dabbed his mouth with a napkin and said, "Mitch. I hope this wasn't too forward of me, but I called in a couple favours with old friends from law school. Are you free day after tomorrow for a job interview?"

Mitch's eyes went wide as saucers. "I'm sorry, what?"

"It's just a mail room job," Dad moderated. "Nothing fancy. But a terrible minimum wage job, combined with a few roommates, might make the City livable for you."

"Yeah, but I don't have any experience, or references—"

"I'm your reference," the lawyer insisted. "And she knows you're fresh out of high school, and forgive me for oversharing, but she knows your... living situation. But she's willing to give you a chance."

"Mister Chase, thank you so much!"

Mister Chase levelled a finger at Mitch. "You're going to work your ass off for her, you understand? So as to keep your head above water here, and also so as to not embarrass me. I vouched for you."

Mitch nodded so hard that it looked like his head might come off.

Sammy's dad folded his napkin back onto his lap and tapped the table with his fingertips. "Now. Who wants dessert?"

His parents dropped them off at the campus gate on 116th and Sammy led Mitch down the pedestrian walk. They'd left his backpack, plus the paper bag full of clothes, paperwork, and cash, in Sammy's dorm

room. The summer night was warm and still bright, feeling more like an afternoon than an evening.

"I cannot believe how nice your parents have been," the other boy sighed. "No, not nice. Nice doesn't even begin to cover it."

"They can get like that," Sammy admitted. "Get a wild hair up their ass, start moving heaven and earth to fix whatever it is." He shrugged, and let himself stop walking like a dude, loosening up his hips. The strain on his back immediately lessened. "There's worse traits in parents, I guess. Makes me feel inadequate as fuck, of course."

"You're not being fair to yourself," Mitch protested. He skipped ahead a few steps so he could look back at Sammy's face as he talked. "They have resources you don't. What matters is what you do with what you've got." He pressed on before Sammy could argue. "And what you had was a dorm room. You let me wait there. Calm the fuck down. Because I was... I was not in a good place, Sammy." Then his head snapped back in sudden realization. "Wait, is it Sammy? I never asked."

"People here call me Samantha," he admitted with a roll of his eyes, "or just Sammy."

Mitch snorted. "Took the easy way out, huh?"

"Again," he said, dropping his volume a little and gesturing at himself. "Not a real trans girl. So of course I fucked some things up."

Mitch gave him a look, but didn't say anything, and they walked the rest of the way in silence. Mitch collected his bags, was as amazed as Sammy's dad had hoped he'd be when he opened the envelope of cash, and looked uncertainly at the door.

"If you wanted to crash here tonight—" Sammy started, but the other boy cut him off.

"No, actually. Thank you, but no. Because. Well. Two things." His lips twisted into a smirk. "First off, Farah said you'd give me her number?"

Sammy rolled his eyes but pulled out his phone. Contact information was dutifully transferred. Mitch shot off a text message and got a reply distressingly quickly. Sammy cleared his throat. "And the second thing?"

Mitch speared him with a look. "Do you want to be a girl, Sammy?"

He groaned. It was entirely too late for this. "I like being a girl. Which I'm pretty sure is slightly different, but maybe it's the same. I don't know. But no offense Mitch," he sighed, arms flopping at his sides as he fell backwards onto his bed. "I know for certain that don't

want to be trans."

"Yeah," the other boy nodded, sighed, and padded to the door. Before he took his leave, though, he turned and said, "I don't know how to tell you this, Sammy, that's not how any of that works."

And Indeed There Will Be Time

“I do like the earrings, by the way,” said his mother, doing a very poor job of hiding her smirk.

“Oh, the—” Sammy stammered at his laptop screen, where his mother’s slightly-pixelated face beamed back at him. He reluctantly pulled back the hood of his sweatshirt. It had successfully kept his earrings hidden in video calls for weeks, but had failed, apparently, when she’d seen him in the flesh. “Yeah.”

“Rainbow, right?” she pressed, eyes dancing. “Did you get them at Pride last week?”

“Um, a little before that,” he admitted, and scrubbed the back of his neck. “You’re not upset?”

She actually laughed. “Why would I be upset, honey? I think they’re cute.” And then it was her turn to look uncertain. “If that’s okay to say. Cute.”

He shrugged, smiled. “It’s okay. They are cute.”

“Boys should feel more comfortable wearing colours and cute things,” she opined. “And—sorry—young men, too. Grown-ass adults of whatever gender should wear whatever they like and not worry about what their mothers think.” She winked, and then scrunched up her nose in a little smile. “And they’re a nice little spark of colour, peaking out from under your hair.”

“Which is getting shaggy,” he said for her, knowingly.

Christina Chase threw up her hands in innocence. “I didn’t say anything. Although Steph can hack it down into something more manageable once you get home. It’s quite the mop. Has it ever been this long?”

Sammy shook his head, which set said hair to shifting and sliding. Without his clips to restrain things, it felt a lot heavier than he was

used to. "I don't think so."

"Are you growing it out?"

He squinted. "I don't think I've really thought about it," he said, which was laughably untrue, but perhaps not quite an actual lie. He hadn't thought about haircuts or specific plans for what he'd do once the program was over. Probably have Aunt Steph hack it down, although the mere thought gave his heart a little pang. "Better than a crew cut or a fade," he tried saying. "Not as, uh, respectable. More rakish and cool, yeah?"

His mother laughed good-naturedly along with him, then stilled and raised her eyebrows. His phone had buzzed loudly against the surface of the desk, behind him. "That's not the first time your phone has gone off," she observed. "Do you need to get it?"

"It's just Finley," he said, trying and failing to keep the frustration out of his voice. She gave him an arch look, and he explained, "We had a, um, date that ended poorly on Friday. And they're trying to make it better."

"Did they fuck up?" she asked, no small measure of maternal protectiveness swelling behind the simple question.

Sammy couldn't help but laugh. "No, it wasn't their fault."

Now she raised an eyebrow. "Did you fuck up, Sammy?"

He heaved a sigh. "I don't know. Maybe." Before she could say anything else, he told her, "And no offense, Mom, but you are getting no details out of me about this one."

"Well," she responded in mock affront. "I guess that means it must have been about sex."

"Mom!" Sammy squealed, much to her amusement. He covered his face with his sweatshirt sleeves. "Oh my god, I can't believe you just said that."

"I can't believe you'd confirm my guess so plainly," she giggled, and then smoothed her face into a more serious expression. She nodded past him, to the phone on the desk. "You should patch things up with Finn. I've kept you long enough on a Sunday afternoon."

"It's not something that needs patching up—" he tried to object.

"Just be honest with them," she told him earnestly. "Don't be afraid to be a little vulnerable. Relationships don't work, otherwise. Okay. I love you." And then she smiled, said, "Now go fix your sex problem," and signed off before he could so much as blush.

Finley had sent another picture of two pints of ice cream, held out

above the porch of Sammy's dorm.

He sent back a text saying *I'm kind of a mess, give me ten minutes.* and buzzed the door open.

You're not a mess, you just don't have makeup on for your video call with your mom, came the reply. A moment later they followed up with, *But I'll wait in the lobby.*

Thank you, Sammy texted back. He threw off his sweats, affixed his breast forms, and pulled on a simple cami-and-skirt outfit.

Finley helpfully texted *My hands are so cold right now.* Sammy rolled his eyes at his phone where it sat face-up on his desk.

After he'd finished a quick makeup look—he was down to three minutes—he picked up the phone. *You could have set them down, you know. Anyway, come on up.*

"You've got to hold the ice cream in your hands," Finley explained as they came through the door a few minutes later, "so your body heat transfers into the block of ice cream, getting it to peak softness, ready to eat."

"You are such a nerd sometimes," was Sammy's only response, other than holding his hand out for one of the pints. He sat in his desk chair, which felt isolated and safe.

Finley handed one over. "In my defense, I'm such a nerd all the time," they responded, and fell back onto Sammy's bed.

They ate ice cream together.

When Sammy's spoon hit the bottom of his pint, he said, "I'm sorry for fucking everything up on Friday."

Finley shook their head. "You did nothing of the sort. It was my dumbass suggestion, remember."

"It was a perfectly reasonable suggestion. I'm the one who freaked the fuck out."

Finley shot a look across the room composed of so much compassion that Sammy felt a little sick. His office chair maybe wasn't isolated enough. They said, "You shouldn't be ashamed by a bout of dysphoria."

"A bout of what?" Sammy sputtered in response.

"Dysphoria," his enbyfriend repeated placidly. "You know what dysphoria is."

"Of course I know what dysphoria is," he retorted. "It's when a trans person feels shitty because their outsides don't match their insides. But not all trans people experience dysphoria, Finley. And I

don't. I never have."

Not to mention Sammy wasn't transgender, so he couldn't experience dysphoria, anyway. Not that he could tell Finley that.

His enbyfriend used their eyebrows to say, "If you say so," which was only slightly better than actually saying it out loud.

"No, look," Sammy said, trying to be reasonable. "I got used to wearing breast forms and then, yeah, I had a little moment when I missed them and it set me off-kilter for a bit. But that's not dysphoria. That is in fact exactly backwards from how dysphoria actually works. Dysphoria is when you miss something you've never had and want to have in the future, not when you miss something you just had five minutes ago. That's ridiculous."

Finley shrugged. "Dysphoria's ridiculous, sometimes. I'll never have the hips my brain says I should have. I used to wear padding, sometimes, for some dresses. And taking it off at the end of the night made me kind of panicky more often than not. To the point where I stopped wearing the pads, because the come down was too much."

Sammy's stomach had dropped out of him. "Fuck, Finley, I didn't mean to—"

But they shook their head. "Samantha, I didn't share that as any kind of gotcha. I'm just saying: dysphoria is an inherently irrational response. You can't expect it to follow rational rules."

But Sammy still wasn't trans, so unless dysphoria was really *really* irrational, it still couldn't be that.

But also *be vulnerable*, his mother had said. Maybe being vulnerable was admitting the possibility that it had, impossibly, been dysphoria. (It certainly matched up with descriptions he'd read of dysphoria.) Maybe cisgender people got dysphoria sometimes, too. He sighed.

"Okay, so let's call it dysphoria," he said, and fuck, even just allowing that maybe it was dysphoria made him feel suddenly lighter. He scowled at the sensation. He could examine that nonsense later. "If it was dysphoria, I don't see how that changes anything."

"Well," Finley said, and carefully set aside their empty ice cream container. "Assuming you want to stay together—"

"Of course!"

They nodded and continued undeterred, but the corner of their lip did perk up. "...and you want to get naked with me again—"

"Yes, I would like to try that again, yes," Sammy said, although with far less vehemence and a good deal more hesitation. What if he fucked it all up again?

His enbyfriend nodded again. "So next time—not right now, but some time later—we can try it with the breast forms still on."

Sammy looked down at his hands. "You won't... mind? Less skin to touch, and all that."

"I won't mind. They're very realistic." Finley's smile contained a good percentage of smirk. But a moment later the expression crumbled, only to be replaced by that heart-wrenching, earnest compassion. "And as long as you need them, Sammy, they're a part of you. They're prosthetics. Just like you don't treat somebody's prosthetic arm or leg like it's not a real part of them." They looked dejectedly at the floor. "I should never have suggested you take them off."

"Okay, that's enough of that," Sammy groaned, and pushed himself up to standing so he could cross the room and hoist Finley up to their feet. "Hug me or something. This has got entirely too awkward."

So Finley wrapped their arms around Sammy, and wow that felt right. He realized he'd half-worried that he'd never experience that feeling again. He leaned into his enbyfriend, burrowing into their neck. Finley said something that Sammy didn't quite hear, and he realized that they were still trying to apologize.

"Finley honey, shut up," he whispered into their ear. "We hit a bump. We talked about it. We have a plan for going forward. It's okay." They didn't answer beyond squeezing him a little tighter.

Eventually they had to part so that Sammy could finish his Pre Calculus work before the next morning (the prof had strongly suggested there would be a quiz). He walked Finley to his dorm room door and leaned on it. "Thank you for being so gentle with me. And okay with... going slow sometimes, and me freaking out anyway, and... I'm kind of a lot, aren't I?"

Finley turned on Sammy with a grin, scooped him forward and kissed him until his toes curled. "You are a lot," they agreed when they came up for air, and tapped their forehead against his. "But I'd never want you to be any less."

Heart hammering, Sammy couldn't do anything beyond nod, and then watch as they sauntered down the hall towards the elevators.

"Okay, so this one starts off with some... other language," Sammy explained as he looked down at the page helplessly. "I know we're supposed to read these aloud, but all I'm gonna do is mangle the Spanish or whatever and none of us will understand it, anyway."

"It's Italian," Leon spoke up, pointing at the footnote at the bottom of the page. "Dante, Inferno. It means, uh—" He made as if to read the translation, but then just shook his head and paraphrased, "I'm only talking to you because you can't tell anybody what I've said."

"Okay, that's a great start to a poem," Sammy groused, and took a long pull from his soda. It was late afternoon in the dining commons, between lunch and dinner rushes, so almost quiet. The Lit professor Doctor Ngawa had insisted that they not just read the reading, but stage a little poetry reading of the reading. Sammy had suggested to a few people that they all do it right after class: knock it out as soon as possible, with endless french fries on hand.

"Just read," Farah giggled, rolling her eyes.

With a sigh, he did. It started out with a weird invitation to go out for the night, and then got a little creepy by comparing the night sky to a patient etherized on a table. And then it started wandering, like the guy suggesting they go out didn't really have a plan for the evening, but was making it up as he went along, and wasn't very good at that, either.

Rookie mistake, thought Sammy. Always have a solid plan for a date night.

And then it talked about yellow fog and the poet insisting that there would be enough time to do... something, it wasn't really clear. And as Sammy read, he got the impression, too, that the lack of clarity was intentional, as if this guy who wanted to go out was just sort of nattering instead of saying what he wanted to say, if he even knew himself what that was.

"And indeed there will be time," he read aloud—and at least there was a nice kind of rhythm to this poem, not like the last one—"To wonder, 'Do I dare?' and 'Do I dare?'" It went on a little more like that, as if the guy had forgotten that he was asking anybody out in the first place, and now he was wondering if he dared to do anything, or if he'd just be caught up in questioning himself and his own intentions.

The guy seemed really obsessed with how he looked old and thin and brittle, like he was wasting away. Probably because he was spending too much time asking himself these silly questions and not just, you know, going out for the night and having fun. He seemed so tired, even through it also seemed like he never actually did anything, just worried about whether he should or even could do anything.

He sounded like a real loser, basically.

He talked about some nameless women like they were the only

bright things in motion around him, and he was something drab and grey among them. Unremarkable and forgettable.

Oh geez, and now he was going on about growing old again, and wondering if he should part his hair or even eat a peach. And then there were mermaids, kind of out of nowhere, and even then they were hardly actually in the poem, but far off, where the guy couldn't reach them. Or maybe he could, or—it wasn't quite clear—maybe he even already had. But if he had, it was a dream, and waking from the dream was like drowning.

That was where it ended.

"Jeez, that was weird," Sammy muttered when he was done.

"Are you okay, Samantha?" asked Farah, and when he looked up, her face was full of concern.

Sammy blinked. "Yeah, why?"

She pulled a tissue out of her bag and held it forward. "Because you're crying, honey."

He dabbed fingers to the corners of his eyes and realized she was right. "Oh. Um. Weird. Is there dust in the air or something?" But his heart was also pounding, and something in this weird poem seemed to be tugging at him. He scowled up at the top of the first page again. "This J. Alfred Prufrock really needs to up his game. This was the weirdest way to ask somebody out on a date I've ever seen."

"You're doing pretty well with your lilt and cadence," said Vanessa's head on Sammy's laptop. "But today we're going to focus on your terminal drop."

"What's terminal drop?" asked Sammy, with no small measure of despair. It sounded like something else he was doing wrong and would have to correct.

"Terminal drop is what you just did right there," Vanessa laughed, her usual ever-flowing font of positivity. "Where at the end of the sentence—the terminus—your pitch dropped. Which is impressive, because that was, technically speaking, a question, and yet you made it sound like it wasn't one. You made it sound like the end of the whole conversation." She paused, and asked, "Are you all right, honey?"

Sammy pulled himself together. Sat up straight. Squared his shoulders. Smiled at the little red light at the top of his screen. "Yeah, um. Just a little scattered. Sorry if I kind of wasn't all here."

"You want to skip the week?" she offered, eyebrows lifted. "We just got started, I won't even count it against your 10-lesson subscription."

"No, no," he said, shaking his head vigorously. The last thing he wanted to do was waste Vanessa's time. "I'll get my head back in the game. Promise."

Vanessa nodded a few more times than was necessary before saying, "Okay. Here, let me ask this: what's your dad do for a living?"

"He's a lawyer?" Sammy answered, wondering what that had to do with literally anything.

His voice coach bobbed her head. "Yeah, that tracks. So he talks for a living, and he always needs to sound like he knows what he's talking about, and I bet he can shut down a conversation with just the tone of his voice, right?"

Sammy scowled softly. "I mean... yeah," he agreed, thinking about his dad's visit this last week, and how whenever he'd talked he'd sort of taken up all the space in the room. He allowed other people to talk sometimes, but only when there was just one thing that they could reasonably say, like 'thank you' or to express surprise at whatever he'd just said. The only exception being his wife, upon whose words he'd hang with a stupid smile on his face.

He thought about the tone of voice his dad used to present himself as affable and friendly even when he was delivering bad news, or maneuvering somebody into a rhetorical corner.

He thought about the genial tone his dad used when he was unilaterally ending discussion but wanted you to think he was doing everybody a favour in the process.

Vanessa was saying something, and Sammy coughed. "I'm sorry, I didn't catch that. I was... just thinking about my dad."

She nodded, and then carefully and slowly repeated herself: "I said I'd bet money that you picked up that terminal drop trick from him, but you use it to shut down conversations where you're uncomfortable." She lifted her hands. "It's a really common verbal habit among trans girls."

Sammy sighed, not because he was being called out for pulling some sort of trick, but because here he was, once again, being called a trans girl, for something he apparently did all the time without even thinking about it, except he wasn't trans. "So it's bad?" he asked.

"It's not bad," she moderated, tipping her head side to side. "But it's exceedingly masculine-coded. It's a conversational pattern exercised mostly by men..." She rolled her eyes upwards, hesitated for half a moment, and then apparently felt obliged to add, "...and surly teenagers."

“Yours giving you trouble again?” he asked with a grin, which also allowed him to sidestep the fact that he himself was technically still a teenager, too.

“You have no idea,” she sighed, and then visibly shook off her own domestic frustration. “But. Back on topic. It’s a generally masculine thing to do, and it’s a thing that will be generally received as masculine behaviour. And when your goal is to present feminine, that works counter to your intention.”

“So I need to end my sentences a different way?”

“Exactly!” his voice coach laughed, and gestured into her camera, towards Sammy. “Just like you did there. In general, you want to go up in pitch and forward in brightness...” She gestured ‘up’ and ‘forward’ with her fingers as she explained. “...at the end of the sentence. And that’s something that we typically do when we’re asking a question, like you just were.”

“But I’m not always asking a question, so....”

Vanessa held up a hand. “There’s other ways, and we’ll get to them. Right now, for this exercise, you’re going to read this wikipedia article that I’m linking to you...” A link popped up in the text chat sidebar. “...but say each sentence as if it were a question.”

Sammy clicked the link, which opened up a bright white webpage in his browser. Something about a soccer team in England, of all things. He started reading aloud, haltingly. Each simple statement of fact presented in the article he had to turn into a question, as if he were unsure about the thing that he was talking about. Which in one way was fine, because he really did know nothing about this English football team. But in another way, it was...

“I sound like an idiot,” he groaned at the end of the first paragraph. “Like I don’t know what I’m talking about.”

Vanessa bobbed her head. “Yep. Turns out sounding like you’re confident when you speak is coded as masculine in our culture. Which is... unsurprising, when you think about it, but still really depressing.”

“Okay, but you said there’s other ways,” he said, leaning towards the laptop, very nearly pointing a finger at Vanessa’s image on the screen. “How do I not do, uh, terminal drop, without making everything a question?”

She smirked. “Okay. Next you’re going to read the second paragraph, but you’re going to make it sound like you’re incredibly proud of these facts you’re presenting. Not that you’re proud to be presenting these facts, or that you’re proud to know these facts, but as

if you're proud of the facts themselves. They're just so fascinating, they worked so hard to be facts, and it's a pleasure for you to share them with me. Think you can do that?"

Sammy blinked at the camera. "Vanessa, I have no idea what you're talking about."

She lifted one finger. "You terminal dropped," she pointed out with a wink, and then looked off to the side, which Sammy knew meant she was looking at a different window. "Let me demonstrate," she said, entirely too perkily.

And she did, continuing the perky lilt to her voice. The second paragraph described the football club's place in a larger association, its record of wins and losses, and who had managed the club for each of its landmark accomplishments. And sure enough, her voice went tripping along though these utterly boring facts as if each one was an amazing little tidbit of lore, the warmth in her voice putting a little polish on each fact as she presented it. It was like she was giving a school presentation to her class about a topic she thought was fascinating and everybody else should find fascinating. But it was just some sports team that nobody in either of their acquaintance either followed or even knew about.

And she sounded incredibly feminine as she did it.

"Now you," she prompted when she was done.

Sammy waded into the third paragraph, struggling to sweep his pitch upwards and his resonance forwards at the end of each sentence. He had to start earlier than he originally thought: not the last two or three words, but really the whole second half of the sentence. But after the first few, he got into the cadence of it, imagined himself some schoolgirl holding up a giant posterboard, sharing the Good News of English Football to her class.

"This is somehow worse than making everything a question," he groused once he was done.

Vanessa bobbed her head in what Sammy had come to understand was her "it's complicated" expression. "So first of all, we're overdoing it right now. Intentionally. Later, we'll dial it back a bit. But also it can... just be uncomfortable talking like this after you've been accustomed to speaking with the easy authority granted to masculine speech patterns."

"Like my dad does," Sammy added. "All the time."

Vanessa shrugged. "Benefits of patriarchy."

Sammy wrinkled his nose. "So every time I talked to people before

this, I was... leaning on patriarchal power structures?" he asked, dipping into the language they used in Uncle Gideon's history class. "That's... not a comfortable thought."

Vanessa shook her head. "No, it's not," she said, not without sympathy.

Sammy was quiet for a little while, thinking back to conversations he'd had. How he'd shut down Farah, that one time in the dining commons, and sent her stalking away, muttering and doubting herself, when all she was doing was flirting a little. A pang of guilt stabbed him in the gut.

"It's okay," Vanessa told him, as if she could read his mind across the video chat. "It's a lot to take in."

He summoned up a pale smile for the camera. "What is this, voice training or therapy?"

His voice coach bobbed her head side to side again. "I'm legally not allowed to call this voice therapy as I'm not a licensed speech therapist, but there's a reason it's called voice therapy elsewhere." She cleared her throat and looked almost apologetic. "To get to an authentic feminine voice, Sammy, you're gonna need to wade through some... unpleasant realizations about how the world works, and how you've been moving through it."

He slumped back into his desk chair. "That seems like a whole lot of work just so people stop looking at me funny."

"That's transition for you," Vanessa sighed, and a bittersweet smile played across her face. "But I promise you, Sammy, once you get to the other side? It's worth it. It's totally worth it."

"The fuck did you just say to your phone?"

Sammy's laughing question prompted Rowan to whirl around on her bar stool, glowing phone held up beside her face. "Sammy!" she squealed, and launched her whole body into him for a crushing hug. "Oh gosh, I've missed you so much! I'm sure you hardly missed me at all. Vacation time, you know? Seems like forever to me but it was just a regular week or so on your end, you probably didn't even notice."

He hugged her back. "I noticed," he assured her, and blinked away the tears forming in the corners of his eyes. A lot had happened in the last week or so where he'd wanted, and not had, his cousin to call on. At least not without dealing with an absurd time zone difference. "Welcome home."

She gave him one final squeeze and then settled back onto the bar

stool. “We could ask for a table, but there’s two seats right here,” she suggested, patting the stool next to hers.

They were at Arts and Crafts, the pub that Sammy’s dad had suggested and Sammy had rejected because it was just a block off of campus. He’d spotted two different tables with students he knew, waving to them with a smile that probably did not communicate how relieved he was that he wasn’t here, dressed as a boy, with his parents. But it was just right for meeting Rowan.

“Sure,” Sammy agreed, climbing up onto the stool and not thinking too hard about how he’d never sat at the bar at a restaurant. (He didn’t count the countertop service at Oak Grove’s sole diner.) Keenly aware that his fake ID was in his purse, Sammy tore his eyes off of the beer in front of Rowan. “So what were you saying to your phone?” he asked again.

His cousin plucked the phone up from where she’d dropped it on the bartop. “I’m learning Hindi,” she explained, and showed him the screen. “There’s an app for that.”

A green owl pranced among cartoon flowers beside a mobile game interface portaying a series of steps along a path. “You’re on Unit Six?” he read off the screen. “And you started when?”

“Two days ago,” she answered, with a self-satisfied little smirk. She tapped at the screen twice, then shut it off and slipped it into her purse. “It’s such a beautiful language, Sammy. When I was immersed in it in New Delhi, it was like swimming through music.”

The bartender arrived then and they had to put the conversation on hold to order. Rowan wanted shwarma tacos; Sammy ordered Korean barbeque tacos and, with only a beat of hesitation, a cider. The bartender promised to have the order right up, and Sammy tried not to be distracted by the fact that he’d ordered alcohol confidently enough that he didn’t get carded.

“It really is an amazing country,” Rowan was saying. “The sights, the sounds, the smells, oh my god, Sammy. Vik took me to this, like, it was sort of a food court, with tons of little shops selling different dishes, and the whole place was all spices and sizzle and just incredible.”

Sammy let her talk, which was mostly burbling about how wonderful the trip had been and how dashing and clever Vikram was. Rowan being Rowan, she recited what seemed like their entire day-by-day itinerary, with colour commentary throughout.

At one point, mouth full of bulgogi, he blurted, “Wait, you met his

parents?" He then had to press fingers to his lips to catch an escaping shred of cabbage. Very ladylike, he chided himself silently.

"Mohandas and Pooja," she answered with a bright smile. "I think I made a good impression. They invited me back for bhojan a second time. Sorry, that's lunch. It's like, the big, important meal of the day there."

Sammy lifted an eyebrow. "And they were happy about their son running around town with a white girl?"

"Despite their best efforts," she said with a conspiratorial little smile, "I worked my way into their hearts."

He took a long gulp of his cider. "Do they know you're trans?" he asked with the barest trace of skepticism. Sammy had felt protective about his older cousin before, but the feeling seemed to be leaping up out of his chest, now. He didn't want Rowan to get herself hurt, and she did not seem to be taking any precautions with her heart.

"Oh yeah," she laughed. "You know me. I couldn't go stealth if I tried, not with my big mouth. I did have to explain that I wasn't hijra, because that's a very specific cultural identity that would be hugely inappropriate for me to co-opt." Here she grinned. "I kind of channelled Tate for a few minutes, but they understood. And then we talked for like half an hour about gender and sexuality and adoption and so on. There are so many little kids in India that need parents."

Sammy blinked. "You're adopting a kid from India, now?"

"Of course not!" she said, looking away.

Sammy only smirked back. "But you did, ahm, strongly imply that you would be amenable to the possibility, sometime in the indeterminate future."

Rowan rolled her eyes back toward her cousin, but didn't stop smiling. "I might have implied something of the sort, yes," she confessed.

"Wormed your way into their hearts, indeed," he laughed.

"Worked," she corrected. "Worked my way into their hearts. Although there may have been some worming involved. It was delicate, but I persevered."

Sammy took a moment to drain the last of his cider. "What about Vik's heart?" he asked. "Work your way into there? Or his pants?" He laughed to cover the sudden panic at his own tactlessness. He could blame the cider, but when did he become such a lightweight?

"Vikram was a perfect gentleman," Rowan responded primly, either not noticing or not judging that he'd overstepped a line. "Also

manners and mores around public affection are so different there. But we did go dancing, and we danced... really close." She blushed at the memory.

"I'm glad you had a good time," said Sammy, and realized he meant it. As much as he was worried about the future disaster looming over his cousin's heart, she seemed happy. Vibrating with happiness, in fact. She'd found a thing that she wanted and she was diving after it with both hands outstretched. Sammy wondered if India really was that magical or if Rowan was just energized by the chase, by the striving, by picking a goal and going after it, full tilt.

"I really did," she beamed back at him. "What about you? What happened here in my absence?"

"Oh, you know," he laughed, and scratched at the back of his head. His sudden impulse was to minimize the last ten days, to tell her that all the things that had happened were all under control, to nimbly sidestep mentioning how much of it still lingered on his mind. He wanted his cousin to think he was cool, and had his shit together.

But Rowan (and her big mouth) didn't hold anything back, and while she definitely did not have her shit together, she was still immeasurably cool. But more importantly, she was happy. She'd go on at length about whatever happened to be bothering her, and it never made her seem less. Quite the contrary, in fact.

So instead of holding it all in, he spilled everything. He told her about the training dildo he hadn't told anybody about. He told her about the bout of dysphoria that had sent him sprawling to the floor. He told her about Mitch showing up at his door. About his parents arriving on Mitch's heels, and how he'd had to scramble to hide everything that Mitch suggested probably didn't need to be hidden. About terminal drop and how maybe he'd been an asshole to everybody he'd ever spoken to, before. He told her about how he and Finley had finally talked, and that they were going to try again, and that he was excited and scared and eager and dreading it.

And maybe he did put a little spin on it, playing up how much it all was and how comically overwhelmed he'd been. Rowan laughed more than she talked back, but mostly she listened, and more than once she interrupted his monologue to hug him tight, teetering on the bar stools.

It was a load off. "I really missed you," he told his cousin. "None of this seemed like video call content, and I don't think I could tell most of that to anybody else."

"Well I'm back now," she said, and her smile turned almost predatory as she poked a finger at him. "And you'd better tell me how things shake out with Finley. I want all the details, girl."

"No promises," he laughed, and tipped back the last of his second cider. "Unless it's really funny."

"This is going to sound weird," said Sammy, "but I read a poem earlier this week and I can't get it out of my head."

"That doesn't sound weird, that sounds like college," replied Finley with a shrug only slightly constrained by the weight of Sammy's body. They were curled up on the couch at Finley's apartment—very economical, very cramped and cluttered, very shared with too many roommates—after going out for tacos. Their plans to stream a movie had been pre-empted by cuddling and staring vacantly at the dead television screen. "What's the poem about?"

"About this, like, sad loser," Sammy groaned. "Who's a sad loser because he worries about things instead of doing things."

"What things?"

Sammy shook his head at the ceiling. "It's... not very clear. It's a super weird poem. But I can't get it out of my head. Little scraps keep coming to mind."

"Good poems do that," they replied, and grinned. "At least I imagine. I dunno, I'm a med student, it's been a long time since I took a literature class."

Sammy laughed along good-naturedly and then pressed himself up against them. He had his hands up under their shirt, stroking their sides and chest. Occasionally they kissed, slowly, as if they had all the time in the world.

A while later, knowing that too much time had passed and that he'd sound kind of like a weirdo, he said, "I just... keep wondering if I'm like the guy."

Finley was not following, which was totally understandable. "The guy?"

"In the poem, sorry. The guy who doesn't do the thing because he's too busy worrying about the thing." He hated the poem right then, for intruding on what was otherwise a very pleasant makeout session.

Their enbyfriend dug their chin into their chest to give him a long, appraising look. "But that's not you, Samantha."

"No?" Uncertain, Sammy looked up into their warm amber eyes, which very nearly drove every thought right out of his head.

"No, because you're not stuck worrying, you're in motion," they explained. "You're in the program to get into Columbia. You're transitioning. You're doing the thing."

Sammy opened his mouth, closed it, looked down again. There was no way to say, "Yes, I'm in the program to get into Columbia, but mostly to escape my hometown and my family. And I'm not transitioning, because I don't want to transition, because I'm not trans, I'm just pretending so I can do the program that gets me into Columbia and away from Oak Fucking Grove." Instead, he said, "I mean. I guess."

Finley chuckled, crooking a finger under Sammy's chin and lifting up so they could look into his eyes. "It's one of the things about you that I find most attractive, you know. You've got a drive to pursue your ambitions, even if they're not ambitions that most other people understand. Transition, higher education. You take big, brave swings, honey, and it's kind of awesome to watch."

Sammy scrunched his nose. This thing that his enbyfriend found "most attractive" about him wasn't him at all, not really. He wasn't brave. He'd fallen backwards into the Marginalized Scholars Program, not pursued it. And that went double for pretending to be trans. For a moment, he wondered what would happen if Finley knew, and a full-body shiver rippled down his spine.

Finley hugged him tighter. "Are you cold?"

Instead of answering—because any honest answer would be far too complicated to speak out loud—Sammy just shook his head into their armpit.

He could hear Finley lick their lips. "So um. This is actually one of the few evenings where all of my roommates are out of the house."

Two of them had been talking in the kitchen when Finn and Sammy had come back from tacos, and had made themselves scarce shortly thereafter. Now that he thought about it, they had both shot apologetic looks at Finley as they scooted out the door. They were plainly supposed to have already left, leaving the apartment conveniently empty for a... satisfying conclusion for date night.

He'd suspected this was coming and even still his guts churned with anxiety. What if he fucked it all up again? What if he just couldn't handle being naked? What if he was just a scared little kid pretending to be an adult? He didn't—couldn't—say anything. He stroked Finley's side to soothe himself.

"So if you'd like," his enbyfriend went on haltingly, "I'd like to take

you to bed."

"Are you sleepy?" he asked lightly, and scowled at himself, face still obscured against Finley's side. Deflection was not going to do him any favours, here. He focused on the warmth in Finley's voice and the invitation—the active, positive affirmation that they wanted to get naked with him. It was like a balm for Sammy's nerves. He was wanted, which he wasn't sure he'd ever been before, not like this.

Finley stammered through an awkward denial and started in on an even worse attempt at clarification before Sammy reached up to put two fingers across their lips. He pulled himself upwards to face Finley and summoned up a mischevious expression.

Finley rolled their eyes.

If Sammy had a reputation for sass, he figured he might as well use it to cover his hesitation. "Are you sleepy" could easily be passed off as a tease. But that would only work if, after the sass, the hesitation stopped.

So he replaced his fingers with his lips, and while the ensuing slow kiss set both their hearts to thudding, he knew that even that was mostly buying time. Time that was running out.

Breaking the kiss, Sammy leaned back and told his lips to smile. The result was shaky, but genuine. He nodded slowly. "Finley, please take me to bed."

Labels

Sammy woke slowly, warm and comfortable, wrapped up in unfamiliar bedding and a pair of familiar arms. The sheets smelled like Finley, and a little like himself, and a lot like—Sammy felt himself blush as his olfactory senses catalogued—sweat and spunk and latex. He'd done it.

They'd done it.

They *did it*, in fact.

Sammy burrowed up against a sleeping Finn as he remembered how careful and slow his enbyfriend been last night. At first all the asking for consent and checking boundaries for every little thing was a little annoying. Then it got maddening. And then somehow a switch got flipped.

It turns out “Can I put my hand here?” followed by a breathless, “Yes please” and then “May I stroke up your back?” and struggling to turn mewling into words was hot as hell.

Finley had put so much care into every touch last night that Sammy came away from the experience—as much as snuggling harder into Finley's side counted as ‘away’—feeling like he was some kind of special treasure to them. Worth all that time and care and attention.

He'd never felt like that before.

And now they were tangled up in bed the morning after, Finley's arms around Sammy, and he didn't think anything had ever felt so right in his life.

One of Finley's hands rested on Sammy's tit, fingers curled around its curve and thumb resting on the nipple. And that, too, felt right, and had felt right last night. Finn hadn't avoided touching Sammy's breast forms—not at all. They'd stroked and squeezed, even pinched the nipples. There was absolutely no reason why Sammy should have felt

any of it the way he did, but not once had he felt like something fake was pasted onto his chest. Every time Finley had touched Sammy's breasts, it had felt like they were touching Sammy directly.

And that had... delivered results.

Sammy wasn't new to orgasms—he was a normal, teenaged boy, after all—but he struggled to categorize what had happened last night as the same thing as what happened after he masturbated. His whole body had lit up, skin flushing from top to toes, a warm rush spilling out of his heart and turning his brain to goo.

Speaking of which, he'd rather like to experience that again, and—reaching down to check Finley's cock, which quickly filled his hand and brought a pleased if sleepy squawk out of his enbyfriend—it seemed like the feeling was mutual. Before Finley could fully rouse, Sammy slid down the bed to wake them up properly.

While Finley's roommates had cleared out the night before, their generous absence did not extend to the morning after. Two of them were waiting in the kitchen when Sammy and Finn staggered out looking for breakfast.

Sammy immediately stumbled to a halt, suddenly overwhelmed by the thought that both of them must know, or at least strongly suspect, that he and Finley had fucked last night. Hell, they'd probably heard them fucking just ten minutes ago. Finley was... not quiet.

But the first one, masculine-presenting in a starched white shirt and tailored slacks, looked up from his newspaper with about as much interest as one might bestow on the people coming out of a subway one wasn't about to board.

The second, though, high femme by way of some rather impressive eye makeup, a pink business casual blouse, and very differently-tailored slacks, grinned at their entry. "Is this the day we finally meet Samantha?"

"Who's Samantha?" asked the first one.

"Finley's girlfriend, Jesus!" came the arch reply. "They've been dating her for like a month, now?"

"Congrats," the first one mumbled automatically, and then looked up at the both of them myopically. "Which one of you is Finley, again?"

"Yeah, love you too, brah," Finley laughed and clapped their roommate on the back as they crossed the kitchen. They fetched a pair of bowls from the cupboard; a box of cereal and a jug of milk were

already on the table. They pulled out a chair for Sammy and sat in the last one, themself. "Yes, this is Samantha, she and her," they told their roommates, and then introduced the two of them with names and pronouns, as well.

Sammy noted that the pronouns matched what their presentations might imply, but the names slid right off of his brain. He'd been fucking in the next room over while they had their morning coffee and he'd just walked out here like it was perfectly normal. He forced himself to smile and pour cereal.

Breakfast conversation was meagre and mostly driven by the pink blouse lady. She asked how Sammy's program was going (because apparently Finley had mentioned it and she'd remembered it, and apparently she was just one of those exceedingly extroverted people who just retained details about people they'd never met just in case they had to make conversation with them later) and if he planned on majoring pre-med like the rest of them. Apparently everyone in the apartment was pre-med.

"Except for Ziggy," starched shirt spoke up.

Pink blouse swatted him. "Ziggy is too pre-med. She's just a chem major."

He didn't look up from his paper. "She's going to end up a pharmacist, trust me. All she's ever going to do is count pills her entire professional life."

"And save patients' lives by identifying drug interactions from scrips they got from multiple doctors," she retorted, and reached over to swat at Finley's cereal-eating hand. "Right, Fin? What did you say the other day about pharma?"

Finley slow-blinked at her, and then shook his head a little. "Sorry, what? I lost the thread of the conversation."

Pink blouse only cackled in response. "Wow, she really got you fuckbrained this morning." She shot a smirk at Sammy. "Well done, girlie."

Sammy put on a smile that probably looked more like a grimace. "Thanks."

If pink blouse noticed Sammy's expression, it didn't slow her down. "Anyway, you should consider pre-med. We need more lady doctors. Even if you're not going to be a lady doctor lady doctor, you know? Although I don't know how anybody goes to a gynecologist who's a dude. Can you imagine?"

Sammy shook his head. "I cannot."

Pink blouse swatted his shoulder in approval. “See? She knows how it is!”

Sammy blinked, realizing all at once that this woman who’d hoovered up so many personal details had somehow missed that “Samantha” was supposedly trans. And she thought that Sammy was a cis girl? He shot an uncertain glance at Finn, but they were focused on their cereal. Or unfocused on their cereal, as the case may be. It was a full minute before they looked up again, and by that point the moment had passed.

Sammy just shook his head and applied himself to finishing breakfast.

Finley’s place was a walk-up, so once breakfast was concluded they had to take three flights of stairs down before they came out into the city’s morning heat. Finley insisted on walking Sammy to the subway, and they both ambled along without any great hurry. It did not take Sammy long to realize that his enbyfriend had fallen uncharacteristically quiet. He nudged his shoulder against theirs, eyebrows lifted in question. “Morning after regrets?” he teased, before a rush of panic suggested that maybe that was, in fact, the problem.

But Finn shook their head and smiled. “Not at all. Last night was great. I just... I made an observation, and I’m not sure if I should share it.”

“Well, now you have to,” Sammy responded with relief. They didn’t regret the sex. That was good. No observation could be worse than Finley realizing that they didn’t enjoy fucking him.

His enbyfriend chuckled, took a deep breath, and said, “I couldn’t help but notice that you flinched, just a little, every time my roommates called you ‘she’ or ‘her.’ Or ‘girlie.’”

Okay, maybe there were worse things than momentary morning-after regrets. “Um,” Sammy said, mind suddenly and absolutely blank.

“Which is fine,” they rushed to clarify, and blathered a little. “I’m not... judging or anything, and it’s only been a month for you, right? Since you started presenting femme full-time.”

“Six weeks,” Sammy heard himself say. Meanwhile, he thought: do they know? Have they clocked him as a boring cis boy?

“And the high femme thing, it really works for you,” Finley went on breathlessly. “You’re like. You’re really good at it, Samantha. You always look amazing. But... how you look and how you feel inside, they don’t have to match up exactly, you know?”

Sammy squinted. "I'm not sure what you're saying."

Finley released Sammy's hand long enough to scrub their face. "I'm saying," they said, and took his hand again, "that maybe you might consider using different pronouns."

He stumbled to a stop there on the sidewalk, because that was not what he was expecting, at all. "Different pronouns? Like—"

He almost got out, "he and him" but before he could, Finley sputtered, "They and them? Or maybe some neopronouns? Zie/zir or fae/faer?"

Sammy wrinkled his nose. "I get the whole point about neopronouns, but I don't want to explain my pronouns to everybody I meet for the rest of my life."

"Well, then what about they and them?" they suggested with half a shrug and half a smile. "I know some people for whom it works marvelously."

And in that moment, standing on the sidewalk a few feet away from the subway stairs, with the morning light illuminating Finley's face and the hopeful smile spread across it, and his whole body and brain and maybe even his soul still simmering in the afterglow of their sex, Sammy found that he could not say no. He couldn't deny his enbyfriend, so eager to help him find happiness.

And besides: *be vulnerable*, right? Maybe Finley knew something that he didn't understand yet. Maybe he could try it out, and see how it felt. What did it cost, to just test drive some pronouns?

Or maybe he was just fuckbrained.

"Okay. Let's do it."

"Yeah?" Finley asked through the widest smile Sammy had ever seen on their face.

"Yeah."

Finley pretended to make introductions to an invisible bystander. "This is Samantha, they're trying out new pronouns today."

"You're a goof," Sammy said, and leaned forward to kiss them. The kiss went on a little longer than intended, which really should not have been a surprise to either of them.

"They're a great kisser," Finley added with a wink.

In the close, humid air of the subway, redolent with human sweat and its usual piquant little undertone of urine, Sammy had a long ride to turn over the matter in his head. In their head? He scowled at the subway floor. Or they scowled.

Wow, that was going to be annoying.

He'd use the new pronouns when he spoke, at least at first. That would work, right? And he wouldn't have to correct himself everytime he thought anything. And besides, he hardly ever used third-person pronouns to refer to himself, anyway. It was easy.

It was how he'd been using she and her for six weeks, after all, and that had been working out just fine.

Sammy walked into the lobby of his dorm just in time to see the elevator doors sliding closed. He groaned; the elevator was notoriously slow, and he'd have to wait for it to creep up to wherever it was going and then all the way back down again. He certainly didn't have it in him to go up the stairs. But the doors shuddered to a halt as a slim-wristed hand popped out, then groaned open again to reveal Farah, waiting for him to board.

"Thanks," he sighed, and leaned against the back wall of the elevator. The girl looked him up and down. "What?"

She shook her head, the trace of a smirk tugging at the corner of her lip. "Nothing."

"No, really, what?"

She rolled her eyes slightly. "It's ten in the morning on a Saturday. I'm coming back from breakfast, but you weren't in the dining commons. And those are the same clothes you wore to your date last night."

Sammy could feel the blush washing over his face. Caught on the Walk of Shame. "I just—" he stammered, but didn't know what to say.

"I'm not judging," she cut him off, and gave him a smile that at least appeared genuine. "Just noticing. And hoping you had a nice time."

"I, uh, did," he managed, just barely. His face was on fire. Why was this elevator so slow?

"Um," said Farah, and looked hesitantly to Sammy.

He was about to cringe away from whatever question she was about to ask, but something about her expression stopped him. Worried. Vulnerable. "What is it?"

She rolled her eyes, but it seemed to be mostly at herself. "Can I talk to you about something?"

"Any time," he answered immediately.

Which was of course exactly when the elevator dinged for their floor. They both stepped out and Farah frowned. "This isn't a hallway conversation."

Sammy shrugged and pointed both ways down the hall. "Yours or mine?"

"You probably want to change," she hedged. "Shower."

"Unless you're telling me I smell," he grinned, "it can wait."

She tilted her head towards Sammy's room, which was closer. They walked in companionable silence, and Sammy toyed with the idea of telling her he was trying out they and them pronouns. But once his door was shut behind them, she said, "So I'm like... really into Mitch. Like, I am thinking about him way too much, way too early, and it is fucking with my head." She pointed one finger, helpfully, at the side of her head.

He slung his bag onto his bed and gestured Farah towards his desk chair. "Isn't that a good thing? Sometimes things just click?"

"Yeah, but," she groaned, and fell into the chair, hands over her face. She rubbed her forehead for a minute, almost but not quite speaking, and finally grumbled, "This sounds so stupid to say out loud."

"Most of what I say sounds stupid," he laughed, getting comfortable on his bed. After he was done talking with Farah, he might just curl up and nap, study schedule be damned. "But I have recently discovered that it feels better getting it out, anyway."

Farah nodded helplessly, shrugged, and said, "I'm a lesbian, Samantha. I have been since I was, like, eight. I have always known what I am, I have always known what I like. I have never, ever had even the smallest little smidgiest bit of feelings for a boy."

He squinted at her. "I thought you said you weren't above making an exception."

She blushed. "That was bravado. Completely and totally baseless bravado. I saw him sitting there and my mouth just... ran off on its own."

"I am familiar with that phenomenon."

"And it's been... fuck." She scrunched up her nose in thought. "I was going to say it's only been a few weeks, but it's only been one week. We've only seen each other, like, five times, total."

"That's intense."

"Yeah, but I'm thinking about him even when he's not there," she explained, chopping the air with a frustrated hand. "He's been busy, super busy, with his interview and starting work and finding a place and... so it's not like we've been attached at the hip or anything."

"So it's not just... lovebombing or new relationship energy stuff," he said, and forced himself not to preen over the fact that he was casually

using a whole bunch of words he hadn't even known a couple months ago. Was using new words becoming his thing?

Farah was shaking her head, looking lost. "And at first I was like—" and here she took on a singsong voice as she narrated her internal monologue: "Maybe I'm thinking about him like a girl and just... blithely invalidating his gender identity, and that would make me a... complete fucking asshole."

He couldn't help but chuckle. "Yeah, that would be bad."

"But he is such a guy, Samantha," she exclaimed helplessly. "He is a dude. A man. He is gross and hotheaded and often just... thoughtless. And like, I know, not all men or whatever. But it's just... all the things I used to tell myself I didn't have to deal with because I only dated girls?" She bounced her hands at shoulder height on her left, as if weighing a bunch of invisible weights. "He's got—" she turned and chopped both hands down with certainty "—all of them." She shook her head slowly back and forth, as if in wonder. Then her shoulders collapsed downward and she squeaked, helpless, "And I kind of like it."

She seemed deflated, like she'd said everything there was to say, and Sammy hazarded: "Well. So first, do you want help or a hug?"

She smiled at him gratefully. "Help. And maybe a hug after."

He nodded, and took a moment to compose an answer. "Okay, so. Gender and sexuality and all of that, we like to think it's cut and dried, divided into nice neat little categories, but it rarely is. It's... fuzzy."

"I've heard so many queer people say shit like that so many times," she said, "and it's never made any sense to me before."

"Yeah, well," Sammy shrugged. "Now you've got personal experience of the phenomenon."

"You sound like Ngawa."

He only lifted an eyebrow at her. "Doesn't mean I'm wrong."

"Okay, but what do I do?" she all but whined. "Can I even call myself a lesbian if I'm dating a guy? Or am I—" She suddenly looked vaguely ill. "Sammy, I don't want to be straight. I might just keel over and die."

He couldn't hold back the snort of laughter that bubbled up inside him. After a momentary look of aggrieved shock, Farah also dissolved into giggles.

"There is such a thing as being bi, or pan," he reminded her, needlessly; she rolled her eyes at him. "But even so. He makes you happy, yeah?" She nodded, so he continued: "So enjoy the ride and

see what happens. Be vulnerable. And yeah, maybe that means you need to re-evaluate how you think about yourself, but if that's the cost of being happy... that's a pretty good deal."

She scrunched up her nose again. "Am I needlessly making a big thing out of this?"

"I don't think so," he shook his head. "Identity's important. Self-knowledge is important. Which is why you've got to let them change when life shows you they need to."

"When did you get so enlightened?" she laughed, and gestured at him where he sat, cross-legged on his bed. "You're like some guru dispensing transcendental wisdom, here."

He blushed and laughed it off. "Fair warning: I may be completely full of shit. I just think you should chase the happiness. Everything else is just labels."

"Yeah, but I like my labels," she pouted, and stood up. "Liked them, I guess. Past tense." She reached out her arms. "Now give me that hug."

A text from Finley: *Me, all day: fucking them was so nice. I should do that again. Or more specifically, I should do them again.*

"I hate group projects," growled Leon as he rather forcefully set down his tray, but then at least had the grace to look around the table sheepishly. "No reflection on any of you, of course."

"No, group projects suck donkey balls," Farah opined. "But at least this one isn't part of our grade."

"Nothing is part of our final grade in our upside-down little version of university," Sammy grinned. "Only the final exam."

"Two weeks from tomorrow," Farah breathed, with no small measure of dread.

"Which is why it's up to us put together a summary presentation on the Romantics," Sammy said, packing his voice full of false enthusiasm, "to help all our fellow students remember stuff we learned way back in June."

Leon, mouth full of cheeseburger, said something that sounded a lot like "Fuck our fellow students."

Farah sniggered, but Sammy felt his fake smile falter in a less-than-fake way. He shook it off. Whatever. Leon had tried for a joke and maybe went a little too hard. Who'd never done that before?

“So do we organize this by people or, like, themes and movements and...” Farah shrugged. “I dunno, typical characteristics of Romantic literature? Am I making sense?”

“I think you answered your own question,” Sammy offered. “It’s easier to remember people than it is abstract concepts, yeah? And if we present a bunch of people—names and faces, easy things to remember for most folks—and then we attach a few of the concepts to each...”

Farah nodded forcefully. “Yeah. So like: here’s Mary Shelley, she wrote Frankenstein and invented science fiction, her focus on imagination and creation of possibilities is a key feature of the period, blah blah blah.”

Leon rifled through his notes. “Okay, so this should be easy. Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Byron, Shelley, Scott...”

“Well—” Sammy said, putting forward a hand. “Those are big names, but if the goal is to present the period through the people, then we have to figure out what each of those writers contributed, and make sure that, when presented all together, they give us a good overview of the period, right?”

“And those are all dudes,” Farah pointed out.

Leon slapped his notes. “That’s who we talked about in class, I’m not... picking cherries, here.”

Sammy winced a little at the boy from Ukraine’s hauteur. “There’s also Austen,” he said, soothingly, “who we actually read for class, and, like, half a dozen Brontës—”

Farah nodded absently, not looking up. “I can never keep them all straight.”

“Sure, but they weren’t as successful during the period,” Leon kept protesting. “And we’re presenting the period as it happened.”

Sammy looked sidelong at Farah, who was pointedly focusing on her notes. So he took a deep breath and tried to address the points presented. “One of the key features of the romantic period is the rise of women authors, so we should be sure to include a representative sample—”

“I know what my notes say,” the other boy insisted. “And what we talked about in class. It was these men who defined the period. Most of the women wrote under male pseudonyms, so nobody at the time even knew they were women.”

“Leon, that’s not relevant,” Sammy said flatly, and only a beat later, his brain noted: terminal drop. He’d just done it, because he wanted

this conversation to end. And it seemed to work, because Leon only scowled at his fries.

He looked over at Farah again, who didn't look up from her notes. But she wasn't reading, either. She was... just waiting. Waiting for the argument to blow over, for the boys to stop almost shouting at each other. He groaned.

"I'm gonna go get a refill," he said, picking up his glass that was only half-emptied. "Can I get anything for anybody else?"

Another text from Finley: Are you the kind of person who likes their coffee black or with cream and sugar? Don't answer, I'm not bringing coffee to class, I just wanted to use your pronouns.

"Samantha lost her V-Card!" Rowan crowed over the video chat, and Sammy rolled his eyes. He'd expected this reaction or something similar, and truth be told, he was far from upset at the teasing. He was actually kind of enjoying the attention, and had shared the news expecting that he would.

"Distinction without a difference," Zoey put in as if she were a referee calling a foul. "Virginity is a bullshit societal structure that really doesn't do anybody any good."

"I understand that completely," Rowan nodded fervently, and then shrugged helplessly. "But I still want to tease my cousin. So you see my conundrum."

"It's okay, I'm not embarrassed or anything" he giggled, patently aware that he was still blushing. "I'm just... happy it happened, you know?"

Rowan bobbed her head. "Yeah, but how was it?" she asked. "Setting aside the fact that you have no basis for comparison or qualitative judgement."

"It was good," he answered reflexively, and then felt himself blush again as he amended: "It was kind of great, actually. I'm not really sure why I'm supposed to do all this other stuff like study or sort laundry when I could be fu—" He cleared his throat, switched tack, and finished "...spending time with my enbyfriend."

Both Rowan and Zoey erupted into laughter, this time.

The three of them then spent some time waxing rhapsodic about the sex they'd rather be having instead of studying or working. When the energy died back down, Rowan smiled into the camera and said, "I'm

just happy you two have worked out so well. Especially after how badly they fumbled things at first."

He nodded in agreement. "They've been super gentle with me, and so patient. Sometimes a little too gentle and patient," he added ruefully, and then remembered how, the last time he'd told them to be less chivalrous, he'd ended up sobbing on his own floor. Maybe he should let Finley go slower more often. But they had so little time left together.

"They're good for you," Rowan was saying, nodding in satisfaction.

Rowan's explicit approval of Sammy's enbyfriend settled into him as a warm glow in his belly. She'd been skeptical before, and withheld her signature enthusiasm, but now she seemed on board with Finley. Which meant she might also be on board with their most recent suggestion.

"In, um, other news," he segued awkwardly, "Finn and I were talking and, um." He took a breath. "I'm gonna give they and them pronouns a try. See how they feel." He felt himself pre-emptively wincing in the face of what he expected to be Rowan's negative response.

But she only laughed and checked the watch that wasn't on her wrist. "Oh wow, are you at that point already?"

"What point?" he asked uncertainly.

Rowan looked up at the ceiling, bopping her head left and right, as she counted in her head. "Yeah, it's been almost six months, right?"

"Since Preview Days, yeah," Zoey nodded.

"What are you talking about?" Sammy asked again.

Rowan looked back into the camera. "So there's like, two basic paths that trans femmes go with their pronouns and presentation," she explained. "There's the girls who try to like... gently wade into things, maybe some painted nails and hair scrunchies, and 'oh, you can use they and them for me, if it's not too much trouble' and they do that for a little while, and the girl stuff keeps piling up around them until they're up to their ears in girleness. And then they're finally, like, 'okay, I'm she and her,' and usually pretty high femme."

Sammy screwed up his face. That did not seem at all familiar, which meant... "What's the other path?"

His cousin smirked. "The femmes who go hard from the start, jumping straight into makeup and skirts and every femme thing they can get ahold of. She and her, all the way, no apologies. Girl power!" She threw an ironic peace sign and stuck out her tongue to punctuate

her point. “And then they realize that, you know, maybe all this stuff isn’t really necessary. Maybe I don’t have to be the girliest girl who ever girled. Maybe I can wear shorts every once in a while. Maybe I can—gasp!—go out of the house without a full face of makeup. And maybe I can try out they and them pronouns.”

Sammy narrowed his eyes suspiciously.

“Anyway, both paths hit the let’s-try-some-different-pronouns thing about eight to twelve months in,” she went on. “So given you figured things out a little before you showed up on my doorstep with a suitcase full of girly clothes to wear in the big city... sounds like you’re right on track.”

Once again he was getting accused of being a perfectly normal trans girl when he was anything but. Everyone’s expectations of what a trans girl was supposed to be always seemed narrow and specific, but were also somehow expansive enough to subsume Sammy and his very not transgender life. Sudden, hot anger flashed through him and he nearly told Rowan exactly where that suitcase full of girly clothes had come from. But he shouldn’t, he couldn’t. That would really hurt her, and him, too. Instead he heard himself say: “I kind of thought you’d be way more upset about this. Like I’m abandoning ship.”

She waved a hand. “You’ll come back to the she and her fold. I’ve seen how your eyes light up when you look at shoes.”

Zoey rolled her eyes at her friend and looked about to say something, but Sammy cut her off. “So my choices don’t matter, here?” he spat.

Rowan blinked in surprise, and then the corner of her lip curled. “No, Sammy, you can be exactly as special a snowflake as you like.” Her eyes drifted just a little left: she was looking at a different panel of the video conference window. “Hey Zoey, have you met my cousin Sammy? They’re trying out their new pronouns.”

“I have met Sammy,” she replied, with strained tolerance for her friend’s usual bullshit. Her eyes flicked into her camera, so she appeared to look directly at Sammy. “And I think they’re brave for trying out their new pronouns. I hope they find something that works for them.”

“Oh my god, quit it with the third person,” he groaned. “I’m just trying it out. That’s all.”

Zoey nodded decisively; Rowan nodded, too, with a little defiant fire in her eye. But the conversation was stalled, and after a few minutes of chit chat, they both signed off.

Sammy groaned, dropping his forehead down onto the lip of his desk. "I'm just trying it out," he repeated, in the same, stupid growl. "That's all." He'd bitten his resonance back down his throat and into his chest, dropped his pitch into the basement, and scrubbed every trace of breathy uncertainty out of his voice. It was a credible impression of his father.

He'd terminal dropped the conversation straight into the river.
Fuck.

Finley, texting: Mom wanted to know if I'm lonely without my classmates and I told her, "I'm seeing somebody and they give me all the company I need. I see them like four times a week."

What are we doing this Friday? Sammy had texted, to which Finley had fallen strangely silent. He'd posed the question on Wednesday night, and now it was Thursday morning, and still no reply.

There hadn't even been any little messages with the grammar creatively contorted around to use 'they' to refer to Sammy. For a moment he worried that Rowan had said something about the pronouns to Finley, and now they were holding back, or worse: upset about it.

Eventually he dismissed the possibility: Rowan was all too certain that he'd come around to rejecting the pronouns, and Zoey always made a big thing about not "triangulating" around conflicts among her friends.

Which left him standing over his phone where it sat innocently on his desk, scowling at it as if that would produce a text from his enbyfriend.

They probably weren't even awake yet. They didn't have classes to get to on Thursday. Sammy did. He unwrapped his shower-damp towel from his body and went about putting together an outfit for the day.

His wardrobe had grown since that first flurry of consumerism the weekend before the program started, but even so the many combinations of tops and bottoms and outerwear and shoes still shook out to a finite number of outfits that actually worked. This top only really worked with these two skirts and those pants. This skirt that pulled tight across his ass required these shoes with the heel, or else why bother. And of those outfits, only a few were really appropriate

for classes (as much as anything Rowan helped buy was ever really appropriate for classes). So there were only so many options, really.

He checked the weather—too hot for layers—and went with the simple option of a light sundress, strappy sandals, and the chunky Betty Rubble necklace that Finn had bought him on their first date. The necklace didn't exactly go, but he added it compulsively, to prevent himself from looking furtively to his phone yet again.

He had to struggle to get his breast forms to sit right on his chest, which was becoming a recurring problem that frustrated him to no end. He'd been wearing the wobbly things for six weeks; surely his muscle memory alone knew where to place them so they completed a natural curve. But it seemed like every day he kept trying to affix them too high, and had to adjust, and sometimes that was after the adhesive had already got tacky, which made everything far more difficult than it needed to be.

He forced himself to breathe slowly. Correct placement mattered a little more in this particular sundress, which tended to billow on the sides, flashing hints of side boob—which was the reason he liked this particular sundress.

When his tits were finally positioned, adhesived, and bouncing in his bra, Sammy turned back to his phone. It sat, quiescent and dark, on his desk.

He picked it up and unlocked it. **What are we doing this Friday?** was still the last text in the conversation with Finley. He hadn't even sent it that late last night, so it wasn't like they could have been asleep.

Finley was ignoring him.

He set the phone back down, stomach churning, and pulled on the sundress. He wasn't used to this and didn't know how to feel about it. He was probably overreacting. Finn probably ran out of charge or something, and hadn't woken up yet. But doubt lingered, as did fear.

Had he fucked up somehow?

Had he not responded with enough enthusiasm to Finley using they and them for him?

They'd fucked for the first time on their last date; after the first blush was off the experience, had Finley realized that it had been underwhelming?

Was Sammy bad at sex?

He clipped on his necklace and clipped back his bangs, then picked up the phone again.

What are we doing this Friday?

Hm. The last time Firley had fallen silent over text was back in early days, after their very first date. When they'd been holding out for Sammy to ask them out instead of the other way around. And sure, they'd since claimed that they didn't need to take turns, but they'd taken the lead on the last two dates, so...

Sammy tapped out an experimental message: **May I take you out on Friday?** He hit send and waited.

No response.

Dinner and a movie? he texted next, noting absently that he was just shy of desperate, and falling back on what his mother had described as the most tired date format possible. He'd have to look up what was even showing—

The little status under the message went from “Delivered” to “Read.”

Three bouncing dots appeared.

There are so many summer blockbusters to pick from came the reply, and Sammy's knees gave out. He fell backwards onto his bed and remembered to breathe.

A volley of back-and-forth texts followed, in which they both discussed which of the many summer movies they'd like to see, with a few pauses as they shared trailers to preview or looked up what was showing at different local theatres. Slipping back into their easy banter might have heartened Sammy, but his fingers itched to ask: **Did I do that right? Was I supposed to ask you out? Did I fuck up, and did I make it right?** But he couldn't quite bring himself to ask.

He'd ask later, he told himself, and once they settled on a movie pick, he texted: **Okay, it's a date. But class starts in twenty and I still definitely need makeup and maybe breakfast.**

Priorities, Finley texted back, with a winky face.

Sammy slammed his door and paced back and forth across the short length of his dorm room. His fingers flexed to comb through his hair, but then he remembered that it was all clipped back, and then he remembered he was in his dorm room so fuck it, and the clips came clattering out as he fisted his own hair. He kept pacing.

Finally he pulled out his phone and texted Vanessa: **Hey, it's an off day for me but do you have a minute to talk?**

It was only a moment before his phone started buzzing for an audio call. Checking that it was, in fact, his voice coach, he put it up to his ear. "Hey."

"Hey hon, what's up?" came Vanessa's voice, crackling a little. The subway clattered in the background.

"Um, can I uh—" he started, stopped, screwed his eyes shut. "Can I just start using femme voice all the time?" he finally blurted out. "Am I ready? Is... it ready? My voice?"

"Whoa, honey," she soothed back over the line. "You sound upset. Are you okay?"

He scowled out the window at the brick wall opposite. "Yeah, I'm fine," he said, and then immediately amended: "I mean, no, I'm not fine; yes, I am upset. But... not like, the worrying kind of upset. Just..."

"You wanna tell me about it?"

He sighed, deflating a bit, and crumpled down into his desk chair. "We're doing group projects for class, and I just got home from the most recent meetup for that and I keep... it's just... now that I know what to look for, I can see the guys shutting down the girls, and the girls inviting each other to find common ground, and the guys being... fuck. Being fucking assholes. And I'm one of them."

"You are not one of them," she assured him. "As indicated, if by nothing else, by how upset you are about what you're seeing."

"But I keep doing it!" he growled. His fingers clenched. He wanted to smack himself in the forehead, in the mouth. "The terminal drop and the false confidence and the bullshit. So much bullshit, and it's all... dude-talk bullshit. And I can't just—stop. It's like my old voice is tied up with a dozen different ways to dominate a conversation, and I'm... Vanessa, it's so fucking exhausting."

Vanessa made soothing noises over the phone line. Sammy sniffled, then jammed the back of his hand across his cheekbones. It came away wet with tears and streaked with mascara.

"I don't know how to stop doing it all without just... using femme voice," he explained. "So I thought maybe I'd ask, if I could just... switch over."

"Well," she said, considering. "We've done six weeks of lessons, out of the ten that I have planned for the complete curriculum. But really, the last session there's nothing new, that's just for catching up and reviewing things. So you're... two-thirds of the way through, and I've presented most of the fundamentals."

Sammy shrugged and looked helplessly out the window. "Okay?" That wasn't an answer. He needed an answer.

"And it's not like real-life practice is going to hurt anything," she said reasonably. "You'll sound awkward and shaky, but you were always going to sound like that at first."

"How's that?"

"I don't graduate my students when they have fully-developed femme voices, Sammy," she explained, not for the first time. He dimly remembered a conversation like this, way back in the first session. "I graduate my students when I've given them all the tools that they need. And then you need to put them all together, in real life situations instead of a classroom or a private video chat. It takes months, if not years, to settle into a well-rounded femme voice."

He nodded, massaging his forehead, dimly aware that he hadn't really heard the latter part of what she'd just said. "So then I guess my question is: do I have the tools?"

"You have most of the tools," she answered, "and like I said: real-life practice can't hurt."

"But am I ready?"

She chuckled. "Sammy, are you asking me if you're ready, or are you asking me for my permission?" When he didn't answer, she added, "It's your voice, honey. You can take it out for a spin whenever you like."

"Okay," he said, and grimaced at how rough his voice sounded. He cleared his throat and tried again. "Okay," he said, pitch high and resonance forward. "Then I'll give it a try. What's the worst that can happen, right?"

Enough

“Cellular mitosis,” explained Sammy to the class, “is when one cell splits into two cells. The original cell starts with a complete set of chromosomes...” He’d forgotten, during his desperate call to Vanessa last night in which he resolved to just switch over to his femme voice entirely, that he was presenting his review materials this morning, in front of the whole class. Oh well. He was doing it anyway.

His pitch was high but not too high: manageable, attainable, sustainable.

He kept his resonance forward, up against the back of his teeth. He imagined he was pushing each word forward with his tongue, so he could bite it off into the world.

He added just a touch of breathiness. Too much and he’d simper and sound entirely too... well, sexy. He’d experimented with a lot of breathiness, and while he definitely had plans for that sound, those plans did not involve a classroom.

And he made it seem like he was so deliriously proud of these facts. Little cellular dynamos, replicating their chromosomes and dividing and growing, the original biological tryhards. How could he not cheer them on, and share their glorious industriousness with the class? Not a single hint of terminal drop. Just giddy enthusiasm for this wonderful and fascinating world he got to live in.

The result was far from perfect, he knew. More than a few of his classmates had given him a double-take as he started talking. A handful were still scowling softly as he continued speaking. Every once in a while he’d lose a bit of his voice for a word or phrase—resonance reverberating out of his chest, breathiness peeling away into nasal sharpness—and somebody would wince, just slightly.

So he’d just give himself a moment to pause, regather his focus and

put his tongue and throat and lips back in place, and muddle onward.

His presentation took less than ten minutes, even if it felt much longer. At the end he asked for questions, dreading that somebody would ask, not about differentiating cells, but his different voice. No one did. He headed back to his seat and collapsed in a slightly giddy, slightly worn-out heap.

As the next presenter came up to the stage and shuffled through her notes, Sammy looked over to give her an encouraging smile. But his lips faltered. Just beyond the presenter, sitting at the desk tucked up against the front wall of the lecture hall, sat Finley.

They caught Sammy's eye, and by their expression had been waiting to do so since he'd dismounted the stage. Eyebrows raised, eyes theatrically wide, lips curled in confusion. They made a tight little gesture, unremarkable to the rest of the class and just for Sammy: a hand-flopping shrug of uncertainty and surprise. Their intent came across crystal clear: *What the fuck was that?*

Sammy tried to beam back, through expression and gesture, something like *I thought I did pretty good. What did you think?* But that message did not seem to get through. Finley only looked more bewildered.

Three more students made their presentations before class was over, and then the professor called Finley over to help smooth over some scheduling for the next week's review presentations. Sammy waited for a few minutes, hoping to use actual words to talk with Finn, but they were buried in students clamouring for preferred time slots. He couldn't even catch Finley's eye before dashing out the door to his next class.

He tried texting as he settled into the start of History class. Finley did not respond.

Hey honey I know it's not our usual day, said the text from his mom, but can we do our call today instead of tomorrow? I've got a thing.

It wasn't a text from who he really wanted to hear from, but Sammy had just returned to his room from the shower and so was about as defemmed as he ever got. He decided to embrace serendipity, threw on a hoodie, and called home.

"Hey honey!" sang his mother, the camera wheeling around, mostly focused on her face but also showing the corners of her bedroom and two half-filled suitcases laid out on her bed. "We got an upgrade deal

on plane tickets, but we've got to fly tonight instead of tomorrow. But first class is worth it."

Sammy was about to say something when his father's voice cut in: "You just like the bourbon creams the flight attendants hand out."

Christina Chase looked away from the camera to beam at her husband, off camera. "And the leg room. And getting off the plane first. Not just the bournon creams, but also, yes, the bourbon creams." Then she grinned down at Sammy. "Anyway. That's us. Off to a trade show next week, and all this week was just preparing for the trade show. We're very boring. How are you?"

Sammy smiled back, opened his mouth, and stopped himself from speaking right away. He swallowed his voice back, preparing to resonate from down in his chest, and adjusted his throat to drop his pitch. "I'm good," he said, and it sounded a little strangled, but whatever. "It's all review all the time here. The final exam is week after next."

"Oh gosh, are we interrupting?" his mother asked immediately, a worried crease crinkling her forehead.

"No, actually, I was just getting ready to go out," he assured her. "Taking Finley to—" he didn't want to say "dinner and a movie," the date format his own mother had advised him to avoid, so he said, "to a little date. Downtime's important."

His father said something garbled off camera, and his mother rolled her eyes even as she nodded. "As long as it doesn't interfere with your studies," she said dutifully. "But we trust you, honey. I'm sure you know what you need far better than we do."

"Since when," Sammy laughed—just as his father laughingly shouted the same exact thing. A flash of offense fluttered through him, but he was also already laughing, and it was easier to just laugh more. He leaned to the right as if he could angle his view through the camera to spy his father. "Hey, it's funny when I say it, it's just mean when it comes from you!"

The camera tumbled again as his parents handed off the phone, and then his father's face filled the screen, his patented I-got-caught-but-can-you-blame-me smile plastered across his face. "I'm just joking, hon. But I probably shouldn't, especially when I'm only halfway in the call." Real concern flickered across his face. "I never want you to think I'm not in your corner."

Sammy could feel a fragile little smile creep across his lips. "Thanks, dad. I know you're behind me," he said, and ignored the

little voice in the back of his head that questioned if he really did know that.

“Hey, you um. You’re going to dinner at Hank’s tomorrow, right?” his father asked next, suddenly hesitant.

It took Sammy a moment to translate, but he nodded. “Yeah. And he goes by Henry now, dad. He hasn’t been Hank for a long time. Decades, I think.”

“Understood,” his father nodded, and tapped the side of his head. “I’ll update the file. I don’t think I got that memo, but we haven’t really on those kind of terms.”

“It’s okay, dad—” Sammy started, but his father evidently had more to say.

“You know we haven’t actually been in the same room since... well. I was going to say since he left for school, but he did come back to Oak Grove once. It— ah. Didn’t go well.” He looked a little sheepish. “Mom and Dad were... unkind.”

“What happened?” Sammy couldn’t help asking.

“He brought his— his boyfriend, then, husband, now,” Richard Chase explained. “Gideon. And Mom and Dad were already not exactly inclined to accept that Ha—” He lifted a finger and corrected himself. “That Henry had a boyfriend in the first place. And then it came out in dinner conversation that Gideon is trans. And by ‘came out in conversation,’ I mean Henry made damn sure that it came up.” He pursed his lips in remembered frustration. “They’d just got engaged, you see. Matching rings, not easy to miss. And they wanted to lay all the cards on the table so everybody was on the same page, and then—I imagine—invite us all to the wedding.”

Dad paused, so Sammy prompted: “Didn’t get that far?”

Richard shook his head, and then lifted his own pitch into falsetto, asking, “Why don’t you just go back to being a woman and have a normal wedding?” He cleared his throat. “That was Mom’s suggestion.”

Sammy winced. “Ouch.”

“Yeah, there’s a reason we didn’t go down to Florida to visit them very often,” his father sighed. A moment later, he shook his head and shrugged his shoulders back. “All of which is to say. I’ll always be in your corner, Sammy.”

Whatever words Sammy might have said died at the back of his throat. All he could manage, after a strangled moment, was a little, timorous, “Okay, dad.”

"Well that's enough sentiment from me," his father coughed. "But um. Tomorrow when you see Henry. Tell him I said hello?"

Sammy nodded. "Yeah, I'll do that."

His father handed off the phone before Sammy could say anything else, before he could even think about what he might say. His father had given him an opening, and it was over before Sammy even realized it. He could have opened up. He could have told them—what, exactly?—that he'd been dressing up as a girl, but wasn't really trans, but everybody thought he was and he kind of liked that state of affairs? He didn't even have a coherent story to share.

And was that even an opening? His father had disappeared himself from the video call with alacrity, as if he didn't really want Sammy to say anything more. Wanted to say he'd be supportive, without having to actually be supportive. Or was Sammy being too harsh?

But then his mother's face was filling the screen, asking a question that he hadn't even heard. He asked her to repeat herself. "Did you clear up your little problem with Finn?"

Little problem? It took him a moment to realize she was referring to the spike of dysphoria that had prevented them from fucking. He could feel his face go hot and red. "Um, yes," he squeaked. "All cleared up. Like you said: I let myself be vulnerable, and we talked it out, and... yeah, that's been um. Fixed."

His mother gave him a knowing smile. "Good."

Of course once that problem had been resolved, Sammy had blundered directly into a new one, and now his enbyfriend was possibly not even talking to him right before they were due to go out. But he couldn't exactly ask his mother about debuting a femme voice to pair with the femme presentation he'd been parading around campus for months—not that he was even sure what, exactly, might have upset Finley about that, because they hadn't even replied to his texts.

"You're sure you're okay, honey?" his mother asked, that crease of worry reappearing.

"Yeah, I'm fine," he answered automatically. "Just a lot on my mind. School stuff," he clarified, and lied, before she could ask. "It's a lot of content, and my schedule is packed—"

"Well we should be going, too," she told him. "Packing and then I need to figure out some dinner before we leave..."

"We could just eat out, you know," his father's voice came from off-camera.

Christina Chase shot him a look and then smiled down into the camera. “Anyway, we love you. Have fun on your date.”

“Love you too, and I’ll try,” he answered, and put on a smile to indicate that it had been a joke.

The date progressed all the way to dessert before Finley finally erupted. Up until then, though, his enbyfriend had been decidedly off: pale smiles, a little recurring pinch between their eyebrows, halting conversation. Halfway through his salad, Sammy realized that the date was careening down the road, just barely missing the guardrails, and that wasn’t going to last for much longer. And he wasn’t even really sure this road had guardrails to begin with.

“Your femme voice is... really impressive,” Finley started innocently, although it was a bit of a non sequitur, since they’d been talking about the monumental task of packing up their apartment. But Sammy was using his femme voice to talk about all of that, so perhaps it wasn’t so out of nowhere.

“Thank you,” he said, high and tight, continuing in femme voice. But the back of his neck prickled. He felt like he was treading on thin ice, but couldn’t tell why. “It takes a lot of effort.”

“Then why even—” their enbyfriend said, stopped, and scowled at themselves. “I mean. It’s not like you sounded bad before. You were—” They grinned. “You were audibly trans. Like visibly trans, you know? Except with your voice instead of your appearance.”

“Yeah, which... led to some shitty looks, and even shittier interactions.”

Finley looked a little pained. “I’m sorry, I didn’t—I didn’t realize. I just... I mean, I liked your other voice.” They gave Sammy a pale smile. “You know me: I always love a good bit of gender fuckery.” But then they shook their head. “And that really shouldn’t matter. Doesn’t matter. What matters is what you like, what you want, yeah?”

Sammy shrugged. “I just know that I sounded uncomfortably like my dad, especially when he was being all lawyer-ly. And the way my old voice worked, it... made me feel shitty about how I interacted with people.”

Finley took that in, nodding as if they were literally rolling the thought around in their head. They were quiet for a long moment, and Sammy had half a hope that the conversation was over. “But you don’t just...” their enbyfriend started, stopped, and tried again: “I mean, that kind of voice doesn’t come out of nowhere, right? As I

understand it. It takes... a lot of exercise and practice, and..."

"Oh yeah, it's been, what, seven weeks?" he answered. "Weekly lessons—Rowan got me a gift certificate—and then, like, daily practice. Or should have been daily practice. Sometimes I missed a day."

Finley nodded thoughtfully at their burger. "So you've been doing this for... as long as we've been dating."

He bobbed his head. "Almost. I started just after our first date."

"Meticulously documented in your day planner, no doubt," they said with a pale smile. "Along with all your classes and review exercises and calls home to mom."

"And dates with you," Sammy added, trying to put a positive spin on this, whatever this was. Finley's voice was dark in way that he was not at all used to.

"Yeah, but what gets me," Finley said, and forced a laugh that had absolutely no joy in it, "is that I knew about the classes and reviews and calls and dates and everything. You always tell me everything about your busy day... but you never told me you were doing this."

"I have a detailed shaving schedule, I didn't bother you with that, either," he laughed, which was exactly the wrong thing to do.

Finley's face fell and then darkened. "Yeah, but this is... a big thing about changing how you move through the world, and it's..." they groped for words, scowling off into the distance over Sammy's left shoulder. "It's important to you, I assume, since you put so much effort into it. And you didn't tell me anything about it." They licked their lips, as if considering their next words. "You hid it from me."

"I didn't hide it," Sammy blurted before he could even consider his response. He reached forward for Finley's free hand on the table, but they pulled it back. Instead he turned his over, an invitation. "Finley, it's not like it was some big secret I was keeping from you."

Even as he said it, though, he wondered. It felt like everything in his life was a secret these days, a big mismatched pile of secrets, each kept from a different set of people in his life. Don't tell your parents that you're wearing skirts and makeup every day. Don't tell the school that you're not actually a tragically underserved transgender student. Don't tell Rowan that you're not a girl.

Don't tell Finley that you're spending hours each week teaching yourself to not sound like your dad.

"It feels like it was," Finley all but murmured. "A secret." They screwed up their face. There was frustration there, and pain, and also—Sammy was surprised to realize—a strong current of anger. "It's a

big thing, Samantha. It's how you interact with the world; it's how you present yourself to the world. It's... it's how you choose to be, and... and it hurts that you kept it from me."

"Oh honey," Sammy breathed, voice breaking. "I never meant to hurt you, I'd never do anything that would hurt you—" He could feel hot tears well up in the corners of his eyes, then spill down his cheeks.

He looked to Finley's face to see if they were crying to, but their eyes were dry. They shook their head, lips working, trying to find words to say.

...at which point their pocket started playing the Funky Chicken.

Finley scowled and pulled out their phone. "That's my mom's ringtone," they explained. Worry pasted over all the other emotions on their face. "She never calls. I'm sorry, I have to—"

Sammy nodded and made a 'go ahead' shooing gesture.

They answered the incoming video call. "Hey, Mami."

The ensuing conversation occurred in rapid Spanish, with Finley's face slowly transforming from concerned to confused to annoyed. Their gaze went from their mother's face on the screen to Sammy's face across the table. Just before he could start worrying that he'd somehow done something so wrong that even Finley's mom had heard about and had called in to complain, his enbyfriend rolled their eyes at their mother.

Finley pressed the phone against their clavicle and leaned across the table. "Apparently my mother called—specifically and intentionally during our date—so that she could talk to you." At an outraged squawk from the muffled phone, they pulled it away from their chest to glare at the screen. "Don't even argue with me, Mami, that is exactly what you did. Yes it absolutely is." They then turned away from the phone to make eye contact with Sammy. "You want to meet my mom? Over FaceTime? During a date? It's perfectly okay to say no."

Sammy couldn't help but smile a little. "I could say hello," he offered, "just briefly? I am kind of curious what she's like." Not to mention, he wouldn't mind not returning to the previous topic of conversation.

Finley rolled their eyes and turned their gaze down to scold the phone screen in more rapid Spanish. Meanwhile Sammy carefully scrubbed the tear tracks off his cheeks so that he was ready to accept the phone when Finley handed it over.

On the screen was a diminutive Latina, dressed professionally with

make up that Sammy was pretty sure had just been refeshed. Doing some quick time zone math in his head, he realized it was just after the end of the work day in Nebraska. She'd got home and made herself look pretty before she called to meet Sammy. He gave the woman his best smile in return.

"Ay!" she cried, smiling, and then loosed a torrent of Spanish at him.

"Um. Ah. I'm sorry," he said, shaking his head. "Sorry, I don't actually speak Spanish. I know I look like I should, but—"

"Oh, you don't worry about that, *mija*," she crooned. "I was just saying you look so pretty! A nice change. Because usually Finley dates people who look all edgy and urban. What's the word? *Alt*?"

"Mami," Finley groaned from their seat.

"Is is *alt*?" she asked, the question directed to either Sammy or Finley; it wasn't clear.

"Um, maybe?" Sammy hedged.

"It was 'alt,' like, three years ago, *mami*," Finley told the phone, and then their gaze flickered up to Sammy and they corrected, "Mom."

"Anyway, I just wanted to meet you," she went on with a smile. "Finley has shown me pictures, but they don't do you justice. You take care of my *mije*, ay?"

"I, uh, don't know what *mee-hee-yai* means," Sammy admitted sheepishly.

"Kid," Finley supplied with a shrug.

"There's *mija*, for little girl," their mom explained, "and *mijo*, for little boy. So I needed something to call Finley when they figured themself out, so I came up with *mije*. It's good, yeah?"

Sammy couldn't help but giggle. "Yeah, that's actually, uh, really sweet." He glanced up at Finley, who was looking away to cover their blush. "It was nice meeting you, Mrs Aceves, even if it was briefly."

"You too," she beamed back. "Now give me back to Finley so I can tell them to treat you better."

"Finley treats me very well," Sammy protested, and was about to elaborate, but she cut him off.

"Well no matter how well they treat you, they should treat you better, ay?" And she winked.

"Okay," Sammy relented, and turned over the phone.

Finley spoke to his mother in Spanish again, which only resulted in her squealing a few minutes later. He plainly tried to placate her, then turned the phone around to face Sammy again.

"Finley just told me that you're non binary," she said, apologetically.

"And earlier I called you *mija*. I'm so sorry I assumed, honey. I'll call you *mije*, too, okay?"

He grinned back. "Thank you, Mrs Aceves. It's quite an honour to share it with Finn."

"I just like to get things right," she explained, and nodded sharply. "Okay, see you again soon, I hope."

Sammy said goodbye, Finley turned the phone around, and then they said goodbye. Phone returned to their pocket, they rolled their eyes. "Sorry about that. My mom is... a lot."

Sammy smirked. "I've been wondering where you get it from."

They did not return to the topic of Sammy's voice training thanks to their need to pay the check and dash a few blocks to catch their movie. The press of people on the sidewalks forestalled conversation and they skated into the theatre just before the previews started.

They settled into their seats in the darkened room, their arms touching on the shared armrest just for a moment before Finley flinched away. Sammy folded his own hands into his lap. Maybe later, during the movie, he could lean up against their shoulder.

The movie was the latest installment of the seemingly-endless parade of comic book movies that had taken up residence in theatres across the world. Sammy had missed one or two of the direct-to-streaming series that were associated with it, and wasn't sure if he'd missed some continuity tie-ins. But the action sequences were exciting and the character banter was funny and okay fine, there was an emotional throughline about acceptance and found family and yes, Sammy might have teared up a little in the darkened theatre.

He'd wiped the corners of his eyes with popcorn-butter-damp napkins and after the movie was done—including the inevitable after-credits scene—he hurried to the bathroom to make sure he hadn't completely destroyed his eye makeup. He touched things up, anyway.

Finley waited across the lobby; Sammy took his time working his way through the Friday night crowd. He knew the date wasn't going well. His enbyfriend was upset about his voice, or about him keeping his voice training a secret (although it really did seem that they were upset about the voice, independent of the actual secrecy). No amount of four-colour action was going to erase the dinnertime... talk? argument?

Had this been their first fight?

No, Sammy noping out of Finley's too-soon embrace by calling

upon their good friend Jessica and her fictional text that she needed help: that must count as their first fight. Comforting to think that their first fight had been Finley's fault. (And Sammy's own latent homophobia, but let's not dwell on that.) But they hadn't really been together then anyway, so it probably didn't count.

First or no, the fight had soured the evening in a way that Sammy didn't know how to fix. He wished they could just pretend it hadn't happened and proceed onward with the evening, holding hands and cuddling up and... well. Even in the crowd of strangers, Sammy blushed at his own half-formed plans for the night.

Or maybe that was the solution? Push forward. Be the change you want to be in the date. Lean in into the fucking.

It was certainly preferable to untangling all these feelings they were both muddling through.

So Sammy put a little extra wiggle into his hips as he closed the last distance to his enbyfriend. When he was sure they were looking he bit his lip and smiled, then pressed his body up against theirs. "So," he said, ratcheting that breathiness as high as he could go, "your place or mine?"

Finley gaped, then cleared his throat, but that didn't seem to help anything, as his lips worked but no words came out.

So Sammy giggled. "I've always wanted to say that," he confessed, and slipped his hand into theirs. He gave the smallest little tug towards the exit and looked up at his enbyfriend hopefully. "Is my place okay?"

They gulped, nodded, and let themself be led away.

Afterwards, with Finley dead asleep and Sammy curled around them in his dorm room bed, he studied their face in the ambient glow that came through the brick-facing window.

They were so very nice to look at.

And kind. And careful, and considerate. Funny. Smart.

And leaving in ten days.

The pang that ripped through Sammy's heart was not about Finley leaving, not exactly. It was the dread certainty that, with just ten days left, he was still going to fuck it all up.

This was supposed to be a practice relationship. This was supposed to be an exercise where he could make mistakes and not have to live with the consequences. Where he could fuck it up and just walk away.

It's just the last thing he wanted to do was walk away, especially if

he'd just fucked things up.

Case in point: the date. Sure, it had ended with some very enthusiastic sex. But let's review how it started, his brain insisted. It started with Sammy just assuming Finley was taking him out, assuming that he didn't have to put in any effort himself.

His dumbass brain had settled into the comforting delusion that he was the girl who gets asked out by the boy, which was all sorts of fucked up for all sorts of reasons, not the least of which was that Finley wasn't a boy, and he wasn't a girl!

That wasn't their relationship. That wasn't *them*. He was, what, thoughtless? disrespectful? ungrateful? in acting as if it were. Whatever word was right, he'd been a little shit.

And then he'd scrambled and asked Finley out to the worst date ever, some boring dinner and a schlocky movie—there wasn't even a romance subplot in this one—and then had a fight over dessert. A fight that was also his fault, because he'd been keeping secrets from Finley for absolutely no reason that he could name.

He didn't have to name the reason, though, to have the creeping suspicion that Finley was never going to be excited about Sammy doing voice training and maybe Sammy always knew that and kept it from them because he didn't want to... what? Betray Finley's hopes that maybe Sammy could be nonbinary, too? But he'd started the voice lessons well before he'd started using they and them pronouns.

Before they'd started using they and them pronouns for themselves?

Nope, still weird.

The point was that he was a terrible girlfriend. Or enbyfriend, now. Or boyfriend, really, or jesus, whatever! Whatever he was supposed to be, he was bad at it.

And he only had ten days left but he wasn't going to make it, he could feel the epic fuck-up coming, and then Finley would leave for California in disgust, with all the memories of their time together turned to ash because of whatever it was that Sammy was going to do.

Or, let's be honest, had already done.

He wanted Finley to leave with happy memories. This might be Sammy's practice relationship, but he could still do a good job, right? Because Finley was a real person, not a doll to practice on, and Sammy shouldn't be toying with them. He should pay attention to what Finley wanted, what Finley needed out of the relationship, and deliver that.

Sammy laid his head against Finley's chest—and wow that felt so

right—and stared at the wall, wishing he knew how to actually do that.

For Sunday dinner, the Roth-Masters had added another leaf to their dining room table. Agatha and Zoey were in town apartment-hunting, and Rowan argued that the girls' shoestring budget could only benefit by their crashing in the townhouse. Sammy suspected her dads didn't need much convincing to give Rowan more time with her friends. But it made for a lively evening, especially once Rowan brought a third bottle to the table.

"I think this is when we bow out," Gideon laughed as he handed Rowan the corkscrew. He stood up and then pretended to haul Henry out of his chair, too. "It was so nice having all of you over at once, girls."

To the chorus of thank-yous from the actual girls, Sammy added, "And thank you for having me over for dinner so often. It's really good for my brain, I think."

Henry laid a gentle hand on Sammy's shoulder. "It's what family does." And he nodded across the table to Agatha and Zoey. "Which goes for you two, as well. You're always welcome here."

"Speaking of family, Uncle Henry," Sammy spoke up, just before the man slipped out of the dining room. He cleared his throat uncertainly. "My dad says hello?"

Sammy hadn't lifted his pitch and made it a question to sound femme; he just wasn't sure how the second-hand greetings would land. But by the thunderstruck look on his uncle's face, he was right in suspecting there was some significance to the apparently superficial message.

Henry's look of surprise melted into a smile. "Thank you, Samantha. Tell him I said hello right back." And then a bemused harrumph welled up out of the man, and he tipped his head back towards the door and the stairs beyond. "But right now, I'll say good night."

Rowan poured out the new bottle and the four of them took their wine glasses to the sitting room, which looked out onto the darkening street. The conversation wove between admiring the townhouse to the travails of apartment-hunting to the upcoming academic year. They asked Sammy what he was going to major in.

"Oh god, just let me get through the next two weeks first," he groaned.

"Yeah, the big exam, right?" Rowan grinned, and then leaned over

to squeeze his shoulder. "You're gonna do fine."

He gave her a wan but grateful smile. "Big test, sure, but also Finley leaves in—fuck. Today's Sunday, so they literally move next week."

They all made sympathetic sounds and said nice things about Finley. Sammy played along for a little while, but then shook his head. "It's not the... the necessary breakup, that's always been coming. I just feel like I'm going to screw it all up before they go."

"I don't see how," Rowan laughed.

He took a deep breath and reminded himself: *be vulnerable*. "They didn't respond well to my femme voice," he confessed. "I didn't tell them I was doing voice training, and they feel like I was keeping it from them. And that's..." He squinted out the windows. "That's the only thing they've said out loud, but... I don't think that's everything. I just... get the sense that they're kind of disappointed in me? Like I'm not living up to what they expected I'd be."

"You're doing fine," Rowan insisted immediately.

Meanwhile Zoey asked, "Do you think it's possible that anxiety about the final exam is leaking over into how you think about your relationship?"

"Hm, maybe," he allowed, nodding slowly. He rolled the idea around in his head, considering. Maybe it was just misplaced stress; it was certainly plausible enough. The final exam next week was essentially going to determine the course of the rest of his life. And yet...

Sammy loosed a long sigh at the ceiling. "Finn's mom said something about how they usually date people who are more..." he wobbled his head. "I mean, she said 'edgy' and 'alt' but I got the distinct impression that what she really meant was not femme."

"Yeah, but they're dating you now, so fuck their dating history," Rowan retorted, slurring her words only slightly. "People's standards change all the time."

"They can," Zoey moderated, "but personal preferences still matter." She gave Rowan a look that rather plainly communicated that they were both talking about Vikram right then, but weren't going to do so out loud.

Rowan stuck her tongue out at her in response.

"Finley used to date anything with a pulse," Agatha spoke up, and leaned forward just slightly. "Back in freshman and sophomore year, especially. They had a reputation. But I think..." Here she sighed. "I think Finley was painfully aware of how their gender presentation

limited their candidate pool, and kind of... threw themself at anybody who'd say yes."

"That's a little sad," Zoey murmured, and burrowed herself into Agatha's arm a little tighter.

"But like I said, that was... a while ago," Agatha went on. "I think they mostly got over it, but the reputation lingered on. Anyway, that's just context. Point is, if you look at all of their relationships over the years, it does look kind of gender-blind. Women, men, nonbinary, butches, twinks, femmes, bears, a partridge in a pear tree. Kind of a queer parade. But." Here she squinted a little. "The lovers that lasted for more than a few weeks? Mostly androgynous. Or gender-flippy, in one case. But I think that kind of washes out to the same thing in Finley's head."

Rowan squeaked suddenly, and then put two fingers to her lips as she swallowed. When her throat was clear, she said, "And Sammy was—no offense, honey—but they were super clocky when Finley first met them. And then they veered hard femme, which might have read as flippy, except they never really flipped back. So Finn might have made some assumptions that did not bear out well."

Aubrey gave Rowan the smallest little nod possible, and then slid her eyes over to Sammy to make sure he'd weathered her implications being made so brazenly explicit.

"You are incredibly polished these days, Samantha," Zoey put in, too rushed. Trying to redirect the conversation. "And your femme voice is great. Icing on the cake."

Before the other two could chime in with requisite compliments, Sammy cleared his throat. "Am I too femme for Finley?" he asked into his wine. He couldn't bear to look up, lest he meet one of the girls' eyes and get an unspoken answer in the affirmative. Right then, he just needed them to tell him otherwise, to lie if necessary.

But their responses were almost exactly as he might have predicted. Rowan insisted that Finley was head over heels for Samantha, prior preferences be damned. Zoey gently suggested that Sammy simply talk to Finley about it, because if nothing else, Finley plainly cared for him. Aggie let the other two girls talk, and said nothing at all.

The conversation and the wine petered out shortly thereafter, and Sammy had class in the morning, more review to prepare for the biggest exam of his life. He said his goodbyes and walked to the subway in the last dregs of summer sunset.

As worried as he still was about how he was going to screw up his

relationship, he felt a little lighter having talked about it. "It's nice having friends," he murmured to himself, and then had to laugh a little at how simple and pathetic he sounded. But he'd never had friends who he could talk to, not like this. And talking through his problems made them feel a little less overwhelming, made him feel a little less alone.

He'd never had queer friends, he realized. Friends who knew what it was like to be queer, who understood what his life was like, being queer. Because things worked just slightly differently for queer people, and his friends were a little more experienced in how things worked. Experience that they could lend to him.

Turns out queer community was actually important or something.

He liked thinking of himself as queer, even if he was queer in different ways than most of his friends thought he was. He wasn't trans, not really. But he was definitely queer. He smiled a little at the sidewalk, feeling like he could pull the label around his shoulders like a warm and comfy wrap.

And then he had to giggle, because he'd been thinking about the label like it was a girl's cold-weather wrap, something finely knit and soft, with a supple fold. His hands slid down his sides, feeling where his blouse gave way to his skirt, and how the skirt fell down from his hips. He did like the clothes. The girl clothes. And maybe that was part of how he was queer, really. Clothes weren't gender and all that, but your preferred presentation probably counted, right? What you liked to wear, not whatever you were currently wearing.

He was going to have to get rid of all these clothes, too, in a couple weeks. That was also looming there, on the other side of the big exam and saying goodbye to Finley. He'd have to go home and wear sweats and hoodies all the time. Eugh.

For a moment, he wondered if maybe that was what he was really worried about, and that was what was leaking into his relationship with Finley, but no. He'd completely forgotten this charade was almost over. In his head, he'd just started assuming he'd wear cute clothes forever.

If only.

Oak Grove could not survive a boy walking its streets dressed as a girl. It would probably collapse!

Or more likely, he mused, it would attack, like it had when Mitch did the opposite. Not really the opposite, but sort of. Because Mitch was a boy, even if Oak Grove thought he was a girl, so when he

dressed like a boy and got his hair cut like a boy, he was only ever living authentically.

Sammy looked down at himself, then up into the window of the corner bodega. The details of his outfit—the flowery green blouse with the ruffles, the subtle pattern of the pencil skirt, the strappy sandals—got lost in the reflection. But the shape was distinctly femme. He tried to meet his eye in the image, but the light did not cooperate. He was just looking at a vague girl shape.

When Mitch dressed like a boy, he was living authentically.

When Sammy dressed like a girl...

He dashed down the street to the subway stop and hurried down the stairs. His thoughts, unfortunately, followed him. He paced up and down the platform, as if he could lose them in the thin evening crowd. A train wailed into the station and he boarded, not looking up at the windows lest they throw his reflection back at him.

He focused on his breathing, which was coming hard and fast, and once that was under control, he told himself he was being silly. He knew he liked feminine clothes. That wasn't any revelation; not any more. He just had to... figure out how to fit it into his life. Like he fit everything into his day planner. He could take control of his life, he could build it in whatever shape he wanted.

If he wanted to wear a dress, he could damn well wear a dress. It certainly never stopped Finley.

Despite everything else going on in his head, Sammy couldn't help but smile at the thought of Finley, and the sparkly green dress that they wore whenever a date was even moderately fancy.

And Finley had said that Sammy did high femme well, didn't they? They had an appreciation for girl clothes, too. They just didn't feel the need to wear them all the time, and heck, girl clothes were kind of an undertaking some mornings, and being able to just... not?

He remembered what Rowan had said about the trans girls who try out they and them pronouns: "Maybe I don't have to be the girliest girl who ever girled. Maybe I can wear shorts, maybe I can not wear a full face of make up." And he'd been so angry with her, and now... now that sounded like a comforting possibility.

Maybe he was going about this all wrong. Maybe he could enjoy his feminine clothes without it having to be his whole identity. Because that was it, right? That's what it felt like: everybody who wanted him to be a trans girl wanted him to be a completely different person. And he just wanted to be... a slightly different person.

A slightly different person who wore cute clothes sometimes, had friends, and was queer. That sounded like a person Sammy would like to be.

Someone who Finley could be proud of.

And maybe Finley had some hard-won experience to lend Sammy, too. Maybe Finley had been where Sammy was now, and had resolved to wear cute clothes sometimes, and have friends, and be queer. And the path to being that person was to discard all the gender expectations that everybody else put on you.

Sammy got off the bus and drifted up the stairs, musing. Maybe Finley had been right all along.

Maybe Sammy could be nonbinary. Use they and them pronouns. Wear a skirt when that felt right. Have queer friends, be a part of a larger queer community.

That would be enough, wouldn't it?

That would appease the corner of Sammy's brain that enjoyed feminine clothes, but it wouldn't be going all the way.

Sammy wouldn't be really trans, not like Rowan and Mitch. Not ripping apart a whole life and putting it back together all wonky. Not trapped into wanting people to accept a gender they never could. Not destroying himself trying.

Sammy could just nope out of gender altogether. Be only technically trans, like Finley was only technically trans.

Words burbled out of Sammy down the walk down the sidewalk: "You want to see me as a boy wearing a dress, that's fine. At least I still get to wear the dress. You can think I'm weird, but I don't care. I'm nonbinary."

That would definitely be enough, right?

A Strict Three Day Rotation

“What are you wearing?”

Sammy looked down at his belly and then back up to Farah. “A hoodie.”

She leaned over to see the sweatpants he was wearing, half-hidden under the surface of his desk. “Okay, but. You match. That’s not just a hoodie, that’s a track suit.”

He shrugged, even though he’d been rather happy to find the set when he went out shopping yesterday. He had made certain plans for how he was going to present himself, and was dreading what those plans entailed, but then was gratified to learn that he could still look a little coordinated, even if he wasn’t in camis and skirts and girly things.

She settled into the seat next to him, as the rest of the muttering, shuffling crowd of Composition students found their own seats. She did not lose the look of concern on her face. “And like... I don’t know how to say this, but what happened to your boobs? Are you wearing a binder or something?”

He shook his head, and had to take a long, shuddering breath before he could answer. “I didn’t put on my falsies this morning. I’m not even wearing a bra.” His chest felt all sorts of weird about that, but that seemed to be on the other side of the TMI threshold for a casual chat in class.

Farah stared for a long minute. “Are you okay?”

He gave her what he hoped was a comforting smile, even though he was very aware that without the contours and highlights and other subtle eye-direction that his makeup would have provided, his face and his expressions all looked different and probably a little off. “I’m fine. I’m just... trying something different with my presentation. It

was so much quicker to get ready in the morning. I got here super early."

"I'm sure," she said, falteringly. "And of course you can wear whatever, you still look..."

He lifted an eyebrow. "I still look... what?" he asked, not knowing what to hope for.

She opened her class binder and, keeping her eyes fixed on her papers, shrugged. "Hot. What's historically been my type, until... y'know." Farah slid her eyes over to take in Sammy's look, wrinkled her nose in thought, and pronounced: "Fashion-conscious butch lesbian, I guess?"

Sammy may not have known what to hope for, but that certainly wasn't it. Hot, yes, but lesbian, no. "I was trying for masculine," he grumbled.

Farah laid a pitying look on him. "Oh honey. I'm not sure you can pull off boymode anymore, even if you want to."

"I—" he started, and then the professor was calling the class to order. Quietly, he explained his plan: "Yesterday I dressed femme, today I'm doing masc, tomorrow I'm gonna shoot for androgynous. And then sort of... take it in rotation from there. Femme-masc-androgynous, femme-masc-androgynous. So I can just wear what I feel like on any given day, you know?"

She gave him little more than side-eye, doing a poor job of splitting her attention between the professor and her friend. "You're going to wear what you feel like any given day by following a strict three-day rotation?" she whispered incredulously.

She had a point, but Sammy didn't want to hear it. He'd latched onto the idea of rotating his presentation and it immediately appealed. He'd even put it in his day planner. Whatever; Farah didn't understand. "I'm just... leaning into being nonbinary," he explained. "Gender-flippy."

Farah snorted and then shot him an apologetic look. "Sorry, that's just a funny way of putting it. But. Whatever makes you happy, honey." And then she focused her attention forward.

There was so much to review.

Yesterday had been a speed run through Biology factoids, then a hairpin turn into All of World History in Eight Weeks, and then launching directly into Literature and finally what felt like crashing at high speed into an impenetrable wall of Pre Calc. Sammy wanted to gripe about matrices and when they'd ever be actually useful, but he

was frustrated when the answer popped immediately into his head.

Also, his life felt like a sequence of matrices, all stacked on top of each other, rotating ninety degrees each time so they could all multiply and overwhelm him with stuff that he probably should have learned in high school, had he been paying attention.

And was it wise to start in on an ambitious overhaul of his gender presentation on this week of all weeks? Probably not, but that was just the thing: Sammy didn't have time.

He had one last weekend with Finley, and he had one school week to prepare for it, whether or not that week was filled with key review opportunities for the biggest exam of his entire life.

Sammy was going to make it all work if it killed him.

It turned out that dressing androgynously was harder than Sammy had expected it to be. The track suit had been comparatively easy to find, but he needed more than just that. He'd kept shopping (while doing a series of increasingly useless internet searches on his phone for 'gender neutral clothing') until he found something that seemed promising, but now, looking in his dorm room mirror, he wasn't so certain.

It was a vest. And not a cute girly vest, but like some sort of waistcoat thing that the men in *Persuasion* probably wore. He'd wrapped it around a button up blouse he'd bought with Rowan weeks ago, one of the few that didn't have a plunging neckline. To these he added a skirt, and the result was... discordant.

Sammy slitted his eyes at the mirror, trying to make the outfit snap into focus, or to pick out the piece that didn't fit with the others.

He'd worn the exact same colour palette—teal, mint, and black on vest, blouse, and skirt, respectively—with different outifts before, and it had worked just fine.

He'd pinned up his hair with small, almost overlookable clips, and gone easy on the makeup—just a little eyeliner and some tinted lippy—and knew that none of that was the problem. From the neck up he looked... if not androgynous per se, at least composed.

It was the clothes that didn't work together.

Or maybe that was the point?

Sammy tipped his head to the side, considering. Maybe the point, here, was to pair items of clothing that weren't traditionally worn together, as a sort of political statement about gender presentation being an artificial construct.

Or maybe he just needed the right shoes.

Desperate for a solution within his reach, he dug through his closet, contemplating and discarding shoe after shoe. No strappy sandals. No heels. Definitely not the kitten heels, even if they were shorter than the other heels. For a brief moment he wondered if Mary Janes would work, and even slipped them on, but they tipped the balance away from “androgynous” and soundly into “girl who did too much high school theatre” territory.

Finally he found, at the back of his closet, his old white converse from back home. And, lacking any other options, pulled those on and looked into the mirror.

“Well, at least they’re not wrong,” he muttered. Then, given the time, he had to dash out the door to class.

“So Friday’s your last day in class,” Sammy said, sauntering up to Finley with a grin.

His enbyfriend looked up, blinked, and then without moving their head an inch, gestured pointedly with their eyes at the professor, standing right beside them.

The professor gave Sammy a perfunctory smile. “We’ll be sad to see them go. Mixter Aceves has been indispensable this summer.”

Sammy nodded, and then let a slow smile creep across his face. “I was wondering, since you’re done with us Friday morning, if I could ask you out Friday night?”

Finley choked on a sudden cough; the professor laughed. “Yes, you can definitely start dating then,” he said with a roll of his eyes. He clapped Finley on the back and headed for the door. “Have fun, kids.”

Sammy grinned up at his enbyfriend, lower lip pinched between his teeth. “So what do you say? I haven’t been to the Statue of Liberty yet; can I take you there?”

Finley looked to the door closing behind their ostensible boss and then giggled. “You’re going to be the death of me. And yes, I’d like that.” Their hands drifted towards Sammy’s hips.

“Good,” Sammy grinned, and leaned forward, head tilted back, so Finley could kiss him. “It’s a date.”

There wasn’t anyone else left in the classroom, so the kiss went on for some time. When they finally parted, Sammy gave them a wink and headed for the door.

“You look amazing today,” Finley called after him.

He turned and walked backwards a few steps, giving his enbyfriend

a canary-fed cat's smile. "I know."

Sammy did not know he looked amazing, did not know where that came from, did not know what was happening.

He knew that Finley wanted somebody who was gender-flippy and asked them out on dates and didn't use a femme voice, but also did high femme well, and that seemed to imply to Sammy a level of confidence he didn't think he'd ever experienced in his life, but he was damn sure going to fake it, at least through Friday, to craft the perfect date where he gave Finley exactly what they wanted.

What they deserved.

So Sammy hurried to his next class, careful to avoid his reflection in windows, thumbs hooked under the straps of his backpack so they didn't touch the flipping hem of his skirt, trying and failing not to think about how he was wearing a bra that squished his chest into something approximating boobs but without his breast forms to give him actual curves.

He itched all over.

"Oh thank god," muttered Leon on Thursday morning, "you're back to normal."

Sammy rolled his eyes. "I've been normal this whole time, Leon, I was just wearing different clothes."

"That's not normal," he grumped, and threw himself into the next seat over. He gesticulated at Sammy's houndstooth skirt and wine red blouse-over-cami. "This is normal," Leon insisted. "Your normal. Or at least, the normal that I am used to seeing on a daily basis. Your clothing being all weird was throwing me off all day. Both days!"

"Well thank you for making my gender presentation about you, Leon," Sammy snickered. "It makes me feel all warm and gooey inside."

“Don’t mention it,” he grinned back. “And you look very nice. As if that were ever in question.”

“Thank you,” Sammy answered automatically, and made a small and needless adjustment to how the open blouse lay. He’d been a little excited to put on this particular outfit. The day’s forecast promised a break from the summertime heat, and Sammy missed a good, layered look after so many sticky summer days.

It was certainly not that he was excited to get back into girly clothes in general, he told himself. He’d had to reiterate that point to his inner monologue more than once already today.

At this point, femme clothes were simply easier. That was all. Also he didn’t worry himself over how he looked half as much. He could feel himself sitting straighter, more confidently, because he knew that he looked right.

But that was just familiarity. Give him a few weeks, and he’d know exactly how to rock a cool alt-non-binary look, or go hard masc enough that nobody would have reason to question his boymode. He was still at the hard part of the learning curve.

Like two months ago, when he was first starting with the girl clothes that Rowan had bought him, it had been weird and difficult, right?

The student giving their review presentation at the front of the class faded into the background as Sammy tried to think of an awkward stumble with his femme wardrobe. There had to be one. There had to be a bunch! He had to have struggled for a week or two to figure out how to match tops to bottoms and to layer things and which shoes to wear with what.

But he was coming up empty. Girl clothes had always been easy.

You know what it was? It was Rowan hand-selecting his entire femme wardrobe. Her experienced eye had constructed a capsule wardrobe that presented so many good outfits that he couldn’t help but make good picks.

Now he was forging a new path on his own, and so therefore things would be more difficult.

A small voice in the back of his head questioned how learning to dress masculine was a new path for him, given that he’d done that for all of high school and middle school before that, but he squelched the traitorous whisper. It wasn’t like he’d been trying, back then, to look good. Now he was, and it was hard, and that was okay, because it was worth it.

And maybe he’d learn something that he could take back and apply

to femme clothing.

Sammy shook his head to dislodge the last thought, and then remembered he was in class, and should probably be preparing for the big exam next week.

"Hey, chica," smiled the grill guy as Sammy stepped up to his station.

The greeting took Sammy so off guard that he momentarily forgot that it was Friday and he was ostensibly in boymode. "Uh, hi."

"What can I getcha?" the grill guy asked, a little rushed, despite there being nobody in line behind Sammy. After Sammy ordered his bacon cheeseburger, the man behind the grill got it started with an uncharacteristic alacrity and then turned back to lean over the counter. "Hey, I wanted to apologize."

Sammy only blinked.

"I was an asshole," grill guy went on. "My sister sat me down and set me straight about things. I said something in passing to her, and she just... kinda blew up at me, but like, for good reason? Because, again—" and here he pointed at himself with his spatula "—asshole."

"Oh, I don't think you were—" Sammy faltered through minimizing the man's asshole behaviour.

"No, I was," he nodded confidently, and moved some pre-cooked bacon onto the griddle. He looked back up and scrunched his face into a grimace. "I like to be right, too much. Because let's face it: I'm not rich or famous or an athlete or whatever. I'm a short-order cook making just a bit over minimum wage, and it's just... I make up for that sometimes by telling myself I know more than I do, you know?"

Sammy nodded mutely.

Grill guy flipped Sammy's burger, applied a slice of cheese, and topped it with the warmed bacon so that the bacon would sink into the melting cheese. He kept talking as he worked. "Anyway, I see a pretty girl walk up to my station, she's latina, which is rare enough around here, and I make a soft pass. Which I shouldn't, you know, because I'm at work, but anyway. Not only do I get shot down, but the way she sounds isn't what I expect, and I... don't respond well."

"I mean, I did sound awkward..."

He shook his head. "It was never your fault, chica, it's entirely on me. Especially the weeks after, where I did that thing where I didn't use 'he' or 'she' for you at all, what'd she call it? Oh yeah: passive aggressive bullshit. Except my sister didn't say bullshit. It's amazing, she can make you feel like absolute dogshit without using a single

dirty word. Anyway. I shouldn't have done that."

Sammy tried for a placating smile and ended up with a grimace of sympathetic awkwardness.

The guy slid Sammy's finished burger onto the countertop. "You're a 'she' if you say you are, and I hope it makes you happy."

Sammy took the plate uncertainly. "I'm, um, actually using they and them pronouns, now," he heard himself saying. "Trying them out. Maybe I'm not a girl so much as I'm genderqueer."

Grill guy bobbed his head agreeably, and then broke out into a haphazard smile. "I don't actually know what any of that means," he confessed, "but I'll look it up on the Internet when I go on break. Anyway, enjoy your burger, chica."

Sammy lifted the plate in question. "Thanks. You, uh, have a good day."

Sammy stood in front of Finley's door, a bouquet of flowers in his hand, trying to find his old masculine voice. "Hey. Hey. Hey, beautiful," he tried, smiling at the door number. He pushed his pitch down and swallowed his resonance, trying to sound like a dude. It hadn't even been two whole weeks that he'd been using femme voice full time, but now his masc voice felt weird and fake and trying too hard. "Whatever," he finally groaned, and that actually sounded almost right, so he knocked on the door.

Finley swung the door open immediately, a smirk plastered across their face. "How long were you going to stand there practicing saying 'hello?'" They'd buzzed Sammy in through the ground floor door, so of course they'd known he was there. He'd just hoped they were busy somewhere else in the apartment. Not standing on the other side of the door, listening.

Sammy pushed all that aside and held out the flowers. "These are for you, beautiful."

Finley accepted the flowers with a clearly pleased smile. "Thank you. I don't think you've given me flowers before," they said, stepping aside to let Sammy in. They were wearing their favourite, sparkling green dress with their hair piled on top of their head with an equally glittery claw clip.

"Thought you might like them," Sammy said with a shrug, looking away so Finley wouldn't see the self-satisfied flush on his cheeks. He himself was in his amber track suit, which contrasted rather nicely against Finley's gem tone dress, he noted. They'd make a cute couple

tonight. Almost straight-passing, like they'd been on the picnic date a few weeks ago, which felt like a minor victory to Sammy. The only thing that spoiled the impression was Finley's beard, which Sammy was pretty sure why they wore a beard in the first place. So they'd be pleased. Good.

Finley was putting the flowers in water, explaining with a laugh that the vase was their roommate's, and they'd leave the flowers for her to enjoy. Then they dried their hands on a dish towel and strutted back into the living room, scooping up a clutch purse on the way. "Shall we head to the subway, then?"

"Oh, I uh, got a car," Sammy said, and at Finley's raised eyebrows, he explained, "Wanted to pick you up and whisk you away."

Finley settled an arm around Sammy's shoulders and nuzzled their nose against his neck. "Well whisk away, Romeo."

They went down the stairs hand in hand. Finley was quiet but smiling, and Sammy tried not to think about being called 'Romeo.' Because it was scoring a point, right? In that he got called something masc, which meant the clothes and the voice must be working to some extent.

And sure, it felt kind of weird, because Finley had always assiduously femmed Sammy, had in fact been aggressively consistent about it. It was a gesture which Sammy had always appreciated, even if it had been off base. After all, it showed how much Finley cared about what (they thought) Sammy preferred.

Until he'd started using they and them pronouns, at least, and then it had all gone away. Popped like a soap bubble. Which was still Finley showing how much they cared, it just... hit differently.

Anyway, now they'd flipped to masculinizing him, either because they were paying attention to how Sammy was presenting, or Sammy's presentation was so authentically masc that Finley just responded naturally. Sammy just wasn't sure which one he wanted to be true.

In the car, Sammy asked about Finley's progress packing up, just to distract himself from his spiralling 'Romeo' thoughts. Finley made a face, said it was progressing just fine, and they didn't really want to talk about it. So instead they people-watched and pointed out colourful characters walking the streets of New York, of which there was no shortage.

And then they were among the colourful characters of New York as they walked across Battery Park and got into line for the ferry. A sluice

of metal bars and fences that could have come off a cattle farm kept the hundred-or-so people clumped in place in the late afternoon heat, waiting for the ferry to arrive. Sammy and Finley held hands, leaned against each other, smiled vaguely, but conversation was difficult in the press of people. Sammy kept trying, but every topic he tried fizzled among so many watching eyes.

It occurred to him only as the ferry pulled up to the dock that Finley, in their sparkling green dress and bushy beard, was attracting far more looks than Sammy and his track suit. Did it bother them to be gawked at? It never seemed to matter on previous dates, but then they'd had a cute girl on their arm, those times. All they had now was this sort of colour-coordinated but mostly overlookable boy. And a soft boy, at that. Not even an impressive specimen of masculinity; nobody was looking at Finley's date and thinking "sure, they look weird but that got them a hunky boyfriend." They certainly weren't thinking that Sammy would be able to do anything to protect Finley if somebody got nasty about them traipsing all over gender expectations.

"You coming, honey?" Finley laughed and pulled Sammy down the cattle sluice. The crowd was boarding, the line was moving, and Sammy needed to get his head in the game to make this the best date ever.

They nabbed a place on the rail near the bow of the ferry. There they cuddled against the surprisingly cool breeze off the harbour and made the inevitable Jack and Rose jokes prompted by a bow railing and frothing water below.

"What's the nonbinary version of 'King of the World?'" Sammy asked.

"First of all, that's a different scene entirely," Finley corrected with a smirk. Sammy could just barely see the twist of their lips from where they nestled in his arms. "Although I've shipped Jack and Fabrizio before. They're cute together."

"I'm not sure I've actually seen the whole movie," Sammy admitted, lips pressed against the side of Finley's jaw. "Just, you know. Memes."

Finley loosed a theatrical sigh. "I am dating a phillistine." This gave way to an extended synopsis of the movie, focusing especially on the ways in which Fabrizio was done wrong by heteronormative narrative framing. Sammy just held onto them, nodded along when it felt appropriate, and enjoyed the sound of their voice.

The statue loomed taller and taller on the horizon, and then the ferry was docking and they were disembarking. There were a few little hills

and trees dotting Liberty Island, but the statue's shoulders and uplifted arm rose above it all. "Okay, I'm just gonna say it," Sammy said, craning his neck. "It's really tall."

And then came the stairs. There were stairs leading up to the pedestal, and then there were stairs inside the pedestal. Those led up to the platform at the statue's feet, and the two of them went all the way around, which Finley ruefully admitted got them little more than an upskirt view of the towering green woman. And then the stairs began in earnest.

The two of them plodded up the spiral stairs that corkscrewed up the inside the statue, in a long line of tourists doing the same. There were few opportunities to step out of line, and otherwise a gentle social pressure to keep pushing forward and upward at a pace just slow enough to be maddening and determined enough to require focus. At the very least it meant that Sammy did not feel his conversation was inadequate: neither of them had breath to spare on small talk.

When they finally reached the top, Sammy hardly recognized the arching ribbon of windows as the inside of the statue's crown. "It's so small," he panted back at Finley. "My dorm room's bigger."

Finley patted him on the butt and then pushed it forward, towards the bank of windows. "The inside view isn't the point, silly."

After nearly an hour of stairs under harsh electric bulbs, the sunlight spilling through the windows seemed downright surreal. Sammy stepped forward as the line allowed and leaned into the first window. "Oh wow."

The harbour stretched out below them, seemingly endless and teeming with bobbing watercraft and their churning wakes. A long line of distant docks marked where the water ended and land began, with a great swath of buildings behind it, stretching out to the horizon.

"Behold," intoned Finley at his elbow. "Brooklyn."

Sammy reached back to swat at them. "Let me be a out-of-town tourist for a minute," he teased, noting for a moment that he'd slipped back into femme voice, but dismissed the thought. He pressed his face against the glass, trying to see further to the left, where the buildings rose higher.

"You can see that direction better from the windows down the line," Finley advised, the voice of experience, but they smiled out at the stunning view, too. "You picked a gorgeous day to do this."

"Lucky," Sammy shrugged, and grabbed Finley's hand to pull them

along to the better view of downtown. This time he deepened and darkened his voice. "In more ways than one."

They stared out the windows, hand in hand, for a long while, letting the line of people move past them. "It's so... stately," Sammy said, struggling to find the right words. "Looks peaceful and quiet and serene and... I live there. I know it's not." Finley giggled as if it had been a joke, and Sammy supposed it was a funny observation. "It's almost like it's not really the City. Some other place."

"New York, not The City that we know and love," Finley nodded along, and then pointed. "Oh wow, look at the dude kayaking in the middle of the Harbour. Bold choice, my dude."

More than once, Sammy shuffled closer to rest his head on Finley's shoulder, then stopped and drew himself up to his full height to offer his shoulder to them. He tugged them a little closer, wrapped his arm around their middle, but the unspoken message never seemed to go through. Finley's head remained upright.

Finally it was time to go, to trudge back down just as many stairs as they had come up, and now without the promise of an amazing view to entice them. Then came the wooden switchback holding pen for tourists waiting to board the ferry, in which there was nowhere to sit. They made jokes about their aching legs.

There were at least seats available on the ferry, which took them from Liberty Island to Ellis Island. "There's a nice cafe here," Sammy explained as the ferry bumped up against the dock, "I thought it would be a good place for dinner."

"Amazing, I'm starving," his enbyfriend groaned, poking their sparkly green belly. They did not make any move to get up, however, until the rest of the ferry was empty and the two of them could walk right off the boat.

There was also a museum on the island, which the two of them bypassed in favour of sitting down and eating. Sammy navigated their way past dioramas and infographics to the cafe tucked into a distant wing but, once he held open the door for Finley, loosed a defeated little groan.

"The cafe looked a lot nicer on the website," he sighed, taking in the line of people waiting to pick prepackaged sandwiches out of standing fridges and then to pay at the counter. What few tables huddled at the edges of the room were swamped with tourists and strollers.

"It's fine," Finley assured him, and pulled him into line. "The company's the important part. And it's been a hot minute since I had a

chicken caesar salad wrap."

"I'm not sure we'll be able to sit down," Sammy observed, worriedly looking over the scant seating and the squalling babies that were parked among the crowd.

"Then we take our food outside and have a little picnic," their enbyfriend suggested, smiling and squeezing Sammy's hand. "It's a beautiful day."

Grudgingly mollified, Sammy waited in line. Making small talk was, hours into the date and with aching thighs, something of a struggle. He felt like he was losing his grip on the day, on his beautiful plan to give Finley the kind of send-off that they deserved, the experience and the enbyfriend that they really wanted. Everything had been so crystal clear in his head: the two of them, hand in hand, smiling at each other, queering up the Statue of Liberty and then having a nice meal before heading home for the evening. Just two enbies in love.

The problem was that there was only one enby here. Or at least only one who was any good at it. Sammy just couldn't seem to position himself right, present himself as confidently as he felt he should, be as natural in the role that he had to fill to make Finley happy. And he kept perseverating on those failures so that he wasn't present, he wasn't enjoying himself, and that degraded his performance even more.

He'd kept at it, though, going through the motions and saying the lines that he'd practiced all week: loving but confident stuff, delivered in a deep-pitched, dark-resonanced masc voice that oozed assurance. But it was like he wasn't really there, like he was a marionette making itself dance alongside Finley instead of holding them and touching them and moving alongside them.

It was like looking out at the City through the plate glass windows of Liberty's crown: nothing like walking its streets and bumping into passers-by and smelling the heady melange of cooking food and car exhaust and perfume and asphalt (and piss).

He wasn't here, he wasn't present, and Finley could tell. Over and over they'd got that hitch in their smile when they noticed that something was off, just like they did now as they looked back at Sammy and asked what he was eating and oh shit they were at the front of the line now and he hadn't even picked up any food.

Sammy scrambled backwards to grab—what did he come up with—an apple, a yogurt, and some sort of sandwich. That would do. "And,

um, drinks?" he asked the clerk, who pointed at the standing fridge way back down the line. Sammy coughed. "Um, just charge me for a coke and I'll go grab it."

Sammy paid and they went outside. It was short work to find a park bench overlooking the water, and they settled in to plow through their cellophane-wrapped feast. Both were quiet for a long while at first, although halfway through Finley shifted seating so they could nestle up against Sammy. He smiled softly; another minor victory, but he'd take it.

"You know, I was kind of joking before, but this is a surprisingly decent chicken caesar wrap," they said, contemplating the last few bites.

Sammy nudged them companionably. "I'm glad."

"So now that you're a little rested and not hungry," Finley hazarded, "are you feeling better?"

He sighed, leaning into Finley as much as they were leaning into him. "I think so, yeah. I just... the cafe being a disappointment got into my head." Which was true, and also nowhere near the whole truth, but the last thing Sammy wanted to do was unload all of the whole truth on his enbyfriend on their last date.

Last date. Somehow he hadn't put it in those words before, even in the quiet of his own head.

"What's next?" Finley was asking, and gestured with the remnants of their wrap. "After we finish dinner."

The original plan was to take Finley back to his dorm room for as much fucking as they could fit into the evening, but Sammy's head was still all wobbly from too many not-quite-articulated emotions. He wasn't even sure he could mount a saucy smile to propose sex.

He shifted to look back at where they'd come. "You wanna check out the museum for a bit?"

"I'll follow you wherever, honey," replied his enbyfriend, and popped the last twist of tortilla into their mouth.

Ellis Island had at one point been a blobby little island presenting on maps with a soft natural contour, but those days were long past. Every corner of the island had been built up, with century-old brick docks and promenades squaring off every interface of land and water. The result looked less like an island than a building dropped in the harbour. The actual buildings on the island looked like nothing more than continuations of the blocky construction, even with the fancy exterior composed of broad banks of windows and exposed brick.

"French Renaissance architecture," Finley read off a placard, and then squinted up at the building. "I guess it's appropriate that the biggest immigration depot in the United States stole its look from somewhere overseas."

Sammy giggled in response, then deepened his amusement to a more masculine chuckle, and grabbed Finley's hand to drag him inside.

Sammy went in confident that he could use a quick walk through an unassuming history museum as a sort of palate cleanser, a way to wash away how things had been going awry and refocus his intention on holding Finley's hand and laughing together at dumb jokes they'd both make, and just being present, being part of a couple.

That lasted about ten minutes.

"Everybody's so..." he heard himself saying, and noticed only then that his brow was creased in frustrated confusion. They were looking at their fifteenth infographic layered over old photographs blown up to proportions so massive you could see the different-sized spots of the original, ancient newsprint.

Finley looked sidelong at him. "Hm?"

Sammy shook his head. "No, it's just. It's a museum about immigration and immigrants and everything keeps going on about diversity and different communities joining the country and I mean, that's great and all, but like... everybody's so white."

"Fun fact," they responded with false cheer, "at this time, Irish and Italian people weren't considered white... despite being really fucking white. Eastern European folks, too."

"I was just..." Sammy started, and looked around, chagrinned. "I was kind of expecting some people who looked like us?"

"People like us didn't come in through Ellis Island," Finley shrugged. "And some of us didn't come into the country at all, really."

Sammy quirked an eyebrow at them, so Finley elaborated: "Most of my family is, like, demonstrably from Puerto Rico, with entry visas stamped in Miami and Charleston. But there's a few roots in my family tree that don't have any documentation, and some of those go back far enough that you've got to wonder. Were they undocumented immigrants from down south, or were they kids of indigenous and white parents?" They nodded at the display of white faces. "Maybe one of these people actually is one of my ancestors, and they crossed paths with a nice Choctaw at some backwoods dance party one night in 1908. Their resulting kid gets mistaken for a Mexican, because that

appeases the sensibilities of the white people in power, and they just... slide into a Latin community somewhere and live out the rest of their life." They patted their own chest. "And a few generations later, I'm the result."

"Huh," was all Sammy could say, and then the two of them wandered down the corridor. When he finally framed what he wanted to say—"I didn't realize you didn't know where some of your family came from"—they were already three exhibits away from where the original conversation had happened, so he didn't say anything at all.

They wandered through the rest of the museum, even watched a short, stilted movie. Finley smiled and made little jokes throughout, and Sammy laughed along with them and held their hand, but he still wasn't there. The museum had taken on a murky, disquieting demeanor. He wasn't there—wasn't emotionally present for his date, sure, but also he wasn't there in the museum—couldn't find himself in any of the displays, didn't even know where to start looking.

He squeezed Finley's hand, which they probably thought was some overwhelm of happy emotion, but all Sammy wanted was to assure himself he at least had one connection to the rest of the world.

And then it was time to go.

The line for the last ferry was a crowded mess, as was the ferry itself. They milled around the standing-room-only boat, watching the water and the skyline go by, and mostly killing time. Sammy didn't want the day to end, not like this, and not only because he had plans. The only problem was he couldn't tell Finley his plans with all these people around, and in the mean time the date felt like a slowly-deflating balloon.

When they were finally able to disembark the ferry, Sammy pulled Finley off the concrete sidewalk swarmed with tired tourists and onto the grass of Battery Park. When they were finally out of earshot, he turned around and took both of Finley's hands. "So I, um, have sort of a surprise?" he started, which despite its hesitancy was a scripted line he'd been practicing for a week, because he didn't know how else to broach the subject. When Finley only lifted their eyebrows, he explained: "So for the past few weeks—since Pride, in fact—I've been... practicing... with a training dildo?"

It took his enbyfriend a moment to understand what he was saying, but when they did, their eyebrows shot even higher. They tried to say something, but just made a little choking sound.

Sammy squeezed Finley's hands. "And if it's okay with you, I'd...

like to try the real thing tonight.” He smiled up at Finley and bit his lip, which was not exactly playing fair, because he knew Finley would agree to anything when he bit his lip like that. “Would that be okay?”

Finley nodded like their head was going to shake right off of their neck.

The warm, dancing glow of candlelight greeted them when Sammy led Finley into his dorm room. The genderqueer gasped at the sight. “How did you—”

Sammy pulled them further inside. “Farah. I gave her my key and texted her when we left the Battery. She thought the idea was wildly romantic.”

Finley wrapped their arms around Sammy’s waist. “It is wildly romantic,” they murmured, and drew him into a long, slow kiss.

The first kiss led into the next, and then the next, each one broken only by the necessity of breathing and of divesting each other of clothing. When the last garment hit the floor, Finley pulled Sammy backwards towards the bed. “Condoms and lube?”

Sammy nodded to the little table next to his pillow, normally the nighttime home of his phone but tonight the site of three tea lights, a squeeze bottle, and an open cardboard box of square wrappers.

Finley sat down on the bed, their hands on Sammy’s hips holding him in place in front of them. “And just checking in, now that we’re here and naked and everything: you still want this?”

Hips immobilized, Sammy bent at the waist to bring his face within an inch of Finley’s. And fuck it, he dropped masc voice in favor of breathy sexpot voice. “I very much want you to fuck me, Finley.” And then he kissed them before they could stretch out the chivalrous consent talk a second longer than it needed to be.

Kiss completed, condom and lube applied, Finley suggested that he sit in their lap to start, which would give him control of depth and speed and also kept it possible for him to change his mind at the last second or even afterwards. Sammy squashed his frustration that they were still talking about fucking and not *actually fucking* by grudgingly recognizing the suggestion was perfectly reasonable and also by focusing on the positive: “And we’ll be facing each other.”

Finley pulled him onto the bed and their lap. “Yes. Because I want to see your beautiful face.”

“But there will also be kissing, right?” Sammy asked, heart suddenly in his throat and breath catching. The insides of his thighs slid along

the outsides of Finley's. He was doing this. Was he really doing this?

"There will also be kissing," Finley promised, adjusting Sammy's position with gentle guidance on his hips.

"Where's your—" Sammy started to ask, and then the slick-sticky head of Finley's cock bumped into him, right where left leg met butt.

Finley's hands steadied Sammy, and then their right slid around the bottom edge of his ass. Sammy's breath caught and he forced himself not to just jam his body up against theirs. "Hold on," Finley murmured, focusing on adjusting things they couldn't see. Sammy, meanwhile, focused on their breath dancing across his chest.

And then the tip of Finley's cock slid up against Sammy's entrance, and it was both like and not like practicing with his dildo, but his hips seemed to understand exactly what was happening, tensed and suddenly eager for movement, and it was only his enbyfriend whispering, "slowly, now" that prevented him from impetuously dropping his whole weight down onto them.

In contrast to the gleeful abandon in his hips, though, Sammy's head was filling up with second thoughts, a growing certainty that this was a bad idea. He'd been practicing with the training dildo for weeks and in all that time, it had never not been anything other than strange and awkward. Only a hint of something like pleasure lurked behind everything else, and that was probably just his own wishful thinking talking.

Finley hadn't said they wanted this, but this was what you did in a relationship, when you were somebody's boyfriend or girlfriend or enbyfriend, whatever, and besides, the light in Finley's eyes at the park when Sammy proposed coming back to his dorm room and doing exactly this seemed to bely two months of equivocation on whether they wanted this. Sammy wanted to make Finley happy, and whether or not this actually felt good for him, it would feel good for them, and

"Oh," he heard himself sigh. His hips had apparently decided to start in on things while his brain was still going in circles. His body was lowering and Finn was slipping in and everything inside him was squishing open and— "Oh."

"You're doing so well," his lover whispered, and kissed his collarbone. "Keep it slow for now."

But Sammy wasn't in control of anything that was happening, there was just warm treacle flooding through his body, his muscles turning to jelly even as they tensed to slide his hips up against Finn's. His

nipples pressed against their chest, his belly against theirs. His eyes fluttered closed. Finally his butt came to rest on Finley's thighs.

Sammy rested his forehead against theirs and took two long breaths.

"How does that feel?" his lover asked gently.

"Feels amazing," he crooned dreamily. "And also... like... I'm going to start... moving." His hips wanted to twitch, wanted to thrust and pull and drive up against them.

"Start slow," they advised, and he giggled helplessly in response.

"I don't know if I can go slow," he warned, but he at least started slow, drawing his hips back an inch, then pushing forward again. That wasn't quite right, though, and he adjusted his stance and did it again. That—that was *right*.

Finley groaned in response. "Sammy, you feel amazing."

He tried to focus on Finley's face, which was beaming. "Kiss me?" he asked, and they did. The kiss became an electric flutter that travelled all the way down his spine to where he was connected to Finley and then bouncing back up to his lips and he broke the kiss to laugh, high and light and carefree. "I'm gonna. I'm gonna start moving. Um. Possibly a lot."

Finley chuckled, and Sammy could feel it more than he could hear it, because he'd pulled Finley close, chin resting on their shoulder. He let his hips and thighs start moving as insistently as they liked, clutched at his lover, and lost track of everything else.

It was early morning when Sammy nudged Finley awake. He was curled up in their arms, sheets twisted around them both, their chin on top of his head, so mostly he was bumping his face into their pecs and speaking directly into their chest. "Hey. Hey, Finn."

Their enbyfriend stirred, shifted to face Sammy directly, and reluctantly slit their eyes. "Again? Again again? Jesus, Sammy."

"Finley, I—" he stammered, overwhelmed by the sudden thought that had startled him out of slumber, the thing that he had to give voice, right now, before it drowned underneath exhaustion, dopamine, and oxytocin. Before he forgot what he had to say, before he didn't have a chance to say it, before it was all over. "What if..." he whispered, suddenly fearful at the magnitude of the proposal he was about to make but nonetheless driven by dreamy half-awake urgency, "What if I came with you?"

"I thought you had," they responded, a lopsided grin on their lips.

"Like, more than once."

"No, not—" Sammy hissed, and then giggled. He laid a hand on Finley's chest. His insides popped and fizzed with more emotion than he'd be able to sort out for days. But this he had to say now, tonight, this morning, before Finley left his bed. "What if I came with you... to California?"

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