

# *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!

## *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 dilligent 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, he was failing utterly 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.

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.

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.

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 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 it 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 frisson 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, solicitously 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, but he considered cancelling it 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.”

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