ESTRO JUNKIES

RCBG Book 1

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To the dykes who made this possible

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PROLOGUE
ENDLESS GRIND

Nicky

I'm out of clean clothes.

The hamper's only half-full, but that's because the rest of my attire is carpeting my floor under a layer of empty spicy crisp packets and shed hairs. The only mostly clean clothes are the pyjamas I'm still wearing. The bright pink hearts on my tee are easily covered with the purple zip-up hoodie dangling off my bedpost, and the joggers only have marinara stains on the inner thighs. I'll just keep my legs crossed during lectures, and I'll try to remember to do laundry this evening.

I disrobe and take my shower basket to the flat's shared bathroom, already steamy from a more-punctual flatmate's morning routine. My towel smells—it hasn't dried properly, practically still sodden. I should have hung it up on my door or ergonomic gamer chair or something. I climb into the stall and wrestle with a tube of toothpaste that's almost flat. At least the three-in-one shower gel is half full. I brush my teeth while tepid water runs down my back and emerge in under two minutes, scurrying back to my room so I can pretend to change into a fresh outfit.

"Good morning," I say to Kyle once I walk to the kitchen.

Kyle reciprocates my mumbled greeting while carefully flipping over a pair of fried eggs in his well-buttered pan. He's in a lime-yellow polo shirt and khakis, his curly hair damp and leaving wet patches on his shoulders. Must be in a hurry. I walk past him, pop open the egg carton on top of the fridge, and swear loudly.

"I'm out."

I turn to Kyle, eyes downcast, and feel him shove a plate into my hands before I can even ask him.

"Eat up," he says, sitting down with his own.

"I'll pay you back—"

"I used your cheese, so let's call it even." Kyle waves me off as I join him. "It's fine, Nicky. You're not the problem flatmate here."

I follow his eyes to the pile of dirty dishes in the sink and wince. Plates with crusted-over sauce stains, bowls still half-full of melted ice cream, and what seems like every glass and fork in the flat form a haphazard pile, all of it smelling faintly of sour milk.

"I'll talk to Daniel," I say.

"You haven't already?" Kyle cuts into his breakfast as he speaks, sparing me the effort of avoiding his gaze.

"I have, but I'll do it again."

"I'm not going to clear it out this time." Kyle glances up at me with a stern expression. "You're not either."

"I won't." That promise, at least, I can keep.

"Good." Kyle gets up, sighs, and adds his plate to the top of the mess. "Don't let your breakfast get cold, I worked hard on it."

I take a bite. The egg's perfect—crispy bottom, runny yolk, a slice of cheese melted on top—and the toast is smeared with some kind of minty bright green sauce that I'm pretty sure Kyle makes himself. It's spicy and excellent, and I'm thrilled I'm not the biggest slob in the flat so I can stay in Kyle's good graces.

Halfway out the lobby door, I decide to take a peek at the mailboxes. They're tucked behind the staircase, a half a dozen metal cubes arranged in a small grid; ours is on the top right. I'm not expecting to see anything, to

hear back so soon. I'm here just to satisfy the voice in the back of my head insisting I check every day until—

There's an envelope stuffed into our box. An errant manila corner peeking out the slot.

It's addressed to me.

I bite my lip, glancing over my shoulder like someone's about to sneak up and catch me in the act. I'm already late to my first lecture, and I have a fifteen-minute walk ahead of me. The letter isn't going anywhere—I should get going, attend my classes, and collect it when I return.

There's a pretty good chance I know what it says anyway.

My feet are carrying me upstairs to retrieve the mailbox key before I even make the decision consciously. The letter may not be going anywhere, but neither are my thoughts, fixated entirely on its contents and the minute but extant chance that it promises me deliverance. I grab the key off its hook and rush back down, tearing the envelope open as soon as I have it unlatched.

"Dear Mister—"

Teeth clenched, I skip over my name and dive into the body.

"We are terribly sorry to inform you—"

"FUCK!"

This time, I look around to make sure nobody heard me. The lobby remains fortunately empty—everyone else from this building is likely already in class. Even Daniel.

It's always something. Every time I hear back from a private clinic, it's always downsizing or downscaling or "pausing operations" or, as in this case, shutting down entirely. They have too many clients, they'll say, or their waitlists have ballooned enough, or they simply have to "discontinue" providing certain kinds of care in this politically charged climate. A climate in which a clown in tweed sporting a ridiculous bowtie keeps doing media circuits accusing doctors of sacrificing kids to the trans cult. So sorry, can't risk prescribing you hormones.

Despite all that, I really thought this clinic would come through. I found it recommended on a weeks-old Reddit thread as still accepting new pa-

tients, but I guess a few weeks is an eternity nowadays, with how quickly they're folding in the face of bigoted rabble-rousing. I'm going to have to start the process all over again. Expand my search radius, scour the internet for clinics so far out that appointments would become day trips, assemble another list of e-mails to fruitlessly, pointlessly, worthlessly beseech in my most polite tone: *save my life, goddamnit.*

I'm already in bed before I realise I don't have the energy to face today with this rejection in my hands. Facedown in my pillows, my eyes stinging, feeling like I should cry. But I can't.

I haven't been able to cry in years.

So instead, I roll over and reach down to the floor, extracting my laptop from under the pile of discarded ramen cups. My search engine queries are practically lines of code at this point. I'm combing through forum posts and discussion boards and even *Twitter*, heavens help me.

Only five private clinics are still actually operational in the whole country, one account says—*for now*, they ominously conclude. Another adds that it may be as low as *one*. They are greeted with a chorus of chastisement for "fearmongering", "doomsaying", and "alarmism", which in turn kicks off a backlash against "complacency", "naïveté", and "hugboxing". Battle lines are drawn, insults are hurled. A fever pitch of drama clouds every bloody digital inquiry I make as to who, if anyone, is still prescribing oestrogen.

The sun climbs high, then dips low while I work; I have to continuously shift positions to keep it out of my eyes. Eventually, I drum up five more e-mail addresses to entreat. None of the clinics have a publicly listed phone number. I send each of them my pre-written form letter and wait.

Yet again.

I'd hope, but that seems pointless.

The day is already more than half over. I stretch slowly and notice my stomach rumbling—all I've eaten today is one egg on a piece of toast. I'm out of ramen cups and chocolate bars, and I only have half a packet of stale crisps under my bed. Munching on the chewy remnants to stave off the

worst of the hunger pangs, I delay having to leave the room by checking if the lectures I skipped have posted their slides online.

One of my programming classes has an assignment due tomorrow. It's on identifying the conditions needed to break out of infinite loops.

The gnawing in my guts grows too great to ignore by the time I finish. Briefly, I entertain the idea of getting it all done: grabbing a decent meal, like maybe an actual club sandwich from that student café where everyone does homework, taking all my dirty clothes to a launderette, and even buying a tube of toothpaste from the supermarket on the way home. But I can feel myself deflate from the effort required to even organise the necessary sequence of events in my head. The momentary burst of inspiration drains away entirely when my gaze sweeps the floor. It wouldn't even be enough to get my room clean. I'd still need to pick up the litter and vacuum, and I don't even have the energy to finish this thought.

Spicy chips from the corner shop it is.

I tug on a pair of mismatched flip-flops and ease open my bedroom door, hoping to leave the flat without anyone noticing, especially—

"Nicky, hi! Long time no see, ha-ha!"

I wince. "Hello, Jeff. Yes, it has been a while, I suppose."

Jeff is my last flatmate, and he thinks he's funny. My timing was bad enough that he opened the front door just as I was about to leave. Jeff's a good bit shorter than me—slender, blond, and effortlessly effeminate in a way I'd kill for. He's wearing the most form-fitting Lycra that public indecency laws permit, and he's positively beaming at me through a perspiration sheen that only makes me more self-conscious of my full-body layer of crust and artificial flavourings.

"It has!" Jeff laughs, presumably at me. "I've even seen your boyfriend poke his head out more than you."

"Daniel isn't my boyfriend. I'm not gay." At least, not in the way Jeff would think, but I can't and don't want to get into it.

"Of course not." Jeff actually *giggles*, for reasons that escape but nonetheless irk me. "Well, it's healthy to get out once in a while, Nicky. You should join me on a run sometime!"

"Sure," I say to end the conversation.

Still giggling, Jeff finally walks past me and lets me out of the damn flat.

Fortunately, the corner shop cashier is less judgmental than Jeff—or less chatty, at any rate, which is what really counts. I stuff a mound of crisps into my jute bag, then add some creamy ramen because it's on a 3-for-2 offer. Daniel would roast me for willingly eating noodles so bland, or go on a rant about how ramen has no business being cheesy, but cheap's cheap. I throw three more onto the haul.

It's dark by the time I settle into my gaming chair, tearing open a packet and waiting for my PC to boot up. I'm not really in the mood to game, per se, but I have to log in and do my daily quests to keep my account current. An ad for the new expansion pops up before I can even hit the play button. I groan. I'd be tempted to skip it if my guild would let me.

Having something to fill the endless hours is nice, at least. I can check in, fulfil just enough of my obligations to avoid anyone getting annoyed or upset with me, and then retire to bed and listen to streams of speedrun attempts until I pass out again.

Maybe tomorrow, I'll find the energy to get the laundry done.

I'm about to ping the guild chat to see if anyone's up for a farm run when a sudden rap at my door interrupts me.

"Nicky?" Daniel knocks again, louder. "Can we talk, bro? It's kind of urgent."

This is... weird. Usually, Daniel would send a text asking me to hang out IRL. I actually haven't seen him very much of late—he's been oddly subdued. He told me he has "numerous projects due" when I checked in with him. His major's pretty intense, so that does happen. We still do our dailies together, for the most part, so I figured everything was on the level, but...

"Yeah, come in dude, what's going on?"

Immediately, Daniel strides in, wading through the floor muck to flop down on my bed. He's wearing his pink hoodie that he insists is "salmon", as if acknowledging its pinkness would undermine his manhood more than the cat ears on the hood. He's a slight, wiry guy, mousy-haired and soft-faced and a good six inches shorter than my towering six feet—shorter, even, since he's never heard the words "good posture". He's practically

hunched over on my bed right now, knees pulled up to his chest and—is he wearing *leggings*?

I swivel around to face him, taking my headset off. "Everything okay, man?"

"Yeah. Yes. Um. Just give me a minute, okay?"

I nod. Daniel takes a few deep breaths.

"Take your time, man," I say to fill the silence. It's not like him to be this quiet.

"Okay. Right. Nicholas." Daniel looks up from his knees and meets my gaze. "Before I explain what's going on, you have to understand: I'm not gay. I like women. I am completely straight, and this is not a gay thing, not a trans thing, not anything like that."

Nothing could have prepared me for what Daniel says next.

CHAPTER 1
RANKED COMPETITIVE BREAST GROWTH

~~Daniel~~ Katherine

"I'm taking oestrogen."

I would not call the circumstances of my confession ideal. It is a random day in the middle of term that bears no significance to either of us. I could not have planned this; attempting to do so simply permitted me to fabricate delay after delay, formulating increasingly threadbare rationalisations for why it was not the right time.

So now that it's done, I carefully search Nicholas' face for traces of emotion. A feat in which I do not excel at the best of times.

He seems perplexed. Bemused, but not in a positive way, if I had to assign a polarity to his state of bewilderment. His expression appears rather unhappy, and furrowed brows indicate he is struggling to process this information. Perhaps he's even reevaluating everything he believed to be true about me.

Hence, my preamble. By asserting that I am not queer in any way, shape, manner, or form, I can ensure Nicholas does not feel the need to fundamentally shift his understanding of me. Many a coming out has been greeted with hostility, alienation, disavowal and abandonment, but I have

foreclosed those possibilities by assuring Nicholas that I am and continue to be a cisgender man.

All he needs to accept is that I am on oestrogen, a revelation that will finally put his mind at ease regarding my inexplicable physiological changes. No doubt he's been polite enough to avoid mentioning them until now, but sooner or later, his curiosity would get the better of him.

However, even this much seems beyond Nicholas, if I am interpreting his emotional state correctly. My admission appears to have caused acute distress, to a degree that is detectable even without my scrutinising his cheekbones. He's agitated, seemingly unable to so much as properly form words, eventually expelling only a choice few monosyllables.

"What? How?"

Some resistance is to be expected. But Nicholas' shock is concerning. He's always been more receptive to my so-called "quirks" than most, even indulging in them from time to time. A high-grade model of a battle mech sits in a place of high honour beside his light-up keyboard; we built it together. The bright kanji-covered poster on the wall beside his bed is one of a show I introduced him to. I'm certain one day I'll succeed in convincing him that my hoodie is indeed salmon-coloured, so that his masculinity will cease impeding him from purchasing one.

This time, though, the "quirk" may be a bridge too far. The tone and volume of Nicholas' exclamations is alarming, and I sense that I must offer him additional context to temper his reaction.

"It's just for a competition!" I speak quickly, hoping my words may cut through his mounting discomfort. "Relax, bro."

Nicholas disregards my imperative entirely, wringing his hands and swivelling slowly in his chair, muttering under his breath all the while. After a few interminable seconds, he whirls around and fixes me with a piercing stare.

"Daniel, why are you messing with me like this?" He's practically shouting. "Seriously, just say what you want to say without trying to mock me."

"Bro, no, seriously—okay, *look*."

Only a visual demonstration will suffice now. Nicholas will be in a better

place to accept what I have told him once he can no longer deny the truth before his very eyes. I throw back my hood, revealing my now-luscious shoulder-length locks, and jump to my feet, unzipping my hoodie all the way in a single fluid motion. Unfortunately, a crisp packet catches me underfoot. I slip and tumble back onto Nicholas' bed. To play this off as an intentional manoeuvre, I throw my overgarment open and unveil the bodacious, buxom torso I have been struggling to conceal.

"Behold!"

Nicholas frowns at my tittage. He's unmoved by the bounty that has spilled forth before him. Perhaps Jeffrey's oafish speculation on Nicholas' sexuality has some merit after all?

"Well, I'm glad you're comfortable enough to wear a magical girl t-shirt?" Nicholas shrugs. "Does that mean you're ready to admit the hoodie's pink?"

"It is *salmon*, you unrepentant plebeian, and that is not what I'm attempting to draw your attention towards!"

How unobservant is Nicholas? Despite audaciously exposing myself, he is unmoved and nonplussed. Accepting that I must be more obvious than I am entirely comfortable with, I stand up once more—carefully, this time—and all but shove my breasts in Nicholas' face, squeezing them together with both hands.

He recoils. "Okay, wow, okay dude! You have tits! What the hell, bro?"

The repeated gendering, while uncomfortable, is a routine part of male homosociality to which I've resigned myself. It is better than Nicholas not speaking to me at all.

"As I said!" I tumble onto Nicholas' bed again, to reinforce that my earlier stumble was purposeful. "I am taking oestrogen. I have been doing so for a while, and I'm only doing it for a competition because I persist in both my heterosexuality and cisgenderhood."

"What do you mean you're doing this for a competition?" Nicholas will not let the matter rest. "Dan, what competition would you possibly need to take oestrogen for?"

"Ranked Competitive Breast Growth. It is an underground sport for cis

men, open to anyone who lives in this city and hosted on a Discord server. A race to grow the biggest breasts over the span of three years."

The silence that falls between us is pregnant, though with what and by whom I cannot say.

"That *cannot* be real."

"Explain these, then." I gesture towards my ample bosom, since Nicholas is prone to overlooking such conspicuous details.

Nicholas groans, massaging his left temple with two fingers.

"Okay, fine, so *how* did you get the HRT to grow breasts competitively, Dan?"

"The competition provided it, of course."

Mystifyingly, this detail startles Nicholas most of all. He sits up straight and blinks at me profusely. Then:

"Show me."

We are approaching territory I have yet to map. He's delving into superfluous details that I haven't expected him to be interested in. This competition is certainly an intriguing one, its very existence difficult to grapple with, but surely the ample evidence I have quite literally rubbed his face in should suffice?

Then again, my own barometer for what people find outlandish has always been poorly tuned. Nicholas aligns with me in more cases than not, but if showing him my RCBG-provided supplies puts his mind at ease, it is no great trouble.

"Very well." I rise to my feet and take Nicholas' hand. "Come into my most sacred chamber."

My repeated ascents and descents from Nicholas' mattress have left me lightheaded. I lean forward unsteadily. Nicholas quickly balances me on his shoulder, heaving a sigh.

"Dan, did you forget to eat again?" He begins telling me off without waiting for an answer. "You can't just drink Monster all day, man."

"I had to, there were no clean plates left."

Waving off his petty concerns, I lead Nicholas by the hand. The moment I open his door, a belligerent voice calls out from the kitchen.

"Dan, are you *seriously* going to ignore this mess forever?"

There are far more pressing matters on my mind than the pointless, repetitive mundanity of domestic hygiene. The very future of my oldest friendship depends on the outcome of this conversation. As Nicholas mumbles apologies towards the kitchen, I promptly drag him to my own bedroom and slam the door shut behind us. We require utmost privacy for the deed.

My room and Nicholas' are rather alike, largely because I insist on embellishing his living spaces for him. Where he has a singular mecha by his gaming set-up, I have a veritable squadron. Anime posters and metallic panels of commissioned fan art line every available surface. All pictures belong to properties with un- or under-stated lesbian themes, such that I retain enough plausible deniability declaring myself a fan.

We kick aside empty Monster cans to clear a path to my desk, where I settle down while Nicholas hovers by my shoulder. I pull open my lowest, biggest drawer with some effort—the box of supplies contained within is heavy. Resisting the urge to ask Nicholas to lift it for me—I must continue to play the man myself, after all—I manage to deposit it on an empty patch of wooden surface with a pronounced thud. My mecha squadron falls over, and Nicholas rushes to set them upright.

I gesture towards the box with a flourish. "There you are!"

Nicholas gawps at the trove.

If one were to liken exogenous hormones to precious metals—and to women such as me, the comparison is more than apt—then what I have unearthed for Nicholas is nothing short of a hidden treasure. Boxes of pills, vials of amber liquid, and shimmering tubs of translucent gel, all efficiently packed.

"How—*why* the fuck is there so much?" Nicholas sounds astounded. "There's way more here than you can use before it expires!"

"Astutely observed, Nicholas." *Unlike your lapses earlier*, I don't add—I am trying to practice a modicum of tact. "Competitors are expected to do our own research and select the regimen that is most effective for us. It's part of the race."

Nicholas doubles over, one hand on the back of my chair, the other on his knee.

"This is a lot. You just *got* all this... What are you even competing for?"

Truly, is Nicholas unable to draw even the most basic of conclusions?

"A monetary prize, naturally. A million dollars go to the man with the biggest breasts."

It's the perfect plan. As a trans woman, I have a natural edge in this competition. Where cis men will struggle with dysphoria, encumbered by the psychological distress of growing breasts, I will have none to contend with. My biological advantage in this sport ensures I can last as long as needed, gleefully watching as my competition winnows itself, and claim the prize as my final, most beautiful and awesome self: Katherine, the magnificent. I will have the biggest assets in two senses of the word, finally shedding every trace of my old self and life.

Though of course, I want to keep Nicholas.

No doubt awestruck that his best and oldest friend is poised to become a curvy millionaire, Nicholas stumbles towards my bean bag chair and collapses onto it. He looks dazed. His fingers dig into his thighs.

"I will, of course, still be your friend." I reach over and pat his shoulder to reassure him.

"Right." Nicholas glances up at me. "So, how do I sign up?"

"Pardon?"

Kyle

"Kaalappan, why do you not know where your wife is?"

Good question. It might be because I'm not actually married, and therefore don't actually live with the woman my mum insists on already calling my wife. I instead live in a flat with three other men, all of whom have atrocious fucking hygiene. Therefore, rather than keeping abreast of Rupali's every move, I'm scrubbing a pile of dishes I'd ideally want a hazmat suit for.

I don't say any of this, of course. Backchat is frowned on in desi families.

"Amma, I know where my wife is."

My phone is on the countertop, as close to the sink as it can be without

getting splashed. I glance at the screen, open to my texts with Rupali. I suppress a groan when I see that she still hasn't responded.

"Then please do tell me why she missed her call with Sushma auntie, Kaalappan."

I'd love to explain why Rupali missed her mum's daily check-in, if only to stop mine from using my full name so much. See, amma, Rupali's an active member of the college's Gay-Straight Alliance. She couldn't answer Sushma auntie because she's in a meeting to organise protests against the university's changing policy on trans care. She's also in that meeting with her childhood best friend, by the way—yes, amma, the transgender one, who you all excommunicated. Anyway, now that Sushma auntie will be disowning Rupali, let me know who my back-up fiancée is when you figure it out.

"We were... watching a movie."

"Oho! A movie." I don't think mum's buying it. "Which movie, beta?"

I quickly wipe my hands on the dishrag and pick my phone up. "Oh, you know, just one of the older ones. Yashraj, I think."

"Can't even recall the name or the plot?"

"Amma, can *you* tell the difference between all the 90's rom-coms?" I'm texting Rupali as fast as I can, informing her we were watching *Dil Toh Paagal Hain* earlier this afternoon and begging her to tell me if she used a different excuse. "SRK was in it. He was named Raj, or Rahul. That could be any of fifty movies."

"Were you or were you not watching this film, Kaalappan?"

"I wasn't paying attention!" I'm starting to hyperventilate—I really need Rupali to see these messages so I can commit to the alibi. "Ru picked it—these are all chick flicks, amma, it's not my thing."

"I see."

We're so fucked.

At least I'm too on edge to be grossed out by the congealed ramen sauce and crusted-over condiment stains on the plates. The need to excise this nervous energy helps me scrape it all off with a mere plastic brush. I focus on blasting the cups with a jet of blistering water. I pray my mother feels merciful today.

"Beta," she begins, her tone soft and strangely amused. "You and Rupali have been engaged a long time, no?"

"Three months isn't really a long time."

Mum clicks her tongue dismissively. "That was just the ceremony. You've known you were to be married for how long?"

"Well. A long time then, yeah." A strange dread pricks at the back of my neck. She doesn't sound angry, but I'm also not sure I like where this conversation is going. "As long as I can remember."

"Since you were kids, no?" There's no mistaking it—my mother's definitely trying to suppress a giggle. "Sushma and I were just talking the other day, how you're not kids anymore."

I break out into a cold sweat. "I guess? Sure. We are both over twenty, yes."

"Now, we understand you two must be getting curious. The wedding is a long time off—after graduation, na, and so is the honeymoon—"

Kill me now.

"Yeah, really looking forward to the wedding! Not for any particular reasons!" I'm out of dishes to scour and have to stop myself from peeling my skin off. "Gonna be a real fun party, I bet."

"Kaal, I'm just saying. We are your parents, and we're obligated to remind you that as much as you might want to, let's call it, *rehearse* for the wedding night—"

"Amma we were just watching *Dil Toh Paagal Hain*! I remembered the name of the movie!"

"—just know that even if you think no one will know, God's always with us—"

"I wanted to fast-forward through all the dance numbers, but Ru insisted on watching them all so I just kind of checked out, that's all!"

"—while intimacy isn't a sin, you should always make sure to leave room for Jesus—"

"There was plenty of room!"

My phone buzzes against the granite countertop. Rupali has finally deigned to answer.

"Sorry, a bit of resistance at the meeting! Movie sounds great, promise I'll be over really soon and sort stuff out!"

That means she's nowhere close to arriving. I grit my teeth.

"—I know in the modern world it isn't 'cool' to wait until marriage anymore, beta, but—"

"Mother dearest!" I raise my voice a hair. "As your dutiful devoted son, I swear to Baby Jesus I don't even know what I'm waiting until marriage *for*, and Rupali and I haven't so much as held hands today."

"Well, don't avoid holding and comforting your wife, beta. I raised you better than that."

Choking back a sob, I grip the edge of the sink, double over, and pray that I may one day divine what this woman wants from me.

"Yes, Amma."

"Anyway, all that aside. How are the classes going?"

I address her more mundane queries and concerns. I'm doing my homework, keeping up with my chores, and buying Rupali dinner every weekend like a real gentleman. No, my flatmates aren't giving me any trouble, I assure her through clenched teeth.

I'm done wiping the countertop by the time she hangs up, so I move on to the kitchen table, then the fridge. Need to keep my hands busy. At least until my darling wife returns from the front lines. I hear the key turn in the lock just as I'm about to break out the broom and dustpan.

"Kaal I'm really, really sorry!"

Rupali sounds so remorseful. I curse my inability to remain cross with her, a smile already creeping across my face. I turn around to forgive her.

Sunbeams can't light up a room like Rupali can. Her brilliant smile, her sparkling eyes, her cascading black curls that you just want to bury your face in. She always looks so warm, so inviting and gorgeous and just—perfect. She barrels into the kitchen in an orange tank top and cargo shorts. She's slightly out of breath, carrying three or four plastic bags stuffed with craft supplies and a stack of poster board slung across her back. I hurry over to relieve her of her burdens.

"Hey Kyle!"

And Jeffrey's here too. Also carrying a bunch of stuff. I mutter a cursory "Hi, Jeffrey" in his direction as I take the bags off Rupali's hands and set

them down. Thanking me profusely, Rupali throws her hands around me and squeezes tight. I wince as her head collides with my chest, only just managing to suppress a grunt of pain.

"So, how was the meeting?" I ask once Rupali lets go and I'm free to set the supplies down next to the kitchen table.

"It went fine," Jeff says, putting his bags down as well.

"Horrible!" Rupali groans, pulling a chair out and collapsing into it with her head in her hands. "That's why it went on for so long—we just couldn't agree on anything!"

Jeff looks at his feet. "It wasn't *so* bad."

I retrieve a freshly cleaned glass from the kitchen cabinet and fill it with water. "Wanna talk about it?"

"Yeah." Rupali accepts the glass. "It's the usual suspects. Quinn and company."

"What was it this time?" I ask.

"There are some reasonable concerns that some members have about the recent, suggested course of actions." Jeffrey has put on an affect that I can only really describe as "HR manager". "As such, members are divided on the best course of action—"

"Quinn doesn't want to do anything about the uni inviting the detrans speaker again," Rupali says. "Says that if we continue to protest speeches, it's bad optics or whatever."

"Quinn has reasonable concerns!" Jeffrey's voice is feeble. I wish he'd just shut up. "While our trans members are right to be upset, this could easily turn into a press circus about free speech on our campus—"

"They're more than *upset*, Jeffrey." Rupali sighs, rubbing her temples. I can tell she's had this back-and-forth many times today. "People are losing healthcare, clinics are shutting down, and Quinn is suggesting we shouldn't speak out against the figurehead for those policies being repeatedly invited to speak here."

Jeffrey leans against the sink with his arms crossed. "Not *nothing*. We should absolutely stand up for our trans members, but we need to do it

through the proper channels. Or the admin might decide that the GSA is too antagonistic."

Rupali rolls her eyes.

"Right, well, that's kind of where it ended," she says to me. "The GSA is going to send some strongly worded letters, and meanwhile those of us who want to actually put pressure on the admin are organising a series of protests."

"So you went out and bought all this because?.." I gesture towards the bags.

"Quinn ruled that we can't use the club's supplies, yeah." Rupali shrugs helplessly.

Jeffrey raises his hands in what I think is supposed to be a placating gesture. "There was a vote!"

Rupali cocks an eyebrow. "You know that makes it worse, right?"

"So you bought these." I try to steer the conversation back to actual pressing matters. "Are you going to tell Sushma auntie what they're for?"

"Oh my gosh, mummy!" Rupali claps a hand to her mouth. "I'm so sorry you had to deal with that all alone, Kaal!"

"They didn't believe my excuses, but fortunately, my mum had some very funny ideas as to what we were up to."

Whatever part of me wanted Rupali to share in my embarrassment dies instantly when I see her reaction. The way she freezes, her breath hitching in her throat, her eyes widening in seeming panic—I should have known better. At the very least, I shouldn't have said what I said in front of *Jeffrey*.

Paper over the misstep, quickly. "Point being, they're not mad, but you better have a good explanation for why you bought enough supplies to outfit a protest yourself."

"Oh, Jeffrey was nice enough to do it on his card, actually." Rupali reaches up and pats him on the shoulder, to which Jeffrey awkwardly laughs and demurs.

Begrudgingly, I have to thank him. "I sincerely appreciate you helping my fiancée with covering her tracks."

"Aw, seriously, don't mention it, seriously!"

Jeffrey's too-wide smile bares nearly every tooth in his mouth at me. I feel like I need sunglasses.

"Okay, so first things first, I'll call mummy." Rupali stands up, phone in hand, her face determined. "I'll make sure both our mums are happy and won't try to cross-examine you any more, okay?"

"Perfect." I sigh with relief and take Rupali's empty glass to rinse it off.

"I also wanted to ask you—"

"Yes, you can store the supplies in my room." I continue drying the glass while Rupali hugs me from behind. "And I'll help you start making signs once you're done with the call too."

She's practically crushing my ribs. "You're the best. When was the last time I told you that you're the best?"

I laugh. "I think a few hours ago?"

Rupali hops over to the living room to call her mum from the sofa. I take as long as I possibly can to return the glass to its cabinet before turning to Jeffrey, who is still standing at my side. Still flashing his too-brilliant smile at me.

"Would you help me to put the supplies away, Jeff?" I ask, as politely as I can.

"Absolutely, Kyle!"

As we gather the items, I pray that Jeff has the good sense not to blurt out something stupid yet again.

My prayers usually go unanswered.

"I've been reading up a lot on your culture and customs, Kyle!" Jeffrey chirps, like he's thought of a completely novel way to try and make conversation with me. "The festivals, the poojas, the temple rituals, they're all so beautiful and spiritually meaningful! You have such a beautiful history."

"You know I'm Christian, right?"

It's not often you see the light leave someone's eyes in real time while their expression remains frozen on their face.

"Oh! Of course!" He's practically squeaking. "I mean, I ought to have known, given your name and everything."

I use my elbow to wrestle with my door's handle. "'Kyle' isn't my actual name, Jeffrey."

"... Oh?"

"It's an anglicised shortening. My actual name gets mangled by most people here." I shoot him a sharp look so he knows exactly what I mean by "most people".

"Well, I'd be happy to use it!"

Undeterred. Like a puppy that you just can't kick enough times.

"My full name is Kaalappan."

I can practically hear the air whistling as Jeffrey deflates further. "Could I get that again, possibly?"

I make sure to face Jeffrey as I roll my eyes. "Just stick to 'Kyle'."

The door finally clicks, and I shoulder it open. I direct Jeffrey to dump the bags on my bed, after which he steps back and remains in my room instead of exercising a modicum of courtesy and leaving.

"Doesn't your family call you 'Kyle' too, though?" Jeff asks, unwisely.

"They call me 'Kaal'." I stretch the vowel out to make sure even Jeff's unobservant ear can discern it.

"I just figured that was, you know—"

"That was what?" I'm suddenly curious. "What did you think about the shortening of my full name, Jeff?"

Jeff rubs the back of his neck. He looks at anything in my room but me. "Never mind, actually, it's nothing!"

I'm the one with a big smile on my face now. "Did you think my mother and Rupali were mispronouncing my name, Jeff?"

"No, not at all!"

"Even Rupali, who doesn't otherwise have an Indian accent?" I'd start snickering if it wouldn't ruin the effect my words are having. "Did you think Rupali didn't know how to say 'Kyle' correctly?"

"I just—I'm not—it wasn't—" He sounds so defeated. "I'll just go now."

"Cool. See you when Ru's done with her call, Jeffrey."

"Is there a chance you could?—"

I allow myself a solitary giggle. "I won't tell a soul about our conversation here, Jeffrey. Best for everyone involved that we keep it between us."

"Right. Yeah."

Eyes downcast, shoulders slumped, Jeffrey slinks away in the direction of his room. I slam the door shut behind him.

My chest is still a bit tender from the collision with Rupali's forehead. I step towards the full-length mirror in my room and take my shirt off.

Puffy nipples. From the right angles, if you squint a bit, you might even be able to describe them as *swollen*, or perhaps, generously, *bulging*. Still mostly just look like pecs, though. Stubbornly, maddeningly flat pecs.

My parents—my mother especially—can never seem to address me without calling me *beta*. Their son. Their devoted, dutiful, pious firstborn. Set to inherit my family's *properties*, and the family *business*, and its *legacy*, poised to marry the woman my family picked out for me. A good boy who will grow up and follow in his father's footsteps.

Whether I like it or not.

Unless I can find a way out. Unless I can actually crack into the damn RCBG server's leaderboard.

Grow, dammit.

Jeff

Lock the door. Open the closet.

Maid dress. Where's the maid dress?

I find it buried under a pile of athleisure, stuffed under black spandex garments to better blend into the disorganised mass. I tug it on over my head, over my skintight shorts and tee. Quick but careful—the fabric is cheap.

I take a breath when it's finally on. The sight of my bare legs under the hem calms me somewhat.

Somewhat.

Cheeks still burning, I crawl under my sheets and open my laptop under cover of dark. I navigate to a hidden, password-protected folder on my drive, full of materials that I'm glad I don't have to enter the search terms to find again. Most of the images and videos show two men. One of them is

usually a cross-dresser—though the titles use less flattering terms than that—while the other one... the least offensive term is "non-white", I think?

Not that I can really trust myself on what's not offensive. After all, I always manage to fuck it up when it comes to Kyle.

Kyle. I still remember how he looked on the day he moved in. He's not exactly buff, but nor is he slight. Stocky, well-built. Taller than me, which isn't uncommon but still appreciated whenever I see it in a man. The moment I laid eyes on him—you know those romance novels that you're not supposed to read as a boy but you guiltily steal from your older sister anyway? They always describe how *tall, dark, and handsome* men are, but for some reason everyone insists "dark" means "dark-haired white man"?

Well, I never pictured that. I swear this is true: I think I've always pictured Kyle. Not "guys like Kyle", but Kyle, with his jet-black hair and eyes and swarthy skin, which on that day was gleaming slightly from perspiration and exertion, and just the safest-looking arms and shoulders and *chest*.

Yes, I've always pictured Kyle.

I didn't know then exactly where he was from—still don't, as he hasn't told me. I offered to help him move a box upstairs, but he just grunted and did it himself. Of course he didn't need the help in the slightest. I wondered if he didn't want to appear weak in front of me, another man, a man from a demographic that belittles and denigrates guys like him—to my utter and undying shame. At that moment, I was painfully aware that Kyle was painfully aware he was rooming with three white people. And whether he was from here or anywhere else, I knew I had to go out of my way to make him comfortable. The second I was finished unpacking my own things, I sought him out in the common room.

"Kyle, I want you to know that I have absolutely nothing against your kind."

I confess I was not expecting him to stare at me with shock. Nor roll his eyes the way he did.

So I tried to figure out where I'd gone wrong without burdening him further. To my mounting mortification, I realised I was too sheltered and inexperienced in matters of talking to people external to my own homogenous and somewhat conservative culture. Which led me to other him needlessly,

even when trying to convey the best of intentions. Resolving to do better, I read up on everything I could regarding the topic of racial justice—a subject my own school and parents neglected—and the travails of South Asian immigrants in particular. When next I spoke to Kyle, I knew I'd have the perfect apology in hand.

"Kyle, I'm sorry. I've realised that, as a white person, I will always benefit from your marginalisation."

That was when I realised Kyle made me too nervous to talk like a normal, sane human being.

It's not his fault. It's not his fault I'm just an idiot white guy who will never get a perfect, sweet, soft-faced but firm-chested nerdy Adonis—or in his case, Arjuna—like Kyle to give me even a second glance. Not when I look like a flat slab of alabaster hewed from a grimy ancient marble column.

Emphasis on the "flat". In spite of my best efforts with RCBG's provided supplies.

I'm not browsing the videos with two men today. Instead, I scroll down to the very bottom, to a folder within this folder, its offerings sealed by a second, more secure password. Inside I find the only thing that could possibly satisfy me tonight.

I'm already drowning in shame. It's not like it can get any worse.

So I open my secret stash of clips and ravenously, longingly stare at a collage of men having sex with women. It's wrong. It's sick. It's the only thing that gets me off when I let myself think how badly I want to be with Kyle, and how I'll never get to be.

Sometimes I do like how I look in the mirror. When I curtsy, or twirl, or take selfies from certain angles, I can almost see myself as someone Kyle could lust after. Sometimes, I let myself fantasise vividly—not anything carnal, but just that I'll wear sheer leggings and have lovely tresses long enough to reach below my waist. The kind of girl Kyle wouldn't be ashamed to be seen with.

Then I remember reality, and start crying.

The way he looks at Rupali… Rupali, who's buxom and chubby and bubbly and only barely comes up to his chest. She has creamy, caramel-chocol-

ate skin and the right bits to please a man. So unlike the stick-thin twink made of sour milk, with nothing for him to grope.

It's okay. I can daydream. I can bear it, inflicting myself on him as little as I can stand, just being in his presence a little bit every day and picturing him in bed every night. Whispering his name into the mouth of every guy I kiss. Seeing him through the eyes of the girl he loves instead of me, and catching the ecstasy in my throat before I scream it loud enough for the whole flat to hear: Kyle, Kyle, only Kyle has my heart and every pumping, gushing part of my body connected to it.

I close my laptop. I take off the maid dress and shorts, and place them in the laundry basket.

CHAPTER 2
PVP ZONE

Nicky

I'm struggling to accept this isn't a dream.

Everything is a twisted version of how it should be, like I stepped on a mirror and fell into a parallel dimension. After all the times I drafted texts, rehearsed short speeches, or even tried to resort to hints—I still haven't had the guts to actually display any of the trans flag pins I ordered—it's Daniel who ended up coming out to me.

Except, he didn't really "come out"—he's a cisgender, heterosexual man, he assures me, just one who's taking oestrogen. For entirely non-sexual, non-gender reasons. I'm pretty sure I heard him use the words "competitive mammogenesis" at one point, and they haven't stopped rattling around my increasingly tender skull ever since.

It's absurd. Nothing about his story makes sense—but there's the box of hormones. Right there, sitting on his desk like it's nothing special. Like trans people all over the country aren't prevented from having what Daniel so casually shows off. One thing's for certain: Daniel did not get that much oestrogen from a fucking clinic. Nor does he give me the impression he had to jump through a great many hoops to secure it, either.

And I just can't think of any reason for him to lie. Not only has he always been pretty bad at it, but Daniel and I have known each other since primary school. The two of us were always by ourselves, quiet and shy and talking about things nobody else was interested in. After a while I learned when to shut up and stop bothering people, for the most part, but Daniel never got a clue. He earned a reputation for his tactlessness, his inability to recognise when his input wasn't wanted, and his obliviousness to being messed with.

Daniel wouldn't have any reason to lie to me about his identity anyway. I'm his closest friend, and if he was actually trans, he'd just tell me so.

Which does leave me in a tough spot. I know firsthand just how horrible dysphoria is, and Daniel seems to think he can subject himself to it willingly, with no adverse effects. Whether that's because of his bizarre bravado or his complete ignorance of trans issues, I can't say.

At the same time, I have an opportunity here. Daniel has access to an institution that's wasting a lot of feminising hormone treatments on cis men willing to harm themselves for money. I can't just ask to borrow a cup—a cis guy wouldn't do that without any incentives, and I have to ensure Daniel keeps thinking I'm a cis guy. He's just made it very clear he doesn't really think about trans women's struggles. If he learns I am one, he's definitely not going to help me sign up.

"Dude, no way!"

Admittedly, he's not really being helpful at the moment, either.

"Come *on*, man!" I'm pacing around Daniel's room, hands on my hips, shaking my head in disbelief. "Why are you being such a wet blanket about this?"

Daniel throws his hands up. "Do you understand what you're asking me to sign you up for, Nicholas?"

"Yeah, I'm asking my bro to cut me in on a sweet deal!"

"No, you are asking your 'bro' to stand idly by while you hurt yourself with back-alley hormones!" Daniel points at his chest—his breasts, rather. "These are like, totally tender and itchy all the time now!"

I would *kill* for my nipples to itch with growing pains. "I can handle a little discomfort, Dan. What, you think I can't take it?"

"I don't think you can." Daniel folds his arms. "Ranked Competitive

Breast Growth requires unwavering mental fortitude. I don't think you quite possess it, Nicholas. Do you even understand the kind of torment you'd be experiencing, watching your body slowly change into a form that is mismatched with your sense of self?"

Yeah, Daniel, I have some experience with that!

"Quit being dramatic and give me the fucking link, Dan." I'm out of patience. "You may not have what it takes to handle a little boobacity, but I can take anything these hormones throw at me!"

Daniel jumps to his feet, his teeth grit and nostrils flared. "You think I can't handle some tit?"

"All I heard from you is a bunch of whining, so yeah!" I puff out my chest. "It's just a bit of fat on your pecs, bro. Maybe *you're* not cut out for this competition without turning into a little baby—"

"It's not just some fat!" Daniel dramatically throws his hood back again. "Observe, Nicholas! My face shape has changed! My very skin has become smoother, softer, the tissue lattice altered at the cellular level! I have started to be seen as a woman more and more, Nicholas—um, despite my best efforts—to the point where people were beginning to comment on my facial hair!"

Listening to Daniel describe all the changes I so desperately want like they're bad things is torture.

The bit about his facial hair, though. Oestrogen doesn't reverse that particular tragedy of male puberty. And while Daniel laments people commenting on his sparse patches of stubble, his actual cheeks and chin look surprisingly smooth.

I reach up to feel his face. "Wait, what facial hair?"

Daniel screeches, batting my hand off. "I was just getting to that! The hormones feminised me so thoroughly, I had no choice but to burn away all traces of my facial hair, lest I invite scrutiny and alarm from others!"

My heart is racing—I don't think Daniel can afford that on his own, which can only mean one thing.

"Did you pay for that yourself?"

"Huh?" Daniel cocks his head to the side. "Well, no, the competition did. Sort of. I provided my insurance information, and they were able to set it up."

These idiots aren't just getting free hormones. They're getting other transition care, too!

"What else are they paying for?" I forget to keep up the cocky dude act, but I have to know.

Daniel waves me off. "What? I don't know. I only looked into what I needed. I think some of the other guys got orchies—I mean, they like, totally cut their balls off because they're nuts—"

The Discord server is arranging orchiectomies for them?!

"—don't you get it? It's a crazy place, and I cannot let you do this to yourself."

This fucking sucks. I am this close to actually being able to access everything I fucking need, and my idiot dude flatmate won't let me because he thinks I'm an idiot dude like him and won't welcome all these changes with open arms.

"No, I get it completely, Dan." I walk up to him, leaning down so I'm at his eye level. "You're scared."

Danel takes a step back and trips, falling into his chair. "That was on purpose! What do you mean I'm scared?"

I walk forward to tower over Daniel and glare at him. "You're scared I'm going to beat you. That's why you don't want me in this race. You know that my tits are going to be banging, broseph!"

Perhaps I've taken things a hair too far. Daniel looks genuinely petrified, shrinking back farther and pulling his knees up to his breasts. My shoulders sag and I open my mouth to apologise, but I'm interrupted by the door swinging open.

"Keep it the hell down!"

We both turn to Kyle glaring daggers at us. I shoot Daniel a panicked glance—how much did Kyle hear?

"Sorry, sorry Kyle." I'm stammering, trying to think of a plausible cover. "We were just talking guild du—"

"You were screaming about growing banging tits while my fiancée is on the phone with her very Christian mother, not two rooms away." Kyle's hands are balled into fists and he's practically hissing. "I would appreciate

not having to explain what RCBG is to her or to anyone important in my life, ever, so kindly *shut the fuck up* and settle your lover's spat some other time."

Daniel's wrapped his arms around his knees again. He practically mumbles into his leggings: "Right, sorry."

"Hold on!" I manage to sputter it out just before Kyle closes the door. "You *know*?"

Kyle rolls his eyes. "Yeah, dude, I know."

"He joined around the same time I did." Daniel probably thinks this additional context is helpful and not utterly destabilising.

My hands are in my hair—this is too much. "Both of you?! Does everyone but me know about RCBG? Is fucking Jeff in the competition too?"

The ensuing silence answers my question well enough.

"Are you all serious?" I cover my mouth with both hands, eyes wide. "You all just kept this from me for how long, exactly?"

"Kept it from you?" Kyle cocks an eyebrow. "Brother, you never leave your room. We don't talk enough for me to need to hide anything from you."

"He does have a point, Nicholas." Daniel says. "Nor are you particularly observant."

"Thank you, best friend." I'm about to tell him there wasn't much for me to observe, when I suddenly get an idea. "Hey Kyle, can I score an invite link to the server?"

"Hm? Oh yeah, sure."

"Thanks, buddy!"

Daniel squawks as I pull out my phone and walk towards Kyle. "Nicholas, wait! Please reconsider! You are being very brash and hasty!"

Kyle looks up from his own phone to snarl at Daniel. "Dan, I swear if you don't stop yelling I'm going to come over there and demonstrate how annoyed I still am about the dishes."

Letting out a squeak of defeat, Daniel pulls his hood down over his eyes and slumps back in his chair.

Kyle texts me the invite link. "It takes a second to get approved. You have to take chest pics and upload them to a private channel. The mods are pretty active around this time."

"Perfect!"

I click the link, awestruck. I'm finally, finally on the track to getting some hormones in my mailbox. After all the dead ends I've been chasing up for nearly two years now.

"Bathroom's free and has a white background, so you can go get the pics sorted." Kyle grabs my arm as I walk past him. "Silently, I trust?"

"You got it, new bestie!" I stick my tongue out at Daniel over my shoulder.

Taking photos of my maddeningly flat chest was harder than it should have been.

They want so many pictures, to such exacting specifications: different angles, different levels of close-up, harsh lighting without shadows. By the time I'm done thoroughly proving that my upper body does not possess even a hint of breast, I'm shaking and on the verge of tears.

No time for that, though. Right after I upload the images, I grab a tape measure and note down a few torso circumferences for the benefit of whoever is screening me.

At least I'm done.

I put my T-shirt back on and leave the bathroom, taking deep breaths to settle my nerves. My phone buzzes before I've even reached my bedroom. I've indeed been approved—I can view the rest of the channels on the server. I open my door with a smile.

"Nicholas, please try to see reason."

I yelp and drop my phone. "Dan, what the fuck!"

Refusing to give it a rest, Daniel is on my bed, sitting cross-legged and pouting heavily. Given that he's still wearing the pink hoodie, it's almost cute, but his continued aggravating behaviour really undercuts that.

"It was foolish and irresponsible of Kaalappan to send you that link," Daniel says. "However, no damage has been done yet, Nicholas. You need not follow through."

I pick my phone up. "Can you just chill the fuck out, man?"

"I cannot! Not when you are so determined to embark on a course of action I can only describe as self-harm!"

This situation is so fucked. Daniel takes everything at face value. He's

going to keep begging me to not "inflict" the feminisation I've craved all my life upon myself, and I can't even tell him why it won't be a problem because then he'll say the competition is for cis men only and get me kicked out!

This is really putting my tolerance of his histrionics to the test.

"Dude, you're really starting to like, crimp my style." I settle down at my desk and open Discord on my PC. "Look, it's totally bro code or whatever of you to try and have my back, but it's getting to be a little emasculating so I'd like you to stop and leave me to it."

"It's emasculating for me to stop you from literally emasculating yourself?"

"Did *you* emasculate yourself, Daniel?" I swivel around to see him with his mouth open, but silent. "Did Kyle, or Jeff?"

Daniel finds his voice after a few seconds. "Jeffrey did not have much masculinity in the first place."

I gesture towards the door. "I don't see you clucking at either of them how they're going to ruin their bodies."

"Because neither of them is my *best friend*, Nicholas!"

That stuns me into silence. I'm somehow both deeply touched and incredibly exasperated.

Daniel sits up on his knees, hunched forward, his eyes big and glistening. "Please Nicholas, I do not want to see you do this to yourself. I understand what it's like to grow into something others want you to be, but that you do not. I would not wish that much agony upon anyone. Except perhaps Jeffrey. Certainly not you. Please, just log off."

He sounds so fucking sincere, I'm almost moved. Too bad I still need my fucking hormones to live.

"Bro, this competition sounds like it's been rough on you, and that sucks but I'll be fine." I return to my screen, searching for the form to fill out for the HRT delivery. "Maybe you should drop out. You kinda sound like you're going through it."

"I have been on this path for nearly a year, Nicholas! You underestimate my resilience." Daniel gets off the bed, hovering by my shoulder like an

overly loquacious gnat. “My voluptuousness may have come at great cost, but I am equipped to bear this massive, curvy burden to the finish line.”

I glance at Daniel’s chest. “Yeah, I’m sure you can carry those burdens just fine.”

The server’s layout isn’t particularly intuitive. There’s a pinned post on the landing channel directing me to guides and information, but regimen advice is not what I need right now. RCBG is also large enough for the typical channel bloat. Many appear to be inactive, likely used once or twice and then left to rot. I see fifteen different types of media discussions but not a single indication of where I’m supposed to submit my freaking insurance details.

A minute of fruitless browsing lands me in the *roles* channel, where I can pick out the colour of my display name and my pronouns. Still no forms.

“Hey, Nicholas.” Daniel points at the pronoun selection prompt. “You should click on ‘she/her.’ As a joke.”

I roll my eyes at him. “Nice try, dude.”

It’s an obvious trap. Despite this, at least a few people seem to have fallen for it, based on the non-zero numbers next to the options that aren’t “he/him.” I pointedly select the only pronouns that won’t get me instantly banned and continue looking.

“I don’t suppose you’ll tell me how to apply for the hormones.”

“No.”

“You’re being a really bad friend.”

“Incorrect. I am being the best friend I can possibly be, as evidenced by my persistence in the face of resistance.”

Instead of trying to respond to that non-logic, I navigate to the *general* channel in the hopes of finding someone who can direct me through the process. Daniel is committed to “protecting” me, and Kyle is probably busy. I briefly entertain the thought of speaking to Jeffrey, then type into the server instead.

Nickname

Hey so I'm new here, and I just wanted to ask where to fill out like my delivery address and insurance details?

Melvin

Welcome! Wdym insurance?

Heir of Breast *replying to* Nickname

Yo, new blood. Fem or boy?

Nickname *replying to* Heir of Breast

I beg your pardon?

Brisket Enjoyer

Oh, you have to weigh in on the blood feud that has split this fair server in twain for generations—aeons, even!

Heir of Breast

Seems like a pretty simple question to me.

Nickname

Okay but I just got here

Chesticle Connoisseur

Yeah and now you have to pledge allegiance to one of the great warring factions.

Brisket Enjoyer

No pressure!

Bridget Is a Femboy

False dichotomy btw. Just saying.

I slowly swivel in my chair to face Daniel, chewing on the inside of my left cheek. "I see the rest of the server is as helpful as you are."

"Whatever do you mean, Nicholas?" Dan has the audacity to actually *bat his eyelashes*, a maddening smirk stretched across his features. "It is a simple binary choice! Pick one to satisfy the denizens, and then proceed with your inquiries."

"It is NOT a simple choice." I jab at the screen with a finger, eyes wide, teeth bared. "This is one hundred percent some kind of trap, like with the pronouns!"

"So select 'boy'."

"That's too obvious!" I bite my thumb, yielding to an old nervous habit and nibbling at the nail. "The choice wasn't 'boy' or 'girl', it was 'boy' or 'fem.' There's nothing about 'fem' that precludes manhood, so what if 'boy' is the wrong choice here? Like it's the overcompensating choice? But then answering 'fem' could just be taken as me saying I'm not a man, and I get banned!"

"Well, that is indeed the crux of the entire debate, yes," Daniel says.

I cock an eyebrow. "Debate, Dan?"

Daniel doesn't look directly at me. He's staring up at the ceiling, his nose twitching, humming to himself louder than he thinks he is. I try not to start tapping my foot while he argues with himself in his head. No doubt his internal monologue has just as many grandiose rhetorical flourishes as his external ones.

Eventually, he nods once and makes eye contact with me again. "Very well, my young pupil. I shall—"

"We're the same age, Dan."

Daniel raises his voice. “I shall impart unto you the lore of the RCBG server and the great conflict that threatens to rock its very foundations!”

I drum my fingers on the edge of my desk and suppress a sigh. “Will that help me get my HRT any faster?”

“No!” Daniel claps his hands together and flashes me a broad grin.

I plop down an elbow and rest my chin on the heel of my hand, steeling myself for one of his meandering screeds. “Go on, then.”

He launches into it with no delay. “Now, Nicholas, as you are aware, there are two types of people on this server.”

“All of this is completely brand new information to me, Daniel.”

As usual, he proceeds as if I said nothing. “Their disagreement stems from differing opinions on optimal RLC strategies, with both factions claiming superior mastery of the metagame.”

“What’s ‘RLC’?”

“Patience, my pupil!” Daniel raises a hand to silence me after I’ve already stopped talking. “‘RLC’, of course, stands for ‘real-life cover.’”

Daniel is not good at explaining things. “Right. Of course. And what that means is?..”

“One of the burdens of competitive mammogenesis is having to explain to your colleagues why you have suddenly sprouted jugs.” Daniel’s tone is matter-of-fact, as though he’s discussing sick notes or traffic delays. “So of course, we have to adopt a *cover*, in *real life*. Hence RLC-strats.”

I scratch the back of my head, frowning. “Wouldn’t you just hide it?”

Admittedly, I haven’t really thought that far ahead yet. I’ve been so preoccupied with learning the right things to say to doctors that I didn’t even have room to consider what I’m going to do once I actually have the bloody E in my hands.

“That is one camp, yes,” Daniel says, bringing me back to the present. “Although, that particular tactic has severe and glaring limitations.”

He punctuates this with an obvious puffing out of his chest, which I choose to ignore.

“So what other option is there, then?” I ask.

Daniel raises himself up to his full height, which isn’t much, pursing his

lips and looking insufferably smug. "Isn't it obvious, my dear Nicholas? You come out as a trans girl."

Complete silence falls up on us for ten painfully awkward seconds.

I say the only thing that feels safe for me to vocalise. "But I'm not a trans girl."

Daniel clicks his tongue and flaps his hands about dismissively. "Yes, obviously, I know that! However, the most convenient rationale for justifying oestrogen use as a cis man is to claim a transfeminine identity, as a cover for the truth."

"Hang on." My head is spinning and there's a sudden ringing in my ears. "This competition is only open to cis men."

"That is correct."

"But in order to take part in this competition, we have to pretend to be trans women?"

"We don't *have* to. That's what the entire argument is about!" Daniel gestures towards my monitor with both hands.

Deflated, defeated by the contradictions Daniel is happily spewing, I turn my attention back to the Discord chat. It can't make any less sense than this conversation.

Heir of Breast

The point is that so-called "femme strats" aren't real. It's not a thing. It's a thinly-veiled pretext that trans girls who have infiltrated this men's space adopt as a flimsy excuse, so they'll be allowed to stay!

Chesticle Connoisseur

Sounds like a bunch of whining from someone who can't pull it off, TBH! :kissy_face:

Bridget is a Femboy

I really hate both of y'all, to be blunt. Trans women have an unfair advantage at this men's sport, because they want the changes HRT gives them and don't have to deal with the dysphoria the male competitors will be saddled with.

Heir of Breast *replying to*Bridget is a Femboy

THANK YOU

Bridget is a Femboy *replying to*Heir of Breast

Shut the fuck up, you "boymoder" troglodytes aren't any fucking better. You people take any sign of feminine behaviour as an excuse to tribunal legitimate male competitors! It's downright homophobic. Just because I like getting railed in a sundress doesn't mean I'm not a man or that I'm not struggling with growing tits, dipshits.

Brisket Enjoyer

I for one am just glad SOMEONE is taking the scourge of trans women invading male spaces seriously!

Then again, reading the chatter on this server for too long feels hazardous. I wrench myself away from the conversation discussing the exact transgression I wish to commit and face Daniel again.

"What does he mean by 'tribunal'?" I gesture towards the transphobic femboy's messages.

The moment I say that, Daniel instantly perks up, eyes twinkling, hands a-flutter, a broad grin bursting past his lips. He practically beams, gazing up at the ceiling as his eyes slightly mist over.

"Why, tribunals are one of the most important mechanics of this sport! You may have gathered that trans women occasionally try to invade and sully the sanctity of this sacred space."

A short pause to regulate my breathing. "Yeah, I got that."

"Tribunals are how we curb such anti-social practices. Anyone can call a tribunal against anyone else, provided they have sufficient evidence that said competitor is not really a man, but a deceptive trans woman seeking access to resources she's not entitled to."

Think fast. I need to sound like a guy who barely knows anything about trans women. "Yeah, I bet trans girls are really good at lying and tricking people."

Daniel's gaze snaps back down at me. He inhales sharply, staring at me slack-jawed. Eventually he closes his mouth, swallows loudly and nods. "Yes, um, of course. I believe that as well, based on all the lying trans women I've seen ejected from the server!"

Breathe. Daniel's already being weird about me signing up. I don't need to give him any more reasons. At the same time, I find I'm almost relieved. I'm so, so glad that I never came out to him. It's not like the topic of trans rights has ever come up between us before, and it's suspicious for a supposedly-cis man to just bring it up unprompted, but now that I know what he really thinks, I'm definitely better off keeping my mouth shut.

Daniel leans in, dropping his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "In fact, Nicholas, you have joined the server at a most tumultuous time! Those who eschew feminine presentation wish to oust everyone who adopts it."

My eyes dart back towards the chat. "Like, literally everyone? There's probably a lot of guys who've, um, used the strat, right?"

"Indeed there are. The entire server has been at war these past few weeks, and it's all coming to a head tonight!" Daniel pauses dramatically before concluding with a flourish: "For the titans of each camp now face each other in a climactic head-to-head! The outcome of their clash decides the very fate and future of every soul in this competition!"

Bemused, I struggle not to smile at Daniel, who is now on his knees, arms spread wide above him, gazing heavenward.

"So they're having, like, a debate?"

It's clear I'm insufficiently impressed for Daniel's liking. He glares at me while he grabs the edge of my desk to hoist himself back up. "*Rhetoric*, Nicholas. That most perfect art of persuasion and reason, honed by its masters to sway our minds through pure logic!"

"I'm not sure what kind of debates you watch, but I don't think there's a lot of logic to them, pure or otherwise." It's fun goading him, watching him get redder with every word. "So you said it's happening tonight, then?"

"Well." Daniel looks at my monitor. "It's actually ongoing. That's why the server is so active, and the voice chat is full—everyone wants to see the first and second place competitors duke it out!"

So it is. I've never seen that many names listed under a voice channel. I scroll for a few seconds, marvelling at how far from the bottom I am.

Daniel shifts his weight from foot to foot, hands clasped. The corners of his lips are twitching slightly, and he's staring at my mouse.

I sigh. "We can watch the debate."

Daniel jumps up a little and squeaks, then clears his throat. "If you'd like to, sure."

My mic and webcam are automatically turned off when I click to join the channel. Only two users out of all the voice-chat participants seem to have the requisite permissions. I throw their video feeds up on my monitor, adjust the speaker volume, and roll my chair back for Daniel's benefit. He settles down in my lap so we can watch together.

The right-hand feed shows me someone dressed in a bulky, almost oversized black jacket over gray joggers. It's March and therefore still technically winter, but the weather's warm enough to make all those layers pretty uncomfortable. The guy must be sweltering. Even so, he's clearly got an impressive pair of breasts, which is not something I ever thought I'd notice in a man. The contestant—*isaacahedron*—is leaning forward, elbows on his desk, his chin resting on his interlaced fingers. His thick square glasses reflect the brightness of his monitor and obscure his eyes so well, he has to have practiced the perfect angle to achieve that effect. His hair is sandy-blonde, cropped short everywhere but the front, and glistening with enough product to keep it spiky. He's the one currently speaking.

"I now request the mods to submit into evidence the *Archive Of Our Own* link from my dossier." His sentence is punctuated by a soft ping as the voice-chat's text channel is updated. "Do you deny that this is your account, linked many times on your public-facing social media, by you, claiming credit for the myriad stories it has authored?"

The other one laughs, voice high and haughty and clear as church bells. A sharp trill that leaves me breathless.

I didn't know that someone who was born a boy could sound like that.

"My dear Izzy, I'm touched! You never told me you were such a fan."

Her username—it feels wrong to use any pronouns other than "her"—is simply "Laura." No too-clever-by-half joke, no pun or reference or pretence, just "Laura." I haven't been looking at her earlier, but now that my eyes have settled on her, it's impossible to look anywhere else.

She seems composed entirely of straight lines intersecting at sharp angles, a vivid portrait painted with mathematical precision. Laura does not sit, she *lounges*, reposing on my screen with an easy, catlike grace. Her prominent collarbones and shoulders are entirely bare. Only her voluptuous, voluminous breasts are covered—barely—by a crimson halter top that just about succeeds in constraining them. Long, straight black hair falls across her arms, luscious and shining, and her lips are done up to match her top. Her leering smile is an unsightly gash upon her otherwise perfectly serene face. Laura is of East Asian descent, I think, though her accent is hard to place, concealing hints of British in a lilting, hypnotic drawl.

"My name is *Isaac*." Isaac breaks Laura's spell momentarily, glaring at his camera lens. "I will once again remind you to cease with this childish appellation."

"That's not what you said last night." Laura winks, and Isaac actually blushes.

"As I said, enough with the juvenile displays!" Isaac loudly clears his throat. "I suggest you focus on the matter at hand."

Laura waves him off. "What matter? You've submitted a link I happily promote on my own socials. How damning."

"Let the record reflect that the accused does not deny her authorship of these stories."

Laura groans. "Sweetie, this isn't a courtroom."

I can't stay silent anymore. I tap Daniel on the shoulder. "So, about Laura."

When Daniel turns his head, his eyes are brimming with tears. "What about Laura?"

"So..." I hesitate to say *he*. "Laura is... a man?"

"Yes."

"Laura is a man doing... femme strats, you called it."

"Exactly!" Daniel turns back to stare at her again. "Isn't she brilliant?"

She's definitely something, though I'm not sure I have the ability to discern what. Could someone who looks like her really be a man? I can't believe Laura.

Katherine

I can't believe Laura.

That someone like her not only exists, but does so within the competition, is nothing short of miraculous. She is a visionary. A pioneer, a trailblazer to whom many in Ranked Competitive Breast Growth owe their undying gratitude. There is no doubt in my mind that Laura is a trans woman. It's obvious to anyone who knows what to look for. She is not merely a trans woman, however, but a trans woman at the very top of the ladder, the unquestioned reigning champion and queen of this sport. A woman dominating a men's field. Laura joined a little over two years ago and has, at every turn, managed to withstand tribunal after tribunal and accusation after accusation, despite living as a woman proudly, openly, and unapologetically. She is an inspiration to girls everywhere, but especially the ones on this server.

I wish I could do what she does. I wish I could be like her.

Izzy is left sputtering in response to Laura's masterful jibe. "I am not a fan of anything you do, say, or write, *sis*. I have simply familiarised myself with your online profile so I can summarise it for this server, which includes your lurid attempts at fiction."

"And did you have a good time?" Laura winks.

"I—no—irrelevant!" Izzy's actually sweating now, though that might just be because he's wearing too much clothing. "The point—which you keep trying to distract us from—is that you've written no less than a dozen stories about characters from decidedly queer media. You've reinterpreted them as trans women, and written everything from romance to coming-out narratives. What do you have to say to that?"

Laura spreads her arms wide. "Men write fiction."

"That's it?" Izzy is speaking through clenched teeth. "That's all you have?"

Laura arches her eyebrows. "What else do I need? Gender is a fascinating subject. Not only does every man in this competition have a unique perspective on it, but he has a more enlightened, three-dimensional view than most, including trans women. We understand what it is to be transfeminised without surrendering our manhood! We are assured of our manhood even when those who gaze upon us are not! We are, dare I say it, more men than any man who has not tested the mettle of his gender in the fires we forge ours in! So yes, Izzy, I've written fiction about trans women. I intend to teach them what we know. Impart that wretched lot with as much faith in their womanhood as we have in our manhood."

I couldn't help it. I actually gasped. The conviction, the skill, the mastery of both philosophy and oratory—Laura is everything a trans woman dreams of being.

Kyle

Laura is everything a trans woman dreams of being.

Against my better judgement, I'm watching the live streamed debate. I have it up on my phone with my earphones plugged in, and I'm telling myself that I'm only half paying attention while I wrap up a problem set that's due at midnight. But of course, Laura's taking up more of my bandwidth than she rightfully should. I've been stuck on the same problem for fifteen minutes now.

CHAPTER 2

Being active on the RCBG Discord is, generally speaking, a bad idea. "Competitive breast growing" is ultimately a pretty passive activity, so the only thing making your presence known achieves is painting a target on your back. One of the reasons Laura is so calm and unbothered by the tribunal proceedings is that she's been through them dozens of times before—though usually she's the one initiating them. RCBG knows well that its queen sits atop a throne of skulls, prowling the channels for any errant participant who gives away a little too much during conversations.

And yet… where else am I supposed to talk about any of this? Where else am I supposed to share in the anxieties of increasingly obvious feminisation, even as my pathetic breast buds refuse to round out? RCBG may be a hostile environment reeking of masculine bravado, but at least it's a place full of people going through the same thing I am.

So I lurk, mostly, on occasion adding my two cents. I try my best to keep my head down, not draw too much attention. I shouldn't see the server as a social space, and I ignore its inner workings and culture.

Laura is hard to ignore, though.

"Are you actually saying that you're writing stories about trans women *because* you're a man?" Izzy—that's what Laura calls him, I don't know his name—is sputtering, face flushed.

"Who better than a man to write about women?" Laura grins. "It's not like they're very good at it."

It's not because she's pretty. Pretty girls are a dime a dozen, and I'm engaged to a gorgeous one. There's just something very brazen about Laura. The way she inserts herself into all the conversations on the server, even when she isn't online—if Laura's not around, everyone's still talking about Laura. The way she positions herself as some kind of expert on hormones and "strategies," when the only thing she did was take oestrogen and get fucking lucky. The way she regularly drops selfies, flaunting her lead on us, showing off a body that so many of us would kill for but just can't get no matter how many adjustments to our regimen we make.

I shouldn't look. I shouldn't look at her pretty pictures or read her stupid guides or pay the slightest attention to her ludicrous circus act.

But I can't look away.

"Nothing you said actually refutes the allegations," Izzy says, practically hissing.

Laura slams her palm on her desk. "Nothing *you* said actually presented a strong case for your allegations! Men write women. That doesn't make me one, any more than having long hair or huge tits does."

I think I hate Laura.

Jeff

I think I hate Laura. She's so *bad!*

I'm sitting on the bed in a fresh pair of shorts, hunching over my phone, headphones on and turned all the way up. Laura's utterly demolished this ignorant, narrow-minded, masc-supremacist little twerp, whose choice in hoodies is as atrocious as his haircare routine.

"You actively, publicly identify as a trans woman!" Izzy is yelling, because raised voices are the last refuge of silly men who don't get their way.

"Yeah. That's my real-life cover. Hello?" Laura cocks her head at Izzy's sheer stupidity. "It's literally how I explain my choice to take HRT without being interrogated about it."

Izzy is fuming SO impotently. "You can execute your RLC without actively participating in transfem communities!"

"You *can*, but I choose not to in order to make my RLC more convincing, and also to stay up-to-date on the HRT metagame." Laura preens, idly brushing a strand of hair off her shoulder with the back of one hand. "I'm always thinking about the competition and how to wring out any advantage I can, honey. Which explains why I'm right on top of you."

Laura winks, and I have to suppress the urge to snap my fingers at an empty room.

I really feel for her decision to hide her manhood from her online friends. It's just so much easier to come out as a woman than it is to explain the complexity of your identity and the nuances of queer existence. Everyone celebrates trans women embracing femininity, but no one lets men simply

be feminine anymore. We're all expected to fit into these neat little boxes and binaries. We're told we're just girls in denial, that it's only a matter of time before we come out.

The presumption and the sheer gall sicken me!

That's why Laura makes me happy. She's so sharp and incisive and quick to correct everyone's outmoded ideas about gender and manhood. I mean, she *does* also make me want to pull her hair and kick her in the shin for being that pretty—but that's only natural. No one's doing it like her! If only I was lucky enough to be born with her genetic affinity for the feminine; instead, I'm a grossly pale square.

I do my best to be content with watching and learning from a legend, but it's hard sometimes. Everything I want, Laura already has.

Nicky

Everything I want, Laura already has.

That's the most maddening thing about her.

It's obvious that Laura is a trans woman, or close enough that it doesn't matter. She's out online as a trans woman, writes fan-fiction about trans women, and she's definitely seen as a woman by every stranger who meets her. A hot woman, at that.

And she's wasting it all on *this*.

"So what are you saying?" Isaac's just screaming into the mic now, seemingly at his wits' end. "Despite everything about how you look and behave and live your life, you're still a man? That's the conclusion we must come to?"

"What is a man?" Laura asks. "Is a man defined only by what he does? Must a man build fences? Paint houses? Go to war? Have a penis? Surely, you would never assert something so transphobic?"

Isaac squawks in outrage. "I am not transphobic in the slightest!"

"Despite everything you've said professing a strict belief in gender roles?" Laura cackles while Isaac fruitlessly continues to object. "Face it, my dear Izzy. You aim to judge me through outmoded strictures and traditions

that I am not constrained by. My clothes, my endocrinal profile, my body or genitalia—none of that determines whether I am or am not a man! The only thing, the only one who can determine that? Is me. And I am not simply a man, but a better man than any of you have a hope of ever being."

She is so fucking full of it.

Daniel, meanwhile, has been practically moved to tears. "She's so correct. She's so brave. She's really setting the standard for men everywhere!"

It's no wonder Daniel's so taken with this drivel. He's never had to think about his gender before. He's never had to confront, for years on end, the agony of seeing your body slowly morph into a vehicle it physically hurts to inhabit. He needs to cling to Laura's contradictory nonsense and too-clever excuses because he has no other way of coping. Most guys feel too insecure to order fruity cocktails, while Daniel is on full-on feminising HRT. Believing that asserting his manhood is enough is all he's got.

Well, I, for one, am not entertained by Laura's edgy debate bro cosplay. Asserting my womanhood is well and good, but I need the bloody hormones to live. I wish I could get back to trawling the server for the forms I still need to fill out, but Daniel's too engrossed in Laura's theatrics. I tune it out while idly stroking Dan's hair. The charade of a debate finally ends after an interminable amount of time, when Daniel finally turns around with a giddy look on his face.

"What an expert dismantling of stereotypes!" Daniel's doing his excited hand-flaps above his head, so as not to accidentally slap me, as he has in the past. "Wasn't it just a masterclass?"

"Yeah, totes." I've been so bored that it's a genuine effort to recall words with more than one syllable. "Leg's kinda falling asleep, man."

"Hm? Oh, sorry!"

Daniel hops off and I massage my thighs. I'm about to stand up and stretch myself when I get a DM notification.

Brisket Enjoyer

Hey, heard you were looking for these links. Kickoff is in a week and I'm not sure how long it takes for the hormones to deliver, so fill these out ASAP. Otherwise you'll be stuck waiting until the next quarter!

Nickname

Oh fuck, thank you so much!!! I'll get these filled out tonight!

Brisket Enjoyer

No problem, girliepop ;P May the best man win and all that.

Brisket Enjoyer must be a fellow trans girl. That or it's just my bias speaking, because I'm overwhelmed with gratitude and joy. I open the first form right away and start filling out my delivery address.

"Nicholas, don't!"

"Oh, crawl out of my ass!"

Baffled, exasperated, and most of all *furious*, I look up at Daniel as he swivels my chair around, forcing me to face him.

"Nicholas, you don't know what you're doing!" Daniel literally seizes my shoulders and shakes me. "The financial incentives are going to make you act against your own best interests!"

I've had enough. I push Daniel away as hard as I can. He squeals, stumbling backwards with his arms windmilling wildly, and crumples onto my bed. I rise to my feet and bear down on him, fists clenched, breathing heavily.

"DUDE." I shout at the top of my lungs.

"Nicholas—"

"STOP SAYING MY NAME! Just shut the fuck up and leave me alone, man! What is your fucking problem?!"

CHAPTER 3
EVASIVE MANOEUVRES

Kyle

There's a knock on my door partway through Laura's umpteenth diatribe about her unassailable manhood. I quickly lock my phone screen and begin putting my homework away before I call out:

"Come on in."

Rupali and Jeff enter as I get up from my desk. Jeff flashes me an awkward smile, which I don't reciprocate, and begins rifling through the pile of crafts on my bed. Rupali hugs me again.

"It's handled." She smiles up at me with her chin on my chest.

I laugh and rub the back of my head, keeping my hands carefully away from her. "I didn't doubt it."

Any other guy in my position would feel lucky.

I do feel lucky. Rupali's an angel, a beauty without peer, a balm on my wounds and stresses. A breath of fresh air I wish I could inhale and keep in my lungs forever. She lightens my burdens, brightens my days, and sets my heart on fire with both the warmth and mischief in her eyes. She's perfect for me in every way, and I was given her hand in marriage when I wasn't yet a teenager.

Which goes to show just how cruel fate is.

I daydream about it sometimes. About a world where Rupali wasn't promised to me, yet another family heirloom for me to inherit. A world where I just happened to meet her on the playground, or at school, or at maybe the library while running late for my next class, stopping dead at the sight of her disarming smile. I'd work up the nerve to talk to her, barely managing to get the words out. She'd laugh and be charmed anyway because tongue-tied dorks are her type.

But I have to live in this world instead, where our fathers are business partners. Where our match was predetermined as much by familial ties as by what's written in the stars. Where I'm the reason that Ru never even considered the possibility of going to proms and dances with anyone else, or wondered who might have a crush on her, or got to be with someone who wasn't foisted upon her.

She's a nice girl. A really nice girl. Always has kind things to say about me, and gets through the time we have to spend together with a chipper attitude. Our parents certainly check up on us enough to make the idea of giving her more space unfeasible. So I do my best to keep it short, keep my hands to myself, and be as helpful as I can. Sometimes we actually watch movies and shows to make our stories more believable, but I mostly just do homework and club stuff with her. It's the least I can do.

"So, the handles?"

"Hm?" I return to the present and take the bundle of dowels Rupali hands me. "Yeah, sure, I can wrap the handles."

"Thanks a bunch." Rupali picks up the electric tape for me, since my hands are now full. "I figured you'd be better off doing that while Jeff and I figured out what to put on the actual signs."

"Good call."

I start to turn around, but something about Rupali's demeanour makes me hesitate. She's fiddling with the roll of electric tape and shifting from foot to foot with a strange expression on her face.

"Forgetting something?" I ask.

"Oh, no, no, it's not that." She's tapping the tape against her chin and

peering up at my face. “I’m really sorry that you got caught managing our mothers’ overactive imaginations.”

My cheeks grow hot again. “Ru, really, it’s fine.”

She shrugs. “I did what I could, but I do get the feeling from mummy’s giggling that they still doubt our chastity.”

My heart sinks. “Oh no. What do we do? How angry are they?”

Ru quirks an eyebrow. “Kaal, they’re not angry.”

“They’re… not?” I cock my head to the side. “So then, they bought it, right?”

“Oh, my sweet innocent boy.” Ru smirks, reaching up to pat the top of my head. “They didn’t buy it, but they’re not mad either.”

That contradicts literally everything I was raised to believe. “I don’t know, amma was really reading me the riot act earlier.”

“Kaal, Jaya auntie was trying to embarrass you. On purpose.”

“Oh.”

Rupali’s tittering laughter rings in my ears. She places a hand on my exposed tricep, running her fingers up to where my sleeve begins, then down to my elbow.

“Have you always been this strong?”

Rupali’s voice is strange now, too. Her tone is seemingly innocent, yet full of meaning. I can’t figure out what she’s trying to say.

I clear my throat loudly. “I just do a lot of cleaning, I think.”

Her hand drifts again. She places her palm on my chest. “Right.”

She’s never gazed so intently into my eyes.

“It’s a shame, isn’t it?” she asks suddenly.

“What is?”

“Our mums think we’re living in sin, when we’ve been so, so good.”

I become aware of a large bead of sweat dripping down my temple. “Yeah. Yeah. Kind of sucks, honestly, that they don’t trust us.”

“When we’ve done absolutely nothing to betray that trust.” Rupali shakes her head, her gaze still fixed on my face. “Nothing at all.”

I don’t know how to respond. I settle for chuckling slightly, while Rupali continues to snicker.

"It's like we're getting all the doubt, the ribbing, the disappointment, but with none of the benefits."

I swallow. My throat is so dry. "Benefits?"

Rupali doesn't elaborate. Her eyes bore into mine. Are her fingers digging into me? Is she trying to grasp my heart through my ribs? Can she feel how hard it's pounding, like it's trying to burst right out of my chest?

After what seems like an eternity, Rupali throws her head back and laughs. Her hand slides off me, and she takes a step back. I inhale—I stopped breathing for a bit.

"Poor baby!" Rupali covers her mouth, practically cackling. "You look so scandalised, Kaal."

I make a rasping sound with my throat that I try to play off as an awkward laugh. "Ha, no, I knew you were joking."

"Mm hmm." Rupali winks at me. "I'd never take advantage of a good, sanskaari boy like you."

"Ha-ha."

Still wheezing, she pats me on the shoulder, then hurries past me. "Thanks for getting started, Jeff! Sorry, was just having a word with my fiancé."

I remain a bit longer, trying to gather my wits. The dowels aren't that heavy, but my arms hurt from how long I've just been standing here carrying them. I hoist the bundle up onto one shoulder and finally exit my room, closing the door behind me.

Jeff and Rupali are sitting on opposite ends of the dinner table, scrawling slogans onto poster board. I ignore Jeff's clumsy little wave and settle down between them, grabbing the electric tape and getting to work.

"We uh, won't be attaching the handles to signs right now," Jeff says. "It'd make the signs harder to store, and—"

"Thank you, Jeff, I got that." I don't even look up from wrapping the dowel.

"Right! Well, thanks again for helping."

I shoot him a little sidelong glance. "Yeah, I love helping *my girlfriend*."

Predictably, he deflates. "Of—of course. You're an excellent partner."

I shake my head, suppressing the urge to chortle at his pathetic wilting. Does he think he's fooling anyone? With those droopy, sad eyes and that

adorable little pout? He may as well stamp his feet and whine, "Kyley-poo, why don't you like me?" in his annoyingly high-pitched drawl.

I do feel bad for him. Well, a part of me does. I'd have to be heartless not to recognise the tragedy of his situation. It must suck for him to fall so head over heels for his very engaged, very heterosexual, very foreign flatmate.

For me, though, it's really quite entertaining.

I know I shouldn't mess with him like I do, but it's just so fun. He always looks so crestfallen, so mortified when I pounce on his latest faux pas and twist the knife just enough to make him whimper. I know I shouldn't. But that doesn't change the fact I do get a sick little thrill out of watching him try to keep a tear from staining the message he's so carefully scrawling on the sign. Almost makes me want to pinch his cheeks.

Sometimes I wonder what he expects will happen between us if he keeps holding on to that torch for dear life. Does he think I'll just grab him by the shoulders and slam him into the wall one fine day, when I've finally had enough of my accursed arranged-married life? Stroke his soft, pale cheeks, perhaps? Look deep into his eyes and tell him how the only thing that can set me free from my miserable, traditional, cloistered existence is kissing a clueless white boy?

Yes, Jeff, I've always dreamed of throwing it all away. I'll leave my beautiful wife, scorn my unaccepting family, and defy the most sacred strictures of my community and culture for someone who can't pronounce my name.

"Rupali, could you pass the blue?" Jeff asks, practically squeaking.

"I've got it." I pick it up and hand it to him, making sure our fingers touch for just a second too long.

His eyes go haywire, darting between the bottle and my face. I give him a wide, toothless smile and go back to my dowels. That should keep him up tonight.

I suppose it is nice in one way, at least. Though he's far from my type, Jeff's attentions do assure me there's at least one person in the whole wide world who's into me without my family forcing them to be.

I'm almost out of handles to wrap. I'm about to turn to Rupali and ask if there's another bundle I should grab, when a loud scream makes all three of us start.

"What the FUCK is your problem, man?"

"Oh my gosh!" Rupali stares past me. "Was that Nicky?"

Shit.

While I don't know exactly why Nicky is losing his mind at Daniel yet again, I do know what the married couple has been bickering about all evening. And right now, I'd rather risk letting them strangle each other into a blissful, permanent silence than let Rupali anywhere near Nicky's room.

Unfortunately, Rupali has ideas of her own. She has an affinity for pathetic basket cases, and my shyest flatmate who barely talks or leaves his room has been an object of morbid curiosity for quite some time now. The fact that Nicky is actually yelling has her out of her seat faster than I can turn back around and start making excuses.

"Wow, they're really going at it!" Rupali says, sailing right past me before I can even come up with something.

"I fucking wish," I mutter under my breath. I rush after my fiancée and tell a still-stunned Jeff: "Stay here and don't say a word."

He awkwardly gives me a thumbs-up.

By the time I enter Nicky's trash heap of a bedroom, everything is chaos. Daniel is on the bed, sitting up straight on his knees and screaming in Nicky's face, while Nicky stands right in front of him, both of them gesturing wildly. I'm not really trying to listen to their nattering, but I gather that every third word is some synonym for "breast." Rupali has placed a hand on each of their shoulders, trying to interject and pry them gently apart. Worst of all, Nicky's giant desktop monitor has Discord open, proudly displaying the RCBG server and its various channels and conversations. I hurriedly stand in front of it.

"Okay, that's enough, please?"

Rupali finally gets through to the squabbling idiots, separating them. Nicky steps back with his arms folded. Daniel settles down on his haunches.

"He started it," Daniel mumbles like a moody child, and I don't say that I wish he finished it too.

"Started what?" Rupali looks between them both. "Can someone explain what's going on here?"

Since I'm behind my fiancée, I give Nicky my most emphatic "Do Not Fuck This Up" death glare. Luckily for him, he catches it. His expression morphs from a petulant sneer to one more appropriately chastised, which I hope means he'll actually say something not completely stupid.

"Well, you see." Nicky takes a deep breath, then throws his hands up. "Surprise, Rupali, I'm trans!"

I'm going to murder him.

Daniel is frozen, his eyes wide and jaw hanging open. Rupali blinks rapidly, angling her head towards Nicky like she didn't catch what he said.

"I'm sorry, did you say that you're trans?" she asks.

"Yep!" Nicky nods profusely. "I'm tired of not living my truth. I'm trans, I'm a woman, and my name is, uh, Nichole!"

If he wants to sell this bit, could he at least have picked a name that's not just the feminised version of his?

"All right." Rupali turns around to glance at me, her eyebrows arched. I flash her a big toothy grin and two thumbs-up, like that clarifies anything, making sure to cover as much of Nicky's screen as I can. Shaking her head, Rupali turns back to Nicky with a frown.

"So why were you two yelling?" she asks.

"Oh, that!" Nicky looks up at the ceiling, then down at the floor—anywhere but Rupali. "See that was because—well, I came out to Daniel, and he didn't take it well."

"What?" Rupali, Daniel and I all say it at the same time, in vastly different tones. I have no idea where the fuck Nicky's going with this, but at least Rupali seems to be taking him at his word, shooting a horrified look at Daniel.

Nicky presses on. "Yeah, no, he just kept telling me not to bother, because… because my tits just wouldn't be banging, he said."

"Excuse me?!" Daniel springs back up on the bed.

"You're not excused!" Nicky places a hand on his chest and looks at Daniel with a sniffle. "That was a very hurtful and transphobic thing to say to me, bro!"

I don't understand why Nicky insists on keeping the silly frat bro cadence while trying to convince my fiancée he's a trans woman, but I do see the

logic. He's going on oestrogen soon anyway, and I guess he can do that "real life cover" thing. An argument over "coming out" cleanly explains what they were yelling about and why, and should cover all our bases so long as Daniel catches on. I almost breathe a sigh of relief.

Daniel does not catch on.

He leaps to his feet, still on top of the bed. "How dare you impugn my honour! I rebuff your vile accusations and in turn levy charges of my own. For you see, Nichole, I too am a trans woman!"

He rips off his pink hoodie and tosses it aside. It lands on my face.

"Behold my true form!" Daniel puffs out his mediocre bust while I swat his sweaty clothes off me. "I present to you a fully oestrogenised body, a testament to my identity and character which proves beyond a shadow of a doubt who the transmisogynist here is. I am Katherine, she/her, which means that Nichole has been misgendering and deadnaming me this whole time!"

Daniel—apparently having put more thought into the cover name than Nicky—strikes a triumphant pose, hands on hips, nose held high.

Nicky responds with a click of the tongue and a roll of the eyes.

"Um, girliepop, you like *just* came out. So I've been respecting your stated identity the whole time. Nice try."

"But you can't accuse me of transphobia when I'm clearly trans!"

Nicky tuts again. "Internalised transphobia is a thing. Plus, wow, implying my identity is any less valid because I haven't started hormones yet? That's pretty bigoted."

A sudden clap of Rupali's hands stuns them into silence.

"Okay. Everyone stop trying to call each other transphobic," she says. "Katherine, please step down from the bed."

Katherine—easier to just call her that if I'm going to keep the ruse up in front of Rupali—obeys and carefully descends, her eyes low and shoulders drooping.

"So this is clearly a pretty emotionally charged moment." Rupali pats them both on the shoulder as they refuse to look at each other. "I remember how much of a mess my best friend was when she told me."

Right, this old story. While Rupali's busy regaling the two morons, I discreetly turn around and log out of Discord. I then quit the application and

initiate shutdown on the computer for good measure. As soon as I'm done, I give Nicky—Nichole now, I guess—a covert nod, which she returns.

"I guess what I'm trying to say is, I have some experience with this. I've seen how scary it can be and how much people need support when going through it." Rupali pauses, her voice trembling. "I'll try to help however I can, okay?"

Nichole is actually sniffling a little, which is really helping to sell this. Thank God, she managed to pull through after all.

"Rupali, I don't know what to say. Thank you for saying that and I hope you understand how much it means to me."

She pulls Rupali into a hug.

"To us!" Katherine stays clear from the physical contact—she's kind of particular about who's allowed to touch her. "We appreciate your kind words."

"Of course." Rupali steps back and smiles at them. "Look, there's going to be people who tell you how sudden this is, or ask you to prove your identity to them, and just—fuck those people, okay? Don't justify yourselves to anyone, and don't hesitate to reach out to me if you need."

"I definitely won't." Nichole is still holding my fiancée's hands. I'm not sure how I feel about that, but they're clearly having a moment—and avoiding the topic of RCBG, so I guess it's fine.

Rupali beams. "I'm glad to hear it. Maybe I'll even see you at the GSA sometime, or at one of the protests against the uni policy changes."

"Yeah, maybe!" I finally feel safe saying something. "Ru, why don't you get back to the signs with Jeff? I'll just have a word with my flatmates about the dishes and rejoin you all in a minute."

Once the door closes behind Ru, Kathy decides she hasn't pissed me off enough today and opens her stupid mouth.

"You know, Kaalappan, now is perhaps not the most appropriate time to revisit the domestic labour rota—"

"Shut the fuck up, *Kathy*." I glower at her. "And *Nichole*. Didn't I tell you two to keep it down? And that I specifically did not want my fiancée to catch wind of any of this bullshit?"

"Well, I was trying to sign up, but—"

I shut Nichole up with a glare too.

"I literally don't care," I say. "You two geniuses came out to my girlfriend as trans women."

"Sorry," Nichole says, looking at the floor.

"It doesn't matter if you're sorry. What matters is consistency." I take a step closer to the pair. "From now on, I'm calling you Kathy and Nichole. 'She' and 'her' pronouns all day. No breaks, no exceptions, no slip-ups. Am I clear? Am I understood?"

Katherine and Nichole exchange a glance.

"Sure," Katherine says.

Nichole nods. "If you insist."

VERDICT ON THE TRIBUNAL BETWEEN USERS “LAURA” AND “ISAACAHEDRON”

Trickster’s Tatas

@everyone

Trickster’s Tatas

Official Verdict on Tribunal 293-J

Trickster’s Tatas

Decision presided over by democratically-elected jury comprising myself, @Bench Press Meta 2025, @BigTittyFemboy, @Heir of Breast and @WizardsBigNaturals

Trickster’s Tatas

Tribunal 293-J is the latest in a string of tribunals between @**Laura** and @**isaacahedron**, respectively rank 1 and rank 2 on the leaderboards, all initiated by Isaac. While nothing in the competition’s rules technically prevents Isaac from initiating like a dozen tribunals in a row with “fresh” evidence every single time, it’s pretty obvious to the jury that Isaac basically already has all the evidence compiled and just keeps digging through Laura’s socials for new pretexts to instigate as many tribunals as is needed to knock number 1 out of the running.

Trickster’s Tatas

Now, while knockouts have become a proud tradition of this roughly two-and-something year old sport, this server is about competitive *mammogenesis*, not competitive debate. We feel pretty safe saying that while constant attempts to discredit a competitor’s male identity is *legal*, it is not *sporting*. Frankly, if Isaac was going to knock Laura out, he’s had more than enough chances. The “boymoder v/s femme strats” debate between them —and the proxy debates between server users who follow their respective examples—is getting pretty fucking stale too.

Trickster’s Tatas

Therefore, the jury’s latest verdict is: enough of that. Laura and Isaac have had their online histories and offline lives pored over endlessly. They have been timed out from tribunal participation for at least six months.

Trickster's Tatas

Some users—such as me! Outvoted 4-1!—might consider this unfair, and it kind of is, because it effectively gives them both immunity. The jury's rationale here is: if it was going to happen, one of these two would have done it.

Trickster's Tatas

Show's over, folks. If anyone feels strongly about their tribunal timeout, you're welcome to exercise the nuclear option against either contestant.

Trickster's Tatas

Also, we're introducing a new rule: participants will be more heavily penalised for clearly using tribunal proceedings to flirt with each other.

Trickster's Tatas

Signed, Trickster's Tatas (Rank 3 on leaderboard)

CHAPTER 4
STAY ON TARGET

Kyle

After a week of storing the supplies in my and Jeff's rooms, we can get them ready for the bus. Jeff and Rupali tie the thick stacks of sloganeering poster board together with twine, wrap them up in clear plastic and fashion straps to sling the lot across their backs. I take care of the handles for the signs, hoisting the two bundles onto my shoulders, and Rupali puts the tape in her purse.

We walk to the bus stop with our burdens, sweating in the midday sun despite the slight nip in the air. The bus we're waiting for only runs every forty minutes or so, and takes a circuitous path winding through the outskirts of campus to our destination. From there, we'll have to walk for at least ten more minutes to the greens in front of the main admin buildings and assemble the signs in the open.

Rupali and Jeff talk for the whole bus ride. I'm not really listening. I sit silently in the row behind them, taking up both seats with how much I'm carrying, and stare out the window. Sheets of clear ice and piles of muddy slush dot the landscape, marring the dewy grasses with a frosty hangover.

The trees are starting to grow back their leaves, and the clouds are getting less gray by the day.

I'm not looking forward to what I have to do when we get off.

"Oh, we're next!"

Jeff helpfully hits the "stop" button and picks his stack up off the floor. Rupali follows suit. We skid to a halt in under two minutes and make our way out as quickly as we can.

The three of us disembark onto a soggy pavement, desperately trying not to lose balance. The walk ahead of us looks pretty slippery and miserable, which almost makes me waver. I don't exactly have a choice in the matter, though.

So as the bus trundles away, I carefully step towards the empty bus stop, even as Jeff and Rupali begin walking in the other direction. I set the bundles down, leaning them against the bench.

"Kaal?" Rupali calls my name from a few feet away. "Honey, it's this way."

I straighten up to face her. "Yeah, I know. Sorry, I'm going to have to take my leave."

By now Jeff's also caught on. He's a bit further along, but he stops in his tracks and puts the posters down to turn and look at me. An audience makes this so much more awkward, but I ignore him. It's only Jeff.

"Take your leave?" Rupali sounds astonished.

I wince at her tone. "I know it's not ideal, but you both have your hands free, right? You should be able to grab a bundle each and make your way—"

"Are you fucking serious right now?"

Rupali also shrugs the posters off her shoulder, fretting at me with her hands on her hips. I grit my teeth and take a deep breath.

"I'm aware it's not ideal. I really wish I didn't have to, but I have a make-up lab that I can't reschedule—"

"Bull. Fucking. Shit."

"Okay, will you stop interrupting me?" I find myself glaring at Rupali and abruptly lower my gaze. I take a step forward with my arms wide. "I'm just—"

"You won't even say her name."

I throw my hands up with a cry of frustration. "Whose name, Rupali? I don't know what you're talking about."

"Why do you treat her like this?" Rupali's voice is loud, accusatory. It cuts right through me.

She's never spoken to me like this before.

I look at a snowbank on the side of the road. "Treat who, like what?"

"She was your friend too, Kaal."

"Rupali, I really need to get to my lab on time—"

Ru stands in front of me, so I can't avoid seeing how her eyes are full of tears. "Tahani is like my sister, Kaal. And you're just going to keep refusing to acknowledge her existence?"

"No, yeah, she definitely exists!" I raise a hand to massage my throbbing temple. "Do I need to acknowledge it, Rupali, when you're busy acknowledging her existence enough for the both of us put together?"

She steps back, eyes wide, tears flowing now. "I beg your fucking pardon, Kaal?"

"And I pardon you!" I point towards the direction of the admin buildings. "But if anyone finds out what you're up to on the weekends, Ru, when you're supposed to be watching movies and holding hands with me, you'll find there's not much pardoning to go around!"

Rupali sets her jaw. Her voice drops, low and cold. "Did you just threaten me, Kaal?"

Unbelievable. I grab fistfuls of my hair and struggle to not tear it out. "No! Of course not!"

"It sure sounded like you did!" Rupali gets louder too. "It sure sounded like you were reminding me of what mummy and Jaya auntie and everyone else thinks of Tahani, like I don't already know! Like I'm not intimately fucking familiar with it, like I didn't have to listen to my elders call Tahani all sorts of things I can never unhear, like I don't know the depth of my own family's hatred for my best friend! You think you're telling me anything I haven't considered, Kaalappan? Do you think you have to remind me how backwards our families are? How badly they treated Aparna auntie and Tahani?"

"How they'll treat *us*!" I'm shouting at the top of my lungs now. I can't stop. I need to get through to my dense, dense fiancée. "Appa would belt me half to death for even knowing what 'GSA' stands for, and here you are at

protests marching for free transition and holding hands with the exile. *One* of us still has to maintain a fucking modicum of caution here!"

Ru wipes the tears from her cheeks. It's hard to look her in the eyes.

"I see. You treat Tahani like she's untouchable out of the goodness of your heart. Because you're so magnanimous and practical-minded and generously allowing me to engage in frivolous activities like advocating for my best friend's rights."

"I can't allow or disallow you to do anything." *Unfortunately for the both of us*, I don't say. "But I guess helping you hide this from our parents means nothing now, because I won't sit down for tea with the both of you."

"Jaya auntie won't be notified if you say Tahani's name, Kaal!" Rupali jabs a finger in my chest. I ignore the pain. "You don't have to pick up a sign and come march with me in fishnets. But you don't talk or ask about her, ever. You refuse to see me anywhere there's even a chance she might be. You act like she didn't grow up with us, like she means nothing to you, like she's dead to you!"

"She might as well be!"

I shouldn't have said that.

Jeffrey claps both his hands to his mouth, failing to suppress a gasp. But it's the way Ru looks at me that really does it. She just freezes, staring like she can't believe what she's seeing, what she's hearing.

Like I'm a monster she's been shackled to, whose ill temper she'll have to tolerate forever.

I turn on my heel. I don't even try to see where I'm going, because Ru's horrified expression looms before my eyes, blocking everything else out. I just pick a random direction and walk, hands in my pockets, head down, watching my feet carve through mostly-melted snow and dirt.

I fish my headphones out of a jacket pocket and slip them on. Connect. Open Spotify, thumb open the first playlist I see, put the volume on max. Blasting Falguni Pathak to drown out the thoughts.

She hates me. She should hate me. She's engaged to someone who doesn't even have the guts to do what she does. She's the stereotype of a pretty progressive girl dating a conservative beast, and it wasn't even her choice.

CHAPTER 4

I don't know where I am. I don't know where I'm going. I'm just walking, and trying my best, and trying to forget that my loving amma-appa have proven that they will easily see a child as a demon for refusing to be a boy.

You're wrong about me, Ru. She's not dead to me.

She just makes me wish I was dead.

~~Nicky~~ Nichole

It's here.

It doesn't feel real. The box is just sitting there, in the same mailbox from which I extracted denials and delays and endless excuses. Surely it can't be so simple? Surely I can't just… pick it up?

I pick it up. It's as heavy as Daniel's—no, *Katherine's* box, and of the same make. Nondescript, plain black, with a gold latch and hinges. Is it made of wood? I run my fingertips over the grainy material. Can't tell.

Maybe it isn't even the package I've been waiting for. Maybe Jeff ordered a box of wall dildos for a GSA event.

I guess I'll take it upstairs and find out.

Fortunately, I have the flat to myself this evening. Rupali told me earlier that she, Jeff and Kyle would be busy at a protest, while Katherine should be off shooting lasers at other lasers in a lab or something. I ascend the stairs quickly. I left the door unlocked, so I depress the handle with my elbow and shoulder my way in.

"Nichole! I'm overjoyed to see you holding your package."

Katherine stands in front of me, smiling. I almost drop the box and cry out, "Oh, climb out of my armpit!"

I suppress the urge to swear under my breath, and walk past her. She follows me to my room, humming a tune from a show she made me watch with her recently.

"Are you going to slap the vials out of my hand or something?" I ask, setting the box on my desk. I flip the lid open and confirm that yep, those are definitely oestrogen.

"Not at all, Nichole!" Katherine spreads her arms wide. "I am here to welcome you into the competition, to make up for my less-than-hospitable reaction before."

"You tried to prevent me from joining and kept telling me to do things that would get me banned."

Katherine nods. "Yes, it wasn't very sporting of me. So instead, allow me to guide you through your first dose, and assist you in administering it."

We stare at each other in silence as her offer hangs in the air. Katherine's grin keeps getting wider, and her outstretched hand quivers with the effort it takes to keep holding it up.

I snap the box shut. "I'm not going to let you swap my vial with saline or whatever your plan is."

"What?" Katherine lets out a nervous laugh. "I would never!"

"Uh-huh." I place the box in the bottom drawer of my desk, lock the drawer, and settle down on my chair. "I'm going to wait to take my first dose at initiation tonight. Myself, by my own hand. You're welcome to stick around and watch if you like."

Katherine begins to sigh, then tries to pass it off as yawn. "Very well."

She flops down on my bed and pulls out her phone, snuggling into the covers. I forgot she wouldn't catch that my invite to stick around wasn't sincere, but it feels too awkward to rescind it. Instead, I quietly fume and switch on my PC. I can check in on the server, then knock out some dailies.

There's a new channel: *q2-2025-initiation*. The other contestants who also got their hormones today must be chattering like crazy, because the channel was only just created and still has too many texts for me to catch up on. I scroll up for like thirty seconds before giving up and going straight to the latest messages.

Heir of Breast

The point is, you *can* just start taking hormones and you don't have to wait until or even attend initiation, but doing it all together with the other new intakes is like… I don't know how to explain it. It's just special.

Bench Press Meta 2025

Like being formally inducted into the brotherhood.

Heir of Breast

Exactly! We're all competing, but that doesn't mean we have no esprit de corps. We're doing something special that we only share with each other—it's a bond that transcends mere notions of rivalry or friendship. It is its own kind of *fraternity*.

Chesticle Connoisseur

That sounds both gay (non-derogatory) and culty. Deeply homoerotic at the very least.

BigTittyFemboy

It's kind of both! That's what makes it hot.

Brisket Enjoyer

Fucking hell that's actually a box full of hormones

Brisket Enjoyer

Like wow. It's here and it's full of HRT. I almost expected it not to turn up, after I waited for the whole damn quarter.

Nickname

Lmfao @**Brisket Enjoyer** I kinda had the same feeling, you know?

Chesticle Connoisseur

It *was* pretty damn surreal.

Brisket Enjoyer

More infuriating than surreal, to be frank. Like I've got a couple of vials, some tubs of gels, and exactly how many pills all packed in here? This place is just giving away wholesale quantities of HRT to random people with minimal vetting, while politicians fly their favourite detrans grifter around the country to give weepy speeches about how trans healthcare needs to be banned. And the competition is one thing, but are all of you just keeping all this stuff? Letting it expire? Do none of you know a single girl in need?

Chesticle Connoisseur

Um…

Heir of Breast

Hey what the fuck is your problem?

Bench Press Meta 2025

This took a weird turn real fast. This is a competition for men, what do we care about fucking national healthcare policy? Let the suits worry about that and focus on what's important.

Heir of Breast

I don't tithe half my income to charity either, do you?

WizardsBigNaturals

Hey, why do you care so much what we do and don't do with our hormones? Answer quickly.

Melvin

Why are we talking about detransition?

Brisket Enjoyer

Your refusal to reckon with your culpability in this fucking farce is not my cross to bear, and I offer you no absolution. All of you could be helping alleviate the ongoing nightmare that is the unceasing worldwide crackdown on trannies, instead of trying to convince each other you're all totally manly mannish manful tubular dudebros.

Bench Press Meta 2025

I fucking knew it.

BigTittyFemboy *replying to* BrisketEnjoyer

Manhood =/= masculinity, binarist!

Melvin *replying to* Brisket Enjoyer

Um, you can't say that slur...

Brisket Enjoyer *replying to* Melvin

I can! That was kind of supposed to be a clue! Get one!

Heir of Breast

Yeah, thanks, that's all we needed. Which mods currently have the power to ban users?

Brisket Enjoyer

Oh, don't bother. Wouldn't want to invade this "men's space" for a second longer than I had to. Peace!

Brisket Enjoyer's username grays out on my screen and I lean back in my chair, heart hammering.

They turned on her so quickly. I can't afford to get comfortable, no matter how quirky and silly the server can seem. One wrong word and I'll be set upon by a pack of bloodhounds, eager to rip me to shreds.

It feels worse because I *knew* she was trans, or at least I had a good feeling. The only other person I'm fairly sure is a trans woman is the almighty, untouchable Laura, who doesn't so much interact with the server members as she descends from on high to dispense her pearls of supposed wisdom. Not to mention she's the one who's responsible for the highest number of knockouts in the server's history. Laura is definitely someone I need to stay away from.

There's something else, too. Brisket Enjoyer's last messages are still up

on my screen, searing themselves into my corneas. I know that *I'm* a "girl in need," but I can't help but admit I don't know anyone else who might benefit from my surplus oestrogen. I was concerned only with securing my own supply. Have been for years now. I've been so single-minded, I haven't even thought about the others who might be in my position.

But I wouldn't even know where to start. Trans girls in need of hormones don't exactly advertise ourselves very loudly. Maybe once I have my own affairs in order, once I've figured out how to schedule laser hair removal, once I'm a few months into taking hormones, I'll think about giving away the excess. What if I need the extras, for whatever reason?

"Ah, the washouts have begun."

Katherine's sudden statement makes me start. I rotate my chair to see her sitting up on my bed, scrolling through her phone, presumably following the same conversation.

"Washouts?" I ask.

"This happens every kickoff," she says. "There's always a portion of the intakes who admit they're just trans women who lied to get hormones."

"Why do they admit it?" I regret the words the moment I say them, but too late now.

Katherine shrugs. "Perhaps they find the server—I mean, ahem, who can say? Who knows why women do half the things they do, right? Bitches be crazy."

I give her a sidelong glance. "Kaal would probably ding you for that."

That makes Kathy flinch, which is more satisfying than it should be. "Ah, yes, best to excise the common wisdom of bros."

"Mmhmm."

"In any case, we already have our second announced departure." Katherine holds up her phone screen. I turn back to my monitor instead of looking at it.

Chesticle Connoisseur

Yeah, being around here isn't good for me. I've only been here like a month, if that, waiting for the hormones, and I'm already starting to regret it. Tell myself I'm never going to be a woman no matter how much medical intervention I get. My girlfriend threatened to leave because she said I was stuck in thought patterns she exorcised years ago, and she refuses to be around this kind of toxicity anymore.

Heir of Breast

Girl none of us want you intruding in our space either, trust me.

Chesticle Connoisseur

That's just fucking it! This fucking bullshit you all spew, where you act like doing everything a trans woman does but saying "NO TRANNY" will magically preserve your manhood! Some of you are getting fucking orchiectomies for "strat reasons"—do you seriously think walking around with a sign that says "still cis tho" is going to prevent you from being seen like I am? What do you idiots have to gain from this charade? This entire server is just a pit of self-harm for women in denial to stew in.

BigTittyFemboy

This is exactly fucking why I can't stand y'all. It's not enough for you harpies to take over the news and get wall-to-wall coverage for your attention seeking, but you have the audacity to spew your disgusting, binarist, anti-queer rhetoric at men who don't conform, as though we're all just a type of you. The arrogance makes me want to puke. Fuck OFF, tranny.

Heir of Breast

Okay, @**Bridget Is a Femboy** has the ban button this week and is online. Get this hysterical bitch out of here, please.

Bridget Is a Femboy

Done! Trash taken out.

BigTittyFemboy

I still don't like that they get banned from the competition but they just get to keep all the hormones. It feels wrong. Like, where's the punishment?

Heir of Breast

Their punishment is having to live life as trans women, lmao.

I struggle to swallow the bile rising in my throat, and I pray that Katherine doesn't say anything to me for a little while.

Fortunately, I hear Kathy roll over in my bed and pull the covers over herself. She needs to cocoon sometimes, for any number of reasons—she saw

an upsetting TikTok, or a picture of a cat that was too cute, or something in that vein. I thank my luck for the blessed relief and focus on taking deep breaths to settle my nerves.

Maybe that's enough of the server for now. My daily quests won't do themselves, and if I start on them in front of Katherine she might go to her own room to join me.

No dice, though. She stays put. It's only when I'm about to commence a third mind-numbing farming run that I hear rustling behind me as Kathy emerges from my blankets.

"We should do femme strats."

"Hm?" I tilt my headphones off one ear and turn slightly towards her. "What was that?"

"I said that we should take the femme strat approach to our real-life covers," Katherine says, sitting up.

"Oh. Um. Why?"

A "guy on oestrogen" would probably be hesitant about this, but I'm not exactly faking my concern. Given that I haven't even taken my first shot, I don't feel ready to wear girl clothes. Shouldn't I wait for at least some of the effects to kick in? I imagine putting on a skirt as I currently am and feel a bit queasy.

"To play the part better, of course!" Katherine punctures through my dithering with the emphatic tone she uses when she's made her mind up for the both of us. "After all, Nichole, have you ever heard of a trans woman who wasn't excited to start dressing and living as a woman?"

"Um..." I draw the syllable out to wrack my brain. I'm struggling to come up with any examples of trans coming-out stories that don't portray a cis man tearily applying lipstick while dressed in some frilly abomination. At least, any such examples that a guy would know about.

"Exactly!" Kathy claps her hand together with a strange amount of glee. "To keep up appearances and satisfy Kaalappan's exacting standards, we simply must begin dressing the part!"

The picture in my head is now of me in the frilly abomination, staring at my own stubbly reflection with my lips painted red.

"I don't know, Kathy. I don't even have any women's clothes."

She leaps out of bed and grabs the mouse out of my hand. "Easily remedied!"

"Hey, I was going to kill fifty—you know what, never mind." I sigh and let Katherine close my game.

For the next couple of hours, Katherine takes me on an agonising journey through Amazon's catalogue, picking out skirts, leggings, blouses, tights, trousers, tops, even *underwear*. When I feebly protest on financial grounds, she waves me off and tells me they're mostly for her, but I'm more than welcome to borrow them—we're kind of the same size, aren't we? She then starts browsing fishnets.

By the time she's satisfied with the size of her online cart, it's nearly time for kickoff. I shoo her off my lap and navigate back to the server as she takes up her customary position hovering over my shoulder.

The voice channel for initiation is streaming a countdown, to indicate the exact second when the competition officially begins for Q2. Most people in the chat have excitedly agreed to administer their first dose in sync, on video. Laura's here too, her arrival attracting its own flurry of activity. Apparently she always makes an appearance at kickoffs, to "officially welcome the new blood as the reigning champion."

She's already on video. She's wearing an emerald tube top, her makeup done to match. I look at her and suddenly see myself in that top, showing off my square, blocky shoulders. Wearing clumsily applied eyeliner and too much green eyeshadow, the blush on my cheeks chipping and flaking.

I duck down and retrieve my box with shaking hands.

There's a disassembled auto-injector included with the rest of the items. It comes together easily, its parts interlocking with satisfying clicks. I slide a vial of oestrogen into the chamber and it feels like loading a gun. I press it into my skin. Wait to pull the trigger on my old life.

My hands are still shaking.

"Nichole…"

"Don't." I'm staring at the place where the injector digs into my bare thigh, refusing to look at Kathy.

"That might be too much pressure—"

"It's *fine*." I see the countdown tick down in the corner of my eye. "Just tell me when."

Katherine sighs. "Very well."

I didn't really buy into it. All the talk of *joining the brotherhood*. Does it matter whether I start taking HRT exactly when the timer hits zero, or if I do it an hour later, or if I'd done it an hour ago already? Fifteen minutes ago I'd have said no if asked.

And yet, now I can't imagine anything other than waiting for the clock to strike, commemorating the precise date and time, down to the second. I want to know. I want to remember the moment it finally, finally happens, forever.

The voice channel's completely silent. Even Laura is uncharacteristically quiet, all of us just waiting. Holding our collective breath. My blood pounds in my ears, louder than my thoughts.

"Turn on my camera," I say.

Katherine starts. I worry she's about to say something and cheapen this, but then she does as she's told. She crowds my peripheral vision, adjusting the webcam's angle and aiming it at the injection site.

She steps back when she's done. "About thirty seconds left."

I can tell from the quaver in her voice that she wants to ask me something really stupid. I start counting down in my head, hoping to drown her out.

It doesn't work.

"Nicky…" Katherine's voice is soft. "Are you really sure about this?"

Am I sure?

Does a woman crawling through a parched desert want to collapse into the first oasis she stumbles across, no matter how muddy?

My vision is swimming. I look up in time to see the counter hit zero and pull the trigger with all my strength, jamming the auto-injector even harder into my thigh. Pain blossoms through me like lightning animating a corpse and I throw my head back, exhaling sharply. A strangled moan tears free from the depths of my throat.

Droplets of blood, bright and round and perfect bloom from the injection site. They race down my skin in jagged lines while Kathy swears loudly and

scrambles for a paper towel. I laugh, giddy, until I'm choking on a sob, tears streaming down my cheeks.

I can feel it.

I know it doesn't work like that. It's not instantaneous. I'm not going to see any results for weeks, if that. But I don't care. I can *feel it*. Feel it coursing in my veins, spreading through me, filling in all the gaps that have been missing. Fixing me, healing me, reshaping me, revivifying me.

I am renewed. I am revitalised. I am reborn. I am—

I *am*.

"I told you!" Katherine's on her knees, pressing a wad of tissue into me. "Be careful!"

I can't help it. I'm smiling. I look down at Kathy fretting between my legs and I just smile and tremble and cry harder than I ever, ever have.

Katherine

She's *weeping*.

She didn't listen. She never listens. Not to a single warning, a single thing I try to tell her about what she's doing to herself. Refusing to comprehend the depersonalisation and depression and sheer, unadulterated melancholy she'll experience if she persists in reshaping her body into a form that doesn't agree with who she is on the inside.

And now she's weeping in my arms, the tissues in my hands stained with her own blood. Her body tried to reject the offending hormones, but she absolutely refuses to because of pigheaded bravado or whatever masculine urge blinds her to reason. Leading her further and further down a path I keep failing to drag her off.

I need to stop this. I need to save Nichole from a fate she doesn't comprehend, no matter how severe and cruel the methods I deploy must be.

As soon as I return to my room, I'm going to order all the clothes in my cart. Mother will inquire after the size of the purchase on her card, but it's worth enduring a quick call with her. I saw how uncomfortable the mere

idea of wearing women's clothes in public makes Nichole. I will impress upon her the necessity of taking up femme strats as soon as possible, with Rupali and Kaalappan providing a ready pretext. The reality of going out as a man dressed in women's clothing is the only thing that can jolt her out of this misbegotten conviction.

It's going to be uncomfortable for us both. I myself am scarcely sure I'm ready to don feminine garb. However, I've been gendered female everywhere for about a month or two now, and wearing women's apparel in all likelihood only raises the chances of that occurring.

I'll have to pick where we go out carefully. I need Nichole to confront the dysphoria she's busy suppressing, not actually be harmed. I'll bide my time, wait for the perfect opportunity to present itself, and only then spring my trap. Because if Nichole is going to refuse to consider her own well-being, as she always does, then I have to do it for her.

I have to save Nichole from herself.

CHAPTER 5
OVERCOMMITMENT

Nichole

I don't really understand what the server did with my insurance.

The laser clinic I've been going to for the past two months is *fancy*. It's quite out of the way, about a half-hour train journey from the closest stop, which is both arduous and fortunate since there's no chance I'll be spotted by anyone I see regularly around campus. "Clinic" also feels like something of a misnomer. While there are certainly women in white lab coats scribbling on clipboards and operating complex machinery, the tucked-away location and the nature- and comfort-focused ambience feels more like a weekend getaway. Like a spot to catch up on spa time with girlfriends.

So though I haven't exactly pored through the terms and conditions of my student insurance plan with a fine-toothed comb, I'm pretty sure it's only supposed to cover accidents, emergency hospital trips, and maybe the occasional health check-up or doctor visit. It definitely shouldn't be accepted by the receptionists at a "clinic" with hardwood floors and canopy views and cucumber water.

Not that I picked this place for the perks. I picked it because the online brochure talked up their new, cutting-edge, state-of-the-art and *expensive*

machines, designed to burn away facial and body hair faster and more efficiently than any competitor. They use an interference-based mechanism to precision-target hair pigment, or something, based on brand new research papers hot off the Norwegian academic presses. However they work and whatever they use, they promise total removal in the fewest number of sessions. Even if I'm not getting billed by the hour, I'd still like to be baby smooth as fast as possible.

Sadly, the biggest limiting factor in that regard remains how fast skin heals. I started going every week since Jeffrey told me I could get my arms and legs done as well, but that still leaves me with rashy, inflamed cheeks for days. I didn't expect finally getting my facial hair removed to leave me feeling so much worse. During lectures, I'm forced to wear my hood up all the time to avoid strange looks, and if anything I find myself leaving the house even less. Only the prospect of waking up one day with smooth cheeks I never have to shave again keeps me going.

The week leading up to the next appointment is always the worst, when the laser burns haven't fully healed and I also have to stop shaving so the tech can target my grown-out stubble. On those days I don't even go to class.

Today is probably one of the worst days I've had in a while. My nipples are sore, puffy, and tender, making it hard for me to ignore my still-too-flat chest. Tiny strands of wiry brown hair form an unseemly lattice under my chin, and my swollen upper lip is red as a tomato. I can barely stand to look at myself in the mirror as I brush my teeth, and I have to turn around to stop thinking about how much I want to dig my fingernails into the back of my ear and peel off my own face.

At least it's the weekend, so I can stay inside without as much guilt. All I want is to sequester myself under my weighted blanket, catch up on my book review podcast while scrolling Twitter, and not inflict my hideous visage on another living soul for at least the next forty-eight hours. I brush my teeth as fast as possible with my eyes closed. After rinsing, I open the bathroom door, hoping the kitchen's still empty so I can hurry to my room unseen.

"Nichole! I have an urgent favour to ask of you."

Kathy stands at the threshold, hands behind her back, beaming up at me. I yelp, stumbling back to avoid walking right into her, and drop my shower basket.

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" She stoops down with me to help gather my things.

Kathy dresses much more smartly these days. She's in a red miniskirt, patterned leggings and a black tee with a bunch of multicoloured cats all saying "Nya!" in bright speech bubbles. Her hair's grown past her shoulders —a good few inches longer than mine—and sports shocking pink highlights. Ever since Kaal's ultimatum, Kathy's really taken to dressing like a girl. I hate to admit it, but she actually looks really, really cute, even if her sense of style is a bit "anthropomorphic light-up keyboard".

I toss my toothbrush into the basket and stand up. "What do you want, Kathy?"

"Hm?" Kathy, still squatting, cocks her head up at me before springing up on the balls of her feet. "Oh, yes! Nichole, we must be off at once!"

"'We'?" I raise an eyebrow and walk past her; she follows. "Kathy, I don't have any plans to be anywhere or do anything right now."

"Excellent, then you'll be free to accompany me."

Damn it. "No, I'm *really* not."

I pick up the pace, as though I can outrun her. Katherine keeps up, entering my room right after I do, and comes to a rest next to the chest of drawers. She sways slightly with her hands clasped before her—her designated "patiently waiting" pose. I sigh and put my shower basket away before I turn to face her.

"What do you want?"

As usual, she ignores the obvious context clues. "There is an event I would like to attend. It is a 'meet-and-greet' organised by the GSA, for queer and questioning people to connect with others in our community."

I sit down heavily on my bed. This is why I don't really talk to Kathy anymore, outside of checking up on guild stuff and the occasional anime binge. Every interaction with her is like trying to decode a puzzle or an arcane dialogue tree in an RPG, where choosing the wrong option will compromise my access to healthcare. In fact, just two weeks ago, Kaal actually told me Kathy was trying to build a case that I'm secretly a trans woman. He said she asked him to "confirm her suspicions", and he told her to go and vacuum.

Laughing with him about it were the scariest five minutes of my life. I almost quit the guild before Katherine promised she would stop trying to gather evidence for a tribunal.

Right now, I'm not in the best frame of mind to navigate her byzantine verbal traps and rhetorical mazes. But she's here, in my room, saying things to me instead of leaving me to climb into my crypt. So I have to think through what she said and formulate a non-incriminating reply.

I repeat one of her own favourite lines. "Kathy, you're a cisgender and heterosexual man. You've told me—many times, emphatically—that you're not a part of the queer community. So why do you want to go?" And why are you trying to drag me along, I don't add.

"Firstly, Nichole, the *Gay-Straight Alliance* is definitionally not exclusive of non-queer people!" Katherine folds her arms and huffs at me. "Secondly, you might recall that despite being, as you said, cisgender and heterosexual, we are maintaining a pretence of transsexual self-identification for our RLCs!"

I rub my temple. "Can you say that word? I don't think we can say that word anymore."

Katherine presses on. "It is highly suspicious if we purport to be trans women and yet do not participate in *any* queer community events! So I propose that we dress in women's clothes and attend the meet-and-greet together."

Admittedly she's making a reasonable point, for once. It would probably be good for me to actually go outside and meet other trans women instead of just reply-girling them online. I might even be able to find people with whom I can just *be* a trans woman, instead of having to play this double-agent mindgame. That honestly sounds so nice—and much less exhausting than being around my childhood best friend.

But not now. Not when I have itchy nipples instead of actual breasts and shaggy unkempt hair barely reaching my shoulders and an angry swollen upper lip and cheeks that look like they were shaved by Two-Face. Certainly not in women's clothing—I haven't even shaved my legs in a month,

not since I tried out a skirt for the first time and had a breakdown trying to take a selfie in a full-length mirror.

I can't be seen like this. I hate that anyone has to perceive me at all, even my flatmates. I can only imagine the things Jeff is snickering over as he gossips with his friends about the barely-oestrogenised freak who lives in his flat. The idea of turning up at a GSA event where he might be, where he might point me out, where others might turn to him and go "*That's* the bitch? She looks so much worse than I was picturing!"—it's too much.

I realise I'm hyperventilating.

"I already have an outfit for you picked out," Kathy says, unhelpfully, as I struggle to hold back tears. "You can just come to my room and—"

"No!"

"Pardon me?"

Deep breaths. Suck the air down. My fingertips hurt—I'm clutching the edge of the mattress too hard. I swallow and look up at Kathy's inquisitive expression and try to get myself under control before I give away how freaked out I am and she adds the evidence to her secret tribunal dossier.

"I'm just not in a position to be—I can't—I don't want to." I shake my head.

"Nichole." Katherine leans forward, frowning. "Ever since we came out to Rupali to preserve our cover, you have persisted in remaining indoors for the majority of your days. You do not speak to her very much more, and you still act as you did before your professed transition. This will not do."

I feel like I've been submerged in icy water. "Are you saying I still act like a guy?"

"Yes!" Katherine claps her hands together like she's made some grand point. I want to throw up. "You are not playing the part as you ought! Rather than coming across as someone who's had a lifetime of dysphoria alleviated by miraculous medical interventions, you behave as though the treatments are taking a great psychological toll upon you. If anything, you have only become further withdrawn and isolated. Even we hardly speak anymore."

"Yeah, I wonder why."

"If you behave as though the hormones are making you miserable, in-

stead of happy, you will not be able to convince Rupali that you are in fact a trans woman." Katherine's the one shaking her head now. "Is that not the compact that you hastily entered us into, *Nichole*?"

The way she says my name like it's an accusation—I can't make heads or tails of it. I'm not happy enough on hormones, so I'm not a real trans girl? But if I was happy, wouldn't she use that to claim I was a real trans girl and cut me off from the things I need? I don't know what she wants from me. I want to cry.

Why can't she ever make a lick of sense?

"What should I do?" I ask, defeated.

"Come to my room. Put on the skirt. Let's go to the meet-and-greet."

"Okay."

Katherine

Coaxing Nichole out of her room was the right choice. Nichole is not, at the best of times, particularly introspective. Were I to leave her to her own devices, she would happily shrivel up into a dysphoric husk, ignoring the mounting discordance between body and mind until she is forever trapped in a form she cannot bear to inhabit. The symptoms of this malady have already manifested, in fact, as proven by her increasing reticence and agoraphobia.

She is incredibly fortunate that I am here to consider her best interests.

No, only by confronting what it means to exist as a wholly different gender in the outside world will Nichole be dissuaded. I have dressed her in a short skirt, tank top, fishnets and kitten heels, completing the ensemble with a hairband sporting a bright pink bow. Being so indelibly marked by femininity will finally force her to see how differently she will be treated, and then she will finally, at long last, go back to being my happy and dependable friend who is not dead-set on self-harm.

Though I must confess that Nichole has perhaps taken to femininity more readily than I expected. Even with only the barest effects of oestro-

genisation visible upon her body, she is remarkably shapely, graceful, and —dare I say—ravishing. Her slender shoulders and long legs and delicate features are all prominently on display, attracting a different sort of attention than I anticipated.

Of course, being so ogled, while complimentary after a fashion, isn't particularly pleasant. Nichole spends the whole bus ride steadfastly looking down at her own knees, presumably to avoid both the stares and the sight of her own reflection in the window. I remember behaving much the same not too long ago.

When we disembark, she is well and truly shaken—clutching at her own elbow and staring at her feet. Having to endure face-to-face social interactions in this state will surely pull out the final nail from this coffin she insists on burying herself in. I will ensure that we spend at least an hour at the event.

We make our way across the street, towards the various pride flags fluttering in the spring breeze. The GSA event is at a popular cafeteria, *Dorothy's*. Located at the nexus of several blocks of flats largely rented by final year and graduate students, the establishment is often packed. Study groups unspool their assignments on the outdoor picnic tables, and many a budding scholar frequently dashes through to pick up a steaming caffeinated beverage and a portable meal. Ironically, this makes it the least busy on weekends, as college denizens sleep off the after-effects of imbibing too many substances the night before, or convince themselves they have plenty of time left to finish their assignments due Monday.

The meet-and-greet is being held in the outdoor seating area, as a variety of makeshift signs declare, with two of the tables reserved for a pile of board games and a pile of confections, respectively. A smattering of attendees mill about, some of whom have gathered in the farthest corner to play that silly card game only the smelliest of nerd boys enjoy. I gently lead Nichole by the hand—since she has stopped moving of her own accord—towards a vacant seat.

An individual with close-cropped neon green hair intercepts us, wearing a too-unbuttoned Hawaiian shirt over a pencil skirt and leggings. A sticker

on the shirt reads "Name: Quinn, Pronouns: xe/xer". I am proffered a marker and a stack of similar stickers, presumably to fashion my own adhesive identifier.

"Welcome to the queer meetup!" Quinn's voice is deep and booming, instantly calling attention to our arrival. Nichole starts and glances around nervously, not even looking at Quinn as xe happily continues. "This is your first time, I'm guessing?"

"It is, yes!" I accept the marker and peel two stickers off the stack. "I am Katherine. She is my best friend, Nichole. We are both, of course, trans women, as you can plainly see."

Nichole squeaks, gives me an inscrutable look, and then sighs and nods.

"Lovely to have you!" Quinn gestures towards the sweets piled high behind xer. "I understand how nervous you must be, but I promise you that we're all quite friendly. The GSA prides itself on providing the local queer community with safe, sober, judgment-free spaces, where queer people of all sorts can just relax and mingle. You're more than welcome to grab a game and a sweet treat—Dorothy's made plenty!"

"Dorothy?" I tilt my head to indicate that I'm asking a question.

Quinn points at the sign over the café's door. "She owns the place! And very generously allows us to hold these biweekly meetups while providing the baked goods. You'll find we're all great friends of Dorothy here."

Quinn winks, and Nichole groans softly, for reasons that aren't clear to me. I smile and nod, then bend down to write on the stickers so I don't have to respond. Quinn continues to hover over me until I return the marker, whereupon xe snatches it out of my hand.

"Excellent, you're all set!" Quinn is looking past me as xe speaks. "I have more newcomers to greet, but thank you both so much for coming, and I hope you're able to make some actual connections here."

"I hope so as well," I say.

Quinn is already walking away. "I know you came with your friend, but I would suggest splitting up for a little bit at least—it'll help them come out of their shell!"

I nod. "That makes sense."

Nichole doesn't seem to think so. She's back to clutching at her elbow, and she's glaring in Quinn's direction. Her attachment to me is obvious and certainly sweet, but I require her to be maximally discomfited if I am to succeed.

"Can you inquire within as to whether there are free drinks available, Nichole?" I ask. "I would quite enjoy a piping hot chocolate to go with my pastry."

"What? But—"

"I appreciate that!" I clap Nichole on the shoulder. "I will go now to search for my friend."

I pretend not to hear Nichole's sputtering and leave her to attempt the task I have set. I move towards the pod of card players—but not too close—and cast my gaze about. I wish I had a clear idea of what to look for.

The excuse I fashioned for Nichole is not entirely untruthful. I am searching for someone, and I do hope to make her acquaintance and to eventually, some glorious day, count her among my friends. For now, however, I am limited to chasing context clues and whispers, deducing her goings-on and whereabouts from scant allusions and hints. A reference to fencing terminology here. A perusal of the Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies faculty page there. Cross-referencing the meeting times of the uni's theatre club dedicated to fight choreography with GSA events—until a pattern slowly but surely emerges.

She'll be difficult to spot, of course. While she has shown her face on video a few times, she has always been careful to mostly leave it out of the selfies she shares. I would expect someone as conscientious as her to present herself very differently offline. I've had to focus on the most minute details, the barest of hints, and memorise the most peripheral of facial details to give myself a ghost of a chance.

The theatre club's rehearsal ended about fifteen minutes ago. Surely she will be on her way here—after changing her attire, of course—and be clearly identifiable, if not facially, then through some other unmistakable characteristic, like her sheer authoritative aura. I hope I am not mistaken. So much of the evidence is circumstantial, subject to any amount of scheduling disruptions, but if I am ever going to meet her, it will surely be now—

I see her.

I see her!

Her hair is braided into twintails rather than straight and flowing, and she is wearing a beige blazer and a skirt that can be described as "business casual". Not quite as eye-catching as her curated outfits, and she is wearing round glasses that change the shape of her face a great deal—but to a true acolyte, a true devotee of her every mannerism and offhand comment and throwaway remark, she is unmistakable. And if that were not enough, the sheathed rapier slung across her back is all the confirmation I require.

I have, at long last, found Laura!

I am unable to suppress a squeal of pure, joyous glee. She is here, breathing the same air as me, entering the café through the front doors, and all that remain between me and her are a few dozen paces. Then I can tell her I found her and shake her hand and communicate to her that I am a fellow trans girl following her example in competitive mammogenesis, covertly of course, and we can begin the process of becoming the bestest of friends, better even than me and Nichole, because Laura is actually trans!

"I scoop, by the way."

One of the smelly boys in the corner throws his cards away and stands up abruptly. He is surprisingly tall and bulky for how rotund he is, remarkably nimble in his hoodie and puffer jacket and gray joggers. Before I've so much as taken three steps, he's right beside me, throwing his overly-beefy arm out to hamper my forward progress. I squeak, walking right into his bicep, which doesn't move an inch. I stumble back into a seat as this brute looms over me, his face twisted into a sneer.

"You are not as careful as you ought to be, *Katherine*."

I gasp. "But how—!"

That's when I notice his tits.

To his credit, they are hidden adequately enough through slouched posture and baggy attire. Casual observers surely wouldn't spare him a second glance. However, this close to his burgeoning mammosity, I could no more ignore his fabric-warping jugs than I could fail to recognise the cruel smile and spiky hair of Ranked Competitive Breast Growth's runner-up.

I gasp again. "Izzy!"

His expression changes immediately. "Fucking—no, that is not my name!"

He slides into the seat across from me, glowering. Izzy's brutal manhandling has left me dizzy and seeing spots, so I am helpless to do anything more than appear as nonthreatening as possible.

"Nice to meet you," I offer, trying to maintain social decorum.

"It very much is not." Izzy folds his arms. "Why are you stalking Laura?"

"I am not *stalking*—"

"Have you and Laura ever spoken to each other? Even once?"

I am forced to stop and think. "She has left a laugh react on no less than three of my GIFs in the meme channel."

"Of course that's how you pronounce it." Izzy rolls his eyes. "So you admit that you and Laura have never, not once, held an actual conversation publicly online, and certainly not in private?"

I'm feeling very cross-examined. "Well, I mean, we could have spoken in private."

"But you haven't."

"...No."

Izzy throws his hands up. "Hallelujah, a straight answer."

I frown. "What does it matter? Our lack of communication is the precise issue I have arrived here to rectify!"

Izzy doesn't respond right away. He squints at me for a little while instead. "My gosh, so you actually talk like you type?"

"Of course? Doesn't everyone?" I tilt my head to indicate bemusement.

"Right." Izzy sighs. "Look, highlights. Laura likes her privacy. That's why she doesn't accept DMs, friend requests, or converse with anyone on the... net. It's a very clear indication of her boundaries. Speak when spoken to, and if you're not spoken to, then don't speak. And certainly don't track her down in real life, you absolute lunatic."

This is all wrong.

I should not still be sitting here, in the outdoors section, being harassed by a busty male barrister-cop. I should be inside, standing in line behind Laura, memorizing her favourite drink order as I eagerly await an opening to introduce myself as her new best friend. My window of opportunity is

rapidly closing, slammed shut by the overzealous bodyguard I didn't know Laura had. I did everything right—made all the right deductions—this cannot be how my only chance is snuffed out! But I cannot think of anything to say to pacify the snarling guard dog in my path.

I can feel myself giving in to despair. "How did you even find me?" I miserably ask.

"I have many eyes in many places, highlights." Izzy leans back with a smirk. "But let's just say that you shouldn't be posting to Reddit with such a recognisable username. Nor should you be going to Reddit for advice about—well, anything really, but definitely not 'how do I find my ex-wife whose socials are all private'."

"I'll have you know that I was given some very helpful tips."

"Of course you were. You posted to a sub of divorced incels, you complete basket case." Izzy shakes his head.

It is of no use. Izzy is utterly unsympathetic—I would have more luck trying to persuade Sisyphus' rock to not fall. I prepare to summon my remaining strength and make a mad dash for the café before it's too late, when the clouds part and the angels choose to smile upon my wretched soul. A voice more melodious than heaven's sweetest harp rings out:

"Izzy? Is that you?"

I make several pertinent observations.

Firstly, Laura herself is suddenly gracing us with her presence. She swaggers up to us lazily, a drink in each hand, one arm around the shoulders of none other than *Nichole*. Nichole is the palest I have ever seen her, staring at her own feet, seemingly petrified and not in the least moved by the fact that Laura's bare wrist is touching her actual skin. Unappreciative as always.

Secondly, Izzy's eyes have widened and his expression has changed entirely. He sits up straight and is breathing quicker, and overall he is significantly less relaxed. I do not have much time to puzzle out exactly what this signifies, but I can hazard an educated guess that for all of his pretensions to being Laura's pet hound, she did not expect him to be here any more than she expected to see me. This is made likelier by Izzy's sputtering non-responses to Laura's straightforward inquiry: "What are you doing here?"

If I am right, I must capitalise on this revelation. Slamming my palms on the table, I rise to about half my full height and offer a pretext. "Izzy is my friend. He invited me here to convince me that *Magic: The Gathering* is a worthwhile pastime and not just an elaborate financial sinkhole for the hygienically compromised."

Laura, Nichole and Izzy all look at me. No one says anything. I may have horribly misjudged the situation. I am about to apologise to Laura for daring to speak without being spoken to, when I am graced with a miracle most holy.

Laura laughs.

Laura. Is laughing. At something I said.

Izzy, still sputtering, glares at me. "I'll have you know *Magic* is a scintillating and intellectually stimulating—"

"Yes, sweetie, we all know how much you love being stimulated." Laura, chuckling, actually settles down at our table, next to Izzy. I struggle not to squeal with glee when she addresses me directly. "I think this girl belongs to you? She pointed at you when I asked if someone misplaced her."

"Oh, yes, this is my Nichole. I brought her here for enrichment." I sit back down as Nichole joins us, still mute.

Laura snorts. "Seems like she needs it. Wow, Izzy, I didn't realise you had two whole friends who shower regularly! And they're both girls, too. I'm so proud of you."

"First of all, if you absolutely must insist on feminine appellations when we are in public, call me *Emmy*." Emmy née Izzy scowls. "Secondly, they're both from the server."

Laura's head immediately snaps towards us. She gives us both a sharp look. I don't know why, but I feel the need to hold my breath.

"Ah, that explains it! We are amidst brothers of the cloth." Laura leans forward, resting her chin on one hand, her other arm wrapped tight around Emmy's waist. "Pulling off the RLC well, let me say."

The momentarily elation of being gendered correctly by Laura dissipates as Emmy's unwelcome intrusion continues to throw wrench after wrench into the finely-tuned gears of my machinations. Any hopes I may have har-

bored of a frank conversation with Laura, woman to woman, must now be firmly placed on ice, for as long as Emmy insists on being a willing extension of the server's panopticon. And based on how tightly Laura is grasping Emmy, any attempts at banishment from the table would be fruitless.

No matter—being able to speak to Laura at all is a privilege.

"We are indeed following your tactically sound methods to the best of our ability. Well, Nichole is still new to this, of course." I gesture towards her and she sinks a little lower into her seat.

Laura nods at Nichole. "It's not a bad ensemble, but you probably want something more understated at this stage. I'm guessing you just joined this quarter."

"She did, yes." I pick up the drink Nichole brought me and take a sip.

Nichole glances rapidly between the drink in my hand, my face, and Laura. She is making a strange, throaty noise almost akin to croaking, and she's breathing more heavily than a seated person ought to.

"I'm going to the shitter!" Nichole jumps up and sprints into the café.

I nod sagely. "She does experience acute gastrointestinal distress when nervous." My plan is going better than I hoped.

"Unfortunate." Laura glances after Nichole, then turns to Emmy. "So, Emmy as in *Noether*, I'm guessing."

Emmy sighs. "Yes, well, if you insist on calling me by a woman's name, I'd rather it be a name that holds some significance to me. Emmy Noether unravelled some of the universe's most arcane mysteries, and I am happy to honour her in this small way."

"Of course. My dear Emmy." Laura's eyes flash. "Am I calling you that in bed from now on?"

The way Emmy's head droops in response—from snarling wolf to snivelling lapdog in moments. The sheer force of Laura's undeniable authority.

"I suppose."

"Go fetch yourself a cute little label, write 'Emmy: she/her' on it, and come back, won't you?"

Emmy's jaw drops, but she says nothing to rebuke Laura's imperative. She rises to her feet instead.

I believe I ought to do the same. "Here! Let me show you where the labels are."

I indicate that Emmy should follow me and lead her towards the tables closest to the café's entrance. Away from Laura, Emmy's expression returns to its naturally sour state.

I preempt any jibe she may be preparing. "So. It seems that Laura was not, in fact, expecting you."

Emmy grits her teeth. "Perhaps."

"I could ask her if she makes the details of her comings and goings known to you?"

"Don't you fucking dare." Emmy grabs my arm. "I get it, highlights. Mutually assured destruction. I won't say anything because you won't say anything, yes?"

I allow myself a triumphant smile. "It seems your horse is not as high as you wish it to be."

"My horse is indeed distressingly sober." Emmy peels a label off a stack left abandoned on a chair. "But I only did this because I caught *you* sniffing around her online trail. If I'd had a better idea of your identity, I wouldn't have had to tail her anticipating you, so well done on that front at least."

"Do not be ashamed. Wishing an audience with the champion is a thoroughly comprehensible desire."

"Oh, for the love of..." Emmy rolls her eyes at me as she applies the label to her lapel. "The champion grants me audiences aplenty, I assure you. I just didn't want some creep to harass her. Sucks to be me, I guess, since said creep has me locked in an unfortunate stalemate."

I find myself somewhat disinclined to humour Emmy's delusions here. The idea of Laura, beauty nonpareil, stooping so low as to cavort with someone who plays *Magic: The Gathering* defies every truth and belief I hold dear.

At the same time, if I think about how Laura and Emmy interact without letting Emmy's fundamental lack of appeal cloud my judgment, their exchanges do indeed possess a certain amorous quality. Perhaps Laura gets some thrill out of allowing her perfection to be marred by the lowliest of vermin. Even the greatest amongst us have their unseemly vices.

If that is the case, then I cannot allow my leverage over Emmy to be

squandered. I see clearly now that I must befriend and ingratiate myself to Laura's witless seneschal so that I may one day rise above and usurp her unearned place at Laura's right hand. Laura will have her worthy champion —it will only be a matter of time.

"So, Emmy. Perhaps the fib I supplied Laura earlier… need not be a fib?"

Nichole

I'm going to shit myself. Or throw up. Maybe both.

I had to walk all to way to the back of the café with everyone fucking staring at me because I'm moving fast and trying not to expel all the contents of my guts and also I'm dressed like a cross-dressing pervert because my stupid fucking flatmate threatened to out me as a trans woman? Or a guy? Both? And then when I get there, the bathroom's occupied, so I can't even double over a toilet in peace. My head's spinning and my vision's swimming and everything I'm wearing is too tight and too revealing and it's choking the air out of my lungs.

My shoulder collides heavily with the wall as I slump against it, holding my head in my hands. Don't cry. They'll see you cry and then they'll stare even more and they'll know what a pathetic gross freak you are, you can't cry, you can't cry, Nicky, you can't cry.

"Oh my gosh, Nichole! Hi!"

A hand on my shoulder. I freeze. Slowly I lower my shaking arms, daring only to turn my head. I see a thick mass of curly black hair, bright and friendly eyes, and a smile that even in this horrible moment succeeds in lifting my spirits somewhat.

"Are you okay?" Rupali asks.

"Rupali!" I sound like I'm squeaking. "What are you doing here?"

"Well, it's a GSA event. So I'm carrying stuff, mainly."

Right. I do know she and Jeffrey are involved in the GSA. It's just that the sheer terror of being outside in girl clothes for the first time overrode my

conscious thoughts. At least, that's what I'm going with, so I can tell myself I'm not a bad friend.

"Of course. I'm fine, yeah." Saying this with my hands on wobbly knees probably isn't convincing. "Just a little overwhelmed."

Rupali pats my shoulder. "Is it your first time? In these clothes?"

I nod. "Scary."

"Nichole, it's okay."

I shake my head vigorously. "They can see me. Everyone can see me. Everyone can see how weird I look."

Rupali purses her lips. "Nichole, might I suggest taking a look around you? You're at a GSA event. The people here are not exactly dressed conventionally, you know?"

I'm not trying to dress unconventionally, I almost scream. I want to look as conventional as fucking possible in this get-up, but I *don't*, and I hate that I don't, and I hate that everyone can see that I don't. But instead of saying any of that, I suck in a deep breath and do as Rupali suggested.

What I see is more hair colours in this room than there are colours on the rainbow flag. Piercings, tattoos, leather, chains, buzz cuts and mohawks and studded collars—I'm one of the least interestingly dressed people in this room by far. Two tables down, I spot someone in a sheer dress and leggings, hairy chest proudly on display. The people seated closest to me are a pair of butches with matching carabiners in their belt loops, holding hands as they sip their drinks and look out the café's windows.

No one's gawking at me. And I doubt anyone would judge me if they did. Even if I'm not happy with how the world may see me now, in this small section of it, at least I'm safe.

At least I look like I belong.

I straighten up. Rupali rubs my back. "Feel better?"

"Yeah," I say. Truthfully, I mostly feel dazed, but I also don't feel sick anymore, which is a definite improvement.

"Tahani and I are sitting down for a moment to take stock of the supplies. Do you want to come join us?"

"I'd love to."

Rather than asking who Tahani is, I rack my brain. The name does sound familiar, and I'm sure Rupali's mentioned it a few times—when talking about her childhood best friend, in fact. The one who transitioned as a teenager.

Oh, no, I'm about to meet a trans woman who transitioned as a teenager.

Rupali ushers me to a table with two open, plugged-in laptops. I sit down, still mostly moving on autopilot. My ears are ringing and I'm not quite taking in what Rupali's saying anymore, but I look in the direction she points. My breath catches in my throat.

She's pretty simply dressed, in a low-cut top and high-waisted jeans. She's tall—almost certainly the tallest person in the room, but it really works for her instead of seeming conspicuous. She's long legs and slender, toned limbs and a river of jet-black hair that reaches down to her hips. Tahani looks like a supermodel, like she can only be described with words like "svelte" and "distinguished" and maybe even "ethereal". And the way she carries herself—she wears features that I've seen trans girls decry and fret over with the utmost grace and poise. Bushy eyebrows I could never pull off in a million years, a modest bust I would spiral over, her darker skin tone—she's so beautiful and confident in a way I don't think I'll ever be able to match.

She's collecting two drinks from the blonde woman behind the counter with a smile. She's walking towards me—that is, she's walking to our table, and she looks like *that* and I look like *this*. I want to heave up my guts again.

"That was an interesting conversation!" Tahani puts down the drinks and plops into her seat. She waves at me. "Hello, new person."

I awkwardly wave back.

"Tahani, this is Nichole, Kaal's flatmate."

"Oh, you're the mysterious girl Ru can't shut up about!" Tahani raises her cup at me. "Glad to see that you *can* leave the flat."

"Tahani!" Rupali glares at her.

"I was just worried I'd never be able to meet her, since the flat is a no-go zone due to the ancient laws of our culture, and your fiancé's sour attitude." Tahani smirks at me like we're sharing an inside joke, then turns towards Rupali. "Anyway, guess what!"

"What did you learn?" Rupali asks.

"Well, I thanked dear Dorothy for her boundless bi-weekly generosity, and I was able to gather over the course of the conversation that yep, she's not getting paid for those delicious treats outside." Tahani jerks her thumb at a window. "All supplied out of the goodness of her heart."

"Oh, that's very interesting." Rupali glances at her laptop screen. "Because we definitely have a catering budget allotted for these events. I even sent the spreadsheets to Kim to confirm."

"So our dear treasurer Quinn, who hasn't restocked the club supplies, who keeps telling us to take extra-good care of these handmade signs and flags, and who is outside right now trying to look like xe cares about these events xe usually ignores, is hoarding all these budget allocations for… what, exactly?" Tahani drums her fingers on her chin, faux-contemplative.

"Bigger Pride floats? The parade after-party?" Rupali shrugs. "That's all xe seems to talk about. The big event, so to speak."

"Xe's really not going to like it when we suggest boycotting all those precious arms companies the business and engineering schools just *love*."

I admit, I'm quite lost. I gather they're talking about the person who misgendered me after seeing me write down my pronouns, though. I clear my throat and speak up. "Quinn seems like a real piece of work."

Tahani raises both her eyebrows and claps lightly. "Your friend is perceptive, Ru!"

"Sorry, Nichole, didn't mean to just air all this out in front of you." Rupali closes her laptop with a sigh. "We've just been noticing some irregularities in how Quinn and Wendy seem to be running things."

"Wendy's the GSA President," Tahani says before I can ask. "Though, frankly, in name only."

Rupali elbows her. "I don't think Nichole really needs the full story right now, Tahani. This is her first time out in girl clothes."

"Oh, a milestone! I see, I see." Tahani nods. "You look more mortified than euphoric, though. Did you decide to be bold and face your fears, and your fears faced you right back?"

"Tahani!"

Tahani waves Rupali off. “The girl looks like she’s going to faint, Ru.”

Honestly, I’m relieved. “Yeah, um, you could say that. This really isn’t how I wanted this to go, you know?”

Rupali puts her hand on mine and squeezes. “I’m really sorry, Nichole.”

Tahani’s just nodding. “Yeah, I remember the awkward phase. You know, if you’d like, I can help you figure out how to transition your wardrobe with you? Stuff that looks good now that you’ll want to keep later. Like maxi dresses—they’d probably suit you right now.”

I can’t believe my ears. “Do you mean that?”

“Wait, that’s a great idea.” Rupali squeezes my hand again. “Do you want to go shopping sometime, Nichole? Whenever you feel more up to it, maybe?”

I still can’t believe it. Two women, one of whom is trans and knows exactly what I’m going through, offering to help me find clothes I like?

“Yes, of course, I’d love that so much! Thank you. Thank you both.”

CHAPTER 6
ACCEPTABLE CASUALTIES

Jeff

I wish I could skip this meeting.

Keeping up with both group chats while walking is a struggle. I tab over to Tahani and Rupali and tell them, once again, that there's no need to be alarmed, no reason to assume any kind of hostile intent. Then I tab back to the group DM in the GSA Slack. I inform Quinn and Wendy that yes, they're both on their way, and I'm sure we can sort out this misunderstanding without any drastic steps. As long as everyone keeps a cool head, and stays calm, and approaches each other in good faith, as I keep repeating again and again—everything will be fine.

We were allocated one of the smaller classrooms stuck in the corner of the natural sciences building, the stuffy one with uncomfortable wooden seats and tiny windows overlooking the parking lot. I rush inside to see that the other officers are already here. They're milling about the front desk, speaking animatedly in low voices. They barely respond when I sit down in the front row and issue them a quick greeting.

At the desk, Wendy looks up from her laptop for just long enough to wave at me. Her navy blue blazer matches the colour of her bangs, as do her

large, round frames. Quinn hovers at Wendy's shoulder, scowling at her laptop screen as she gestures towards it, whispering tersely. There's none of our usual camaraderie, no one cracking jokes or making small talk or talking about any plans to hang out after the meeting. Everyone's all set jaws and tensed muscles and rigid backs despite the innocuous-seeming agenda items written on the blackboard in multicoloured chalk. Pride events, plans for the end-of-year career fair.

I just stare at my phone screen, too wound up to even scroll mindlessly. Instead I'm doing my best to ignore the notifications from Tahani and Rupali. Five minutes after I arrive, the door opens once again. Quinn looks up and scoffs. "I see the guest of honour is finally here."

I sink a little lower in my seat and suppress a groan. I don't need to turn around to know who just walked in.

"Good afternoon to you too!" Tahani walks to the front of the classroom with Rupali in tow. They both settle down next to me, and I reciprocate their murmured hellos.

"Sure." Quinn straightens up, hands on xer hips. "You know why we've invited you to the officers' meeting, I hope."

Tahani sits up, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. "Did we finally carry enough things to unlock the next level in GSA?"

"Cute." Quinn nudges Wendy, who spins her laptop around so Rupali and Tahani can look at the screen. "Now, about this e-mail you circulated to the listserv."

"You don't need to show me something I wrote, Quinn." Tahani waves her hand dismissively. "It's quite fresh in my memory, you know."

Tahani's uncooperative attitude almost makes me want to start chewing on my fingernails again. I clear my throat. "What she means, Quinn, is that it's all just a misunderstanding—"

Rupali interjects. "It doesn't seem to be a misunderstanding at all, actually. We even asked someone familiar with the record-keeping to make sure."

Quinn glares daggers at her. "Alleging that the org is mismanaging funds is a *grave* accusation, you two."

"Oh, I'm so sorry, there *does* seem to have been a misunderstanding."

Tahani places a hand over her heart. "I'm not accusing the org of mismanaging anything, Quinn. I'm accusing *you*."

No one so much as breathes in the ensuing silence.

I place a hand on Tahani's arm. "Honey, I think you might—"

Quinn slams xer palm on the table loud enough to make everyone but Tahani flinch. "I think we've tolerated your deleterious presence in this org for long enough."

"Okay!" I wave both my hands to try and get everyone's attention. "Clearly, we all need to take a moment, take a deep breath, ground ourselves a bit, yeah?"

"Excuse you, 'tolerated'?" Rupali cocks her head, still stubbornly ignoring me. "Tahani and I go to every meet-and-greet, print out and organise pamphlet distributions—"

Quinn raises xer voice. "Thank you for being generous enough with your time to hand out flyers and show up for free muffins. That does not give you the right to act like you have seniority in this org when you don't, or that you're being grievously wronged when its members don't prioritise your personal hobbyhorses!"

"So, are we getting it on the record that you don't want the uni's anti-trans actions opposed in the slightest?" Tahani raises her eyebrows. "Your stance is that the queer organisation is not obliged to do or say anything on behalf of its trans members?"

"Tahani, that's hardly a good-faith interpretation of Quinn's words." Wendy speaks up now, adjusting her glasses. "The GSA has advocated on behalf of its trans members many times. We tried to help you when your insurance plan stopped covering HRT, didn't we?"

Tahani stares at Wendy for a few seconds. "Remind me how that went, again."

Wendy hesitates. "Well, there's also—I'm the editor of our newsletter, as a trans woman, and I've written so much about the worsening policy climate and the anti-trans legislation pushed because of a single detransitioner's testimony."

"I mean, that's great." Rupali frowns. "But the last time that detransitioner was invited to give a speech at the university, the GSA didn't so

much as put out an official statement. The student demonstrations weren't even organised through—"

One of the officers next to Quinn says, "I really don't think we, as cis people, should be weighing in on this matter, and certainly not by speaking over trans women."

"Thank you so much, Dennis." Quinn nods. "Funny you mention the demonstrations. Do you know what happened in the aftermath?"

Tahani turns away from scowling at Dennis to address Quinn. "Yeah, the media focused entirely on the tiny group of counter-protestors—"

"You made the uni the subject of the latest campus free-speech moral panic!" Quinn mockingly applauds. "The university itself became something to protest. Prominent donors and faculty were badgered for statements, asked to condone or denounce its actions."

"So the demonstrations were successful?" Tahani throws up her hands, eyes wide. "Putting pressure on the administration is the entire bloody point, and you're lambasting me for—"

"Of course it was 'successful' to you, wasn't it?" Quinn folds xer arms. "As long as your vanity project goes well, who cares about the repercussions? Who cares about the negative impacts on the uni's queer community, or whether your stunts threaten the very existence of the GSA? Because it's all about *you*, isn't it?"

"The fuck? You're the one who—!"

Dennis takes a step forward. "Rupali, if you raise your voice again, I might have to escort you out."

She leaps to her feet. "The HELL you will, Dennis. If you think I'm going to let you isolate Tahani while you all gang up on her, you do not value your safety enough."

"Ru, please, sit down?" Tahani pulls at Rupali's shirt. "Quinn, you're equating standing up for trans people with putting the queer community at risk. I hope I don't have to explain how self-evidently nonsensical that is?"

Everything is going wrong. I'm blinking back tears, choking on my own words, struggling not to double over and break down. I've screamed slogans in a crowd next to Rupali and Tahani. I've sung karaoke with Dennis

and his boyfriend. I've cried in Wendy's arms at the gay bar after being dumped. I don't understand why any of this is happening, why they're all at each other's throats like this, why no one's calming down and everyone's just constantly escalating and trying to shout over each other.

"Nice of you to restrain the straight girl so eager to scream at your fellow queers," Quinn says, rolling xer eyes. "This is precisely my point, Tahani. You're so single-mindedly focused on your pet issues that you don't understand the GSA depends on the uni's goodwill. If we start being seen as a problem, instead of a vital and diverse part of the campus culture, there may not be a GSA to organise any events—both the ones you love attending and the ones you're so dismissive of."

"The ones I 'love attending'?" Tahani squints. "That's certainly an interesting way to put it. I'm not sure how much you think I enjoy putting up signs and setting up tables."

"Tahani," I manage to whisper, practically begging, "please—"

"Plus, I'm not 'dismissive' of the Pride parade, or the career fair." Tahani gestures towards the blackboard. "I do question the logic behind inviting arms manufacturers, or banks whose owners are donating large sums to anti-trans politicians, instead of boycotting them."

Wendy closes her laptop with a snap. "I'm sorry, Tahani, that some of us have ambitions beyond holding signs on street corners for the rest of our days," she says sharply.

Dennis sighs. "I want to design planes, Tahani. I'm sorry if you think building commercial aircraft for Boeing implicates me in war crimes."

"We have more to think about than just making political statements endlessly for no gain and no purpose, Tahani." Quinn shakes xer head. "We can't all live our lives from one protest to the next, without a care for our future. Doesn't that matter to you? Are the lives of your fellow queers just acceptable casualties in your endless crusade?"

"Stop!" I'm crying now. I don't know when the tears started to fall, but I can't take it anymore. "Everyone, please, we're all—I thought we were all friends! Please, we have to stop infighting and screaming at each other!"

Tahani leans away from me. "Darling, I'm not the one raising my voice here."

"Right, you leave that to the cis girl." Quinn jerks xer head towards Rupali.

Tahani slaps both her thighs. "You know, I think I know where this is going. Why don't we call it, folks? Have a short meeting where you can cross me off the list nice and early?"

"Don't act like we take pleasure in this," Dennis says, and I can tell he's genuinely hurt.

"Of course not." Tahani stands up. "Sorry to be such a nuisance."

Rupali jumps to her feet too. "Tahani, wait!"

But Tahani's already left. Rupali whirls around, glaring at all of us, before dashing after her.

I'm sobbing. I can't stop sobbing. I bury my face in my hands as Dennis rushes next to me to hug me tight.

I open the front door with still-shaking hands.

The living room and kitchen are empty, which I'm glad for. My throat is dry enough to give me a persistent cough, and my knees wobble so much that I collapse into a kitchen chair after filling up a water glass.

My stupid phone won't stop buzzing. I tab over to the officer's Slack while gulping down huge mouthfuls.

Alex is blowing up the meetings channel. *"Hey gang, so is there a reason I wasn't invited to this 'emergency officer meeting'? And apparently neither were a couple other folks? And how come it wasn't announced or pinned in this channel?"*

Dennis' boyfriend, Benjamin, concurs: *"Yeah, what exactly was this meeting for? Denny's telling me it was about reaching out to queer-inclusive companies for the career fair, but I'm the one in charge of that and I wasn't notified?"*

I can't read any more of this. I swipe up to close Slack and my group chat with Rupali and Tahani reopens. Tahani's sent us a long series of texts, ending with:

"My point is that I'll be fine. You shouldn't stick your neck out for me—it is VITAL that you don't stick your neck out for me, in fact. I knew exactly what I was walking into today and I knew exactly how it would go and it did, and honestly I can just breathe a sigh of relief now instead of rocking on the edge of my seat waiting for the other shoe to finally drop. Pointing out the misallocations was Quinn's

last straw, and now xe doesn't have to put up with me anymore because apparently xe just has everyone on xer side, which is great. So there's no need for you two to martyr yourself on my account. No need to kick up a fuss. They'll just do to you what they did to me. It's really okay."

Rupali sends a reply when I'm halfway through reading the previous texts. *"Girlie, I literally only signed up for the GSA to support you. Stop writing your own eulogy and go spend time with Bobbie and Kim. I'll join y'all for dinner later."*

She also sends me a text privately. *"I'm coming over."*

I need another glass of water.

I'm too stressed out. She didn't even ask—though admittedly, I would've said yes if she did. And she does just tell me when she's coming over because she usually has business with Kyle anyway. I'm tempted to fake something, to lock myself in my room and say I have the mumps, or to leave and head to the gay bar and text Wendy and not deal with this right now.

But if I don't, I'll just have to deal with it tomorrow.

A third glass of water sounds good.

Rupali knocks on the door right as I get out of the bathroom. I steel myself for what's coming. Though a part of me is hopeful. Rupali knows my friends—not as well as I do, but she's spent enough time around them. If I can explain where they're coming from, we can all still see eye to eye.

When I open the door, she has her game face on. That expression she has when she doesn't really see you, even if she's looking at you, because she's troubleshooting, going through a series of flowcharts in her mind to solve the problem at hand. Rupali strides right past me, nodding slightly; I follow her to the couch and sit down with her, before her head snaps up.

"We're having dinner at her favourite hot pot place tonight, by the way, if you can swing by," Rupali says. "I know you don't hang out with us much outside of the club, but she'd really appreciate it if you showed up to support her."

"Of course." I still have plans with Wendy, but bars stay open late. "I'd love to."

"Yeah, right now we really need to keep her mind off the ambush." Rupali chews on her lip, looking right through me again. "I was barely

keeping her calm on the bus, but she'll be with her girlfriends all of today, and we'll have a good time at dinner, and then tomorrow, maybe we can take her to the movies to catch that *Legally Blonde* remake or something. The important thing is that she knows her friends have her back."

The way Rupali describes the meeting gives me a sinking feeling, but I nod along. "Yeah, obviously."

"Can you believe that freaking stunt?" Rupali shakes her head.

Please don't ask me that. "It got so heated. I wish it hadn't."

"That was *coordinated*." Rupali's practically snarling. "It's like they rehearsed or something, three people speaking over her one after the other, so much to say without actually addressing what Tahani had to—"

I can't stay silent any longer. "I mean, she *did* accuse Quinn of impropriety, didn't she? I feel like xe showed a remarkable amount of restraint, given that."

It's like that moment all over again. The stifling silence. The tension heightening. Rupali, no longer speaking, turns her head slowly. I turn mine away slightly. The way she stares at me almost burns.

"Jeff." Rupali's voice is syrupy sweet, and I know she's livid. "Can you run that by me again?"

I should have filled a fourth glass of water. "Rupali, I really want us all to see eye to eye—"

"You said that circus was Quinn showing 'restraint'." Rupali is glaring a hole right through me. "You actually said that."

"Tahani's barely been part of the GSA for six months! Fewer!" I can't help it—my frustration bursts forth. "Yet she acts like she should be running the show, like we don't have procedures, a leadership structure, seniority!"

Rupali scoffs and throws her hands up. "Quinn's been using those to stop us from doing things! Telling us not to notify people of protests through the listserv, quibbling over how the newsletter covers events—and then all the while xe's happily screwing up the books without so much as telling anyone."

Why can't Rupali see sense? "Quinn's the treasurer. Xe knows best where the funds should go, doesn't xe? It's still being spent on GSA activities. At best xe can be accused of an oversight, but Tahani acted like xe was embezzling funds for private limos or something."

"Oh, so now procedure isn't important?" Rupali slams her palms on the couch cushions as she stands up, and I flinch away from her. She paces in front of me with her hands on her hips, eyes wild, muttering under her breath.

It's a struggle to breathe evenly. My throat is horribly itchy. My heart won't stop hammering.

"Rupali, please calm down. I know you're Tahani's best friend. I'm only trying to get you to see everyone else's perspective. Tahani issued a very clear provocation, cast aspersions on the whole leadership, despite which no one actually said that they wanted to eject her. She just assumed that."

Rupali stops in her tracks and looks at me askance. "What the fuck do you think talking about 'no longer tolerating' her implies?"

"Okay, I'd really appreciate it if we didn't swear right now, at least?" I'm rubbing both my knees and trying to get my breathing under control. "I'm really doing my best to keep this civil."

"Are you serious?" Rupali keeps raising her voice, which just makes this harder. "Are you serious right now, Jeffrey?"

I take a deep breath and rub my shoulders before replying. "Yes, I am. And I don't understand why you're making such a big deal of this when Tahani clearly wants to move past this, too."

"Excuse me?"

I grab my phone off the couch and hold it up. "You read what she said. Tahani obviously recognises that this was unproductive and is asking us to do the same. So why can't you?"

For some reason, Rupali takes a step back. She places a hand on her heart, her face twisting. "You selfish, dumb, dense motherfucker."

"Please, Ru—!"

"She's fucking spiralling, Jeffrey!" Rupali screams at me and I burst into tears. I'm sobbing in front of her, but she keeps screaming at me. "After months and months of giving so much to this stupid org and begging them to take the slightest action in support of her rights, begging them to actually show that they fucking see her as part of the community, as worth fighting for, she gets dragged into what was practically a sham trial and treated like—like—like worse than dirt! Like a liability!"

"You're being really unfair right now!"

"And you think her telling us she's okay, she'll be okay, we don't need to say anything, we can hang her out to dry if she's too much trouble—you think that's her telling us to *move on*?" Rupali turns away from me with a noise of disgust, waving me off with one hand.

"I'm sorry!" I'm rocking back and forth. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry I thought that maybe Tahani was being considerate of others! I'm sorry that I thought she wouldn't want me to go against my friends."

I see Rupali's head droop. Her shoulders slump. "We thought you were our friend, too."

I cry harder.

Rupali sighs and turns around. "So we are liabilities, huh."

"No!" I wipe my cheeks, but the tears just won't stop. "No, you're clearly the victims of a horrible uncaring transphobic organisation that did everything it could to help Tahani get back on student insurance when the policies changed. Even though she was the only international student affected by them. And because it didn't work, you obviously get to browbeat and punish us and upend how the org functions. How could we deny you that right!"

"That's how it is, is it?" Rupali drops into the beanbag chair, head in her hands. "Yeah, Jeffrey, I'm punishing you for not succeeding. The org's refusal to take a stance on the university's transphobic actions, down to inviting the current detransitioner en vogue as a speaker, has no bearing on my feelings."

I laugh. "Why are you making such a fuss about detransitioners when Tahani's dating one?"

Rupali looks up at me. A whole minute passes before she speaks. "You're acting like you never knew Kim."

I take a deep, shuddering breath. My nerves finally seem to be settling, now that Rupali isn't yelling anymore.

"Clearly, I didn't."

"Fucking hell." Rupali sits up straighter. "I didn't realise you were such a lapdog for Quinn."

It's my turn to scoff. "Right, because you're not Tahani's attack dog at all. I saw you tell Tahani you only joined the org for her. Is getting to scream at queer people and stick your nose in queer business a nice perk?"

"You're so good at pointing out certain aspects of my identity when it's convenient to your argument, aren't you?" Rupali squints at me. "But you've got jack to say about the fact that Tahani and I got dragged into a room full of white people eager to dress us down."

"Oh, please!" I roll my eyes. "Yes, Tahani's such a helpless brown trans woman. She can't do anything wrong because she's so marginalised, she's so oppressed, she's certainly not privileged in the least. Sure, she transitioned as a teenager when so many trans people have to live with the wrong puberty for years, if not decades, but she needs the GSA to cater to her every whim because she might have to face a fraction of what practically every trans person—"

Rupali gets up and I stop talking. She walks towards me and leans down, so she's at my eye level.

"You know what she went through to get to transition. You know what her family did to her. What *my* family did to her. We talked about it. Remember when we talked about it? You hugged her because she was crying, and you said you can't even imagine going through that."

I clench my fists and stare at my knees. I can't bear to look Rupali in the eye.

"You thought that about her this whole time?"

"I—I have to go. I'm seeing Wendy at the bar."

I get up, practically push Rupali aside, and run to the door.

Nichole

A little while after the shouting stops, I hear the front door slam.

I swivel slightly in my desk chair, tapping the side of my mouse with a finger. I was grinding out my daily quests when I heard Jeff and Rupali start arguing, and figured I should just turn up the volume on my headphones and mind my own business.

Some of the stuff I heard Jeff screaming towards the end was pretty concerning, though.

I can hear cabinets being opened and closed in the kitchen, so Rupali must still be there. I haven't seen her around the flat these past few weeks as much as I used to, and so I haven't really had an opportunity to say hi or talk to her, despite her overtures. Truthfully, even now, I'm tempted to put my headphones back on and finish my dailies, sparing us both the awkwardness of acknowledging that I overheard something I probably shouldn't have. That's what I usually do.

But then I remember last weekend, when I was completely melting down at *Dorothy's* and Rupali came over to calm me down and ground me and reassure me, and I decide not to be an antisocial jackass.

I knock on my own door before opening it, which doesn't make any sense but I already did it. I don't want to startle Rupali. I see her in the kitchen, putting the kettle on, head low. She turns to look at me as I approach. Her eyes are very red.

"Hey," she says, voice raspy.

"Hey." I stand in front of her, hands clasped together. I can't think of anything to say to lighten the mood, so I just say what's true. "What Jeff said was really fucked up."

Rupali doesn't respond. She sniffles loudly, looks up at me, and throws her arms around me before I can register what's happening. After a few seconds of being tightly embraced, I put my arms around her too. We stand there, quiet, holding each other, listening to the electric kettle boil.

When it clicks, Rupali withdraws from me and goes to pour the water into a teapot. I sit down at the kitchen table and wait for her to bring it over, along with two teacups.

"Did you hear everything?" she asks, settling down next to me.

"Not quite, no." I watch her pour the tea into my cup first. "I gathered there was some kind of meeting that went bad."

"It wasn't a meeting. It was the GSA's officers all ganging up on us because—well." Rupali stops herself and takes a deep breath. "No point rehashing it one more time, is there?"

"I guess not." I hold the teacup in both hands, letting its warmth seep into my fingers. "But you can tell me about it. If you want."

Rupali sips her own tea. She nods. "Thank you, Nichole."

"Anytime."

"I feel so fucking stupid." Rupali shakes her head. "Tahani told me to stay calm, to keep my voice down—she didn't yell a single thing in that meeting, even when everyone was screaming in her face. I got up and threatened Dennis at one point and they just blamed my behaviour on her, like she said would happen. It was so fucked up."

I wish I had more than platitudes right now. "I'm sorry, that's horrible."

"And Jeff just—" Rupali cuts herself off again with a wave of her hand. "Can't really think about Jeff right now. I've got to focus on Tahani. Have a nice dinner with her. I'm just disappointed in everyone, including myself. I feel so stupid."

Maybe I can go one day without finishing my dailies. Kathy might kick up a fuss about it later, but this is more important. I lean forward and place my hand on Rupali's. "Would you two like to take me shopping tomorrow?"

Rupali turns her head towards me. Her eyes widen. "Oh! Nichole, that's a great idea."

I shrug sheepishly. "I'd love to spend more time with you two, and you'd be doing me a favour—"

"Nonsense! I mean yes, I've been meaning to spend more time with you too, and I was worrying that I'll probably have to come over even less now—but this is great, yeah!" She's seized at my arm with both hands now, chattering away, clearly excited. "It's really the perfect way to take her mind off this week, and we can make a day of it, we'll go to the mall downtown, perhaps?"

"Yeah, great, sounds like a plan." I smile, a bit overwhelmed, but happy. "Happy to help, you know?"

Rupali nods. "Hey, Nichole. Do you have any dinner plans?"

I think I'm out of ramen cups. "I don't have any prior engagements."

"Do you want to come to dinner with me? I'm heading out soon to meet Tahani and her partners for hot pot."

That would be going two days without finishing my dailies. And it sounds like a lot of socialising with people I don't know that well, Rupali included. But she looks so earnest and hopeful and she's smiling so brightly, in such sharp contrast to how morose she just was—how could I possibly say no?

"Yeah! Yes. Sure. I'd love to. I'll go get changed."

Jeff

"Anyway, where was I?" Wendy places two uncapped beer bottles on the table before sitting down. "Right, I fucking hate dating straight guys."

We're in our usual spot in the outdoor area, sitting in wicker chairs by a small, rickety round table. The bar isn't busy enough to be worth sitting inside yet, and the gloomy yellow streetlights provide a nice ambience early in the night.

I pick up my beer and take a sip, noting how Wendy sways a little in her chair. She got here before me and has clearly downed a drink or two already. I wonder briefly whether I should talk to her about watching her alcohol intake, given how much she frequents the bar, but I'm not in the mood to argue about anything more tonight.

Instead, I play along. "Don't say that! You're ruining the fantasy."

"It's a stupid fantasy." Wendy huffs loudly. "I dare the queens joking about how we only go on E to date our straight crushes: do it then! See how well it works out for you. The singular worst part about transitioning, by far, is that gay guys don't hit on me anymore. Fucking sucks."

"Yeah, because gay guys are such catches, right?" I wink.

"Oh, don't even start." Wendy rolls her eyes at me while chugging down the contents of her bottle a little too fast. "I know we all dream of the high school quarterback cornering us in the locker room, but it's only hot to read about on AO3. The reality of growing up and dating that dude is being stuck with someone who's never heard of conditioner and wants to tell you all

about how his favourite podcaster says that brushing your teeth is sissy behaviour."

"I think they say 'simp' nowadays, actually."

Wendy sighs and I laugh, a little too much. A little too shrill. My shoulders shake, my body trembles, and suddenly I'm facedown on the table, forehead resting on my forearm, crying into the crook of my elbow.

"Hey, come on, you nearly spilled my beer!" Wendy snatches her bottle up. "I'm only joshing, bitch, you know that. The podcast bros do inject their dicks with supplements to, like, last forever and fuck like animals, if it helps. You just can't let them get an ego about it."

"No, it's not that." I sit up and wipe my nose. "I'm just—Rupali and I fought today, after the meeting."

Wendy snorts. "Aw, is the straight girl still mad we didn't give her a gold 'Ally of the Year' medal for handing out leaflets?"

I hesitate. "No. I don't know. She did say—"

"Oh, this ought to be good."

"She does have a point that everyone at the officer's meeting was white, except for her and Tahani, you know?" I gulp down more beer. "She's not wrong about that."

Wendy raises an eyebrow. "Yeah, well, we're not the fucking Gay-Race Alliance now, are we?"

I don't think that's a thing, but I get Wendy's point. "I suppose."

"This is the fucking problem with you Westerners." Wendy slams her empty beer bottle down and leans forward, putting a hand on my shoulder. She's slurring her words, and her Polish accent comes back a little, like it usually does when she's tanked. "Some cishet girl learns the right SJW-speak and thinks she can shout at a whole room of queers because she's mastered the art of weaponising race, and all you cunts start begging her to let you be her gay best friend again. Have a little pride."

Wendy lets go, and I take another mouthful of my drink. My head buzzes; I've always been something of a lightweight. "She did kind of weaponise race, didn't she?"

"They always do." Wendy slaps her palm on the table. "She's from fuck-

ing Sri Lanka or something, isn't she? You know how they treat people like us there? You think that Taliban mindset disappeared when she got admitted to a Western college? She just learned how much she can get away with by tokenising her queer friends. Can you believe how she fucking threatened Dennis?"

I nod. "That was honestly so scary."

"Everyone has such an American mindset now, it's ridiculous." Wendy grabs my beer and takes a sip. "I'm supposed to feel bad for some rich girl whose parents are paying for a single room, just because of the colour of her skin? Because being born without melanin gave me some kind of 'privilege'? Except that *my* people get all the same xenophobia, work menial jobs, and get called lazy immigrants who need to be deported, but no one thinks about us because we're all *white*? Stupid."

I take my half-empty bottle back and pat her on the shoulder. "I'm sorry, Wendy. I didn't know about any of this stuff before you told me either, but I'm glad you took the time to educate me."

"Because that's what you do!" Wendy throws her hands up. "That's the stupidest part. Everyone acts like we're all obligated to learn all this ourselves. If you don't read critical race theory textbooks in high school, then you're a bad person now? My school did not even have functioning tube lights!"

I shake my head. "At least my Christian school had tube lights."

Wendy plops both her elbows on the table and rests her chin on the heel of her hand. "You know it's because Tahani enables all her bullshit, right? You can't criticise Rupali because she's friends with a *trans woman of colour*, the patron saint of queer rights everywhere. Meanwhile, look at what Tahani's doing and what she's getting away with, and what she lets her pet straight get away with."

I sigh. "It really is a lot. I don't understand why she thought she could attack the whole leadership without consequence."

"Because she's coddled." Wendy jabs a finger at me. "Because Westerners like you worship the ground the fabled 'trans woman of colour' walks

on, and now she thinks she has the right to usurp our authority, and we should hand it to her with a crown and a smile."

"She's always struck me as kind of entitled," I say. "The first time she came to the GSA was also at an officers' meeting, wasn't it?"

"Yes! And she told us to drop all the silly organisational busywork we were doing to keep things running and focus on getting HRT back on her student insurance plan. Because, of course, we were the ones in charge of that." Wendy scoffs.

"Absurd."

"Unbelievably." Wendy looks over her shoulder, and I think she's contemplating whether to get another beer. I pat her arm and she swivels her head back around. "Oh! Did you know she started transition younger than me? And still throws all these pity parties for her lost access? I had to start off swallowing my mother's extra birth control while waiting for clinic appointments."

"That sounds rough, babe."

"It was! But that's the difference between those of us who *know*, and need it, and those of us who only do it when it's easy." Wendy straightens up in the chair, smoothing the front of her blazer. "I *always* knew, and I always had to work for it. I had to work to convince my parents, the clinicians, I had to fight for it every step of the way. Tahani just wants everything handed to her."

I tilt my head, confused. I'm gripped with a sudden dread I can't quite place. "That sounds terrible, Wendy. But isn't it better to not put people through that, then?"

Wendy shrugs. "I would have loved to not be put through a fucking gauntlet to prove who I am. But you know what? I was, and that means that I have a certainty in who I am and what I want that a lot of other trans girls just don't."

I throw my head back and slam the rest of the beer down. "Sure."

"It's why you have all these bloody detransitioners here." Wendy raps the table with a knuckle. "Tell me—have you ever heard of an Eastern European detransitioner?"

"I suppose I haven't, no."

"Fucking exactly!" Wendy speaks at a volume that makes a nearby gaggle shoot us dirty looks, and I direct my best apologetic look back. "Everything about Western queers is so insufferable, so detached from what it means to be a working-class gay or trans person just trying to make it through this shit-ass world. So many people here transition because they think it's going to fix all their problems instead of creating new ones. I didn't do this because I *wanted* to, Jeffrey. I did it because I *had* to."

I nod, feeling dazed. "That makes sense."

"You're so lucky you don't have to put up with what I do, you know that?"

My ears are ringing. "Yeah."

"And speaking of Tahani, you just know she never had to endure it." Wendy leans in close, finally dropping her voice low. "What it's like to be a *fag*."

"Oh, certainly." This, at least, I understand. "Because she's a lesbian now, but then what does that imply about her before transition?"

Wendy's face twists into a sneer. "Fucking exactly. Straight guy does hormones and then acts like the queerest one of us all."

"It's ridiculous." I shake my head. "I've been thinking about what you said—she's got two girlfriends, right?"

"Two 'girlfriends', sure." Wendy emphasises the word with air quotes.

"Right—the two people she's dating are a non-binary butch, and someone who used to be a gay trans guy." I frown. "That's like—I don't know a lot about Egypt, but those three sure do love denial."

Wendy snickers. "I'm telling you. Trans 'lesbians' are all like that—they crave masc partners, but they don't want to confront how homophobic they were growing up. They don't want to admit that they actually want men. Because then they would have to admit that they're just like us faggots, and don't you know they're *better*? They're *lesbians*, Harold! They're so sparkly and perfect and girls-loving-girls—unlike us dirty sodomites who take it up the ass."

I shake my head. "I really don't understand it. It's like they're scared of really being gay, so they cling to whatever excuses they can."

"Give her a couple years." Wendy sighs. "I say this with no venom, but

the world will teach her that she can't identify out of being a faggot. I know that all too well. And she'll be better for it. She'll understand what the stakes really are, and stop treating us like we're the enemy."

The thought that Tahani and Rupali may yet come to their senses, even if it's years in the future, makes me feel better. "I hope so, too."

"She will." Wendy snorts. "Those lips and eyebrows wasted on a bitch in denial, I swear."

"There's no justice in this world."

CHAPTER 7
RECONFIGURATION

Nichole

Crosswalks is a massive mall complex in the city centre, a hulking mass of glass and steel spanning several blocks and squatting over six levels of underground parking. A multistory labyrinth of bright lights and buzzing escalators, it is bifurcated into two main buildings or "zones". The parallel floors are connected by, as the name foreshadows, crosswalks. I think one zone has more clothing and accessories and make-up, while the other has the movie theatre, gym, food courts, electronics stores, and other miscellany. The place markets itself as a convenient one-stop-shop, but in practice, it's so huge and confusing to navigate that considering it a singular stop seems wrong.

Rupali tells me we're meeting on floor five of Zone B, outside the coffee shop—not the chain brand coffee shop, the artisanal one—and I make sure to get there a good twenty minutes early, just so I can find the place on time and sit down on the bench in front of it.

This end of the mall isn't so crowded today. It's difficult to convince myself I'm being stared at when most people around me hurry by without sparing me a glance. Wearing my largest hoodie and baggiest joggers —in-

stead of Kathy's idea of a "sensible outfit"—probably helps with that. Still, I have to work to keep my breathing even, and I'm fidgeting with an old die from a lost board game in one of my pockets to keep myself soothed.

Going out for dinner with Rupali yesterday was one thing. It was dark and kind of late. We walked straight from the bus stop to the restaurant in, like, two minutes. Tahani was there with only one of her partners—the other one was working on a project or something—so I was spared the ordeal of trying to socialise with more than one stranger. As cool as I find Tahani and as much as I like Rupali, I don't know them well either. Nor am I practiced at spending extended periods of time with people who aren't Kathy. I just about managed to get through the hour by laughing at Tahani's jokes, eating blanched bok choy, and excusing myself when I "remembered a problem set I forgot was due".

But of course let's spend most of the day at the mall tomorrow, girls—I'm totally not fighting off a nervous breakdown at the very prospect.

I tap my trainers on the tiled floor and, chewing on my lower lip, glance around for signs of anyone I know. Left hand in one hoodie pocket running the die along my fingers, right hand holding up my phone so I can stare at it unblinking.

I feel it vibrate before I see Rupali's words bloom across the screen.

"We just arrived! We'll be with you in like five."

My anxiety about being in public subsides slightly. My anxiety about talking to people I know surges. I clench my fist around the die. Tight enough to hurt.

Soon enough, I spot them coming up the nearest escalator. Rupali first, lit up under a stray sunbeam that makes her stand out against the crowd even more than usual. Tahani and her partner are a step or two below her. The weather's getting warmer, and all three of them are wearing dresses, patterned florals much more suited to the time of year than my bulky, concealing layers.

I don't get to spread my petals in the summer breeze like they do.

It almost feels wrong. Getting up, walking towards Rupali, waving my arms to get her attention. Unlike her, I don't look resplendent and graceful

and feminine in the slightest. My hood's still up to hide my rashy face in shadow, and I walk with a slouch, hoping that my continued existence doesn't inconvenience anyone. Calling attention to myself for any reason is terrifying.

Fortunately, she sees me, so I can immediately stop.

"Nichole!" Rupali rushes over and hugs me, laughing, practically tackling me in the process. "Lovely to see you!"

I smile. "You too, Ru." I hug her back, and my shoulders feel just a bit lighter.

The other two catch up with us as we part. Tahani, intimidating enough on her own, is positively striking with her girlfriend's arm wrapped around her waist. Their dresses complement each other—Tahani's is peach and white, while her partner's is dark and silvery, draped over a lithe, muscular frame. Where Tahani is soft and delicate, her girlfriend is sinewy and statuesque, even taller than her, a chiselled sculpture with dark hair tied up in a ponytail. They're an impressive, imposing pair. I honestly don't think I'm worthy of breathing the same air as either of them right now.

Still, I should probably introduce myself. I stick my arm out stiffly. "Hello! Nice to meet you!"

Tahani's girlfriend looks a bit bemused. She accepts my hand with a low chuckle and replies in a voice that's deeper than I was expecting. "Hi, Nichole. I'm Kimberly. We met yesterday."

I wince, gritting my teeth and closing my eyes. "Right. Yeah. We did."

Kimberly snickers and claps me on the shoulder. "Don't worry about it. You clearly had a lot on your mind. Did you manage to finish your problem set?"

"Hm? Oh, yeah! Totally!" I enthusiastically nod at the same frequency as I pump Kimberly's hand up and down. "Right in the nick of time."

"Glad to hear it."

The handshake's gone on for too long, I realise. Mercifully, Kimberly stops it and carefully frees her hand from my grasp.

"Hey, Nichole." Tahani taps me on the shoulder and I swivel my head towards her with a start. "We're thinking of grabbing some lunch before we commence the sartorial pilgrimage. Do you have a preference?"

"Oh, um." My eyes dart around. "I think I'm good with whatever."

"The sandwich place over here is excellent," Rupali says.

I nod vigorously. "Yeah! Sounds great!"

"That was our first choice too." Kimberly leads the way, pulling Tahani along. "My treat."

I hesitate at that. "Oh, you don't have to—"

"Wasn't a question." Kimberly looks over her shoulder and grins. "Relax, okay?"

Easier said than done. "Okay."

I follow. Rupali keeps pace with me, and I studiously avoid glancing in her direction. Her perfume smells amazing, like freshly showered grass in springtime. I wish I thought to put on perfume—I wish I owned perfume. She's walking rather close to me, and our arms occasionally touch. What would it be like to hold her hand? Or even put my arm around her, the way Kim holds Tahani?

I should stop thinking about it. It's a silly idea.

The sandwiches look good, at least. It's one of those places where you have to pick all the ingredients down to the bread—fresh sourdough ciabatta, or multigrain baguette? We slide into a corner table and see that there are pencils and little order forms for us to fill out. Kim offers to take our orders up to the register. Tahani, apparently unable to stomach being out of reach of Kim's breathtakingly well-defined arms, goes with her.

I can't help but stare at them. They wait by the counter, hugging tightly, Tahani burying her face in Kim's chest. Occasionally, she looks up at Kim with the biggest smile on her face. The two of them seem oblivious to anyone and anything around them, happy just to stare into each other's eyes for minutes on end, saying nothing.

I don't think I've ever had that with anyone else. Certainly, no one's ever treated me the way Kim treats Tahani, touching her constantly and eagerly but oh so carefully, like Tahani's a crystal figurine.

Is this just what happens when you're hot? Your presence becomes enough to keep people entranced and captivated?

Will I ever know what that feels like?

"I miss when Kaal used to look at me that way."

I almost fall out of my seat. Right, Ru's still here, sitting right next to me

—and she's staring at Kim and Tahani too, with this distant expression on her face. So far, I've avoided thinking too hard why the frequency of Rupali's visits has gone down sharply, or why Kyle's been surlier than usual of late. It would probably be rude of me to ask. But if I'm being honest with myself, I'm really, really curious.

I clear my throat. "Everything okay with you two?"

Rupali drops her gaze. "Sure. We make sure to check in with each other every day to keep our stories straight. Occasionally, we meet up to call our parents together. Picture-perfect couple, especially in the pictures."

"Ah."

Her tone is dejected, and I try to figure out the appropriate way to sympathise with her predicament. I place a hand on her shoulder and tentatively say, "My condolences."

She barks out a short laugh. "Don't worry about it."

"Okay." My heart's pounding again. Why does that always happen when I talk to Rupali? "But like, I did mean it when I told you that you can talk to me about this stuff. And it seems like you need to."

I reach up and lower my hoodie so that she can hopefully see I'm sincere.

Rupali turns to face me. "You're right. I do. It's just hard because—it's difficult to explain everything. To explain Kaal's and my situation."

"I'm listening." After a pause, I add, "I won't judge."

"Maybe you should, a little." Ru chuckles softly. "Kaal told you we're engaged, right?"

I try to recall. "'Told' is a strong word. I think I gathered that was the case from context, over time."

"Right. It's somewhat easier to drop it in conversation, like it's normal." Rupali twirls a lock of hair around her index finger, tugging at it lightly. She's looking down at her knees again. "Yeah, we're in our twenties, we're going to get married after college, don't worry about it. Yes, we're very sure because our parents didn't really give us much of a choice about it."

"Ah."

"It's more normal in my culture." Rupali sighs. "I mean, the done thing these days is to match-make once your kids are of marriageable age. The

thing with me and Kaal—the whole being promised to each other by our families when we were kids—that's way more old-school. Doesn't really happen very much any more, except when it does."

My guts roil. It's not just what Rupali says but how she says it: bloodlessly, in a completely even tone. Even as she talks about how it isn't normal, it's normal to her. Her normal. I haven't had much say in the circumstances of my birth, and I grew up with pretty crappy parents, but I can't even imagine having a husband picked out for me before I was an adult.

That'd require my parents to care about my life at all, for one thing.

There's also the detail of having a *husband*. Admittedly, I haven't given a great deal of thought to my sexuality. As with most other things in my life, I've been too focused on my lack of transition resources to worry about the pesky details of who I am and who I want to be once I actually start the process. I'm pretty sure I like girls, for the most part. Though I've never really had a girlfriend. The first time I told a girl I had a crush on her, she immediately announced it to the whole class. I was bullied so relentlessly for being a shy, nerdy loser with a crush on a pretty, smart, sporty girl that I learned to keep things like that to myself. I don't even really talk about girls and crushes with Kathy.

That abject fear of approaching women did almost convince me for a minute that I might be into guys. I've read stories from other trans girls online, how their sexualities changed once they started hormones, how they found themselves attracted to men when they weren't earlier. A part of me almost hoped this would happen to me too, just so I'd never have to work up the courage to ask a girl out ever again. Maybe it's still too early to tell, but I doubt it's happening to me. Thinking of being with a man—to say nothing of being promised to one—just gives me a sense of unshakeable dread.

Steeling myself, I put my arm around Rupali and pull her in. We sit with our heads together, holding each other tight.

"That sounds rough."

"Thanks." Rupali squeezes me tighter. "It could be worse. I'm pretty lucky, to be honest."

"You are?"

"Well, yeah. I actually like Kaal."

My heart sinks. "I see. That's good, I guess."

"It is. Or it would be, if not for that one thing." Rupali lets go of me and sits up, gesturing towards Tahani. "I told you a bit about what happened to her."

I nod. "Yeah, you said your best friend had a hard time when she came out too."

"Understatement." Rupali takes a deep breath. "Tahani's home situation has been tough. She was always a pretty gender non-conforming kid, and her dad didn't like that."

"Fuck."

"She's spared me the details." Rupali's hands clench into fists. "But, you know, we used to live next door. And I'm not blind."

I hug her again.

Rupali exhales, long and loud. "I trust you won't bring it up unprompted."

I shake my head. "Of course not. Everything stays between us."

"I didn't think you would, but I had to make sure, you know?"

Ru smiles at me, and I smile back, feeling lightheaded. She looks back at Tahani and rests her head against my shoulder. "It was just one thing after another. Her mum had to fight like hell to get full custody. Our families didn't really cut off ties with him either, which is funny because he was an 'outsider', so to speak. They got married without family approval. But it's worse to be a divorced woman than it is to be married to someone the family doesn't approve of, I suppose."

I wish I had something more useful to say. "That's horrible."

"And then it all came to a head when Tahani came out and her mum supported her instead of shipping her off to a faith camp like everyone else wanted." Rupali's voice is completely lifeless, monotone. "They cut her off. Tahani and her mum couldn't afford the house without support and moved away. I stayed in touch. Others didn't."

I think I know what she's implying. "Kyle didn't?"

Rupali's silence is as definitive an answer as any.

"Wow." I'm struggling to wrap my head around all this. "I'm sorry, Ru. This is a really messed-up situation."

"It's messed-up for him too." Rupali hesitates. "He helps, in his own way. The three of us were friends once. Kaal hasn't said anything about me spending time with Tahani, and he never asks what I'm doing or who I'm seeing, and he covers for me just the same."

I feel sick again. "You make it sound like that's a favour he's doing you. He shouldn't have a say in it at all, should he?"

Rupali laughs, and this one is long and bitter. "He shouldn't, but."

"Right." I frown. "Your culture."

"Yeah." Ru sighs. "Listen, Nichole. I don't want you to get the wrong idea about this stuff."

I'm not really sure how I could get the "wrong idea" based on what she's told me. "Okay?"

"Kaal's doing a lot better than most guys would in his circumstances. And I have a pretty sizeable family group chat, so I have a lot to compare him to, believe me." Rupali speaks rapidly, almost frantic. "It's just this one thing, and it's because he knows what a risk it is to be in contact with—it shouldn't be, and he agrees it shouldn't be, but it is. And he has to keep that in mind too, you know?"

Pretty convincing as far as excuses go, I don't say. "Right."

"All I want is for us to see eye to eye on this." Rupali sounds so crestfallen. "Tahani isn't just my best friend. She's my sister in all but name. I can't imagine my life without her in it, and I hope Kaal sees that."

Based on what I know about the draconian, grumpy, set-in-his-ways guy I live with, Rupali's hope is misplaced. But I'm pretty sure telling her that right now would be inappropriate. Maybe when we're better friends.

"I hope Kaal comes around too."

"I'm starting to miss him, you know?" Rupali chews on her lip. "It's ridiculous. We go to the same school, we share so many classes, and I miss him."

That *is* ridiculous. I avoid meeting Rupali's lovelorn gaze. "Well, give him time. All the time he needs. He probably needs a lot."

"I think so too, which sucks. I feel like I'm experiencing Kaal withdrawals."

"Ah."

"I mean, just cuddling him!" Rupali slides back, putting a good few inches between herself and me. "That's all we do."

I really don't need to hear this. "I wasn't implying—"

"Not that I don't want—I mean, you've seen him, you know what I mean."

It's getting harder to breathe again. "I do? Do I?"

"He's always been a pretty guy, don't get me wrong." Rupali's eyes are on the ceiling and her mind is somewhere else entirely, insensate to my desperate attempts to steer the conversation in any other direction. "But celibacy used to be a lot easier, like until last year? And then suddenly, he just—wow. Especially lately, you know?"

Breathe, Nichole. She couldn't possibly suspect anything. "I have no recollection nor knowledge of anything that might have altered Kyle's appearance in any significant way. Maybe he does push-ups in his room. For his pectorals?"

"I've never known him to work out much." Rupali shrugs. "It's more like his face, anyway, like it got softer or something. Do you think he got a skincare routine?"

"Quite possibly! I couldn't really say!"

"Order up!"

Kim and Tahani finally return. Each carries a heavily laden tray, which Rupali and I promptly take from them with profuse thanks. I practically tear the sandwich wrapper off with my teeth and take a huge bite to occupy my mouth. I make sure to chew very, very thoroughly.

"So, plan of attack." Tahani addresses me with both her arms wrapped around Kim, who's forced to eat one-handed. "Trousers are the biggest win here. A pair of skinny jeans, another pair of nicely tailored trousers, and even wearing your old T-shirts with them gives 'girl clothes', you know? You'd have to buy a bunch of blouses, and you probably will, but a couple of good pairs of trousers will go a long way."

I nod through a mouthful of sandwich and make noises of assent, but I'm

only half-listening. It probably doesn't mean anything. Shouldn't read too much into it. But—

Having your family pick your husband for you is horrible. Even Ru can't deny that, through all her insistence that she's so lucky and really doesn't mind. She's known Kyle for a long time, and he tolerates her friendship with Tahani—for now—and he's also hot.

Or at least, has become hot over the past year.

Maybe Ru hasn't thought about her sexuality very much either. She's never had a reason to. But what if she did? What if she actually considered what she wants, what she likes—*who* she likes?

Would she still land on Kyle as her first choice?

Kyle

"Katherine? A word?"

I put the sponge and brush down, rinsing my hands off in case I need to chase after her. Fortunately, she seems to be in one of her less flighty moods. Katherine kicks her door shut behind her and turns to face me. Makes no move to approach me, however. I take my gloves off with a sigh and walk across the kitchen.

"Is this about domestic labour schedules again, Kaalappan?" Katherine has the temerity to look annoyed. "I'm sure you'll find you have no need to account for me in that regard."

"I noticed that you started washing your dishes right after using them, which is an improvement, sure." I jerk my thumb at the dish basket. "You do still leave them to dry, and therefore leave them for me to put away."

"Understood. I shall endeavour to dry them right away as well. Will that be all?"

It's a struggle not to grind my teeth. "No, actually. While I'm jazzed that you're no longer leaving half-full tubs of melted ice cream in the sink for me to sort out, we still have a rota, Kathy. And it includes more than the dishes."

Katherine frowns. "I don't see why? If I simply avoid placing any undue

burdens on you or the others, and take care of my own living space, there is no need for me to be involved in these tedious matters at all."

I put a hand on my hip. "Girl. I can *smell* how well you're taking care of your own living space through the closed door."

But Katherine's already turned her back on me and is halfway to the exit. She stops and looks back over her shoulder. "A pertinent critique. I shall make sure to aerate my abode more thoroughly, and furthermore shoulder the responsibility of cleaning the public living space directly outside my door. This should more than suffice, I'm certain."

"It will not!" I throw my hands up. "I'm sorry, do you not use the 'public living spaces' at all? Do you not track your filth all over the bathroom and living room? Are you going to fucking piss in a bucket from now on?"

She kicks the front door shut behind her before I finish my last shouted sentence. I'm left glaring daggers at where she stood, which is silly and achieves nothing.

So I return to the kitchen with a frustrated growl.

No more dishes to clean, at least. I can get started on meal prep. I dig a bag of onions out of the pantry, grab my cutting board and knife, and get to work. Peel about a dozen onions, split them all in half, then get to dicing. Let the rhythmic motions and sounds of the knife slicing through layer after layer calm me down and push all thoughts of Katherine's mutating germ cultures out of my mind.

I wish I didn't have such a temper.

Not for Katherine's sake. I get no joy out of yelling at her to pull her weight all the time, but if I don't do it, nobody in this bloody flat will. Nichole's known her all their lives, she says, but all her promises of wrangling Katherine amount to squat.

The two of them hardly seem like best friends anymore. Wherever Katherine's off to, I doubt it's to meet up with Nichole, who speaks to her childhood friend less than I do these days. After all, she's too busy spending time with *my* fiancée.

Maybe if I had less of a temper, I'd actually get to see Rupali too.

I want to see her, but I shouldn't. Losing my cool once was enough, and if

I can't trust myself to keep a lid on it, then I can't trust myself around her. Let her enjoy her time here, with Nichole and her sister and any other queer strays she'd like to adopt. She has the entire rest of her life to put up with my cantankerous ass. I should let her enjoy her freedom while she still can.

Of course, freeing Rupali of the burden of spending time with me really reveals how little I have going on. I basically just go to class, come home to finish my problem sets days in advance, and put that well-earned spare time to good use as the flat's unpaid maid.

Selfishly, I really enjoyed all the time Ru and I spent together. Whether we were watching some interminable soap in bed, or "co-working" when I knew for a fact she was writing fan fiction, or going on little walks during the odd hour we were able to steal away from our busy schedules.

I even enjoyed gluing sticks to signs in her presence.

Onions are done. I get my biggest pot out of the cupboard and wait for it to heat up on the stove. Meanwhile, I retrieve what I need from my bag of whole spices. Cinnamon, cloves, cardamom, a few other knick-knacks. Bloom them in oil, fish them out with a spoon before adding the onions. Turn the heat low.

Rupali really likes my cooking. I should freeze a box or two of this stuff once I'm done preparing it, to give to her the next time we have to call amma together.

I don't understand why she's suddenly so interested in my flatmate. It's obvious why Nichole wants to be around Rupali, but there's absolutely nothing compelling about Nichole that would make anyone want to hang out with her for reasons other than pity. She's dull and lifeless at the best of times. Okay to live with, capable of sorting her messes out before they become active biohazards, but her personality is as compelling as my linear algebra homework. At least Kathy's colourful, for all her faults.

The fact that they're both suddenly such social butterflies is confusing me, too. The reason I ended up rooming with them in the first place was because I'm not good at making friends and didn't have a group to sign up with. For a good long while, this was a flat of three shut-ins, and Jeff. Now I'm the only one who has to invent reasons to leave the house regularly.

I've always told myself it's the cultural barrier. It's hard enough for many people at this school to relate to me even before the word "fiancée" or the whole arrangement with Rupali enters the mix. Most of them are churning through partners and talking about how hard or fun it is to date around, and I simply have nothing to contribute there. Me with my locked-in life plan and the post-graduation wedding, its date rapidly being finalised by the women of my family. Each one miserable in their lot, each one telling me how joyous an occasion marriage is.

But maybe I'm only telling myself that to feel better about how unlikeable, boring, dull and lifeless I really am. As the woman who's known me my whole life finally figured out.

Or knew all along, and could no longer pretend otherwise.

Tomatoes are diced, but the onions still need a bit. I open the fridge and rummage around for other veggies. Mushrooms, peppers, chillies, and the bag of frozen peas will do. I take out the soaked beans as well and place them on the counter.

I could say that Jeff likes me, but that proves nothing. He doesn't know a thing about me. Since we moved in, he's been trying to work out a way to approach me, and the best he's come up with is researching a country I may be a citizen of but never really lived in. Anything Jeff likes about me has nothing to do with me and everything to do with some guy he hallucinated, who happens to look exactly like me.

At least that means I'm good-looking, I guess? To gay guys, anyway.

It's honestly as mystifying to me as Rupali's bizarre affinity for vacuous hermits. If I asked Jeff point-blank to explain why he's into me, what would he even say? Aside from the words "tall, dark and brooding". Do you find how taciturn I am hot, Jeff? Does the way I scrub the bathroom tiles set your loins afire?

He's not exactly hurting for options, either. Jeff regularly heads out to "chill at the bar" and comes home the next morning. He always has a date or two on the weekends, and keeps busy with the GSA besides. Of everyone in this rancid fruit basket of a flat, Jeff is the only one who could be described as legitimately sociable, likeable, attractive. Actually living his best

college life. But for some reason, instead of finding someone who's genuinely attracted to him and who'd happily give him everything he wants, the twisted little masochist can't help but be fixated on me.

It'd be funny if it wasn't so pathetic. The cute twink with a revolving door of sexual conquests, obsessed with the cranky loser who won't have him. I wonder if I should be appalled or flattered.

A bit of both, I think.

A key turns in the lock, and I hear dear Jeffrey return from his run. No doubt he'll be eager to sniff around my skirts for whatever little scrap of affirmation I can be bothered to throw his way, before slinking off to another dalliance that doesn't hold his attention like I do. Should I give him any more attention than usual, perhaps?

"Hello, Jeffrey." I greet him without turning around, before he can say anything. "Off to another date tonight?"

"Uh, hello Kyle!" He sounds surprised that I'm initiating the conversation for once. "The kitchen smells amazing—I mean, yes, I am. After getting showered and dressed. Obviously. Guys don't like it when you show up to a date sweaty! Well, some do. Some guys are into that. Not me, though, and hopefully not my date either."

I continue finely chopping mushrooms to a duxelle consistency until Jeffrey's nervous nattering peters out. "So you wouldn't date a sweaty armpit fetishist."

"Um." Jeffrey hesitates. "Well, it would really depend."

"So you *would* date a sweaty armpit fetishist?"

"I didn't say that!" There's a satisfying note of panic in his voice now. "I have no preference—I haven't honestly given it much thought."

I finally turn my head to greet him with a quizzical expression, my eyebrows knitted together. "Why'd you bring it up, then?"

Jeffrey's face promptly falls, as it usually does when he finally realises what's going on. "Sorry about that. I'll go get ready now."

I watch him go with his tail tucked between his legs, but something moves me to speak before he gets to the bathroom.

"You go on a lot of first dates."

Jeff freezes. Turns around. "I do? Oh, I suppose I do, from most people's point of view. I mean, it's kind of a normal level for out gays, you know?"

"Really? You don't date any more than the average gay guy?"

That actually gets him beaming. He cocks his head a bit and practically does a little twirl. "Well. I *am* probably on the other side of average. Just a bit."

"Not looking for a boyfriend, then?"

Jeff's expression is priceless. "I... I'm not sure."

I shrug, nonchalant. "It sounds fun. Sleeping around. Being chased. Do a lot of the guys ask you out?"

"Yeah." Jeff stares at the floor, rubbing the back of his neck. "It is fun, don't get me wrong. That's why I keep saying yes. But it does kind of, not suck exactly, but it is rough because even if you want something more serious, most guys don't. Not right now, not in college. Men are just looking to get what they want from you and then ghost you. Move onto the next one."

I nod sagely. "Sounds rough," I say, like I have the slightest bit of experience with such things. "But this date's going to be fun, right?"

"Sure. I'm sure it will be."

He's so sad. It's a struggle not to cackle in his face. I purse my lips and stir the vegetables in the pot. "You don't sound that enthused."

"I am."

How convincing. "Oh, good. Because if you're not, I could fix you dinner."

I think Jeff is having the same reaction to my offer that I am, which is wondering whether I actually said what I said and why the hell I did so.

"Dinner? As in, what you're cooking?"

Well, I'm committed now. "I'm cooking food. Food's made to be eaten, Jeffrey."

"Right! Of course!" The sheer elation grates on me—he's squealing like a schoolgirl. "Um, sure, I'd be happy to."

He's blowing off a date for me. He's actually blowing off an actual date, for *me*.

What a psycho.

I salt the tomatoes, no longer looking his way. "Well, I'll come get you when it's ready. It'll be about an hour."

"Do you want any help—?"

"Don't get in my way while I'm cooking, Jeff."

"Got it. See you in an hour."

Katherine

There is no escape from the labyrinth of my design.

My opponent has made a miscalculation most grievous, for the arcane mysteries of the universe are my chosen field of study, and my preferred pastime is examining the fabric of reality for imperfections. Compared to living on the edge of the quantum cliff, a collectible card game is mundane. Amusing only insofar as the art is pretty, and the text occasionally jocular. I identified the strongest strategy within moments of being introduced to this frivolity. Soon after, I appointed myself sovereign of this and all future games, sitting atop a throne of sapphire-tinted power. My permission must be sought before so much as a cantrip may be cast.

Not even perfect play could have saved my foe, because the miscalculation was inviting me to sit at her table in the first place.

"Highlights, does the buff go through or not? I have to make dinner soon."

I examine my hand with the detached air of one who examines freshly manicured nails. "The rules do not impose a time limit on decision-making, do they? I am entitled to exercise every advantage at my disposal, which includes examining every decision tree available to me, at my leisure."

Emmy sighs. "Sure, but if you don't play a card soon, I'm going to scoop so I can make myself mac and cheese."

"No need for that!"

I let myself forget that I am playing with a loser most sore, one with no respect for the competitive spirit, who would happily deny me the spoils of victory to continue gorging on substandard victuals. Sitting up straighter, I glance at my hand of three cards again. It contains two counter-spells, but I only possess the resources to cast one. I cannot simply allow Emmy to

strengthen her plant creature, however. That would mean letting her play cards, and the only person who should get to do that is me.

So I commit more than half my available mana cards, turning them sideways with a flourish. "Very well, I shall counter your feeble attempt at posing a threat to me. The buff does not go through, to use your vernacular, and instead fizzles out in a pathetic display."

"Sure. You counter my single-target buff, so then I cast the mass buff I've been saving. I'm pretty sure you don't have the mana available to cast your other counter."

"Um." I peer at the description of the new card Emmy has placed on the table. "I need some time to consider—"

"For fuck's sake, highlights, you built that deck using my cards." Emmy rolls her eyes. "You used up all the good counter-spells earlier, and you don't have enough mana to cast any of the remaining ones. My plant tokens all get a power boost, and then I'm going to cast this to double that power boost, and then I swing them all at your face. Game, set, match."

My two remaining cards stare back at me from my hand, mocking my mana poverty with their exorbitant costs. I groan and toss them aside. "It is as you say. Well played."

Emmy snorts. "I wish I could say the same."

"You are as sore a winner as you are a loser, I see."

"How would you know?" Emmy smirks as she gathers the cards up. "I haven't lost yet."

I slam my palms on the table. "Yet! It is but a matter of time."

"Can you keep it down?" Emmy's eyes dart about the empty common room in a display of contrition and caution befitting a matronly nag. "I know you're not used to dorm decorum, highlights, but this is a public area. People are trying to sleep, or study, or—"

"It is a weekend, Emmy." I scoff. "I would hazard that most of this building's occupants are *out*, unlike you."

"You are literally spending your weekend the same way I am."

"Yes, and I went out to do so."

Emmy makes a loud, throaty noise in lieu of a counterargument, sig-

nalling that I have secured rhetorical victory yet again. "Right, well, I hope you enjoyed your Saturday night in the engineering quad dorms. Have a safe walk home, I'm gonna start on a late dinner."

"Already?" I glance down and see that Emmy has placed both decks back in her storage box of cards. "We only played three games!"

Emmy slides her chair back and stands up. "Three games that took absolutely forever because you gravitated to the strategy most suited to your personality."

"Thank you."

"That was not a compliment." Emmy gestures at the storage box. "Help me carry this back to my room?"

I consider inventing an emergency to attend to, but that would be counterproductive for my long-term goals. Stick to the plan, Katherine, and ingratiate yourself to the vassal so you may yet have the ear of the queen.

"I would be happy to."

We position ourselves on either side of the transparent plastic box and each grab a handle. It is overstuffed with decades of printed and reprinted cards, garish posters depicting the fantasy world of the game, and even lore books that are passed off as novels. I heft the burdensome trove with all my might, barely keeping pace with Emmy, who uses a single hand to carry her end. Our shoes are loud on the stained, fibrous carpeting as we walk down a narrow passage speckled with doors on either side.

"You really should consider working out. Like, ever." Emmy appraises me with a raised eyebrow. "It'd help in the, ah, chest growth department as well, you know."

I huff in response. "I shall be sure to seek your wisdom, should I ever find myself in dire enough straits to require it."

"Yeah, what useful advice could second place in the global rankings possibly dispense?" Emmy snickers. "Suit yourself, though. If you're as good at, ahem, cultivating pectoral adipose as you are at *Magic*, that's one less threat for me to monitor."

I would cross my arms if both my hands were not occupied. "And if you

allow luck to inflate your ego to this extent, then you are far less of a threat than I anticipated."

"You know the essence of any game is consistency, not luck, right?" Emmy shakes her head. "Approach everything in life with purpose, highlights. For example, in *Magic*, you usually need actual card draw and more than an infinity of counters. You can't just sit around trying to prevent others from doing things and hoping you'll win that way."

I cock my head. "I can't?"

Emmy groans. "In the interests of not inflicting another mono blue player on the world, you can't. You actually need a proactive game plan of your own. Splash in a bit of direct damage with red cards, if you like. You seem like you'd enjoy raining hellfire on your foes."

She isn't wrong. "Hm. Perhaps."

"Or if you insist on being maximally irritating, you can at least splash in some white and be effective at it." Emmy jerks her head at the box. "You can destroy everyone's creatures, disrupt mana curves, play indestructible flying monsters—you know, do something other than say 'no' every time I try to have fun."

Emmy continues to speak as though her words hold any value, a preposterous notion of which I desperately wish to disabuse her. And yet, there is utility to keeping mum. It is easy to see that Emmy is very lonely. Her only avenue for socialisation is a weekly colloquium of dullards who talk only of this children's game and nothing else. Her eagerness to meet with me, under the flimsy pretext of coaching me to improve, shows that she is desperate for another outlet, as does her propensity for oversharing information with me. The more time I spend with her, keeping her happy, the more I can learn about Laura and increase my chances of meeting her again.

So I nod and make noises of agreement. "You certainly make an intriguing case. I will consider enhancing the efficacy of my strategies through the deployment of white power."

"That is definitely not what I said, and do not ever say it like that again."

We finally reach Emmy's room and put the box down so she can unlock the door. She pulls out her keyring and is fumbling with it when a loud

buzzing emanates from the back pocket of her jeans. I glance around as she retrieves her phone, and feign an interest in the chipped paint and flickering tube lights while keeping my ears peeled.

"Hey babe, what's up?"

Muffled, dampened, and barely perceptible thought it may be, I still recognise that voice. Emmy and I listen for some time, both of us silent and paying rapt attention. If I close my eyes and strain my hearing, I can focus on Laura's words. I'm able to make out "crummy day" and "useless garbage fire advisor".

"Here?" Emmy looks back at the path we just traversed. "I mean, yeah, you can if you'd like. Yeah, I'm free, I was going to make dinner—oh, really? Sure, I'll take a panini."

I can hardly contain myself. From the bits and pieces of the conversation I'm privy to, it certainly seems as though Laura is on her way here, right this very second. The time and effort I spent enduring Emmy's odious company is about to pay off.

"My what?" Emmy glances at me over her shoulder. "'Friend' is a strong word, Laura. I'd call her an acquaintance, at best. No, she was just about to get going—what? You don't need to do that. Are you serious? Ugh, fine." With a belaboured sigh, Emmy turns around and offers her phone to me. "Laura would like to know if you want anything from *Dorothy's*."

I snatch the phone out of her hand before she finishes speaking. "A grilled pesto focaccia would be lovely, thank you!"

"You got it, cutie pie," Laura says, and my heart absolutely melts. "I'm getting us all diet cokes, are you good with that?"

"You are most generous and benevolent and I do not deserve such kindness!" My knees buckle due to Emmy insistently jabbing her elbow into my ribs, and I look up to see her glaring daggers at me. "I mean, a diet coke sounds lovely. Thank you." I return the phone to Emmy, trying not to jump for joy.

"Yeah, so how much do I owe—and she hung up on me." Emmy sighs and puts her phone back in her pocket. She frowns when she sees the expression on my face. "What?"

"The rivalry between you and Laura seems quite heated." My smirk grows wider. "Downright torrid, in fact."

Emmy unlocks her door. "Can you make your threats after we've squared the box away, at least?"

"You misunderstand me. Let me emphatically state that I have no intention of calling a tribunal for any reason." I pick up my end of the trove once more and follow Emmy into her room. "After all, fraternisation between competitors is hardly against the rules, is it?"

Emmy snorts. "Rampant, more like. Here is fine, you can drop it."

I immediately let go, and the box falls to the floor with a resounding thud. I raise my voice slightly, so Emmy can hear me over her swearing. "Odd to take such issue with behaviour you so thoroughly indulge in."

Emmy straightens up from rubbing her toes. "Yeah, well, I'm trying to warn the others. Don't make the same mistake I did before it's too late."

"What mistake might that be?" I place my hands behind my back and lean forward, my ear turned towards her.

Emmy peers at me over the rim of her glasses for a long time. Eventually, she walks out of the minimally decorated dorm room, gesturing for me to follow. "I gather you've guessed it already, highlights. I fell for the most obvious trans girl in the competition, and now I have to run cover for her teetering tower of falsehoods to keep her in it."

I keep my eyes down as I consider my next words carefully. "As I recall, all allegations of womanhood against the champion have borne no fruit."

Emmy rolls her eyes. "Yes, yes, Laura's manhood is unassailable and not subject to the gender-conformist standards of our binarist society. Just like yours! I helped her workshop the spiels before we trotted them out in public, highlights, so there's no need for you to mangle them at me."

We return to the still-empty common room and reclaim our seats at the table. I sit down across from Emmy, fixing her with a sharp look.

"You are very candid with me," I say.

Emmy spreads her arms wide. "You're not a threat to either of us in the competition. And if you tried to make yourself one, you'd lose what little

leverage you have over me. I'm willing to stomach an awkward conversation with Laura for the sake of eliminating a legitimate problem."

"Right. I am not a threat, however."

"I know. You're just someone who tricked Laura into thinking we're friends, and now I'm stuck spending more of my Saturday night with you." Emmy purses her lips.

"Believe you me, I take as little pleasure in the pretence as you do." Satisfied by her explanation, I take my eyes off Emmy and stare at the lift instead. Laura is still a while away from the dorm, but she may be a fast walker. "Your public performance with the champion is very convincing, I must say."

"Naturally." Emmy's expression is impressively smug. "Factionalism is a classic con. Let the laggards quibble endlessly about the philosophical merits of presenting masculine or feminine in public. It gives them a circus to focus on."

"A dramatic sideshow to get caught up in, and remain none the wiser about the true nature of your relationship." I nod stiffly. "I must begrudgingly acknowledge that your gambit is a masterful one."

"You're welcome, by the way." Emmy gestures at my clothing. "My tribunals with Laura laid the groundwork for you girls to be able to cavort about in leggings to your heart's content. A little gratitude would be nice."

Unacceptable. The idea that I owe Emmy anything, let alone the deference that is Laura's by right, is a notion most galling. I must put this charlatan in her place at once.

Steepling my fingers, I lean forward and place my elbows on the table. "You are very insistent on invalidating the identities of queer men, including but not limited to your presumptive paramour."

Emmy scoffs. "I know my "paramour" better than you. She's very much a woman in denial of her identity because of hostile, transphobic environments. I'll help her build her case for manhood on the server, but I see no reason to encourage her self-harm outside of it."

This assessment of Laura's identity is almost more churlish than Emmy's insinuations that I am indebted to her. Laura is most certainly not in denial

about anything, but a masterful—no, *mistressful* performer who has pulled the wool over the eyes of everyone but the most perceptive of competitors. Which clearly does not include the silly man she chooses to waste her time with.

"I see." I stroke my chin slowly. "You are clearly uncomfortable with the idea that you may be in love with a man. Is this because you are struggling with internalised homophobia?"

My statement produces the desired effect. Emmy sputters for a few moments, shaking her head vigorously.

"There's nothing for me to struggle with! I'm a heterosexual man in love with a closeted trans woman. It's a common predicament."

"Have you considered that your inability to come to terms with your identity may be hurting your partner?" I ask with a broad grin.

Emmy throws her hands up. "No, I haven't! Because *she* thinks she's straight and I'm the closeted woman."

I'm certain that Laura believes no such thing. Emmy is too antisocial, unpleasant, arrogant, self-assured, and enamoured with the company of malodorous men like her to be graced with the divine kiss of womanhood. However, Laura's keen observations about the subjectivity of gender, coupled with the simple truth that Emmy is in the same circumstances as Laura, mean that any accusations Emmy levels at Laura apply to herself too.

I continue to marvel at Laura's rhetorical brilliance.

"I do see Laura's point. You exist in the same hostile environments, do you not?" I raise an eyebrow.

"No, actually." Emmy straightens up and raises her voice, pointing a thumb at herself. "Laura doesn't have a point because she's the one flying off to get a vaginoplasty, while I have no desire for such a thing!"

My heart stops. My eyes widen, and I feel my pulse pounding in my ears. "Laura's getting a what?"

"Oh, fuck me." Emmy takes off her glasses and pinches the bridge of her nose, sucking in air through gritted teeth. "Shouldn't have said that, but whatever. Yeah, she's flying out next week for the operation."

I am struggling to keep my tone even. "The server covers the cost for *vaginoplasty*?"

"It doesn't. It helped a bit, but not really." Sighing, Emmy reaches for her glasses and puts them back on. "Here's the thing: the server covers orchiectomies because removing your testicles helps with exogenous hormone regulation. That makes enough sense. But the removal of the penis has no effect on that biofeedback loop, and so vaginoplasties aren't covered."

"Then how?"

Emmy drops her voice to barely above a whisper. "Look, I don't exactly know how she went about it either. There are countless questions about what the competition is doing with our insurance that are better left unasked. But Laura, well, she poked around and probed the full extent of what's no longer off-limits. She was able to book appointments at a few gender clinics with massive waitlists and get the necessary letters for surgery. She's paying out of pocket, though, so she's flying back home soon to get the procedure done."

"I see."

I don't know what else to say. Once again, Laura blazes a trail that women like me were too lacking in vision to pursue ourselves. I wonder if I can follow in her footsteps, and whether she will trust me enough to share her methods with me. All in good time, I suppose.

"So." Emmy leans back and puts her hands behind her head. "Are you still going to keep up the pretence that you think Laura is a man?"

"Um." I rack my brain for an appropriate response. "Are you implying that men cannot have vaginas?"

"Accusing people of being queerphobic will only work so many times," Emmy says, sighing.

"Well." Think, Katherine. "I simply trust the champion's judgment in these matters—she is the champion, after all. If Laura believes that the repurposing of her penis is necessary… because her penis would use up precious bodily resources that could be instead oriented towards feminisation… I see no reason to doubt her strategic gambit."

Emmy silently peers at me over the rim of her glasses for some time. "You know what, that's a pretty good attempt at a rationale. I'll see if Laura

and I can't spin that up into an actual argument, for when this eventually gets back to the server."

I shift in my seat. "Does the server need to be informed of private matters and secret strategies relating to the champion's winning game plan?"

"It'll come out eventually because Laura prefers to lord over her fiefdom rather than listen to me about opsec," Emmy says. "Everyone on the server is concentrated in this geographical area. Most of them go to this school. It'll happen one way or another, and it's probably better for Laura to treat this like it's an actual "strategy" she's trying instead of acting like she has something to hide."

"Hm." It is difficult to participate in this conversation without buying into Emmy's framing of events, so I do my best. "You are welcome for what little assistance I can provide."

"Don't flatter yourself, highlights. We're going to iterate on that, and Laura probably would have come up with a better version herself. She's just busy with school and packing right now." Emmy folds her arms and frowns at me. "So it's very cool that I get to spend more of the precious little time I have left with her in your esteemed company."

"You're welcome."

"I very much am not."

Behind Emmy, the lift indicators finally light up with a loud chime, heralding Laura's arrival at long last. I fail to suppress a gasp as the doors part and reveal her in all her glory. Her hairstyle and glasses are very similar to the last time I saw her, and she is wearing a simple yet stylish outfit, a cheongsam—or is it a qipao?—inspired red top, over skinny jeans. Once more, the very sight of Laura takes my breath away. Which permits Emmy to rush to her side before I can so much as stand up, and relieve Laura of her burdens.

"Thanks, babe." Laura exchanges a kiss with Emmy, to my chagrin. "Hey, Emmy's friend. Sorry, I didn't quite catch your—"

"Do not ever apologise to me!" I intend to express myself to Laura with passionate fervour, but it comes out as a series of squeaks. Concerning. "My chosen name is Katherine, but you may address me as you wish!"

"Right." Laura seems bemused. "I'll stick to 'Kathy'. Here's your focaccia. Good choice, by the way, I gotta try that next time."

My heart is singing. "I hope it will measure up to your exacting standards."

"I mean, I like pesto and cheese, so probably."

I unwrap my dinner as Laura settles down—on Emmy's lap, with her arms around Emmy's neck. Biting into the warm, cheesy, airy bread helps mask the bitter taste that suddenly coats my tongue, as well as the wrinkling of my nose at the sullying of Laura's divine form by the very proximity of this knave. Laura deserves a vassal worthy of her, and though I have been forced to admit that Emmy is appropriately servile, she is most certainly not worthy of this degree of affection and doting.

And now Laura's feeding Emmy with her own two slender, graceful, porcelain-perfect hands. I take another large bite and hide my expression behind a greasy pesto wall.

"I've been looking forward to this all day." Laura sighs wearily, and strokes Emmy's cheek so tenderly that I almost choke on the cheese.

"Geezer still giving you a hard time?" Emmy asks.

"You know it." Laura rotates her head from side to side, cracking her neck. "He's pissed he'll have to grade papers for the first time in years, even though I've been doing way more than a TA reasonably should this whole time. I practically taught the undergrad class for him."

My deductions regarding Laura's identity and place in the Gender Studies program were spot on, then. I try not to smirk or chew too smugly.

"Professors do get cranky when they have to actually do their job," Emmy says, snickering. "Has he stopped trying to ask you what your medical emergency is?"

"Nope! It's fucked up." Laura shakes her head, somehow making even such a mundane action seem delicate and dextrous.

Emmy snarls. "He should mind his business."

"You're cute when you're grumpy." Laura giggles, a sound like clinking champagne glasses, and stains her lips on the acne-spotted skin of Emmy's right cheek. "He told me I was "too gender-conforming" today."

"I beg your pardon?" Emmy appears astonished.

Laura scowls. "What did he say again? Something about how being a man who conforms to standards of womanhood is still conformity."

Emmy raises an eyebrow. "And what, does he think his wardrobe of tweed and trousers is pushing the envelope of gendered presentation? What's his fucking problem?"

"His fucking problem is that he's starting to think I'm a trans woman." Laura rubs the back of her neck with a grimace.

"Hm. Now why would anyone ever think that?" Emmy's eyes dart towards me, but I refuse to share a meaningful look with her.

"It's incredibly irritating. I suppose you only have the right to self-identity as you wish if you don't wear women's clothing," Laura says. "Whatever. I don't have to be around him for a while, which is nice."

"You have such a pretty accent."

Laura and Emmy both turn their heads to stare at me, and I realise I said that out loud.

"Voice!" I rush to amend my statement. "My apologies, I meant to say your voice, I only said 'accent' because I was having trouble placing it—" this is sounding worse, not better, Katherine, "—not that I need to know where you're from, or guess—" I must stop talking about her accent or ancestry right this second, "—what I intended to say is that you've done an excellent job voice training, you must have worked very hard I presume because you can hardly tell—"

Emmy turns back to Laura. "She's not my friend."

Laura pats Emmy on the shoulder. "Don't worry about it." She then addresses me. "Thanks. My family's from Southeast Asia, but I went to a British school for a while. So I'm a bit all over the place."

I nod, sweating profusely. "Ah! What a charmed life you have lived." Desperate to change the topic, I reach for the closest available one. "What is your topic of research, if I may ask?"

"Do you really think that after putting up with her advisor all day, Laura wants to talk shop over dinner?" Emmy asks sharply.

Laura, however, instantly brightens up. "No, no, I love talking about this

stuff with people who won't nitpick every little thing I say. I mean, I assume you won't, Carly?"

"Her name is—"

I quickly speak before Emmy contradicts Laura. "Of course not! I'd be happy to listen."

"Beautiful." Laura smooths the front of her top and clears her throat. "So tell me, Carly, do you know anything about so-called "third genders"?"

Recognition blossoms within me, and I smile at my good fortune. "I've read some literature on the topic. I believe the claim is that some non-Western cultures allegedly recognise more than two genders."

Laura narrows her eyes. "You sound sceptical."

Unless I am very mistaken, Laura knows exactly why I phrased myself as I did. Doubt stills my tongue a moment, but I press on. This is clearly a test I must pass.

I recall what I have read on the subject. "Well, I find the whole concept a bit… orientalist? I have seen it referred to in various queer blogs and outlets, and on social media, but it seems to suffer from some, well, oversight. Such as, well, if cultures like, for example, let us look at India. I have seen it often said that India has a third gender, and so supposedly a more advanced understanding of sex and queerness than the West. But then why is it, like the West, such a patriarchal culture?"

Laura inclines her head towards me. "What about colonialism? Western values have been imposed on non-Western cultures for centuries."

I did not know before today that my palms could produce so much sweat. I hide them under the table and wipe them on my skirt as I speak. "Well, of course, but—India has a long history. It is an ancient culture. And it was, I believe, still a patriarchal society before the British Raj? And so if they have had a third gender for a long time, and had a patriarchal culture for a long time, then I'm not sure what makes having a third gender so special."

"Interesting." Laura strokes her chin, her gaze probing, and I feel I am digging my own grave with every syllable I utter. "You think that there's nothing special about a culture having an institutional third gender? When

it provides us with a historical antecedent for gender-diversity across cultures, and history?"

"Well, of course that is historically important, but you see, it's just—" I cannot stop stumbling over my own words. I take a deep breath to still the thundering of my heart. "From what I have read, from those more familiar with the subject and the culture, the idea of a "third gender" is used very much as evidence of a culture being somehow queer-accepting. But when you look closer, people belonging to this third gender, they are not treated very well. They are ostracised, and often the local language terms used to refer to them are regarded as slurs? So it just seems to me that there is some misunderstanding, or perhaps even misrepresentation afoot."

Laura is silent. Her gaze is stony. I'm about to cry when her face breaks out into a wide grin. "Not bad, Carly. That was an okay summary of some of the issues with the scholarship."

Relief floods through me, and I try not to double over. "Oh, thank you."

"You missed a lot of the important stuff, but it was mostly salient," Laura says. "The particular issue I want to tackle is how there's this big dichotomy between "third genders" and "transsexuals" in much of the academic literature. In anthro, history, queer studies, it's taken as a given that third genders, whatever they are, are distinct from trans people."

I am now certain that Laura and I have read the same dissection of the topic. "I see."

Laura takes a sip of her drink before continuing. "So, it's said that third genders are revered and recognised parts of their culture, and that they're not men or women, but they're also supposedly not transsexual people. Because gender-conforming transsexual people in the West want to "cross over" from one sex to another through medical and surgical means, and third genders are supposedly happy to not conform."

Beaming, I meet Laura's gaze. It's clear we're on the same wavelength. I know exactly what she's going to say next.

"Is that actually true, Laura?"

"Why, Carly, it just so happens that a lot of modern testimony from people who are a part of third-gender communities shows that they do, in

fact, want to transition," Laura says, laughing. I'm laughing too, jubilant—it is clear we both know the other is a trans woman now. "Many of them have transitioned, in fact, using hormones and surgeries and all those things that supposedly only gender-conformist Westerners want. Isn't that funny?"

"Your investment in this topic isn't suspicious at all, my dear," Emmy says through a mouthful of panini, and more than ever I wish I could slap her.

Laura elbows her. "My intellectual pursuits have no bearing on my gender."

"Uh huh." Emmy cocks an eyebrow. "You know, it's interesting to me how you insist that third genders and trans people have so much in common."

I glare at Emmy for her impudence. "You dare?"

Laura, too, seems put out. "Babe, please don't say something my advisor would."

"I'm not," Emmy says. "I'm just curious how you square the circle of asserting that third genders are just like trans women, even if they're called something different, because they do all the same things. While other populations—let's say, RCBG contestants, to use a completely random example—are definitely not trans women. Promise. Pinky promise."

Laura actually cackles and elbows Emmy again. "You little rascal. No putting me on trial in public." Laura leans in to whisper in Emmy's ear. "Save it for the bedroom."

Emmy shudders, and I resist the urge to puke.

I look back at Laura. Smiling and joking and perfect, perfect Laura.

She is both everything and nothing like I expected her to be. I've seen Laura viciously tear apart her competition on the server, using their own words against them in an awe-inspiring frenzy of rhetorical carnage. Once, a few months ago, Laura called a tribunal for someone who denied the charges, before Laura revealed that the girl's ex, a fellow server competitor, shared their private texts with her. The way this revelation annihilated Laura's opponent was both terrifying and beautiful to behold. Just like Laura herself. She is everything a trans woman wishes to be, and I'm sitting not five feet from her, basking in the majesty of her presence and listening to her hypnotic words.

She likes talking to me. We understand each other. I am now more certain than ever that I was always meant to seek Laura out, meant to cross

her path and swear fealty to her, meant to sail into a victorious sunset arm in arm with her. And as soon as Laura is done playing with her food, when she is tired of keeping Emmy on a tight leash and seeks to dispose of her once and for all, I will be there. Ready to serve.

It is our destiny.

CHAPTER 8
DISCURSIVE COMBAT

Nichole

It begins like any other day.

I wake up bright and early, feeling good about my weekend. Last night, I put away my clean laundry before going to bed, which significantly decluttered my living space. Classes are winding down in preparation for finals. I think I can take the time this morning to sweep and mop. I'll study JavaScript in a spotless room for a few hours, have a late lunch with Rupali and Tahani, and crack open one of my two final projects this evening. Best of all, I won't even have to put up with Kathy's nagging about "keeping up with the anime season." Yesterday I cautiously told her I didn't have time, and she let me know that I needn't worry, because she's found someone else to bother.

Hopefully the two of them hit it off, elope, and run away together. Even if it means that Kathy somehow found someone before me.

So I get showered, get breakfast, get the cleaning supplies and get my chores squared away with a little pep in my step. I thank Kyle for lending me his floor cleaner and return to my room, settling down to study only an

hour after waking up. I grab my phone to text Rupali as the computer slowly boots. Everything is going swimmingly.

Why do I have so many Discord notifications?

I thumb the app open, expecting to see mostly server pings. A few days ago, I posted a couple of pics in the selfie channel—from the neck down, to be safe—showing off my new fits. I did have some misgivings, of course. Kyle's philosophy of keeping quiet on the server seems smart, considering how fraught every interaction is—the other contestants are primed to jump on the smallest slip of the tongue and use it against you. Better to just report your measurements, leave your chest pics in the private channel, and ignore RCBG otherwise. Too risky to even discuss TV there.

But that leaves the question: who the fuck else am I going to talk to about this stuff?

My new friends are nice. I love hanging out with them and I appreciate their support. But they don't know about the competition. They don't know where I got the hormones from. I've already had to dodge a question or two from Tahani on the subject.

And there's also the fact that, horrible as it is to think this way, I can't fully trust them on my appearance. They're my lovely, supportive friends, which means they're going to choose being nice over being honest. I could look like a complete ogre stuffed into a frock, and Ru would still clap and call me cute.

I need friends like that, but I need some fucking objectivity, too.

So, do I come out online? Do I let my old schoolmates and any stray family members still following me know that I'm trans, so I can post photos and updates and ask for advice in front of them all? The thought is mortifying. At least the RCBG server is full of people going through the same thing I am, even if it isn't exactly a conventional transition. We all have an unspoken compact to keep this insanity between us, and posting pictures to a closed, private server is less harrowing than doing it anonymously on Reddit or something.

Earlier, when I first posted the pics, I got a few heart reacts and a stray comment or two complimenting my—really Tahani's—sense of style.

Nothing remarkable. Barely enough of an ego boost to be worth the trouble. I almost deleted it the next day, but stopped myself because I felt pathetic.

Now, seeing how many replies I have in the selfie channel, I regret not going through with it. Maybe someone spotted something I carelessly left visible in the background and wants to use it as proof that I'm really a girl and must be expelled.

I steel myself, take a deep breath, and look in the channel.

I find the last thing I expect.

Knight of Knockers

Damn okay I see it, I absolutely get what's up.

Jug-gernaut

Holy fuck—this is just after THREE MONTHS?

Traps ARE Gay

Girl drop your regimen ASAP help the flatties out a little

Boob Morning America

THE CURVES. I WAS NOT READY FOR THE CURVES.

Knight of Knockers *replying to* Jug-gernaut

If I looked like that at three months I might actually have a fucking shot, it's so joever for me.

I'm not entirely sure, but I think I'm being complimented. Like, a lot, and by a lot of people. The posts just keep coming, even as I try to read them all. Fellow contestants calling me cute and raving about my supposedly curvy body—I haven't really noticed, staring at myself in the mirror every day,

but now that I look at the photos again, I suppose I have filled out somewhat nicely.

And then there's all the comments on my tits.

That's most of the comments, actually. Many call them cute and perky and remarkable. More express disbelief at how big they are, relative to how long I've been on hormones. I look down at my chest—my *breasts*, allegedly—and note that they could constitute a handful, perhaps, for someone with small hands. I thought they weren't much. Objectively speaking, they aren't, but my Discord mentions are now full of girls telling me they'd have killed to see this much growth in the first quarter.

And it's not just replies and mentions in the server. My notifications are also full of direct messages, friend requests, and nonstop pleas to reveal my secrets and impart my wisdom on the ways of the burgeoning breast. It's overwhelming.

It's also strangely, incredibly, intensely flattering.

I'm certainly getting all the objectivity I could ask for. These are complete strangers, losing their minds over a pair of photos taken in substandard lighting. They're practically salivating, badgering me like paparazzi. I don't know where to begin. I say "thanks" to a few of them in private messages and instantly get a flood of replies from each one. I accept a few friend requests and I'm inundated with more DMs. It's like half the server is online and waiting to hear from me with bated breath, an audience of cheering fans screaming for me to appear on the balcony and wave.

Where was all of this three days ago when I actually posted the photos?

I open up another message, still dazed and reeling from it all, and I'm about to shoot off another quick "Thank you so much!" when I see that the words are different this time. I squint and read the message properly.

"Congratulations on your ranking!" it says.

My ranking?

A quick search on the server leads me to the right channel and discussion. The whirlwind of my life since I started hormones caused me to forget the competition is, well, a competition. The measurements we have to regularly submit apparently get compiled into a score, based on a secret for-

mula no one knows. That score determines our rankings, which are updated every quarter. The latest rankings were uploaded earlier today.

My score is the highest in my quarter.

Not only that, but my place in the global rankings is the highest debut ranking for any contestant in the sport's admittedly short history.

I lean back in my chair, stunned. Recalling every moment in the past three months I spent crying, desperate to see any signs my body is changing, wondering if the hormones are having any effect on me at all. I guess I can no longer deny that they are. I have objective, undeniable, mathematical proof of the hormones' efficacy.

I keep scrolling through the rankings channel, barely following the conversation, trying to take it all in.

> **Knight of Knockers**
>
> Seriously, look at that three month growth: **#selfies**. **@Nickname** might actually make this a competitive race again.

> **BigTittyFemboy *replying to* Knight of Knockers**
>
> Great, another fucking Laura simp rising up the ranks.

That snaps me out of my haze. "Laura simp"? I can't recall expressing a single opinion on Laura one way or another. Avoiding her attention has been a pretty high priority for me.

> **Bench Press Meta 2025**
>
> You know, it's bad enough that the trannies are busy giving conservatives a reason to hate LGB people again. They took over and ruined the queer community and now they're going to do it to this competition too.

Knight of Knockers

I'm sorry, don't you two also present feminine? I'm confused.

BigTittyFemboy

Please, bitch, @**Nickname** is no twink. That's 100% a woman who'll spout Laura-isms the second you challenge her on why she dresses like a 2010s era girlboss influencer.

Bench Press Meta 2025

Look at how low her activity level on here is. This is 100% another chick scamming the system and trying to keep her head down so she won't be noticed.

BigTittyFemboy

Yeah, well, shouldn't have shown off the prize winners if she didn't want attention!

It's a bad idea. I know it's a bad idea. This is a loud, annoying group of vocal transmisogynists who blame trans women for all their problems, and it doesn't matter what they think. The smart thing to do is to ignore them. They're just bitter that I'm rocketing up the rankings and they aren't. I should move on, perhaps preen a little, and close the server to get on with the rest of my day.

My computer's booted up. I open Discord on my desktop and begin typing furiously on the keyboard.

Nickname *replying to* Bench Press Meta 2025

Okay hi?? Hello? So firstly, saying that my *lack of activity* is suspicious is a huge reach and comes off pretty fucking desperate, like no matter what I do you're going to invent a reason to come after me. But also I'm sorry I have a life?? And friends? And homework? And shit to do that isn't posting in the titty server all day?

Bench Press Meta *replying to* Nickname

Oh, pardon me, princess, I didn't realise you had such a busy schedule and so many more important matters to attend to than *the million-dollar prize you're competing for*.

Knight of Knockers *replying to* Bench Press Meta 2025

Honestly, yeah, using people's lack of activity against them is setting a weird precedent, isn't it? That did leave a bad taste in my mouth.

Jug-gernaut

Yeah WTF, there isn't a minimum activity quota for the competition

Bench Press Meta 2025 *replying to* Knight of Knockers

It's literally been done before, by your precious Laura in fact! She called a tribunal on some inactive girl who was proven to be scamming the competition!

Nickname *replying to* Knight of Knockers

Thank you, I didn't realise that *going outside* is female behaviour all of a sudden ;P

Knight of Knockers *replying to* Nickname

LMAO, you're welcome OMG <3 And congrats on your debut ranking!

BigTittyFemboy

Simps, the fucking lot of you. Simps as far as the eye can see. I'm so glad the Trickster is going to put you hysterical bitches in your place. We're gonna clean the server out after your precious Queen Laura is eliminated. At long fucking last.

Nickname *replying to* BigTittyFemboy

I've literally never said a word to or about Laura, so I don't know why y'all keep acting like she's my boss.

Melvin *replying to* BigTittyFemboy

Wait, isn't Laura banned from tribunals or something? How can she be eliminated?

BigTittyFemboy *replying to* Nickname

Ladies doth indeed protest too much, so keep it up princess.

BigTittyFemboy *replying to* Melvin

Bro. Discursive Combat. It's literally happening in a couple hours.

Melvin

What's Discursive Combat?

I feel as out of the loop as Melvin. It sounds ominous, especially with how voracious the incel crowd is acting. I bite back the words I want to hurl at the femboy—whose "big titties", I recall, aren't scored much higher than mine—and search for recent mentions of this "Discursive Combat".

As I sort through the messages by date and channel, the doorbell rings. Kathy's voice calls out in response. I guess she's expecting someone, though this is the first I'm hearing of it.

A conversation from last night, in a channel called *mod-feedback*, leaps out at me. The final few messages are incomprehensible, if combative, and I scroll up to find the beginning of the thread.

Laura

What the fuck is @**Trickster's Tatas [they/them]** still doing here?

Bench Press Meta 2025

Staying infuriatingly stuck in third place, to all of our chagrin. Why?

Laura

Ha ha. You're so funny. You're such a funny guy.

Trickster's Tatas [they/them]

Is there a problem, ma'am? **["Laughter" reacts: 4]**

Laura

"Cis men only" is THE cardinal rule for this competition. I'm thrilled for Mx. Tatas and wish them well on their journey of self-discovery. OUTSIDE this server.

Trickster's Tatas [they/them]

You know, there's an entire thread where I discuss my pronouns with the mods. You could have a look at my rationale.

Laura

No thanks! I know it's silly, and the mods shouldn't have listened to you.

Bench Press Meta 2025 *replying to* Laura

You're doing a fantastic job convincing us, by the way. I am very much inclined to listen to your tantrum right now.

Laura

I'm not sugarcoating it. A non-binary member of this server outed themselves, and they're still here. Fix that.

Bench Press Meta 2025

Unfortunately for you, the moderation decisions on this server remain a democratic affair, and you're going to have to follow the established procedures no matter how much you demand to speak to the manager. Though, a word of advice: don't bother.

Laura

Are you openly admitting to tolerating the presence of a non-man in this competition, then?

Bench Press Meta 2025

I admit to nothing except being fed up with your bullshit, Karen.

Laura

What possible reason could you have for not expelling them?

Trickster's Tatas [they/them] ***replying to*** **Laura**

Oh, that's simple. Pronouns do not, in and of themselves, determine gender.

Laura

Are you fucking kidding me

Trickster's Tatas [they/them]

I, personally, know plenty of cis, queer individuals who use different pronouns but still identify as cisgender. Butch lesbians going by "he/him" is a classic example.

Laura

Butch lesbians aren't allowed in this competition either, asshat! If you change your pronouns, you fall under the trans umbrella in one way or another, and you're out. It's that simple.

Trickster's Tatas [they/them]

Really? Pronouns are where you draw the line, then?

Bench Press Meta 2025

As amusing as it is to see you get a taste of your own gender studies bullshit, Karen, I and the other mods entirely agree with their point. Taking hormones and getting surgeries, *ahem*, makes RCBG contestants "fall under the trans umbrella in one way or another", way more than fucking pronouns.

Laura

That's literally the terms of the contest. We must identify as cis men, even while altering our sex characteristics. Mx. Tatas here no longer identifies as a cis man, and so the mod decision allowing them to stay is invalid.

Trickster's Tatas [they/them]

Where did I say I no longer identify as a cis man, dear Laura?

Laura

Name *one* example of cis men who go by anything other than "he/him".

Tricksters Tatas [they/them]

I can think of many, but I'll give you one, as asked. The femminielli.

Laura

...fucking excuse me?

I look up the unfamiliar word Trickster used. A Wikipedia article on the "femminielli" appears at the top of the results. From a quick skim, this is a community of third-gendered individuals in Neapolitan culture, culturally distinct from trans women.

"... historians maintain that an important aspect of i femminielli *is that they are decidedly male despite their female gender role."*

That sentence unsettles me. But I guess don't know enough about history or Neapolitan culture. I'm left staring into space for a few moments, ignoring the sounds of arguing from the kitchen, waiting for the sudden wave of nausea to pass. Eventually, I take a deep breath, ignore the feeling, and go back to reading the conversation.

Laura

As far as I recall you're an adult from Swemark or where-fucking-ever, not a Neapolitan child, so your claim to "femminiello" is suspect at best. That's before we even get into how you're clearly identifying as a non-binary gender, definitionally! It's *third* gender, not *second* or *first*, QED.

Trickster's Tatas [they/them]

Well, yes. My lineage is primarily Scandinavian, as you so considerately reminded us. However, I have Italian ancestry as well.

Laura

Oh fuck off

Trickster's Tatas [they/them]

I'm simply getting back in touch with my roots, reconnecting with my Italian heritage, and assuming a culturally specific yet decidedly male identity to facilitate that.

Bench Press Meta 2025

And the mods have zero issue with that. Frankly, dollface, if getting a pussy doesn't make you less of a man, then being Italiangender or whatever barely fucking counts. Who gives a shit, you fucked this server up with your queer theory nonsense, so deal.

BigTittyFemboy

The “I” in “LGBTQI” stands for “Italian”.
[“Laughter” reacts: 5]

Laura

This is unacceptable. None of you are as familiar with the scholarship as you pretend, and I’m not going to sit here and tolerate this insult to the competition’s integrity just because you’re all idiots.

Bench Press Meta 2025

Don’t you go by “she/her” IRL?

Laura

Yes, because I have to pretend to be a trans woman in real life, to explain why I’m taking oestrogen.

Bench Press Meta 2025

That wasn’t a thing when the competition started, either. Time was you caught a girl going by a girl’s name to all her friends, and she was out. You put a stop to that. As far as the mods are concerned, the way you and Trickster use pronouns is the same.

Laura

Okay, but it very much isn’t, because I’m only pretending to be trans.

Bench Press Meta 2025

You're insufferable. You know that, right?

Trickster's Tatas [they/them]

If only you could formally challenge me on it, but alas! I told you and Isaac to not abuse the tribunal system, and for the record I was against the other mods' decision to time you both out. But it seems there's nothing to be done.

Laura

LIKE HELL.

Trickster's Tatas [they/them]

Oh?

Laura

I call Discursive Combat. **["Wow" reacts: 29]**

This is really, really bad.

The only good thing about Laura's ridiculous blather on the server is that it allows girls like me to dress feminine and be out as trans without worrying about some snitch at a GSA event. If Laura is stupid enough to put her ass on the line when she literally has immunity from tribunals and she gets herself booted, then all those screaming sexist dudes are going to come for me next.

Especially since I happen to have acquired a nice fresh target on my back.

That said, I still have no clue what "Discursive Combat" is. There's a new channel called *discursive-combat* that has restricted posting permissions and no messages, except for a single link. I click on it. It leads me to a

countdown, the numbers bright red and blocky against a black background, ticking off the seconds until a time roughly two hours from now.

I'm so fucked. My fate is in the hands of some belligerent debate sis, whose idea of surgery recovery is arguing with a troll about Italian genders.

Sounds of bickering from the kitchen grow louder. Too loud to ignore. I remember I'm in a flat full of RCBG contestants and abandon my desktop. Hopefully one of them will have a straight answer for me.

I open my door, stick my head out, and shout to interrupt the squabbling. "Oy! What the fuck is "discursive combat"?"

Katherine

"God, what have you done? You're a pink pony girl! And you dance at the club."

The soothing, dulcet tones of a modern-day siren are done a modicum of justice by my new pair of headphones. Bright metallic pink with a chrome finish, soft ear pads that caress but don't squeeze my delicate lobes, and complimentary clip-on cat ears that stay on despite vigorous headbanging —money well spent.

My playlist transitions seamlessly from one modern-day sapphic classic to another as I slit open a new pack of spicy ramen and extract two packets from the bunch. I make my way to the kitchen, bobbing and gyrating to the tunes, and look around for the electric kettle. Things seem to have been shifted around somewhat, which will unfortunately lengthen my task.

"KATHERINE!"

A rude finger hooks around the band of my headphones and slides a pad of f my ear. I squeal and bat the offending hand away, whirling around. Kaalappan stands before me, a hand on his hip, lips pursed and eyebrow arched.

I hiss at him. "Never do that again."

Kaalappan stares at me dumbly for some time. "Kathy. We're using the kitchen."

I don't understand why he's bothering me with information I'm already privy to. Perhaps he means to alert me to some social convention I'm con-

travening. So I nod curtly at Jeff, sitting at the kitchen table with a bowl of diced potatoes, and turn back to Kaalappan with a curtsy.

"I can see that, but thank you for informing me nonetheless. I acknowledge that you are occupying the kitchen."

Kaalappan tilts his head to the side. "Excuse me?"

"You are excused. Now, if you could direct me to the kettle so I may boil the water for my ramen, I will make my breakfast and be on my way."

"Okay, what?" Kaalappan covers his eyes with one hand, which people often do when speaking to me. "The kettle's right next to the dish soap, where it always is. Probably why it's invisible to you. But also, we're using the kitchen, Kathy. Bugger off."

Chappell Roan, give me patience. "I can see that, and I don't understand why you keep repeating this information."

"Because you're still here," Kaalappan says, gritting his teeth.

"Yes, because I haven't made my breakfast yet," I say.

Kaalappan claps his hands together. "Girl. This kitchen has two shitty electric burners. I'm using them both to caramelise my onions because it's meal prep day, and I want to have a fresh lunch and a full freezer before I get started on my coding finals. Both my pots are occupied, so you can't steal one to make your shitty ramen and then leave it for me to clean. Therefore, bugger off until we're done here."

"I clean the pot when I'm done using it."

"Not well!" Kaalappan rubs his temples. "Kathy, the sooner you get out of my kitchen, the sooner I can be done and you can do whatever you like."

It appears that I might not be able to make breakfast on time. I sway on my feet, anxious. "The kitchen is a communal space."

Kaalappan snorts. "I thought you were opting out of maintaining communal spaces."

"Kaalappan. I have to make breakfast before it's time to watch my shows." I have little hope that this stubborn, unreasonable mule will see reason, but I must try. "It will only take a few minutes. I can simply place the onions in a bowl for the duration—"

"What the fuck?" Kaalappan shakes his head furiously. "Are you mental? Absolutely fucking not."

The doorbell rings, and I let out a cry of frustration. "Now look what's happened, Kaalappan. My guest has arrived before I've made myself anything to eat."

"Your *guest*?"

I ignore Kaalappan's unceasing prattle and stride past him. It won't do to keep Emmy waiting, and I wish to make this anime viewing as pleasant an experience as possible so we can do things other than playing that ridiculous, impenetrable card game. Sliding my headphones down around my neck, I open the door with an appropriately hospitable smile.

Emmy's fashion sense is as consistent as it is concrete-themed and brutalist. She looks up from her phone and places it back in her hoodie's front pouch. "Morning, sunshine. This is too fucking early."

"Good morning to you as well," I say. "Which appellations will you be using today? Everyone here knows you from the server."

"Whatever." Emmy waves a hand. "I don't care."

"Emmy it is." I grab her wrist and pull her inside, heading to the sofa.

Kaalappan greets me again, even more rudely. He's tapping his foot and has placed both hands on his hips. "You didn't say you were having someone over."

I gesture towards the empty sofa and switched-off TV. "No one ever uses the TV on Saturday mornings, Kaalappan. You're usually busy in the kitchen, and Nichole has to practically be dragged out to watch things with me."

"Oh, so you *do* know when I meal prep." Kaalappan nods and squints at me. "Fascinating."

"Is there a problem?" Emmy glances between the two of us.

"No, I'm sorry, this isn't about you," Kaalappan says, sighing.

"It kind of feels like it is," Emmy says.

"Emmy, please make yourself comfortable on the sofa. I will be along with snacks and my laptop shortly." I grandly gesture towards the seating, as a hostess should.

"No, look, you're fine," Kaalappan says to Emmy. "I'm just trying to get

her out of the kitchen and get her to understand why she has to ask us about these things."

"Mm, that makes sense." Emmy nods. "Bit dense sometimes, isn't she?"

I'm about to ask Emmy not to antagonise my flatmate further when I realise that her statement was about me. I clutch at my imaginary pearls. "I beg your pardon?"

"Yeah, it's not fun to live with," Kaalappan says.

Emmy is actually chortling. She never chortles, at least when I'm around. "I can imagine, but I really don't want to."

Kaalappan also appears to find some humour in the situation, though I can't imagine how. "Believe it or not, this is still better than a few months ago."

"You're kidding. This is an *improved* Katherine?" Emmy asks.

I stamp my foot. "Cease this burbling chatter at once!" I give both of them a sharp look for their impertinence.

For some reason, they burst into peals of laughter. While this does indicate a positive shift in their moods, I can't help but feel even more anxious. Laughter at jokes I do not understand or even recognise usually ends badly for me. I blink rapidly to hold back tears, and I'm about to make my objections known when Nichole pokes her head out of the room and shouts at us.

"Oy! What the fuck is "discursive combat"?"

I forget my words. I forget where I am in space and time. My head swivels to face Nichole, my jaw hanging loosely, and I stare at her in the hopes that she will have some manner of confirmation scrawled upon her forehead. I can't believe I heard her say those two words, in that order. She or I must simply be mistaken.

Emmy's demeanour also changes instantaneously. She spins around, slapping her forehead loud enough to echo around the flat, and cries out.

"NO!" Emmy is practically quaking. "Maybe it isn't—of course it is, it's always her, she's always at the scene of the crime, isn't she?"

"Okay, hi, good morning to you too," Nichole says. She steps out of her room and closes her door behind her. "I got that it was bad, but what actually is it? Everyone's acting like it's some kind of death match."

"It basically is one." Emmy is pacing, shaking her head violently, mum-

bling to herself under her breath. She pulls her phone back out. "I was just talking to her—she didn't even mention—you, Nichole. It's Laura, isn't it? Whoever called it challenged Laura?"

"Not exactly," Nichole says, approaching us, and for a moment Emmy breathes a sigh of relief. "Laura issued the challenge."

Emmy's relief catches in her throat. She sputters incoherently. Eventually, she chokes out, "What? Why? Why would she do that?"

I place a hand on Emmy's shoulder. "I will fetch my laptop."

"Boot up your desktop too."

I'm not sure that I appreciate Emmy's imperious tone, but I don't have a direct line to Laura and I don't want Emmy to leave. "Okay."

"Well, as long as it's happening out of the kitchen." Kaalappan shrugs. "Jeffrey, I don't recall telling you to stop dicing."

"Oh! I'm so sorry, so sorry." Jeffrey resumes his menial task.

Emmy and Nichole follow me to my room. I brush the ramen wrappers off my keyboard and place Emmy at my desk. Then I retrieve my laptop from the charging port and flop down on my bed. Nichole remains standing in the middle of the room, fiddling with her fingers in a nervous habit—she left her lucky die in her room, it seems. She looks at each of us in turn.

"Are either of you going to tell me anything, or?"

I open Discord and straighten up, keeping one eye on Emmy's phone as she video calls Laura. "Discursive Combat is a grand, televised debate that every server denizen is invited to. Two contestants enter, and only one may leave."

"Right. Sure." Nichole fixes her gaze on one of my mecha posters and frowns. "Okay. How is that different from every tribunal ever?"

I scoff, unimpressed yet unsurprised by Nichole's pedestrian comprehension. "Tribunals are usually about proving a single party's guilt, Nichole. Think of it as placing someone on trial. Most tribunals—especially the ones not prosecuted by the champion—end inconclusively."

Nichole nods. "Okay. And this is different?"

"Yes. Because *both* parties are on trial, and a draw is impossible." I turn my attention back to my laptop screen and hungrily query Discord for the relevant threads. "It is a nuclear option, exercised only by those willing to

place their own life on the line. Each member of the server is only permitted one invocation of Discursive Combat, and once initiated, may not back down."

"Is this in a rules packet somewhere?" Nichole asks. "Is there an orientation I missed? Nobody told me I was signing up for debate bro fight club."

"The document's pinned in the rules channel, cupcake." Emmy swivels around to regard Nichole with deserved contempt. "Nobody's fault but your own that you don't know your rights and risks."

"That thing is fucking huge," Nichole says, folding her arms. "I skimmed most of it—"

"And that's why you'll never be a winner." Emmy punctuates her point by swivelling back around. All her faults aside, she does have a good sense of dramatic timing.

"Fine. Whatever." Nichole turns back to me. "How often does this happen?"

"Never!" I lean forward, gripping the sides of my laptop, almost vibrating. "This is the first in the competition's history."

"Great." Nichole rolls her eyes. "Just peachy keen."

"If Laura wins here, she will not merely set Ranked Competitive Growth history." I pause for effect. "She will also be granted immunity, and her victory will be all but guaranteed."

"Ahem, she can still be overtaken in the rankings." Emmy is quick to speak out of turn.

I wave her off. "Yes, and pudding may fall from the sky, but I am talking about probable scenarios."

"So if she wins, she gets the exact same fucking thing she had in the first place." Nichole throws her hands up. "Yeah, this seems super worth it."

"Technically, cupcake, the time-out from tribunals would have expired by next quarter," Emmy says.

Nichole stares at her with an expression of disbelief. "Who cares? It's not like she was at risk of being expelled in a tribunal anyway. But with this move, either she or Trickster are out."

"Actually, they can both be out," I say. "Discursive Combat must have at least one loser, but there is no guarantee of victory. If they both make their cases well enough, they will both be ejected."

Nichole's hands clench into fists. "Peachy. Fucking. Keen."

"We're on the same page." Emmy scowls at her still-ringing phone. "The Trickster's growth plateaued ages ago. They're not a threat in any way, and Laura's only doing this because her ability to set the terms of discourse in the server was challenged. It's a juvenile, childish, territorial display that won't do her any good."

"I love you too," Emmy's phone says, and we both gasp. "What took you so long, babe?"

Emmy blinks. "Laura! What the fuck do you mean? I had to call you three times before you picked up."

"Didn't I tell you to do the—didn't I text you?"

I sit up even straighter, alarmed. Unlike Nichole and Emmy, I understand perfectly well why Laura is doing this. She wants to secure the ability for trans girls to exist on the server unmolested. The challenge Trickster clearly threw in her face—invoking her very field of study—made it clear that if she backed down, her authority and ability to safeguard us would be compromised. I have utmost faith in Laura and her capacity to quash this latest threat to her reign.

Or, well, I *had* utmost faith in her before hearing what she sounds like on the phone. That is, incredibly disorganised and slurring her words.

Emmy meets my gaze. "Still on the strong stuff, honey?"

"Sweetiepie, I'm barely a week out from surgery. So yes, believe me, I am paying for the good shit."

Emmy bites her lip. "Are you due another dose soon?"

"They just finished topping me up like five minutes ago. I feel fucking fantastic."

Emmy takes her glasses off and tosses them onto my pillows in one fluid motion, pinching the bridge of her nose. "Of course you do, honey."

"So you didn't get my texts?"

"You've only been texting me hearts and kisses today, dear." Emmy sighs. "I had to find out about Discursive Combat from Nichole."

"Who's that? Actually never mind, not important." Laura drags out a long "um" while Nichole looks offended. "Right, the thing. Emmy, do the thing."

"What thing? Okay, don't try to answer that." Emmy gestures for her glasses and I return them to her. She peers at my desktop monitor. "I'm trawling the Trickster's social media pages right now. Bluesky, Tumblr—main and side-blog—Reddit account, public and private Twitter. They go by 'Bobbie', have a pair of girlfriends, got a journalism degree—"

"That's wonderful, sweetie, love that for them," Laura says. "I was more hoping you could dig into their ancestry. I have a real hunch that they're not as Italian as they pretend to be."

Emmy groans. "I'm digging into their legal identity as we speak, but genealogy isn't as accessible as you might think."

"I believe in you, buttercup."

Emmy, despite the increasingly apparent direness of the circumstances, blushes bright red. I try not to gag.

"That's great, Laura, thank you, but seriously—*why*?" Emmy asks.

Laura actually growls. The sound makes me want to cross my legs.

"Bitch challenges my rep, bitch gets put down like the rabid mutt they are."

"This is not a turf war, Laura." Emmy drums her fingers on the wooden surface. "I know you're in a painkiller-induced haze of late, but do your best to *think*. Trickster mentioned third genders. Explicitly. They know about you, Laura."

"Which is why I need you to even the odds there, Emmy."

"We don't know what the odds are, or how we're going to even them," Emmy says. "Laura, this is a trap. This is the most obvious trap I can think to set for you, and you jumped into it feet first. It's too late to change now, but please listen to me. I am advising an abundance of caution."

"We don't need caution when we have prep time, babygirl," Laura says. "Twenty-four hours and you'll have everything I need to crush this fresh roadkill under my new stiletto heels."

"You're mixing metaphors again," Emmy says. "Furthermore, Discursive Combat is in less than an hour."

"Oh. For real?" Laura sounds shocked, and my heart sinks. "Fuck it, we ball."

"Laura, please listen to me."

"Love you too, babycakes." Laura's mind has already drifted, and I see

Emmy despairing in front of my very eyes. “Focus on the Italian thing and we’ve got this in the bag, capisce?”

“Laura, wait—!”

She hangs up. Emmy hangs her head.

“We’re fucked, aren’t we?” Nichole asks.

Despite my own misgivings, I must not let us all concede defeat before the battle has even begun. It falls upon me to be the voice of positivity and boost our spirits.

“Have faith. The champion will prevail, as she always does,” I say. “Here, why don’t I plug my laptop into the TV outside, so we can watch her triumph in high resolution?”

Nichole places both her hands on the back of her head and exhales, long and loud. “Well, my afternoon’s fucked either way. Might as well watch it in high-res, right? Where’s your HDMI cable?”

“Paint drawer,” I say.

“Right.”

Nichole walks to my dresser and rifles through the drawer of art supplies and half-finished miniatures. I watch her search with interest.

“I did not realise you were a fan of the champion, Nichole,” I say.

“Hm? Oh, right. Yep, big fan.” Nichole extracts the cable from the depths of my abandoned projects. “I love third genders and all that. I’ll go set up now?”

I hand her my laptop. I wait until she closes the door behind her and I’m sure she’s out of earshot.

It is now or never. I rise to my feet.

“Call the champion,” I say to Emmy.

The sounds of Emmy’s furious typing abate and she swivels around. “What was that?”

I phrase myself more politely. “Please call the champion. We need to iron out her strategy in case her Italian gambit does not pay off.”

“I doubt that’s a good idea, highlights,” Emmy says. “She’s in the zone now. Laura’s not exactly shipshape, but we shouldn’t interrupt her during hyperfocus.”

I try to keep my voice even despite my mounting impatience. “She’s all

over the place, Emmy. We need to go over her strategy so that she has something to concentrate on."

Emmy picks her phone up and calls. "Weren't you telling me not five minutes ago to have faith in her prevailing?"

"I was trying to be positive, but she's on horse tranquillisers, Emmy."

"She's not on ket." Emmy pauses. "Well. Probably not. I doubt they'd let her have any. She did ask her mom to bring her edibles, though. Oh, fuck, she better not be on weed too."

"That is my point exactly," I say. "We cannot let her expose herself in this compromised state."

"That was like one time, and I have a better handle on the hospital gown now," Emmy's phone says.

I jump. "Laura! Hello, it is I."

"I recognise you, Carly." Laura does not sound happy. "I accept your wishes of health and luck or whatever, but I'm pretty sure I said no interruptions."

"You didn't, dear," Emmy says, and I hate how grateful I feel for her intervention.

"Oh. Well, my mistake. That said, no interruptions. I'm getting into the zone."

"Of course, dear." Emmy goes to cut the call.

"Wait!" I walk forward. "Laura, please heed me. Focus on my voice and my words."

Laura sighs. "Carly. Listen to me closely. I'm on a high dose of painkillers, attempting to remember everything my grandparents tried to teach me about Buddhism and letting go of material attachments, because any stray sexy thoughts could rip a stitch and result in what the trans girls here call a 'horny period'. I'm not fucking dying. I am, in fact, calling on the ancestors who mastered nirvana for me and exercising a level of peak mental discipline mere mortals are incapable of. So whatever you say next better not be fucking puerile."

I am chastened, but I press on. "I have no doubt you are doing better than anyone else could in your circumstances, but I must emphasise one thing above all."

"What?"

I take a deep breath. "Laura. Do not, at any point, for any reason, reveal that you are a woman. Keep that thought foremost in your mind, please."

Emmy gawps at me. Laura says nothing. I keep my eyes focused on the phone, shifting my weight from one foot to another, struggling not to chew on my lower lip. The wait for a response is agony.

"That's what you rang me to fucking say?"

My cheeks burn hot. Her tone of voice is exceedingly familiar. I look down at the floor and force out a singular word. "Sorry."

"It isn't that late here. I got time for a tribunal after I've sent Trickster packing."

My eyes brim with tears. "I do not wish to tribunal you!"

"Yeah? Why's that?"

Emmy taps my shoulder and I look up to see her mouthing "Shut up" at me. I remain mute.

"The painkillers don't fully numb it, you know that?" Laura asks. "The doctor has like fifty patients to check on by himself, I'm constantly lying in a puddle of my own blood, and I learned the term 'benign necrosis' today. Do you think you could handle a fraction of this and be as chipper as I've been?"

Emmy shakes her head. I say, "No."

"Exactly. We're not on the same fucking level, and I don't need to you talk to me like I'm a fucking baby."

I can't stop the tears anymore. "It was not my intention to offend—"

"You didn't offend me. You could not possibly "offend" me, Katherine. Because you know what you are?" Laura's voice drips with venom. "You're a loser so fucking desperate for approval that you'll let me call you by an entirely different name without correcting me once. You're basically a clown I keep around to socialise my shut-in girlfriend. That's the only reason I'm not sending you packing tonight, despite your eagerness to incriminate yourself. Capisce?"

My throat is closing. I feel like I'm going to choke. Still, at Emmy's prompting, I force out a "Capisce."

"Good. Now keep her entertained while I attend to business. Emmy, take me off speaker."

Emmy does as she's told and holds the phone to her ear. She nods sombrely, mumbles an apology for letting me talk her into calling, and puts the phone down.

I cry the entire time.

Emmy stands up and reaches for me. "Highlights. She's not herself right now. I'm so—"

"Do not apologise to me," I say. I show Emmy my face, sniffling loudly, so she can see my hospitable smile. "You have important matters to attend to. Please make yourself comfortable."

Emmy, for the first time since we met, has an expression on her face I cannot tolerate.

Pity.

"I can head home," Emmy says.

"Nonsense." I wipe my tears and blow my nose on the sleeve of my hoodie. "You haven't the time. Discursive Combat is in fifty minutes. Less."

"Katherine, she didn't mean—"

I march to the corner of my room and pick up my overflowing laundry basket. "I have a few chores to attend to, but rest assured, I'll be back to cheer her on. Good luck to you both."

I leave without another word.

Kyle

Jeff's potatoes end up mostly even, though there's more variation in the size of the cubes than I'd have liked. I direct him to wash off the starch and pat them dry while I pick the whole spices out of the pot. Sure, he's only good for the simplest tasks, but time saved is time saved.

"Anything else I can help with, Kyle?" Jeff asks eagerly.

"Probably not." I open my spice cabinet and peer in. "But if you want to be a good boy, you can peel a bunch of garlic for me."

Jeffrey doesn't pretend to mishear me and ask for clarification this time, so I don't pretend I didn't say what I said. Instead, he smiles and thanks me for assigning him more culinary busywork. What a weird little freak.

I continue to work on the beans and tofu while he happily banks cloves of peeled garlic in a jar. Nichole emerges from Kathy's room right as I'm starting to caramelise the tomatoes.

"Y'all wanna watch Discursive Combat with us?" she asks, plugging Kathy's sticker-coated laptop into the TV.

I want to tell Nichole that I have no desire to watch Laura declare herself Lord of the Femboys yet again, but Jeff brightens up like he's being offered candy. I sigh internally.

"Sure, we'll join you. I'll bring snacks."

"Ooh, whatcha got?" Nichole asks, fiddling with the TV remote to get it on the right channel.

"Nachos and dip, mainly. I have a few jars of leftover chutneys."

"That sounds wonderful, thanks," Nichole says.

Neither of us mentions my fiancée, or my fiancée's best friend, or the disapproving, judgmental sneer Nichole's started to adopt when speaking to me. We continue to pretend to be flatmates with no particularly strong feelings on each other, as before. Just two chill guys in an flat, competing over who can grow the biggest breasts—and who Rupali likes more.

Nichole excuses herself and returns to her room. I smash the tomatoes with the back of a wooden spoon.

Both dishes are ready about ten minutes before Discursive Combat's due to start. Jeff helps me pack the food into Tupperware, and I tell him that he can have some with me as a treat. The puppy wags his tail. Practically slobbering for me.

I put out two bowls with rice when Katherine comes home with her laundry. I'm about to ignore her, haughtily, when I see her place her basket in her room, apologise to her guest, and close the door as quickly as she can. My concern mounts when she staggers—literally staggers—towards the sofa and collapses on it. I tell Jeff to get started and cautiously approach my most insufferable flatmate.

"Kathy? Kitchen's free now."

I speak in my gentlest, most soothing voice. Kathy's head still jerks up like she's been jolted out of a deep sleep. She frantically looks this way and that, staring about like a cornered animal, before settling her gaze on me.

"Oh! Thank you." She nods. "Yes, you two seem done with the kitchen."

I suppress a sigh. "So, you can make your noodles now. I towel-dried one of the pots for you."

"Oh. Thank you." Katherine nods again. "I will be sure to do so."

Katherine's head droops again, and her eyes half shut. It's very obvious she has no intention of getting up and feeding herself, which wouldn't be my business if she weren't wasting away before me on the living room sofa. As festive as this gathering of oestrogenised men watching two queers debate their gender is sure to be, it would kill the mood if Katherine turned it into a *Weekend at Bernie's* sequel.

"Katherine." I prod her shoulder, and her head jerks up again. "Come have lunch."

"Hm?"

"I made you lunch."

She tilts her head and blinks slowly. "You did?"

"Yes. Come sit at the dinner table and eat your bowl."

I gently tug on her pink hoodie and usher her towards the kitchen. Katherine sits down in front of my bowl of rice and beans, accepts the spoon I press into her hands, and slowly scoops up a small, polite bite. Her eyes light up when the spoonful enters her mouth.

"It's good!"

I go back to wiping down the counter, but can't help chuckling. "Your surprise is noted and appreciated."

"That is not—I, of course, know you are a good cook, Kaalappan," Katherine says.

"I helped," Jeff adds.

I don't need to turn around to know he's grinning from ear to ear over contributing to the least labour-intensive part of the process. "Finish your bowl so I can clean it up, Jeffrey."

"Of course, sorry."

Nichole and Katherine's guest—Izzy, I think?—emerge from their respective rooms right as I rinse off Jeff and Kathy's dishes. Everyone settles down on the sofa except Kathy, who remains at the kitchen table with her phone. When I ask her if she's going to watch with us, she shakes her head.

"I require some distance from the TV today," she says weakly.

I leave her to work out whatever it is she needs to. There's no more room on the sofa, so I sit down on one of its arms, next to Jeffrey.

"She's late," Izzy announces, phone pressed to an ear. "I can't believe she's fucking late."

"Some of the incel crowd wants this to disqualify Laura automatically." Nichole squints at her laptop screen with an expression of concentration I've never seen from her before. Certainly not when she's studying. "They can't do that, right?"

"There's no explicit rules about it, but the current crop of mods aren't big fans of Laura," Izzy says. "I mean, she's challenged one of them, for starters."

"Are they going to be judging this?" Nichole asks. "Doesn't that make this rigged? Can we call a mistrial?"

"Slow down, Ally McBeal," Izzy says in an exasperated tone. "Because Discursive Combat is such a big deal, the server gets to vote on the outcome when the debate concludes. Though I'm not sure if that helps Laura's chances, given that she has as many detractors as—" Izzy suddenly sits up straighter and screams into the phone, "Laura! Discursive Combat! You're late!"

A moment later, two video screens flicker on in the group call.

Laura's camera is focused on her face. Her lips are set in a thin, grim line, and her usually pristine straight hair is in complete disarray. She looks sweatier than I was expecting, blanched and feverish, and the top of her hospital gown is barely visible. Her eyes, however, remain recognisable. Blazing bright and cruel, with her familiar derisive arrogance and jeering air.

But frankly, she still looks too good for someone on her bloody deathbed. She may appear dishevelled and battered, but she's unmistakably a

dishevelled and battered *woman*. A woman who's decided the best way to convalesce is to passionately argue she's not one.

Makes you want to throw a tomato at the TV.

I'm about to get up and excuse myself, when I catch sight of Bobbie out of the corner of my eye.

Bespoke suit—it has to be. The cut hews to their shape too closely; the tailoring is androgynous, defying the reflexive classification as "men's" or "women's". They've draped their form in metallic shades, their blazer and shirt a tapestry of platinum and silver giving their lanky frame the appearance of braided tungsten cables. The cheek resting on a leather-gloved fist appears impossibly soft, given that impression, like an illusory sculpture carved to resemble malleable flesh. Everything about them is glossy, polished, vulpine, down to their platinum-blonde ponytail and steely gaze. They even wear a matching shade of lipstick, on full lips that curve ever-so-slightly, to rival the most mocking of Laura's grins.

Is everyone at the top of this fucking competition a complete smokeshow?

Laura groans. "Oh, yeah, I'm definitely bleeding now."

"My apologies," Trickster says immediately, with an actual fucking wink. Their voice is rich and clear and deep, like a languid pool underneath stalactites.

Are these two clowns flirting in front of everyone?

"I guess that isn't just *our* thing," Izzy says. He looks quite hurt.

The call's text channel, which doesn't have posting permissions enabled for anyone, registers a message from a bot: "HEADS or TAILS?"

Trickster speaks first. "Tails."

"What the *fuck* did you just say to me?" Laura asks, her eyes flashing.

Nichole lets out a strangled cry. "Yep, we're turbofucked."

The bot announces the result as "TAILS!", and Trickster wins the flip.

"Damn it, I *really* wanted the opening statement." Laura sighs heavily.

"Is that so?" Trickster giggles, and their voice echoes in my mind like it came from a deep, dark cave. "Why, it'd be rude of me to deny you that. Ladies first, after all."

Laura crosses her arms. “Screw that. You won the flip, you kick this off, you stupidly sexy Swede.”

“As you wish.” Trickster sits back with a smile.

Jeffrey turns to the others. “Is she okay?”

Nichole gnaws on one of her thumbs. “She’s extremely high on painkillers.”

“Is that allowed?” Jeffrey turns back to the TV, worrying his little hands. “Shouldn’t the debate be rescheduled for when she isn’t, you know, indisposed?”

“I’m not sure the mods would have allowed that,” Izzy says, “but even if they did, I already asked Laura and she dismissed the possibility out of hand. Can’t do anything if she won’t agree to it.”

“Love that.” Nichole shakes her head. “Loving everything about this whole thing.”

On-screen, Trickster spreads their arms wide and finally begins to speak. We all fall silent.

“Laura means to challenge my manhood,” they say, “because manhood is a very nebulous, amorphous, intangible thing to Laura, is it not? It’s declarative, performative. She can be on oestrogen and still be a man. She can call herself ‘Laura’ and use ‘she’ and ‘her’ pronouns, and still be a man. She can even fly all the way to Southeast Asia and get a vaginoplasty, and still, you guessed it, be a man.”

Trickster pauses, inclining their head slightly. “On this, at least, we are aligned. If Laura says she needs to remove her penis to optimise her body’s allocation of resources—against any and all available medical knowledge on the topic—then very well. It’s her gambit and mistake to make. The issue is more that Laura considers herself the divine arbiter of manhood. Anything that Laura does is something men can do, because Laura is a man. However, if others do something she doesn’t approve of—even if it’s more or less the same thing that she herself does—then they are not men, because it is Laura who decides if you are a man.”

Nichole taps Izzy on the shoulder. “Hey, um, does Laura know she’s muted?”

We all glance at the other half of the split screen. Laura speaks with ex-

aggerated mannerisms, gesticulating wildly, seemingly unaware she's completely inaudible.

"I texted her that she's muted for the duration of the opening statement, per the rules, but I don't think she saw," says Izzy, heaving a sigh.

I nod, absent-minded, making the right noises in the hopes that everyone shuts up. I want to keep listening to Trickster and their eviscerations of Laura's ridiculous ideas and double standards. Whatever her problem is, it's pretty clear the charade has gone on long enough. They'd be doing her a favour by showing her the door. Laura isn't a man, and she'll be better off somewhere she doesn't feel the need to keep pretending to be one, for others' sakes.

Trickster continues. "Those are the facts I want to leave you all with. Laura will, in her own statement, adamantly insist there's nothing unmanly about availing of transition procedures that are completely unnecessary for the competition. She will try to tell you that she can be taken at her word when she tells us she is a man, but the rest of us must answer to her, must have our manhood validated by her judgment. This despite the fact there are no communities of men who take hormones and avail of sexual reassignment surgery—but there are men who take on a female role in many cultures throughout history. And yet, Laura will claim that it is her, and not I, who is truly a man. We will have to indulge her contradictory and incoherent worldview for some time further, but I am sure that you, as well as I, are quite settled on the matter."

To my surprise, Jeff snorts loudly. "Sure, honey."

"Hm?" I sit up straighter, and all of us look at him quizzically.

Jeff appears abashed, but continues. "I'm just saying, whatever they are, member of 'effeminate homosexual community' is not it. Third genders are kind of like femboys, and Trickster is in the dykiest—which is to say, *tackiest* get-up possible. Like, how can you sit there and claim to be part of an effeminate gender when you're not even dressed *fem*? Make it make sense."

"Huh." Brows furrowed, I redirect my attention to the screen. Jeff has a point, but I'm unable to dwell on it for very long before Laura speaks.

"I just want to start by saying that not being allowed to interrupt your

opponent's opening statement is bullshit, but since I didn't get to, you can't either." Laura clears her throat. She has a wild look in her eyes, and it makes me anxious—she clearly caught Trickster saying something she can use.

"It's funny you say 'no communities of men' avail of transition procedures," she says, "while claiming a third-gender identity. It reveals just how shallow your engagement with the concept is, typical of the Western queer's understanding of global south queer cultures."

Kathy speaks up from the table. "Wait, isn't Italy a Western country?"

"Yep." Izzy mops a sweaty brow. "It sure is."

Laura folds her arms and puts on her signature insufferable smirk. "If you knew a single thing about the glaring inconsistencies in the anthropological literature, you would know those communities of 'men' you so proudly claim to belong to? Whose incontrovertible male identity and rejection of transition healthcare you state as fact? When they're provided access to fucking hormones and surgeries, Trickster, *they avail of them*. I've personally boosted and donated to fundraisers for sexual reassignment surgery, posted by members of hijra and khwaja sira communities."

Hearing the word "hijra" come out of Laura's mouth is surreal. Like two worlds intersecting and reminding me that they both exist in the same reality. Memories come flooding back. My family calling men "hijra" as an insult, to talk about those who "couldn't" father sons or took a little too long to have kids. Cousins clapping at me in this particular, distinct way, to signal that they knew something about me was *off*. Wrong.

Queer.

Laura continues to speak, and I try to keep listening.

"I've talked to queer people from all over the world," she says, "about how blurry the lines are between effeminate gay men, butch lesbians, gender non-conforming people, and transsexual individuals of all stripes. Queer theorists acknowledge that ambiguity in the West, but then turn around and act like there's a clear line between so-called 'third genders' and other queer people outside the West. That's ridiculous, and nonsensical, and it is absurd of you to sit there and claim the mandate of history and academia is on your side. I *don't care*, Trickster. I have seen the

limitations of your authorities, I have studied them in depth, and I fucking spit on them all. I know more than you, and I know more than the fucking authority whose mantle you drape yourself in. Because you see, Trickster, those 'third genders' are largely transsexual women, who do all the same things that transsexual women do, even if their societies refuse to recognise them as such. So your claim of membership is frankly an admission of what you truly are."

You could hear a pin drop in our living room.

Then Izzy lets out a loud, long groan, head in hands.

"It's over," Izzy says.

I tilt my head. "What are you talking about? Didn't she just refute their whole argument? While high as a kite, I have to add?"

"No." Izzy sits back up. "That argument is what Trickster wanted Laura to make. They *know* that this is Laura's field of study. And now, so does the entire server."

"Ah."

As if to validate Izzy's fears, Trickster grins widely as they become audible again.

"Fascinating," they say. "So do I have it, in your own words, that it is actions and not identification that determines someone's transsexual status?"

Laura blinks. The smugness slides off her face. "I don't believe that's quite what I said."

"You may believe what you wish." Trickster giggles. "What you said, on the other hand, is that third gender communities are trans women, because they do what trans women do."

"I—we're discussing an issue of erasure here." Laura raises a hand, as if to silence Trickster. "I'm not saying they're trans women because of what they do, necessarily. Many of them say they aren't trans women, but most of them to some degree or another identify with womanhood. They use women's names, wear women's clothes, and want to be counted in the census as women. Their own societies deny their womanhood, and then Western academics reproduce that denial uncritically. That's my point."

"I see. And wearing women's clothes, using women's names." Trickster

bares all their teeth, allowing Laura a moment to register what she said. "That makes them women."

"If they say it does," Laura says, hissing.

"And you, Laura, say it doesn't."

Laura nods. "In my case, it doesn't make me a woman. I'm a man competing for a prize."

Nichole slaps her palm to her forehead. "She sounds so convincing, truly."

I shrug. "I mean, they weren't wrong about Laura's incoherence, were they?"

"Great." Izzy leans back and stares up at the ceiling. "All that work. All that time. Wasted."

"You know what's most interesting to me about this, Laura?" Trickster asks. They have the air of a cat toying with its prey. "You know so much about this. You've researched this topic in depth, and you argue on behalf of these misrepresented third genders so passionately. With real feeling. Are you telling me that you're so invested in this, as a man? That you have no personal stake or experience with these issues in the slightest?"

"I fucking warned her, didn't I?" Izzy asks the ceiling.

Laura snorts loudly, interrupting Izzy's breakdown. "For all your claims to an enlightened view of gender, Bobbathy, you certainly subscribe to a very reductive model of it. I can't care about this subject as a man? I can't rail against injustice and erasure and misrepresentation of women, as a man? That shows what you believe, naturally, but says nothing about me."

I find I'm actually holding my breath. She sounds so confident, so unperturbed—Laura can't actually come back from this, can she?

Laura throws her head back, brushing her hair out of her face. "Nay, I tell you: it is *because* I am a man that I care so much about these most maligned and misconstrued women. For I am not bound by your limited, base, petty conception of manhood that dismisses any man who truly, in his heart of hearts, loves women. I, Bobbathy, am not just a man, not just *any* man, but *the* man, the ultimate specimen whose spectre Neetzcheezy could scarcely imagine. I am the superman! The man who refuses to bow before society and instead says: no! It is I who will remake you in my image. And I say that caring about women—and I mean ALL women, Trickster—makes me

more, and not less of a man, despite what misogynists like you may claim. I am not tainted by my proximity to womanhood in the slightest, and in fact, I am only empowered and reaffirmed by my love for all womankind."

She actually fucking pulled it off.

"Fucking hell." Nichole runs a hand through her hair. "That's—I think she just saved it?"

I exhale sharply. "Yeah. Damn. Even I almost believed that."

"Oh my goddess, yes!" Izzy says, with teary eyes. "I mean, she doesn't look like a cornered animal anymore."

Jeff claps—he actually applauds. "Fucking thank you! It's so annoying how transgender women keep insisting that you have to be a woman if you're just like them, and I'm glad someone's not afraid to say it."

Nichole looks at him askance. "Come again?"

"You are fucking insufferable. You know that, right?"

We freeze. It was Trickster who called Laura insufferable, in a wholly different tone. No longer confident, brash, collected, calm. In fact, Trickster sounded a lot like Izzy did right before Laura gave her superman speech.

Laura sneers. "That's not an argument, Bobbathy."

"There is no arguing with you," Trickster says, taking off their gloves and tossing them aside. "Because you're utterly shameless and void of introspection. You have that quality only academics do, where you're willing to say anything with the utmost confidence, no matter how brazenly it contradicts empirically observable reality."

"How dare you—"

"You have the gall to be annoyed with your advisor?" Trickster speaks over Laura, pounding a fist onto their desk. "You're no less impenetrable, you infuriatingly smug ass. How dare I? How dare *you* expel all that hot air about how much you love women, when you've kicked so many out of this server? When you've cut off so many from healthcare they needed?"

"Um." I lean forward, trying to take it all in. The change in Trickster's demeanour is giving me whiplash. "Are they saying what I think—"

"Do you know how many girls, Laura?" Trickster asks, getting louder with each syllable. "Did you keep track? I did. I counted every one. I tried to

make sure they were okay, but I didn't succeed in getting in touch with all of them."

"Okay, what's going on?" Laura glances up at her camera. "What even is this anymore?"

Trickster slumps back in their chair. "You don't even think about them. You sit there recovering from SRS, and you don't even think about all the women you deprived of procedures and surgeries they needed."

"I—I'm not—"

"You're not what, Laura?" Trickster's just shouting now. "Responsible? Culpable? Guilty?!"

For a moment, I see something on Laura's face I never thought I'd see. Fear, yes. But also something else, something I didn't think her capable of.

I see doubt.

"It'd be one thing if you kept your bullshit to yourself." Trickster is unrelenting now: hair askew, eyes blazing. "But you suckered this entire server into your sham. You gave everyone here a perfect framework to gaslight each other and themselves, in a climate that already labours so much to prevent us from realising our true selves. You are not only responsible for every woman you've deprived of access to healthcare, Laura, but you're the ultimate enabler of self-harm and denial for an entire class of—"

The call ends. The TV goes silent, and the screen turns black.

Izzy snatches Nichole's laptop and begins typing furiously over Nichole's protests. "I'm messaging the mods right away, cupcake. Bobbathy said 'us' and admitted to a transfeminine identity right before Admin pulled the plug."

"Of course she did." Jeffrey scoffs. "I told y'all she was no fag, didn't I?"

"That you did."

Everyone sounds so distant. Like I'm listening to them speak with my ear pressed against the wall of a room I can't leave. Trickster's final words keep ringing in my ears.

"You gave everyone here a perfect framework to gaslight each other and themselves."

I stand up quickly. "Would anyone like snacks? Post-game snacks. Go team Laura, and whatnot."

Nichole backs off from Izzy and looks up at me. "Oh, sure."

"That sounds lovely," Kathy says. She's still at the table, and she smiles faintly as I walk by. "A victory worthy of celebration."

I open the fridge and stare at the contents without really seeing them. "Yeah, it's basically the Super Bowl for men on oestrogen."

"A climate that already labours so much to prevent us from realising our true selves."

"I have salsa." I force myself to speak because I've been standing at the fridge too long. "And. Tamarind chutney, I think?"

"It all sounds good!"

"You're the ultimate enabler of self-harm and denial for an entire class of—"

"Here, Kaalappan, let me help."

Before I can respond, Katherine gently nudges me aside and reaches past me, picking out the dips.

"Oh, thank you," I say. I feel faint.

"Your leftover chips are in this cabinet, correct?"

"Yeah." I nod. "Yeah, help yourself."

I stagger over to the kitchen table and sit down heavily.

The flurry of activity around me blurs into an amorphous mass of sound and fuzzy shapes. Izzy says a Reddit friend responded earlier than expected with genealogy resources. Turns out Bobbie—that's Trickster's name—isn't Italian at all, as Laura suspected. Nichole and Jeff laugh a lot. It's the first time I've seen them enjoy each other's company. And when everyone's done snacking, Katherine actually collects all the bowls and rinses them out in the sink before I can even get up.

"Thank you," she says, giving my shoulder a squeeze before returning to her room.

"Kathy, a word?" Izzy goes after her.

"Fucking hell, I'm not going to get any studying done before lunch." Nichole checks her phone. "I better run, honestly."

She leaves, and then it's just me and Jeff. He smiles at me, then gets up to dry the bowls.

"Kathy always leaves a job half-finished, doesn't she?"

"Yeah."

How much time has passed?

I stare at Jeff as I do my best to ground myself. He's so pretty. His shoulder-length bob is cute, and his shoulders are so dainty, and I keep thinking about what it would be like to hold his small, soft hands. I get so lost looking at him that it takes me a second to focus when he says something.

"Whatever her faults, I'm glad she talked about third genders," he says. "The server is a really Western-centric space, honestly."

Ugh. "Right, I forgot you're a complete idiot."

Jeff freezes, and I realise I said that out loud. "Oh, um, sorry."

I should apologise too, I think, but I'm honestly not in the mood. "I was enjoying looking at you, you know, but then you just had to open your fucking mouth and remind me what your worst quality is."

Jeff's head snaps up. He turns around. "You were enjoying looking at me?"

"Ugh, yes." No point denying it now. I slide my chair back and rise to my feet. "You're pretty enough when you don't speak."

"You think I'm pretty?"

I stamp my foot. "What did I *just* say?"

Blessed fucking silence.

I advance. Jeff doesn't move a muscle, lips pressed together like he doesn't dare even open his mouth. He just stares up at me with those big blue eyes, still holding the dishcloth. I take it from him and put it aside, not breaking eye contact.

"Don't ever speak of this," I say.

Jeff nods.

"Do you want to kiss me?"

Jeff squeaks, but still doesn't speak. He nods fervently.

So I grab his stupid cute face to press his soft, plump lips into mine. I push him against the counter, and he throws his legs around me. I run my hands up and down his smooth, sexy body, and we both feel our need pressing urgently into our laps.

Then he moans my name—not even the anglicised version—and my eyes fly open, and my hands recoil from him like he's a live wire. I leap back

a solid five feet. I stand there, breathing heavily, staring at Jeffrey half-sprawled across the electric stove, his shorts pulled down far enough for me to catch a glimpse of his—is he wearing a thong?

"Right. Well." My mind is completely blank. "Have a good day."

I spin around and flee to my room.

Shouldn't have kissed him. I'm engaged. To a woman. We're going to be exchanging rings very soon. We'll be married after college. I'm not even attracted to Jeffrey—right? I can't stand him. I just like ordering him around because he's so pathetic.

Fuck me to Sunday school, what am I doing?

Good thing summer break isn't far off. It's going to be so much more awkward in the flat from now on.

CHAPTER 9
WHEN FLOWERS BLOOM

Jeff

Wendy and I have an eventful summer break.

Ma sounds enthusiastic enough when she asks if I intend to come home this year, and disappointed enough when I say no. She and pa are certainly much better now than they were during the first year of college, right after I came out, but I'm still not much inclined to brave their hospitality. Instead, I pick up night shifts with Wendy at *Midnight Munchies*—an eatery catering to students pulling all-nighters—and ask nicely if I can crash on her couch. She agrees.

"As long as you sleep somewhere else a few times a week, the landlord won't get *too* suspicious," Wendy says with a wink. We laugh about it. Neither of us thinks I'll have much trouble sleeping in other beds.

But something's different now.

It's not that I'm striking out, not exactly. More that I'm not receiving as much attention at the gay bar as I'm used to. I've fallen out of the habit of needing to put in some work or surf the apps. Sure, there's fewer college guys because it's summer, and maybe the townies are more picky, but I'm

starting to feel a bit transparent. Like the men I used to charm with a look now see right through me, their eyes glazing over and searching elsewhere.

My clothes don't fit right, either. They're more uncomfortable, tight in spots they didn't use to be. Wendy lends me some outfits she doesn't wear anymore, and frowns when I stretch out her old tees. I thank her and apologise.

One morning, when I'm on my way to the bathroom, my vial and injector concealed in my shower basket, Wendy stops me.

"You can just do your shots in your bedroom like a normal person," she says through a mouthful of buttered toast.

"Oh, um." I stutter, wondering whether to deny it or figure out a plausible explanation. "I'm not—"

"I am not your mother, Jeffrey." Wendy stands up and deposits her crumb-covered plate into the empty sink. "You don't have to hide these things, and you don't have to tell me anything you don't want to."

I hug her.

Finally, I can relax in the flat. I'm not too keen on wearing my other clothes around her or anything, but I'm less worried about her discovering my skirts or tights and asking questions. It's actually refreshing how much she respects my privacy. Far from badgering me with questions, she accepts my being on oestrogen as a perfectly normal thing.

"You can borrow my other clothes too, if you like," she says over dinner one night, before we head to work. "There's a dress or two you'd look good in."

"Oh!" I smile. "I'd love that."

"Mm hmm." Wendy glances down. "Let's pick something low cut so that boy finally gives you his number."

That's the other thing. It's not that *all* men find me beneath notice all of a sudden—far from it. Now, the guys I catch checking me out when they think I won't notice are the sort of guy I grew up avoiding. Which is, most guys. It's strange to see warmth and friendliness and hunger in the eyes of these men, when I'm accustomed to cold sneers and quiet, angry hostility.

A part of me is still convinced I'm imagining it.

I drop my gaze and focus on my plate. "I don't know who you're talking about."

"Yes you do." Wendy is persistent. "That one quiet boy with the ugly backpack covered in Pokémon stickers who barely speaks louder than a whisper."

"Um," I say, picking up my glass of water and hiding my face behind it, "I don't know who—"

"The boy whose order you've memorised." Wendy continues speaking, indifferent to my distress. "The boy who you're always finding excuses to speak to, even though he looks terrified every time you speak to him. The boy who drops by at 1 a.m. every night and orders the coffee sundae with sprinkles. That boy."

"Yes, yes, fine, you win," I grumble pitifully. "I don't think he's interested."

Wendy rolls her eyes. "Well, he's probably never cum in the company of another person."

"Wendy!"

"He does, however, check you out when you turn around." Wendy sighs when I perk up at that piece of information, and cuts me off before I can inquire further. "Let me get you a top, you silly goose, and I'll show you how to tie the apron to really accentuate the right bits."

Once again, I decide against pretending I don't know what it is Wendy means to "accentuate" and mutter my thanks.

I do look good in the V-neck she lends me. A dash of red lip and a little mascara, and I'm almost unrecognisable in the mirror. Blonde locks fall just past my shoulders with a hint of curl, and there's an actual shape to my figure that I've often dreamed of. Maybe I'm being fanciful, but after more than a year of hormone therapy, I almost look like—

Wendy knocks on the bathroom door, startling me. I finish up quickly so we can leave for work.

The boy with the Pokémon stickers on his backpack doesn't show up tonight.

Wendy says nothing, but she squeezes my shoulder at 1:15 and hands me a vanilla milkshake before we close up. I give her a small smile and let her put her arm around me on the way home, resting my head against her and sipping my drink slowly.

She wouldn't believe me if I said it out loud, but I'm not even disappointed. Not really. I laugh at her tirade on useless shut-ins whose balls haven't dropped and nod at her well-worn lecture on my awful taste, but it's really more for her benefit than mine. As nice as it is to be wanted, my thoughts are somewhere else entirely.

They linger on a man who carries himself like a prince. A man whose shadowy, stoic exterior belies a spirit of thundering fury, and whose lips I can still taste weeks after I was blessed by their favour.

When I move back into our flat, a week before term, I'm overcome with anxiety. I didn't see a lot of him before summer break—he was so busy with his finals and projects, and his flight was so soon after his last exam. How will he react when he sees me again, after so many weeks apart? What will he say? What should *I* say? Maybe I should tell him that I—oh, but what if it's too soon?

Two days before term, I hear the key turn in the lock just as I sit down to have lunch. The door swings open, and our eyes meet as he strides in, dragging his suitcase behind him.

Kyle almost seems larger than life. Like he's grown taller, and broader in the shoulder and chest, towering over me with his sheer size and presence. He brushes the tangle of his wild, jet black locks out of his face and stares at me silently. How I long to be privy to every thought behind those stormy eyes, to know exactly what he thinks when he looks at me.

I put down my spoon and stand up, almost bouncing. My shorts and tees are so much tighter now, and I greet him with one hand on my hip and the other on the table, trying to strike a casual pose to show off exactly how much I've grown. Blossomed, even.

"Hi," I say, in a breathy voice.

Kyle continues to stare at me for a short while. Then he nods and goes to his room. When he turns away, I see the hand grasping his suitcase more clearly. There's a gold band on his ring finger.

My heart sinks.

It's official.

CHAPTER 9

Nichole

Going home for the summer changes very little about my day-to-day, except that I can't see my friends in person anymore.

Dad's off in the merchant navy circumnavigating the world again and mum's in Japan, closing deals on aggressive mergers. I think, anyway. Neither of them puts much effort into their excuses for jetting off and cheating on each other anymore. That includes feeling the need to keep me informed of what time zone they're in. The weekly cleaning service still shows up on time, at any rate. Gives me a reason to leave my bedroom for a bit.

At least mum was nice enough to get me a work-from-home internship. Designing UIs for a random start-up's "internal tools" is easy enough, and given that they're looking to be bought out by next quarter, no one's checking my work too thoroughly.

Kathy's busy with her own internship at some lab. She offers to come over occasionally to watch things together or have dinner. I make sure I'm always busy for the times she suggests.

Strangely, being this alone and mostly confined to my parents' flat feels freeing. I don't have to constantly worry about what I say to my flatmates in case it can be used against me. I can freely walk around the house without worrying about snide remarks or awkward interactions, wearing the outfits I bought with Tahani and Ru. Slowly but surely, I feel myself filling them out, fitting them better and better with each day.

I also end up spending more time with Tahani and Ru than we could manage at school. None of us is particularly happy at our parents' home, and we Zoom a lot, sometimes talking well past midnight, sometimes just sitting in call together while we do other stuff. I order a controller so Tahani can have fun beating us up in online Smash, in exchange for letting Ru and me inflict the horrors of Jackbox on her, and sometimes her partners as well.

Splitting time between us, her mum, and calls with her girlfriends also means Tahani's usually the first to hang up. Some days, she can't make it. I

figured at first that Ru wouldn't want to speak to just me all day, or that it'd be forced and overly polite if we tried, but it feels like she enjoys our conversations as much as I do. She sympathises with me about my boring front-end courses and marvels when I tell her how convoluted the long-running plots of most MMORPGs are. Talking to her is easy. Comfortable. Like I'm not being judged for any of the cringe shit I enjoy privately.

One day, I share a guilty pleasure with her: a fanfic reimagining one of *Warcraft*'s biggest villains as a woman in a tortured lesbian relationship with her love interest. We don't really discuss sexuality or attraction per se, but given that Tahani's the biggest lesbian ever, I assume Ru will at the very least be cool with it.

In response, Ru sends me a link to her AO3 account. I scroll through it to find that she's authored dozens upon dozens of fanfics about *Fire Emblem* characters, some short and some the length of an epic.

They're all F/F.

I decide, for Ru's sake, not to comment on that.

Not long after Ru's revelation, Tahani messages me privately. "*Do you understand why, as much as I love Ru, being around her drives me fucking insane?*"

I reply. "*Yeah I'm. Experiencing some of that myself, frankly.*"

"She's been this oblivious for years. She also can't shut up about the Artoria/Jane fanfic you sent her, so good job! Keep it up, girliepop."

I'm barely able to stop my fingers from trembling too much to reply. "*Aye aye captain*."

That certainly recontextualises all the times Tahani's left a group call to leave Ru alone with me.

Having Tahani all but confirm my hunch about Ru is a real shot of confidence. I suppose we could both be mistaken, but reading over Ru's loving and attentive descriptions of female characters, her words frequently leaving me hot under the collar—there's no heterosexual explanation for this.

Of course, that does make the other topic we're avoiding all the more macabre. The only time we speak about Ru's engagement is when she calls me after midnight, about halfway through summer break. Not on Discord, but actually ringing my phone.

"Hey," she says when I pick up. Her voice is wobbly.

"Hey," I say back, unsure how to respond. I want to ask her if she's okay, but it seems unwise.

"We exchanged rings today."

"Ah."

Neither of us says anything for a while.

"Can you just," Ru says, coughing lightly, "can you just stay with me?"

"Of course."

"Thanks."

I stay on the call for over an hour as Ru cries.

Eventually, she thanks me again and hangs up. Only then do I let myself toss my phone aside and sob.

We don't mention the call for the rest of summer, but I carry it with me. I think of it when I notice my measurements grow week after week. I remember it when selfie after selfie drives the RCBG server wild. I force myself to recall what Ru sounded like, what it felt like to hear her wordless grief, when I wax my legs and pluck my brows and dress myself in the mirror, noting how my legs look in short skirts.

I've had a beautiful summer, no doubt about it. And when Ru sees me in autumn, she'll get to appreciate just how beautiful.

Kyle

None of my shit fits anymore.

I was fitted for a tux over the winter break. And I guess I missed how much my chest grew since then, despite checking at least twice every day to see how things are coming along. No matter how much I poked and prodded and stared at my stupid nipples from every angle, they certainly looked like I wasn't putting on any more fat than I already had to begin with.

So when I pick out T-shirts to wear during my visit home and find that none of them make me look as shapeless as I'd like—and since I can't wear fucking hoodies in an equatorial climate—I panic.

I'm working in an electric vehicle CAD shop over the summer. I only have to be home for a week—negotiated down from an entire damn month—but it's going to be a rough week if amma notices I've sprouted tits. I beg one of my bigger and friendlier coworkers for a shirt to borrow. I do have to admit that my parents monitor the joint account I have with amma and I can't buy one myself, but I can't justify why I desperately need a bigger button-down very well. He agrees, though, I guess because I sound absolutely terrified of the prospect of not being able to get my hands on one.

When I fly home, I do my best to hug my relatives from as far away as I can get away with. I try on my new tailored shirt in my room, and I can't even button it up halfway. The bigger one I borrowed isn't the same white, but it's white and I'm able to close the top button, so it'll do. Ideally, I'd wear a binder or a minimiser bra under it, too, but the best I can do is tape my breasts down to try and give the impression of a big but still non-booby chest.

Fuck, I have breasts. Were they always this big? Or did they grow just in time to inconvenience me as much as possible?

Amma keeps asking me if I can find the time to exercise. Her own strict monitoring of my schedules leaves no room for such things, but she says she's worried about how much weight I've put on. And she still asks me once or twice when I last got my hair cut, but luckily, she's much more concerned with suggesting diets for me to try. I feign interest in them so she doesn't make me practically shave my head.

Ru's home for more of summer break than I am. She didn't tell me how long, or if she's doing anything else over the summer. For her sake, I make sure I'm only here for the engagement party and not much longer. We can barely look at each other or force a smile in the other's presence, anymore.

But that's more than expected. We smile more around each other than most married couples in our families, anyway.

She's on her phone a lot. Most of the time I see her, she's talking to Nichole, which I try not to think about.

I also try not to think about Jeff. Before I left our flat, I gave him an e-mail address to contact me if he likes. It's a burner account I don't use for any-

thing else. There are three e-mails sitting in the inbox, polite and cordial and mostly about how his summer is going.

I still haven't replied. I probably won't.

The day of the engagement is hot and humid, but the church isn't far from the beach and it's breezy enough. Should be able to tough it out. I get dressed alone and look at myself in the mirror for a long time. It's a funhouse reflection. Distorted and wrong and bulging in weird places. I don't look right. I've never looked right.

When I see Ru, she exceeds my most fevered expectations. Her dress isn't white but a deep red, long and flowing and matching her gloves. The engagement party isn't something formal, or something people usually do. Just a chance for our families to celebrate our eventual union.

So we stand at an altar before everyone who's supposed to mean the most to us, including each other, and say what we're expected to say. Amma wrote the canned lines I recite to Ru. No one seems to notice how funereal the mood is. How downcast Ru's eyes are, how dark her expression despite the sun shining bright and high. I take in her sweet fragrance mixed with salty sea air, and when I look into her brimming eyes, I see my own face. The face I want to claw and tear apart every time I see it. I wonder how anyone can mistake this farce for a happy occasion.

The priest tells me to put the ring on her finger to forever bind her to a beast, and I comply.

CHAPTER 10
FOR LOVE'S SAKE

Jeff

Everyone can tell that I'm not my usual sunny self. I only smile when I think I'm supposed to, and all my laughter sounds forced. There's a standing offer from Wendy to take me shopping, and a few weeks into the semester, I take her up on it. Over lunch, crying two streaks of mascara into my parfait, I manage to extricate myself from Wendy's embrace and choke the words out.

"He's engaged."

It didn't seem real before. Both Kyle and Rupali have said they were promised to each other, but I didn't realise how serious it was until I saw the ring.

Wendy makes a noise that's a sigh, a groan, and a cry of anguish all at once. She pulls me back into a hug.

At home, Kyle continues to avoid me. He acknowledges me when we cross paths, but he barely speaks a word. It's like we're strangers again.

It's like everything that happened before summer meant nothing.

But it can't have meant nothing. I felt it. I felt how fast his heart beat against mine. I felt how much he craves me, yearns for me, longs to scoop

me up in his strong arms and claim me as his—if only he could act on his true desires. When I look at Kyle, I see him at the centre of a glass cage, beating against the invisible walls of his enclosure.

I wish I knew how to break him out.

He's mine. I know he's mine, I know I have his heart, but that doesn't mean a damn thing, does it? I understand now why he was always so closed off, so reluctant to give name to his feelings. Why we could only ever hope to steal away a few precious moments together.

Love counts for so little in this cruel, heartless world.

All I can do is accept it. I don't want to make things harder for him, and it'll be easier for both of us if I don't insist on pushing the issue. We just don't have the power to change a foregone conclusion. I busy myself. I bury myself in work and obligations as much as I can, so I don't think about how much it hurts not to have his arms around me, and so I can keep smiling at him whenever our eyes meet.

We don't need to say it out loud to know it's true, after all.

A few weeks into the term, Wendy asks me to accompany her to *Dorothy's*. Someone left two boxes of GSA signs and supplies there after the last meet-and-greet, and we need to pick them up. Once we get there and thank Dorothy for holding on to the boxes for us, Wendy accepts an offer of free baked goods and asks me to enjoy them with her outside. I sit down at a corner table with her, chewing on a fudgy brownie, and stare at the cars driving by.

"Are you seriously still keeping up the kicked puppy act?" Wendy asks.

Callous, even for her. I wipe the chocolate off my lips and blink at her with wet eyes. "That's not helpful."

"Neither is letting you dehydrate yourself on my shoulder in perpetuity." Wendy rolls her eyes. "I am not stupid, dear. This is the guy you were pining for all summer, right?"

I nod.

"Okay, great. You got attached to a married guy." Wendy shrugs. "Won't be the last time."

"He's not married yet," I say, somewhat petulantly.

Wendy cocks her head to the side. "If you know that, why are you behaving like this, silly girl?"

I look away, unable to meet her eyes. "I don't—he isn't married yet but he's engaged. I don't know what I'll do when he does marry her."

"Keep crying?"

"Why are you being so heartless?" I ask, miserably.

Wendy throws her hands up. "Because it's just some guy—"

"It's not just 'some guy', Wendy!"

"Then why aren't you doing a damn thing besides moping?"

I pause. I don't know what to say to that.

"Duckling." Wendy softens her voice and takes my hand. I turn back to see not annoyance, but still a certain sternness in her face. "I can't bear to see you like this. That's all. You understand that, right?"

"I guess."

"Don't guess." Wendy sighs. "Look. Either there's nothing you can do and it's horrible and tragic, which means you need to move on and find someone else. You obviously can and will."

"No." I shake my head. "Wendy, I can't just—I can't."

"Then why aren't you doing something about it?" she asks.

I hesitate. "What do you mean? What am I supposed to do?"

"You told me he isn't married yet," Wendy says. "If that's the case, why give up? Why act like it's set in stone and you are a helpless babe?"

"Because..." I try to find the words. "In his culture, engagements are taken very seriously."

"Oh for fuck's sake." Wendy rolls her eyes again. "Yes, unlike everywhere else, where they are merely a suggestion."

"You know what I mean."

"I truly, truly don't."

I hate this. I hate her. But through my annoyance and my grief and my pain, I find I don't have anything to say that proves her wrong.

Why *am* I acting like it's a foregone conclusion?

"I didn't really think about it like that," I say, admitting defeat.

"Then think about it." Wendy pats the back of my hand. "This guy. He's shown interest in you, yes? I hope?"

"Yeah." I inhale sharply, remembering how roughly he groped me, how eagerly he pushed his tongue into my mouth. "We made out before summer break."

Wendy drops my hand. "Okay! See, now that's important to consider, isn't it? Mr. Engaged had no problems kissing you, apparently."

"I wouldn't say 'no problems'."

"Is it normal in his culture to make out with people who are not your fiancée?" Wendy asks with a smirk.

I smile despite her mocking tone. My heart beats faster, and I feel lighter all of a sudden. "No, it isn't."

"Well, there you go." Wendy squeezes my hand. "You're a bombshell, you silly goose, and he wants you. Don't waste your time shedding tears. Go get him."

She makes it sound so simple. "But, isn't that—?"

Wendy smacks her forehead with a palm. "Are you seriously agonising over the morality of making a move on a guy who's already kissed you?"

"No." A knot in my chest unravels. "No, that's—you're completely right. I'm sorry. I'm just thinking like my mum again."

Wendy scoffs. "Take it from me. Small-town Bible thumpers are louder about their morals in public than in private."

"Okay, Wendy." I squeeze her hand back. "Thanks for putting up with me."

"Of course. You're *my* silly goose." Wendy returns my smile. "Also, are you finally going to tell me who it is? I've been so good. I've been dying to know."

I think for a moment. "Alright. I don't know if you know him, but it's Rupali's fiancé."

Wendy's eyes go wide. "It's—oh my gosh!"

She throws her head back and cackles for what feels like five whole minutes. My cheeks grow hot.

"You complete and utter moron." Wendy smacks the table with both hands and goes to stand up. "Don't waste my time like this ever again. I thought this was something serious. If he's stuck with that cantankerous

bitch as his wife-to-be, he's probably dying to rid himself of her fat ass. You'll be the one engaged to him by this time next year."

Nichole

I think I'm the happiest I've been in years.

Tahani lives off-campus with her two girlfriends, in a cosy brownstone far from the city centre. It's a bit cramped, but it has wooden floors and a brick fireplace and a certain homeyness that a complex of flats can't quite replicate. An impressive collection of leather jackets is scattered about, a few hung up by the door, others draped on kitchen chairs or the back of the sofa. Tahani apologises for the mess, gathering them up, but I'm too busy trying to picture the mouthwatering mass of butch to whom the jackets belong.

There aren't any photos, which is to be expected anywhere trans people live. Instead, black-and-white sketches of women in various poses and moods dot the walls, giving the space a more personalised touch than the landscape paintings. I pick up a framed piece that depicts three figures dancing in a circle, arms linked. I put it back down as Tahani finishes gathering the retro consoles and controllers lying in front of the living room TV and carries them to her room with more shouted apologies.

We settle down soon enough to begin the movie marathon. I'm spending my Saturday afternoon on a sofa with Tahani, Kim, and Rupali, gorging myself on snacks, knocking back hard lemonade, and watching lesbian rom-coms. It's perfect.

It's like I've found where I belong.

"I still don't get how *But I'm a Cheerleader* is a rom-com," Rupali says.

Kim snorts. "It's not exactly a thriller, is it?"

Tahani shrugs. "Is it funny? Yes. Is there romance? Also yes. Do they get together in the end? We watched them get together in the end."

"I mean, I admit I didn't find it that funny." Rupali sighs. "Dunno, maybe I'm being a buzzkill, but the entire premise—the Christian conversion camp is only funny with witty dialogue and musical cues. I don't know. Sorry."

I reach down and grab a few bottles from the cooler. Rupali cocks an eyebrow as I press one into her hands.

"To refresh the buzz you just killed," I say, handing a second to Tahani. Kim waves me off, holding up her non-alcoholic cider and mouthing, "I'm good."

Rupali chuckles and pops the cap open. "Thanks."

Kim checks her phone. "Pizza's almost here, so let's wait to put on the next one? Also, what's the next one?"

"Imagine Me and You," Tahani says.

"Ooh, Lena Headey?" I bite my lip.

"As a redhead, too," Rupali says. "Damn."

Tahani and I exchange a look. Kim gulps down some cider to hide her smirk.

"Why's everyone gone quiet?" Rupali asks.

"Oh, I was just thinking." Tahani sits up straighter and puts her drink down on the coffee table. "Did you notice they've started putting up flyers for the GSA Halloween party already?"

Rupali's expression sours. "Ugh, don't remind me of those losers. We're trying to have a nice time."

"Normally, I'd be in agreement," Kim says, "but I think this tells us something interesting. They're probably struggling for funds right now, which is why they need to start selling tickets this far in advance."

"Oh, they probably are." Rupali giggles. "Hey, we tried to warn them how much Quinn was fucking things up."

"I think xe might have blown the budget on the career fair 'swag'," Tahani says. "Hope xe got an interview or something out of it at least."

I put my own drink down and lean forward. "I went back to a meet-and-greet last week. They were putting up torn signs, and I heard one of the volunteers complain that Quinn told her to fix them herself."

Kim nods. "Yeah, members started paying for stuff out of pocket a lot more after Quinn got appointed as the treasurer."

"We certainly had to." Rupali taps the rim of her bottle contemplatively. "I bet the Halloween party's going to be a disaster."

"Probably." Tahani grins and crosses her legs. "We should attend."

Rupali cocks an eyebrow. "Excuse me?"

"I know what you're thinking, but look at the bigger picture, babe." Tahani scooches forward and rubs Rupali's arm. "We all know they're going to fuck it up somehow. Cheap decorations. Exploding smoke machine. Forgetting how to operate the light switches. Whatever it is, *something* will blow up in Quinn's face. Are you telling me you don't want front-row tickets to witness the moment of xer failure?"

"Hm." Rupali is silent for a moment. "Well, when you put it that way."

"Tempting as that sounds, I think I'll sit it out," Kim says. "None of us had a particularly fun exit from the org, but it's probably still most awkward for me."

"Yeah, because you dated Quinn," Rupali says, snickering.

I almost drop my drink mid-swig. "Hang on a minute—you *what*?"

Kim's expression is pained. "It's not just because of that. There were a lot of bridges burned at the end there." She closes her eyes and sighs. "But also, yes, I don't particularly want my spiteful weirdo ex to perceive me."

"Fucking hell." I rub my temple. "Well, at least it's in the past, right?"

Kim frowns at Rupali and Tahani, who are still struggling with the giggles. "If only those closest to me would let it remain there."

"It's okay, babe." Tahani pats Kim's knee. "Sometimes it takes a while to cultivate taste."

"Ha ha."

Rupali shakes her head. "How did that even happen?"

Kim sighs. "Well, I was younger and less sure of myself. We both had different names, different genders, different pronouns. The org was pretty different, too. More hostile to trans members than it is now. Quinn actually seemed like someone with convictions back then."

Tahani snorts. "Damn, you mean I've been dealing with the more inclusive, friendlier version of the GSA this whole time?"

"Sadly, yes." Kim has a faraway look on her face. "We had to fight a lot to get the cis leadership to stop pretending there was a legitimate debate about trans rights. In the end, they changed the rules so there could be more than one President. Wendy and I got elected as one trans girl, one

trans guy on a kind of unity ticket, to indicate the org was turning over a new leaf. I suppose it didn't really succeed."

We all sit in silence for a while after that. I grab my drink. This isn't the first time that Kim's alluded to her… *history*, but it's the first time she's spoken about it in such frank terms.

I never quite know what to say when she mentions it. Logically, I know stopping transition is something you can do voluntarily, in theory. Some people are non-binary, I've been told, and only want a few changes before they go back. Some people have a complex relationship to gender and sex that I don't need to understand—which is good, because I don't. I've known I want to transition forever. And I know there's more than a few de-transitioners who scream their heads off that all transitions are a mistake and should be stopped. Kim, obviously, isn't one of them—she's incredibly supportive of trans rights, and has definitely done more activism for that than I ever have.

Still, something about her whole deal just disquiets me. I don't understand why she thought she wanted to be on testosterone, to take on the features I loathe most about myself, only to realise how much they suck and change her mind. She's not a bad person and she's nice enough, but if I had a choice in the matter, as a trans woman, I'd much prefer not to have her around.

Then again, Tahani's been out for way longer than I have, and she's *dating* Kim. So maybe there's something I'm missing. Either way, it's best I stay quiet until someone changes the topic.

"I remember thinking you were super cute back when I first joined the GSA."

Rupali, meanwhile, seems a little *too* comfortable with the topic.

She immediately sits up, wide-eyed, covering her mouth with both hands. "Shit, I'm so fucking sorry, was that weird to say?"

Tahani and Kim are too busy laughing to answer at first. I continue to chug my hard lemonade and strenuously avoid making eye contact with anyone else in the room.

"It's fine," Kim finally says, still chuckling. "I did work pretty hard to get fit and look good, so."

"Still do." Tahani appreciatively pats Kim's arm.

The doorbell rings, and Rupali springs to her feet. "Let me get my foot out of my mouth and go grab that."

"Rupali, wait, I need to pay for that!"

Kim shakes her head with a smile as Rupali zips off. She gives Tahani and me an apologetic look and follows Rupali to the door. I watch her go and turn my head when I feel a tap on my shoulder.

"I think we're on the cusp of something," Tahani says, dropping her voice to a conspiratorial whisper.

I'm still reeling from the last few social interactions, but I nod anyway. "Sure feels like it."

Tahani glances down at my camisole. "Well, you're certainly dressed for the occasion."

That makes me blush. "Just dressing comfortably."

"Perfect for nippy weather." Tahani winks.

"Ha." I look over my shoulder anxiously. "Do you really think she'll, you know—I mean, do you think it'll actually, like, work?"

Somehow, Tahani pieces together my meaning from the broken sentence fragments. She places a comforting hand on my shoulder. "She likes you. And she certainly trusts you a lot, doesn't she?"

I recall the sound of her crying on the phone. "Yeah."

"It's not been a clean journey for her." Tahani's face falls. "What happened to me was a really effective deterrent to introspection, I'm sure. She's had to wrestle with what this means for her future for a long time. I think actually exchanging the rings was a reality check she's needed for a while."

My whole body sags. "That's a lot to deal with. I don't know if I could handle it, personally."

"Well, you'll never have to find out." Tahani pats my shoulder. "This isn't some kind of grand conspiracy, Nichole. I've seen the way you two look at each other when your backs are turned."

"Oh?" My heart hammers in my chest.

Tahani smiles. "Just be there for her. I'm sure she'll surprise you sooner rather than later."

Kim and Rupali return bearing pizzas and cookies. I thank Tahani quietly

and slide back to my side of the sofa, gratefully accepting a cardboard box from Ru.

We put the next movie on. It's every bit as cheesy and strangely heart-warming as we expect it to be. Lena Headey and Piper Perabo kiss on a crowded London street, and we drunkenly claim the song "Happy Together" for the lesbians.

The whole time, I'm far too aware of where I am in relation to Ru. Noting every single time our bare shoulders touch. Feeling butterflies whenever Ru laughs too hard and leans against me, almost falling into my lap. Ignoring the voice in my head, getting louder over the course of the movie, yelling at me to just put my arm around her, dammit.

I think about singing to Ru. I think about climbing on the roof of a car and screaming out to find her in a crowd. But mostly, I think about kissing her.

I haven't been able to stop thinking about that for a good long while now. I'm still thinking about it when the movie ends and I'm helping Tahani and Kim and Ru tidy up.

"You and Ru are heading the same way, right?" Tahani asks. "So you're probably taking the same bus?"

"Hm?" I finish tying off a rubbish bag and straighten up. "Well, we're both headed to the same area, but I actually live closer to—"

Tahani shoots me a glare, still grinning widely with her teeth bared, and I shut up and clear my throat.

"Yep, same direction, same bus." I nod vehemently.

"Perfect, let me see you both out."

Tahani winks. I don't trust myself to be covert enough to wink back.

So I walk to the bus stop with Ru. She's in a good mood. She's loud and uninhibited and belts out the words to *Happy Together* yet again and demands I join in. I beg her to quiet down, even as I look around at the mostly empty street and find myself laughing along with Ru's infectious cackling and caterwauling.

"Okay, okay," I say, getting her to sit down at the bus stop. "Which one's ours, again?"

"Ours?" Ru grins up at me. "Well, *mine's* the 121. Sign says it'll be here in eight minutes."

"Of course. The 121." I glance up at the blinking digital sign, which lists two other buses due before that one. "How could I forget?"

"Indeed. Since it's *our* bus and all. You take it all the time, I'm sure."

"Indeed I do." I meet Ru's gaze with a sly smile of my own, tilting my head to the side to match her teetering posture.

"Mm-hm." Ru doesn't break eye contact. "Thanks."

"For what?"

"For coming with me. For my safety, I presume."

I exhale slowly. "Don't know what you're talking about, babe. We're going the same way."

"I like it when you call me that."

I freeze.

Ru's grin grows wider. "Not that you do it a lot. But it slips out sometimes."

"Oh." I rub the back of my neck. "I call everybody 'babe'."

"No you don't."

Deep breaths. "Have you been keeping track, then?"

Ru bumps her head against my arm. "Maybe a little."

The voice in my head is the loudest it's ever been. I take another deep breath and sit down next to Ru, putting both my arms around her, and hold her steady. She sits up straighter on the bench.

I keep my arms around her even after she's stable.

"Maybe you had a bit too much hard lemonade," I say, offering her the pretext.

She looks into my eyes again. "Maybe a little. But I think I'm good now."

"I see."

"By which I mean, you can let go of me now. You know, if you'd like to."

"Right." I hug her a bit tighter. "Sure."

Her ever widening grin is so close to my face. Barely inches away. Her head droops, and she leans into me, letting me support more of her weight. I'm very lightheaded, and I almost can't take breaths deep enough to settle my nerves.

I should kiss her. She's putting her hands on my waist, and I should kiss her. Her body is so close to mine and she's pressing herself into me and smiling so much and tittering so cutely and I really, really, really should kiss her.

Why am I not kissing her?

There's barely a millimetre of distance between her lips and mine, and I just can't cross it. I desperately hope that she does. It's so obvious she wants to, but something's holding her back. Well, a lot of things are holding her back, and I know what most of them are. In fact, I live with the biggest, surliest, most unpleasant one.

But what's *my* damn problem, then?

Headlights, bright enough to blind, flood my vision. I close my eyes and jerk back, flinching away from Ru. The roar of engines fills my ears a second later.

The bus is here, and the moment's passed. What could have been our first kiss, stolen from us by a man who'll never appreciate Ru half as much as I will.

I'm so disappointed that it takes me a second to get to my feet. Ru stands up before me, and when I go to do the same, she stops me with a hand on my arm.

"Take your actual bus," Ru says, gently. "You'll see me tomorrow."

I bite back all the things I want to say to her then and there. I just sigh. "Okay. Yeah. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Goodnight, Nichole."

"Goodnight, babe."

That stops her in her tracks, one foot over the threshold. Ru turns around, her eyes shining, and blows me a kiss before she hops inside. The doors of the bus close, and I see my own goofy smirk reflected in the glass.

Kyle

Binders are really uncomfortable.

I have two now. I don't love either of them, and they're both a bit diffi-

cult to breathe in, but they do make my chest appear more normal-shaped. I'm wearing one as I cook. It's awful, but I need to get used to being out and about in hot places while wearing one, so I suck it up.

The RCBG server's more helpful than I thought it would be. I asked about binders in one of the channels, and a couple of guys messaged me to let me know how to use one without hurting myself. One of them, Alex, told me he has two he doesn't need anymore. We met at one of the libraries a week ago so he could give them to me.

At least I'm nearly done. I open the fridge and grab a plastic box of diced tofu, marinated overnight in yogurt and spices. Toss the tofu in with the veggies, stir occasionally until there's some colour on the chunks. It'll only take five more minutes, tops. As I hum to myself and toss the food, I hear a door open, followed by footsteps.

"Hello, Kaalappan. Will you be much longer?"

I run my wooden spoon around the edge of the pot and answer without turning around. "Won't be five minutes, Kathy. You wanna use my pot?"

"Thank you for offering, but I have one of my own now. I keep it in my room."

"There's room in the cabinet if it's taking up too much—and she's gone." I look over my shoulder and barely catch a glimpse of Kathy's door shutting.

She's starting to worry me a little. Kathy hasn't been the same since Discursive Combat. I see her leave her room even less, though on the occasions she does poke her head out, she's leaving with a box of cards or actually doing the chores she's supposed to be doing. Hasn't complained about the rota once, nor launched into any speeches about how domestic servitude is beneath her. For now, I suppose I'll count my blessings, but even if she's a better flatmate, the change in her attitude is unnerving. I've never seen her this withdrawn or quiet.

And Nichole seems to have all but abandoned her.

The tofu looks nicely charred. I'm in the middle of rummaging around for an empty Tupperware when I hear the key turn in the lock.

Shit. Nichole's home.

Since we've been back from summer break, Nichole and I haven't really spoken. Like, not once. Barely even exchanged a word. We've nodded at

each other at best, but we seem to have an understanding. If I'm in the common areas, cleaning or cooking or doing anything else, she won't be. And if I hear her passing through, I usually wait five minutes before emerging from my room.

So her walking into the flat while I'm in the middle of packing away my lunch is awkward. It doesn't have to be any more than that, I suppose. No reason for us to start acknowledging each other's existence now, of all times. I'll just tip the contents of the pot into the container, leave it in the sink—I really want to wash it, but I want to get out of the kitchen more—and struggle for about thirty seconds trying to get the lid to close on the overstuffed box.

The whole time, I'm keenly aware that Nichole's standing there, watching me. She hasn't retreated to her own room or headed past me for the bathroom. Out of the corner of my eye, I see her with a hand on her hip, staring straight at me. I almost ask "May I help you?" but if she's content not saying a word, then so am I.

Eventually, she does speak.

"You know, Kyle, I could smell that from all the way out on the stairwell."

I take a deep, aromatised breath. "Thank you, Nichole."

"Excuse me?"

I finally get the lid to close and turn around. "Well, I assume you're complimenting me on how good the food smells. Something our other flatmates have done occasionally. I'm going to assume that's what you're doing, because the alternative is that you're pulling out the most textbook microaggression in history."

Nichole appears unfazed. "Ooh, big word. You care about microaggressions now, Kyle?"

I can see where this is going and I'm in no mood. I jerk my thumb over my shoulder and speak as quickly as I can while putting the tofu into the fridge. "I always cook with the extractor fan on. If you made that comment in good faith, I'll look into deodorants or air freshener or something. Sorry for the inconvenience."

"No, no, let's talk about microaggressions," Nichole says, eyes flashing. "Or, like, macroaggressions, even. How's Jeff, by the way?"

I slam the fridge door shut so hard the sound echoes around the flat.

Nichole scoffs. "Was that supposed to scare me, Kyle?"

"Listen to me." I look Nichole in the eye, so she understands the gravity of the situation. "Whatever opinion you have, about my life and family and how it's affected people I've known since I was a child. Keep it to yourself. Okay?"

She throws her hands up. "I wasn't going to say anything about your family history, Kyle. I was just wondering if you're aware of some things Jeff might not have told you about."

"He's in his room. He can probably hear you right now."

"Good." Nichole's expression quickly morphs from faux-cordial to snarling. "I saw him give you a little gift this morning. A little token of appreciation, or friendship, or something else?"

I begin taking off my apron. "Alright. We're done here."

"Did he perchance tell you about getting Rupali and Tahani kicked out of the GSA while handing you a little heart-shaped box?" Nichole asks.

"Fuck off." I throw the apron aside, not caring where it lands. "Have a good night, Nichole."

"Sure." Nichole rolls her eyes as I storm past her. "Good luck sleeping."

I stop in my tracks, fists clenched. If she wants to play, let's play.

I put on a smug, satisfied smile of my own. "Well then, *Nichole*. While we're on the topic of providing people information they might not be privy to."

The way Nichole goes white as a sheet is more satisfying than it should be.

"I was just wondering myself," I say, baring my teeth, "if my sweet, trusting and supportive fiancée knows that you're only pretending to be a woman?"

Neither of us says anything for some time.

"Thought so." I leave her and go to open my door. "Now, do try to have a good night, Nichole." I slam it shut behind me.

Why the fuck did I say any of that?

I stumble towards the bed and collapse into it, face down. I don't even think Nichole's "pretending to be a woman". I've never subscribed to Laura's nonsense, for fuck's sake. You can't "pretend" to be a gender, you're

either living as that gender or you're fucking not. Maybe for a bit I thought Nichole believed all the real-life cover nonsense and tried to do it in earnest, but she's just like Kathy. A bit too eager to use the name and the pronouns and wear the clothes and do everything else that comes with the territory.

I just said what I said to hurt her. Because she was driving fresh splinters into old scars, trying to dredge up my biggest regrets and fears, and I needed to shut her down. Needed to make her feel the rage and sorrow that I do, or close enough.

But Nichole's not the one pretending to be something she's not.

I curl up, burying my face in a pillow, struggling not to scream. Jeff gave me a box of chocolates today. Heart-shaped milk chocolates, some plain, some with almonds. He remembered I like almonds in my chocolates, but not too many. That's what Nichole saw.

Jeff's warm and friendly and cheerful and kind to me. Very kind to me. More so recently, yes, but he's always been like that to me, hasn't he? He's always been nice. He's always tried to approach me, paid attention to me, cared about what I like and what I don't and begged me to give him a chance. And I've refused him at every turn. Why have I refused him? Because he isn't perfect?

Like I'm so fucking perfect?

I put the pillow aside and search for my phone, sniffling. I navigate to my contacts.

Kyle

Are you home

Jeff

Hey, Kyle. I'm sorry that you had to hear that from Nichole. I can explain, I promise.

Kyle

So you are home.

Jeff

Yeah

Kyle

In your room?

Jeff

Yeah

Kyle

Cool.

I let the phone fall from my hands.

For five minutes, I remain in my bed, in the dark, staring into space. Then I get up and walk like I'm possessed. Push past two doors. Don't even bother to knock or anything. Jeff barely gets a word out before my hands are on his face and my tongue is in his mouth.

CHAPTER 11
BREAK THE CHAIN

Nichole

Didn't get much sleep last night.

I take the bus to Tahani's in a daze. I didn't forget about the server, not exactly. Quarterly rankings were published again the other day, and I've climbed. A lot. The number of people hanging off my every word and begging for my attention is so high that I've had to close DMs and friend requests on Discord.

But somehow I forgot I haven't told my real-life friends I got my hormones from a titty-growing men's sport. It's not really a topic that comes up organically in conversation.

How do I tell Ru? I'm not "pretending to be a woman", but I'm still fudging a few details by omission. And I'm technically, in some contexts, pretending that I'm pretending to be a woman. Which I have to keep doing, for continued access to some treatments I need and some that I might want. I shouldn't be expected to have everything sorted out right this second; I only just got on HRT six months ago; I need a minute to figure it out.

Did Kyle threaten me last night? I don't see how he could reveal anything about me without also outing himself. He, along with his new boytoy and

our weirdo flatmate, are all in the competition as well. Plus, I doubt Ru knows how much he's been cosying up to Jeff either, which is far worse of a crime than withholding private and sensitive information about my source of hormones.

It's still something I'm keeping from Ru, though. That makes me vulnerable in a way I wish I wasn't.

This isn't how I want to spend my Sunday afternoon. I would much prefer to enjoy day two of the lesbian rom-com marathon and the fact that Ru and I almost kissed last night. Almost. I should be telling Tahani what happened and brainstorming ways to make it happen again, instead of fretting about the server's bullshit creeping into my actual, normal life.

I'm so preoccupied that I don't check my phone until I get off at my stop. I've missed a text from Tahani.

"Sorry about the late change of plans, girliepop. Ru's having an emergency. She just got some news and, well, I don't know whether to call it BAD news? But she's going through it right now and I gotta be with her. Maybe once she's calmed down, you can come over to hers too? Are you already on your way to mine?"

I reply, *"Unfortunately, I only saw this when I got here. What's going on?"*

"Fuck me, I'm so sorry," Tahani says. *"Okay, listen, Kim and I are here talking Ru through the crisis. My other gf's home, so why don't you have hir make you a cup of tea and grab you a baked good, and you can chill at my place for like an hour before heading over? Does that sound good?"*

"Yeah, sounds like a plan."

And now I have another thing to stress about.

I barely feel present in my body when I knock on the door, wondering what's going on and why Tahani can't spare the time to explain it. Is Ru in trouble? Did her parents find out?

The door opens. I glance up from my phone and nearly drop it.

I almost didn't recognise them. Without the very intentional colour scheme of the suit and gloves and with new black streaks in their hair, they don't really look the same. But there's still the platinum blonde hair, the piercing and steely eyes, and that commanding posture that makes it impossible to mistake them for anyone else, even in a plain denim jacket and jeans.

"Ah," says Trickster's fucking Tatas, "I have a feeling I know where you recognise me from."

I try to say something and sputter incoherently instead. It takes me a few attempts to force actual words out.

"Holy shit?"

"You can call me Bobbie. The other epithet is a bit of a mouthful, isn't it?" Bobbie beckons me to enter. "We can talk while you wait, if you like."

I nod vigorously, like I'm trying to clear my head. "Sure, yeah. Let's."

Bobbies ushers me in, sits me down at the dining table, and places a giant, steaming mug of hot cocoa in front of me. I pick it up with both hands, wondering if they had it ready for me or if I've actually been sitting here for longer than I think I have. My head is buzzing. I don't know what to think or make of this.

Bobbie's seated across from me. "My actual pronouns are zie/hir, by the way. The other ones were just for—for the server."

"The server. Right." I put the mug down. "Good to know. Also, hey, what the fuck?"

"You appear overwhelmed," Bobbie says.

"'Overwhelmed' doesn't even begin to cover it." I frantically tap my fingernails against the handle of the mug. The noise is high-pitched, unpleasant. "I saw you try to knock Laura out. You were, like, a mod on the server? But you're also dating—does Tahani know?"

"That's a pretty open-ended question, Nichole. Does Tahani know what?"

I throw my hands up with a cry of frustration. "Why did I ever expect a straight answer out of you?"

"Indeed, considering I'm anything but straight." Bobbie leans back in hir chair and steeples hir fingers. "You're asking me to divulge private information about my girlfriend, Nichole. But if that's what you're worried about, I can assure you that Tahani knows about RCBG. I was the one who told her, after all."

My head spins. "You did?"

"She's an international student. Her student insurance plan stopped covering HRT sometime last year." Bobbie sighs. "We tried other avenues first.

Kim was President of the GSA at the time. It didn't work out like we wanted, for various reasons."

"Quinn, right." I nod. "So, Tahani's in the server too?"

"She was, briefly. She got her HRT delivery and left."

My jaw drops. "Tahani was *Brisket Enjoyer*?"

Bobbie looks amused. "You catch on quick."

I don't feel particularly clever right now. "I can't believe—did you all know? About me?"

"Worded vaguely again, Nichole, but I think I get the gist." Bobbie closes hir eyes. "You're an early-transition woman in a country where basically every gender clinic, public or private, has been shut down. We had our suspicions about you, yes. Very few trans girls in this city, and especially in this university, don't know about RCBG."

"Well, when you put it like that." I take a big gulp of the now-tepid cocoa. "Fuck."

"It's a lot to reckon with, yeah."

I shake my head again and lean forward. "Is this why you've been avoiding me this whole time?"

Bobbie arches an eyebrow. "Avoiding you? I've done no such thing, Nichole. I've just been a very busy dyke."

"Sure." I roll my eyes. "And you're Italian, too. Why haven't I ever seen you around until now?"

Bobbie shrugs. "You don't usually hang out with my girlfriends on Sundays."

"Uh-huh." I don't buy it. "What exactly are you so busy with, then?"

"Most pressingly?" Bobbie taps hir chin. "Trying to follow up with everyone knocked out of the server. Laura hasn't been as active lately, so that's calmed down a bit. After that, redistributing excess HRT from the contestants willing to sell theirs. That takes more time, to make sure we won't be sold out by someone looking to score brownie points with the admin. And lastly, trying to figure out where the competition is getting all the HRT from, so that we can tap into the source ourselves. That part's been the hardest, we don't have too many leads."

"Ah." I feel like a twit now. "That sounds like a lot."

"Whatever fills the time." Bobbie smiles.

I drop my gaze. "I have some, um, extra stuff. In case you want it."

"That'd be lovely, Nichole. There's a fair few girls in other cities who don't have the option to join RCBG, you see."

"Yeah. Yeah, that makes sense." I pick up the mug and finish its cold remnants in one go. Thinking about all the girls who can't even sign up for RCBG is disquieting. "I'm not selling it. I'll just bring it by."

"That's very generous of you," Bobbie says.

"Least I can do." I glance up at hir and hir annoyingly serene features. "Why'd you get yourself kicked out if you need to do all this, then?"

"Right. That." Zie purses hir lips. "Well, I still have a few friends in the server. I won't tell you who, but I wouldn't have risked being ejected without making sure others could pick up the slack. If you're asking why I risked it to try and oust Laura, however, I think the answer's obvious."

"Is it?" I frown. "Her bullshit makes it easier to be out and trans on there, you know."

Bobbie narrows hir eyes. "Does it, really?"

"No one's called a tribunal on me because I've worn dresses," I say.

"True. Would you like to add a caption to your next selfie calling yourself a trans girl, to see if that changes?"

"I know I can't do that, obviously." I groan. "But like, I'm getting fucking hair removal covered by insurance now. Hair removal! And maybe facial feminisation surgery, if I decide I want that. Don't you think that's worth putting up with a little misgendering? And that's on top of the barrel of hormones and a chance to win a million-dollar prize."

"Nichole," Bobbie says, "do you seriously think the prize is real?"

I sit up straighter and open my mouth, then close it when nothing comes out.

"I get why you wouldn't want to dwell on the details," Bobbie says, "I really do. But the fact remains that RCBG isn't a sport, Nichole. That's a flimsy cover for its actual purpose as a tranny torture chamber."

"Torture?" I sputter. "Giving us free healthcare, when nobody else will, is torture?"

"Why do you think they're doing that, Nichole?" Bobbie asks. "What do you think they're doing with the pictures we submit? Do you think those rankings are based on an actual secret formula, or do you think whoever's doing the ranking has some subjective preferences?"

I look away. "I don't know."

"Nichole, I agree it's better than not being able to transition." Bobbie sighs. "I took that deal myself. But RCBG is not a benevolent place. They make us submit topless pics and only give us the healthcare we need to live if we humiliate ourselves for their amusement. Surely you realise there's something deeply wrong and evil at play here."

I fold my arms. "Yeah, well, nowhere else helped me stop wanting to peel the skin off my face."

"I know. And yet."

I glare at hir. "I didn't have a choice."

"Yeah, I know." Bobbie frowns. "I've been there too. You don't have to justify anything to me. I'd still advise being careful, Nichole. Don't engage with that place any more than you have to."

"I don't."

"Nichole." Bobbie folds hir arms too. "Didn't I just say I made sure I had friends keeping tabs on the server before I stuck my neck out?"

"Hm." I take a deep breath. "I see."

"You're playing a game you can't win, girl. That's all I'm saying." Bobbie checks hir phone. "Tahani wants to know if you're free now, by the way. She says Rupali would like to see you, get lunch."

I blink. "Ru! Right. Yeah, I can come see Ru. Tell her I'm—I'll text them. I'll get going."

"You do that."

I start to stand up, then hesitate. "Do you want to come with me?"

"Thank you for the invite, but I'll give you your space now," Bobbie says. "I have some work to catch up on, anyways. Think about what I said, yeah?"

I never want to think about this conversation again. "I'll do that. Thanks for the drink."

CHAPTER 11

Katherine

"Not bad," Emmy says, picking her cards up.

We're sitting cross-legged on the floor of her room, playing a practice round of *Magic*. After weeks of meticulously combing through her collection, we organised an impressive spreadsheet of all the synergies and combos possible with her cheaper, less flashy cards. That enabled me to assemble a few Commander-format decks from the cards she doesn't insist on monopolising, which still pose a threat in their own right.

I shuffle the cards I used and hand them back to Emmy, smiling with satisfaction. "I look forward to pulling this out in front of the boys tonight."

Emmy coughs. "Yes, I'm sure they'll be impressed." She leans back on her hands. "I think they're starting to get some funny ideas, though."

I cock an eyebrow. "Is Kenneth still prattling on because he's sore about losing to a girl?"

"You could say that." Emmy coughs again. "Bringing a girl over to our weekly games and letting her use my cards is giving them a certain impression, let's say."

"I see what you mean." I shrug. "However, as much as I have grown to appreciate the strategic depth of *Magic*, I would rather be perceived as overtly frugal than fall for the trap of spending money on cards of my own. Frankly, I believe we should all be using proxies."

"Right. Frugal." Emmy squints at me. "Well, you can't use proxy cards at official tournaments, but I guess you don't care about that, so, cheap it is."

"Better cheap than stupid." I stick my tongue out at her, wink, and begin to stand up.

"Oh, you're going?" Emmy asks.

"Yes," I say, nodding. "Need to keep the faculties fresh for game night, after all."

"Right, sure, but game night is here," Emmy says. "Is it really the most efficient use of your time to add a superfluous commute?"

I pause. "I suppose that's true. I don't have any pressing work at home."

Or any other reason to be home, I don't say.

"Yes! Exactly." Emmy beams at me. "So, um, you've been meaning to watch *Princess Kaguya*, right?"

"I have. I said that two weeks ago." I tilt my head, impressed with Emmy's memory. "Shall we watch it together?"

Emmy reaches up to her desk and grabs her laptop. "I'd love to."

"Have you already seen it?" I ask.

"No." Emmy opens her laptop and begins typing. "Well, I've been meaning to, but I haven't got around to it."

I frown. "Why did you ask me for recommendations last week, if you haven't had the time to watch anything?"

"Oh, well, it's not a question of time, per se," Emmy says, her eyes darting between my face and the screen, "but more a question of, um, opportunity? I prefer watching anime socially. Enhances the experience."

"Hm." I purse my lips. "Don't you have a girlfriend?"

Laura is not a topic I broach often. She and I have not spoken since her outburst before summer, which is likely for the best. Sometimes Emmy is called away from lunch or our anime marathons and doesn't specify the cause. It's kind of her, but ineffectual in terms of sparing my feelings.

After all, Emmy is the sum total of my offline social circle at the moment. Nichole did not deign to invite me over or meet with me even once over break. She has moved on to greener pastures, as everyone around me eventually does.

I suppose it is fortunate, then, that my friendship with Emmy is so cordial. Cursory though it may be, I at least understand the parameters of our relationship fully.

Emmy takes a moment to respond. "Well, Laura doesn't seem to have much of an interest in anime anymore. Doesn't seem to have much of an interest in a lot of things I thought she did, these days."

"Oh?" I'm intrigued—I do retain *some* fascination with Laura, after all. "I suppose she isn't as active in the media channels anymore. Or any channels, really."

"Noticed that, have you." Emmy sounds unhappy. "Apparently, the immunity she won means she doesn't need to do anything except coast to victory at the end of the year. She pretty much gave up on the server."

Were I in her enviable position, I too would cease involving myself in the petty affairs of mere men. I sigh. "I suppose she has no reason to maintain an active presence in the competition anymore."

Emmy snorts. "Like hell. Her score's flatlined."

Her eyes widen as she realises what she's said. Mine do as well. I lean forward and fold my arms, waiting to hear what Emmy has to say next.

"Oh, fuck it." Emmy groans. She types furiously for a bit, then turns the laptop around to show me the screen. "Okay, look. Most of the contestants focus on the raw rankings, but the quarterly results also display a score, right?"

"The Normalised Total Breast Volume, yes," I say. "Designed to measure the actual volume of fat stored in the breasts and account for differences in bone structure and frame."

"Well, that's what they say. How it really works is an entirely different matter." Emmy chews her bottom lip. "Have you noticed anything different about me?"

I blink at the non-sequitur, but decide to humour Emmy and peer at her with one eye shut. "Well. Are you, perhaps—your hair? It is longer?"

"Yeah! It is." Emmy appears overjoyed by my mundane observation. "I decided to run an experiment—well, as much as I can with such limited data and timeframes. I've long suspected the NTBV formula has a social component associated with it. Those who post in the selfies channel have consistently scored higher than those who don't. As have those who present more feminine, when compared to those who present masculine."

That is a remarkable revelation to blurt out the evening before game night. I gawp at Emmy. "Wait, have you been running the numbers on this? Is that the secret project you wouldn't tell me about?"

"Pretty much." Emmy shrugs, sheepishly. "I didn't really want anyone else to know. It would taint the results, and I don't know how the rankings would react if everyone began to adopt femme strats to boost their score. I've been trying to quantify the effect of this variable for months."

"How does one quantify feminine presentation, or the degree of femininity?" I ask.

Emmy waves a hand. "There are ways. The simplest model is just a binary, an on-off switch for a score boost. Take two contestants with similar raw measurement data and compare the boymoding ones to the ones using femme strats. I had more complex models as well, but the binary one turned out to be surprisingly predictive."

"Of course." I tap my chin. "And I suppose you could even measure those who adopted femme strats later in—oh."

"Hm?" Emmy does her best to sound like she doesn't know what I've realised.

"Was I a data point for you?" I ask. "Because I recently began to present more femme."

"Kathy, everyone submits measurements. Everyone's a data point for me." Emmy places a hand on my shoulder, and I choose not to shrug it off. "Your case, and a few others, did prove valuable. I noticed the femme boost in your score."

"Didn't affect my ranking much," I grumble.

"Well, the measurements are still the primary—let's get back to my point." Emmy clears her throat and withdraws her hand. "My point is that despite measurable growth, Laura's NTBV score in the latest rankings is identical to her previous score. That's literally never happened, for any contestant, in all the time I have data for."

I stare at Emmy. "Well. While this is only speculation, there's certainly one big thing about Laura that's changed between rankings."

"Oh, we're on the same page." Emmy closes her laptop. "Now, this could be retaliation for daring to game the system to get bottom surgery, even though the competition doesn't offer it. But the implications are still, well, unsavoury."

"Indeed." I shake my head in amazement. "What did Laura say?"

"She doesn't care." Emmy sounds almost angry. "I told her about it and she didn't care. I told her that means she could lose, and she just shrugged. Suggested that maybe she's hit the theoretical maximum score. I even pointed out that I found my own score went up by exactly my prediction

after I grew my hair longer and posted a selfie with a little makeup, and her only response was to ask whether I want any tips!"

"Huh." I focus on the ceiling to process this information better. "That isn't what I would have expected."

"No kidding." Emmy is breathing heavily. "I asked her what she'd do if I snatched first place from her in the final quarter, and all she had to say was that I'd get to pick where our honeymoon would be. It's maddening."

My eyes snap back down to Emmy's face. "Your what?"

Emmy rubs the back of her head. "She talks like that a lot. Like we'll win the prize and make off into the sunset together. Says that was always the plan, and it doesn't matter which one of us is in first place. The gall."

Pain, sick and twisted, churns in my guts. I do my best to ignore it and address Emmy's actual words. "Again, that's not something I expected Laura to ever say. But I don't understand why your reaction to it is so acrimonious?"

"Of course you don't." Emmy grabs the back of her desk chair and leaps to her feet. She paces around me. "Kathy, Laura and my relationship—it was a rivalry before a relationship. A heated one, as you said. It's all we've known. It defines us."

"Okay." I try to turn towards her as she flits about the room, but soon give up. "I'm sorry, I'm still not sure what your objection is. Are you saying you can't date someone who doesn't compete with you?"

"Not exactly."

Emmy stops. "Laura still insists I'm a woman in denial."

"Oh."

Emmy stares at her feet, fists clenched. I shift uncomfortably. Loath as I am to empathise with men, this must be a difficult question—whether to be with someone you love under false pretences. Regrettably, I can't say I'd hate to be in Emmy's position, but that is perhaps coloured by my actual gender identity. If I had to detransition or pretend to be a man to date Laura, I can't say I'd find the prospect particularly appealing.

"That's the only thing keeping us together, you know." Emmy stares out the window. "Her beliefs, her passion, her dogged determination to be right

at any cost. That's what dragged me from her orbit into her event horizon proper. A self-assuredness so massive that it collapses into a singularity, threatening to rewrite reality itself. How can you not be compelled by someone like that?"

"Good question."

Emmy shakes her head, oblivious to my agony. "So what happens when the fire goes out, Kathy? Whether because of complacency, or finally being proven wrong? She's so certain one of us will win. Certain that nothing will go wrong and we'll get our happily ever after. Certain that at the end, I'll turn to her and tell her she's been right about me all along, I am a woman. Maybe that's why she hasn't admitted her own womanhood to me yet. She's waiting for a confession that will never happen."

Hearing a straight man describe my deepest, most dearly held fantasy in such pained tones should be classified as a hate crime. I stop gouging deep furrows into the carpeting and take a deep breath.

"I understand why that presents a challenge to you," I manage to say.

"I've tried," Emmy says, eyes shimmering with tears. "I've tried so hard. But I'm not like Laura. I don't hate my body the way she did, before she moved heaven and earth to correct nature's mistake. I don't hate being intimate with her—I could never hate being intimate with her. I want her the way a man wants a woman, and I always will, and I hate myself for it. Most of all, I hate myself for knowing Laura's a lesbian but being too weak to break it off because I love being with her so much."

I really do not need to hear more about how much Emmy enjoys using her penis with Laura. "That sounds tragic and painful."

"It's a lie. Our relationship is based on a lie that Laura convinced herself of, refusing my every attempt to assert the truth." Emmy's shoulders sag, and she stares at her own feet. "We're not going to last."

I cannot bite my tongue right now without drawing blood. "The burden on your shoulders is truly immense, Emmy. And if you sincerely feel this way and that Laura cannot be convinced to see sense, then perhaps you should end things sooner? It will only be more painful the longer things go on."

Emmy's head snaps up. She whirls around. "Really? You think so?"

"Mm hmm." I make eye contact to appear as sincere as possible. "I would hate to see you fruitlessly prolong your pain. You shouldn't settle for Laura refusing to accept you for who you are."

"I see." Emmy appears to hesitate. "That's not the only issue I have with Laura, you know."

"Best to get them all out, then," I say. "Perhaps in writing, so you can recite them all accurately when you leave her?"

"The way she treated you was wrong, Katherine."

My throat closes up. That was the last thing I expected Emmy to say. Not because I thought she was okay with Laura's vituperative behaviour, but because I assumed it didn't matter to her enough to vocalise her objections.

"I told her she was too harsh on you," Emmy says, proving me wrong immediately. "She has a legitimate problem with some uncomfortable things you said to her in person, but she still went too far. And refused to apologise under any circumstance. I'm not—I didn't like that, Kathy. That's too much and you deserve better."

I need Emmy to stop talking. If she keeps talking, I won't be able to hold back my tears. I pull my knees up and try to hide my face in them.

"Whatever you said and did, it's because you're very intense, Kathy." Emmy continues speaking, and my shoulders shake. "You show affection very blatantly and without much tact, and that can be too intense for some people. Some people. Not everyone."

I wipe my cheeks dry on my shorts. "Thanks. I guess."

Emmy descends to one knee and places her hand on my shoulder again. It's trembling. Her hand or my shoulder. I'm not sure which.

"Kathy, you see me for who I am, right?" Emmy asks.

Wordlessly, I nod.

"Yeah. You always have." Emmy squeezes my shoulder. "Maybe that's why I'm so drawn to you."

Oh, no.

"Maybe that's why I don't mind when the guys tease me for—for the way I treat you," Emmy says. "Maybe that's why I like it when they do."

This has gone on long enough.

I push Emmy's hand away. "Emmy, I'm a lesbian too."

The effect this has on Emmy is immediate. She instantly leaps backwards, getting back to her feet and putting distance between herself and me.

"I'm sorry," she says.

I wipe away more tears. "I'm sorry too. You're very kind and sweet to me. Sweeter than anyone else, ever. But I don't like men, and I'm not going to be with one just because I'm lonely."

"Of course. I would never suggest otherwise."

Emmy looks so miserable, and for a moment, I hate myself for what I am, too. She's actually rather gorgeous. Full lips and voluptuous curves and sandy locks and enviably flawless skin, with a pair of breasts that could crush my skull into powder. I could almost tell myself I'm not really dating a man at all, given that she really doesn't look like one, and wouldn't it be nice to let Emmy take me out and get my hands under her hoodie?

But I respect both her and myself too much to indulge that daydream.

I slowly get to my feet as well. "I won't be coming tonight."

"Kathy, no, please don't stop coming on my account. I sincerely apologise for my—"

I interrupt her. "I need to spend the evening making proxy cards, so I don't have to use yours every time."

"Ah." Emmy nods. "Okay, sure. We'll see you next week."

"Yeah." I turn to leave. "This does suck, though. I really did want to watch *Kaguya* with you. But it's best we don't fraternise too much, at least for some time."

"Right. Okay."

"Also," I say, "you really should unpack your behaviour around lesbians. I'm glad you know it's wrong, but you need to do better."

"Yeah."

Still crying a little, I depart for my empty room, in a flat that may as well be empty, in a life that very much is.

CHAPTER 11

Kyle

Rupali and I don't normally have breakfast together, especially on school days. I have more than enough stuff prepared in my fridge, and Ru prefers to grab a sandwich on the way to class.

Today's a special occasion, though.

The dining hall is at its most crowded, with scores of students flocking to overcooked scrambled eggs and hastily buttered toast. Ru and I find a small table in a forgotten corner, far from the queues and spreads and panini presses: two high chairs at a tiny circular table between two floor-to-ceiling windows. The campus greens sprawl below us, dewy and glistening.

Neither of us has a plate. Neither of us says anything.

After I was back in control of my senses, I texted Ru immediately on Saturday night. She responded with a singular question mark on Sunday morning and said nothing else for the whole day. A little past midnight, I received a message from her, asking to have breakfast at seven a.m.

Even with all that time, I couldn't figure out what to say to her face.

Finally, Ru breaks the silence. "So this explains a lot."

I shift in my seat. Clear my throat. "It does?"

Ru shrugs. "I certainly threw myself at you enough times. I really should have figured it out sooner."

It takes me a moment to realise that Ru probably inferred from my rambling confession that I'm attracted to men—given that I slept with one—and therefore gay. The assumption makes enough sense, and I don't know if it helps to object. What would I even say? *I'm not gay, Ru—or at least, I'm definitely attracted to you. It was just harder for me to hold your hand than to fuck my flatmate.*

Best not. I shrug and nod instead.

"You could have spoken up about it sooner." Ru exhales loudly and puts a hand to her forehead. "Spared me a bunch of grief over the summer."

It was obvious she hated being engaged to me, but hearing Ru confirm it is still like ice in my veins.

I cough lightly. "Sorry."

"I mean, I guess I shouldn't assume you had everything worked out." Ru closes her eyes and sighs. "I don't know, Kaal. How new is this to you?"

"Pretty new," I say honestly. "Though in the interest of coming clean, I did kiss him right before summer break."

"Did you, now."

I wince. "Sorry."

"Right." Rupali rubs at her eyes. She appears tired. "Well, doesn't change much now, does it?"

"I guess not." I look down at the table.

"This goes without saying, but I feel like I should make it explicit anyway," Ru says. "I am not going to tell anyone."

"Didn't think you would."

"Good."

We fall silent for some time again.

Once more, Ru's the one to break the silence. "Still hurts, though."

My heart sinks. "Sorry."

"Don't apologise," Ru says, "at least, not for being gay. I know it's really tempting to think of it as like, being dirty, or shameful, and it's not. It isn't."

"I know." I hesitate, then add, "Thank you."

"I mostly wish you could have given me a little more warning," Ru says. "Feels stupid to say, especially with all the moping I did about the engagement, but fuck, Kaal. I did love you. Do, even."

I do too, I don't say, and it's like swallowing glass.

Instead, I say, "I care about you too, Ru. Obviously."

"Yeah." Ru closes her eyes. "I really thought we had it, you know? At least for a little bit. I really thought we got lucky and we'd be married and happy and together, and it'd work because we actually loved each other."

You never told me you really, really loved me, I think.

I take a shuddering breath. "I think we could have made it work."

"Might still have to." Ru plops an elbow down on the table and rests her chin on her hand. "Probably still have to, in fact."

"I guess." My guts twist with guilt. "I don't really see a way out of continuing to—keep up the pretence."

"Mm. The pretence." Ru laughs bitterly. "At least we both know it's theatre now, instead of just one of us."

It was never theatre and I should have told you I really loved you too, Ru. Doesn't make a difference now, though.

"Our system's been working well enough," I say. "We'll keep checking in, keep calling our mums together every week. Should be fine."

"Yeah, we're pretty good at lying by now." Ru shrugs. "What's another fib?"

That stings. I don't know why, but it stings, and I have to look away quickly.

"Honestly, Kaal," Rupali says, "I was a mess yesterday. I cried so much, and for so many different reasons. Sorrow and grief and hurt, but also relief. There was a bit where I was crying and laughing at the same time."

"I'm glad you feel relieved," I say, keeping my voice steady.

"It's because, well, there are silver linings, no?" Ru asks. "You don't have to hide it anymore. And all your reticence about Tahani—well, we're seeing it in a different light now, I guess. It makes sense why you'd pull back the way you did. Why you were so scared."

"Yeah, I suppose it does."

Ru purses her lips. "If only there wasn't this giant fucking elephant in the room."

Oh dear.

Ru folds her arms. "Jeffrey, Kaal? Really, Jeffrey? Of all the fucking men on the planet, did it have to be fucking *Jeffrey*?"

My breath whistles through gritted teeth. "Yeah, it's a bit awkward."

"A bit awkward?" Ru arches her eyebrows. "Sweetheart, Jeffrey was pretty instrumental in getting Tahani and me kicked from the GSA. He assured us he'd mediate a meeting with the officers, then turned on us. That's more than a bit awkward."

"He tells it a bit differently," I say.

That makes Rupali grit her teeth too. "Oh, does he now?"

"He doesn't feel great about it, either." I think, anyway—Jeff and I

haven't actually talked much since the deed, but that text he sent me before I jumped on him seemed regretful. "I don't know, maybe you all need to clear the air or something."

"Wonderful idea." Ru rolls her eyes. "Yet, for some reason, I find I'm not feeling too charitable towards the racist guy who fucked my fiancé."

"And I'm sorry about that," I say, "but maybe leave him out of your issues with me."

"Leave him out of it?" Rupali blinks. "Kaal, how exactly am I supposed to do that? I didn't talk to you about the GSA stuff as it was happening, but you've gone and made it quite core to our so-called issues."

Before replying, I glance around. The other students seem too busy to pay attention to our increasingly loud and decreasingly civil conversation, but there's a few who I swear are eating extra slowly while carefully not looking in our direction.

"You can see how that makes this more difficult, right?" Ru asks, and I refocus my attention. "Shit, Kaal, the fact that you went for someone who fucked Tahani over so bad—"

"Okay, stop right there," I say. "At no point was I thinking about Tahani when all of this happened. It's just an unfortunate coincidence."

"It's pretty fricking unfortunate, yeah." Ru frowns. "I don't know, Kaal, I thought you had a read on Jeff. Time was, I was the one with the rationalisations for continuing to associate with a racially insensitive gay dude who has the hots for my future husband."

"How the tables turn."

"I'm worried about you too." Ru throws her hands up. "Like, congratulations on your gay awakening, but I don't think Jeff's going to be the best partner to you. You shouldn't ignore all that baggage."

"Oh, piss off."

The words are out of my mouth before I realise I said them. Rupali's unamused expression and clenched jaw tell me I might as well speak my mind, though.

"Excuse me, Kaal?" Ru asks, her voice frosty.

I lean forward. "I apologise for being rude, but knock it off, alright? Your

whole peace and love and understanding thing. It's pissing me off. I cheated on you, stop being so fucking magnanimous about it."

Rupali cocks her head to the side. "I'm sorry, Kaal, but are you angry at me because I'm being considerate?"

"I don't know! Yes." I rub my eyes profusely, wiping away any hint of wetness. "You're so ready to make all these excuses that I didn't even think about. Oh poor Kaal, so scared to come out and face the music, driven into the arms of a racist twink. Spare me. Try being a little mad."

"Oh, if you want me to be mad, Kaal," Rupali says, "trust me—it's working."

"Good. Great." I stop caring about the volume of my voice. "Don't like, narrativise me. This is a stupid thing and I shouldn't have done it, and I suck for doing it, but it was my choice to do it, okay? I did it because I wanted to, and I did it knowing it's a bad idea, so don't sit there and tell me all about what a bad idea it is. I don't care. Let me do what I want."

"Cool!" Ru slams a fist on the table. "So I guess I'll hold you fully responsible for fucking around with the racist twat who screwed Tahani over."

I give Ru a bitter laugh of my own. "You do that. You and Nichole are so right about me, Ru. You should hate me forever."

"What does Nichole have to do with this?"

Try as she might, she just can't help but sound guilty and evasive when talking about Nichole, can she?

"I thought we were being honest here." I sneer at Ru. "Dunno, babe, what does the chick you were texting and calling all summer have to do with this?"

"You're sniping at Nichole for being a supportive friend?" Rupali asks.

"Yeah, because I hate supportive friends." I don't even know what I'm saying anymore, but I keep talking. "I hate being reminded how much support you need to get through a week of being near me, because I'm evil and controlling and racist and, of course, transphobic, which I've been for years. So maybe don't be such a hypocrite about putting up with shitty bigoted men you're attracted to, since you have no room to talk."

Those students aren't being shy about looking in our direction anymore.

Rupali runs her fingers through her hair. “Wow. Okay. Fuck me for thinking we could be civil about this, Kaal. You made your point. I give up.”

“You do that.”

I turn my face aside. Can’t let her see the tears.

The chair slides back, and I hear Rupali get off and walk away, out of my life.

CHAPTER 12
YOUNG LOVE

Jeff

It's such a beautiful day. The sun is high in the bright blue sky, and the weather is remarkably warm for the season. Not a cloud to be seen for miles. My boo and I are walking through campus together, arm in arm, enjoying the lovely breeze and shining greenery. I have a stack of Halloween party flyers that he's agreed to carry and put up for me, transforming my dry little chore into an outdoor date with my new—I can't believe I get to use this word—boyfriend. I get to hold his hand, and watch him do a little manual labour with his big, strong arms, grunting and sweating as he carries my burdens uphill for me.

It's all so perfect, just the way it should be.

"We could do this faster if we split up, you know."

And Wendy's here too. She has flyers of her own, but no boo, and so she looks understandably crabby.

"Nonsense, dear!" I adjust my straw hat and give Wendy a smile as bright as noon. "It's going to be hours of walking around, either which way. Efficiency isn't the point. The point is to turn busywork into a nice day out with friends. Don't you think?"

"Hm." Wendy's gaze flits past me. "I didn't realise you enjoy spending time with friends so much. I haven't seen you in weeks."

I laugh and bump my shoulder into hers with a wink. "Has it been that long, Wendy? Time just flies when I'm with my man."

"Right."

My sweet, strong, handsome Kyle, walking on my other side, clears his throat and points at the uni's bookshop. "I think we have to put some up there. Right, babe?"

"Oh, let me check the list." I stop and pull out my phone.

"The bookshop is located in the middle of campus." Wendy rolls her eyes. "Every student walks by it on the way to class. The GSA has advertised every event on its notice board for years. So yes."

I glance up from my list and tut-tut her. "It doesn't hurt to be thorough, darling."

Wendy sighs and hands Kyle some of her zip-ties. "Would you run along and put the flyers up while we're being thorough? Thank you."

"No problem."

Kyle squeezes my hand and gives me a long, wet kiss on the cheek, because he knows how much I hate it when he has to let go of me. He tries to jog away after peppering my face with smooches, but I refuse to let go of his arm, clinging on tight. We laugh about it, and I give him a final big kiss on the lips before I let him skip off, watching him go with my lower lip between my teeth.

Gosh, he's such a hunk.

Wendy clears her throat loudly. "You done?"

"Not even close." I keep leering until he disappears past the glass doors, then turn to her with a squeal, clapping my hands together. "Girl, can you believe this?"

Wendy regards me, heavy-lidded. "No, I cannot."

"It's such a dream come true." I close my eyes and sigh. "Kyle's standing in defiance of his parents and risking everything to be with me, Wendy. How could I be so lucky? Where else can you find a guy like that?"

"You can find plenty of dudes who'll nail you without telling mummy and daddy. There's probably a dozen at the nearest gym right now."

Nothing can sour my mood today, but Wendy is certainly trying. I put my hands on my hips and frown at her. "Is something wrong, darling?"

"Oh, is there?" Wendy's tone is mocking. "Have you finally decided to pay attention to something besides your boyfriend's ass?"

I place a hand on my breast, scoffing. "I beg your pardon?"

Wendy pinches the bridge of her nose. "Okay, sorry. Please don't take this the wrong way, sweetheart. I am happy you were able to work things out with your forbidden fruit. But it's a little frustrating."

"That's your idea of an apology?" I narrow my eyes. "You call being a sourpuss for the whole day 'a little frustrated', Wendy?"

"How would you know what I've been like for the whole day?" Wendy asks. "You haven't paid attention to a word I've said since we started. I stopped saying anything at all twenty minutes ago, and you didn't even notice."

I throw my hands up. "I'm sorry my happiness is so inconvenient to you, Wendy. I didn't realise that I should stay single and miserable for your entertainment."

Wendy snorts. "It's cute that you think you were entertaining."

I glare at her. "I'm not sure I see the problem, then. You don't have to put up with my boring self anymore, after all."

"Sure. Yep, great." Wendy laughs bitterly. "That's precisely what I want."

"I can't figure out what you want!" I throw my head back with a cry of frustration. "Why did you even sign up to come along with me if this is how you're going to be?"

Wendy blinks rapidly. "What a good question, dear. Why did I sign myself up for a menial task that would take me all day and leave my feet sore and aching? Was it perhaps because my friend, who I haven't seen in person for ages, also signed up? And because I thought we would actually get to spend some time together, just the two of us? But no, I show up at your doorstep and guess who you tell me you're bringing along."

Wendy certainly knows how to shut me up. I fold my arms and open my

mouth, then close it again. I glance towards the bookshop entrance, then back at her, pouting.

"Fine," I say eventually, "but you're not exactly making much of an effort with him either."

Wendy slaps her forehead with the heel of her hand. "I love you, my sweet baby bird, but your taste in men is atrocious. You're dating an engineering student with moobs who doesn't know how to talk to girls. I cannot work miracles."

"That's not—he just has a big chest." I look down at my own shoes.

"Yeah, he must lift so many cans of Mountain Dew."

"Okay, I've had enough of this." I shoot Wendy a glare. "You know, Wendy, why exactly would I want to spend any time with someone who doesn't respect me, doesn't respect my man, and doesn't have the good sense that God gave a wild hog? Hand to my heart, I was never jealous of you, but I'd know to be a better sport had I been."

"Jealous?" Wendy stares at me, wide-eyed. "You seriously think I'm jealous of a ratty-haired ungroomed soft boy whose mother still dresses him? I wouldn't give him a second look after a ten-month dry spell."

I laugh. "Don't be so hasty, Wendy. You'll run out of guys you haven't already fucked in due time, and then who knows what you'll have to resort to? Since no one seems to want to keep you around."

No response. When I see the tears, I realise I may have spoken too harshly.

I take a step towards her. "Okay, too far. I'm sorry—"

Wendy shouts a swear word I recognise but don't know the meaning of, and steps back with raised hands. "No, no, you are completely right. It was stupid of me to foist my unloveable ass on you now that you have someone actually worthwhile to waste your time on. Please enjoy the rest of your relationship with a flabby slum-dweller. At least until he discovers how much he likes getting railed and queens out."

Anything conciliatory I want to say turns to bile in my throat. I watch Wendy turn around and leave with gritted teeth and hatred in my heart. She calls herself my friend but acts so vicious the second I'm doing better than she is, to the point of spewing racist nonsense in my face. Kyle's a man

—the only reason he might look soft is that he's on oestrogen for a competition. Wendy doesn't know what she's talking about.

She's wrong.

Not long after that, Kyle emerges from the bookshop and jogs towards me.

"All done, sweetheart," he says. "Did Wendy decide to split up after all?"

"Yep. We'll get it done faster." I put on a smile for my big, strong man and look up at his sweet face. I reach up to run my fingers through the tangle of his wild, untamed locks.

His remarkably long, practically shoulder-length untamed locks.

"Where to next?" Kyle asks.

"Let me check," I say, but make no move to grab my phone. I frown. "Say, sweetie. When was the last time you had a haircut?"

Nichole

On Thursday, about two weeks after Ru found out Kyle cheated on her, right as we stack up our lunch plates and trays, Ru turns to the rest of us and announces in a firm, almost deadpan voice, "I think I'm a lesbian."

Tahani and I exchange a glance, while Kim avoids making eye contact with any of us. I clear my throat. "That's outstanding, sweetie, congra—"

"You all knew already, right?"

"Yep," Tahani says without missing a beat.

Kim pantomimes an exaggerated shrug. "No clue what you mean. You're always saying such heterosexual things."

Ru balls up a dirty napkin to throw at Kim, which she dodges. "Such as?" Ru asks, a small smile playing on her lips.

"Oh, you know." Tahani adopts an exaggerated, almost sing-song tone. "The celebrities you fixate on, the way you give compliments…"

"That proves nothing!"

"I have one," I say. "The fanfiction."

Ru sucks in air through her teeth. "Oof, yeah, I don't really have a defence

for that one. You know, I've had that account since I was fifteen. I'm not even sure exactly how I justified it to myself."

"We're only going back as far as age fifteen?" Tahani asks with a smirk.

Ru scoffs. "You didn't even know what a lesbian was before that."

"Au contraire, ma chérie. *You* didn't know what a lesbian was."

It's like a fever's cleared up. Rupali's joking and laughing and messing around as we walk to class. No longer does she occasionally lapse into silence with an unreachable melancholy behind her eyes, or appear strangely wistful when we discuss dating. Instead she's asking us about celebrity crushes and whether it's too cliché for her to enjoy *Girl in Red*.

Just as Tahani and Kim split from us and head towards their lecture halls, Ru tugs at my cardigan. I fall back. She stands up on her toes and gives me a peck on the cheek.

"We should talk more," Ru says, "about some stuff that we didn't get a chance to discuss. You know?"

I nod so hard, my earphones almost fall out. "Oh, yeah, for sure. Definitely." I chew on my lip. "By which you mean, like, what we were talking about two Saturdays ago, right?"

But Ru's already walked ahead and barely spares me a glance over her shoulder. "Maybe! Refresh my memory."

A cacophony of thoughts and words and feelings erupt in my mind, each fighting to be expressed. Unable to pick a single one, I squawk out a simple "Okay!" and shuffle towards my seat.

Focusing on class is hard after that. Especially with how close to me Ru sits, how good she smells. How we keep bumping elbows.

It's actually happening. After all my daydreams and fantasies, Ru is as free and clear as she can be. And she's very much interested. The skincare routine's paying off. Not even much of a loose end with Kyle. I could never have imagined things going this well.

Class ends, and we go our separate ways. I rush to the library downhill from the computer science building and text Tahani as fast as I can.

"Ru told me to refresh her memory about that conversation we never finished! That's good right?"

"The general cadence of these ambiguous references seems positive, sure," Tahani replies. "*Are you going to ask her out?"*

My heart stops.

"I don't know! Maybe?"

"What's stopping you?" Tahani asks.

"Mostly just sheer terror," I say. "*How can I just ask her out? Isn't it kind of, IDK, complicated?"*

Tahani's response is less reassuring than I want it to be. "*Bestie, if you're asking me to divine Ru's thoughts for you, I can't really do that. I'm not in her head. All I can tell you is that if you want to take that leap of faith, you should. Good luck."*

And now I'm a nervous wreck again.

If Tahani can't say for sure Ru likes me, then how can *I* possibly know? Ru's nice to me, but she's so effortlessly gorgeous and stunning. You have to use words like "voluptuous" and "buxom" to describe girls like her without sounding crude. Next to her, I probably look like a pale stick with balloons taped on.

Also, why am I the one who has to ask her out? It doesn't sit right with me. I've been told I'm pretty a lot, but largely by people who've never seen me in person, only in the carefully curated photos I feed them. Shouldn't I get to feel pretty in real life too? Pretty enough to be worth the trouble?

I text Tahani again. "*Maybe she'll be the one to ask me out and I won't have to do it, LOL."*

This time, she doesn't respond until about thirty minutes later. "*Maybe. I wouldn't count on it, though. This is all very new to her."*

I guess Tahani doesn't think I'm all that.

I send her a "fingers crossed" emoji and plug my laptop into the desk's charging port, getting ready to do some JavaScript homework. A minute later, my phone buzzes again.

It's Ru.

"Let's hang out soon? I'm starting to think I have a lot to celebrate. IDK. How do lesbians celebrate coming out?"

My tears are gone with a few blinks. "*Good question. Wanna ask Tahani for ideas?"*

A minute passes. I can't tear my eyes away from the screen the whole time.

"Sure," Ru says finally. "*I guess we can do something with them this weekend. Let's plan something big."*

"Heck yeah!"

It'll happen. We'll celebrate her newfound freedom this weekend, and after some drinks and some partying and some looking into each other's eyes, one of us will blurt it out. Likely both of us at the same time, right before we make out so hard it's public indecency.

And then I won't feel guilty for fantasising about her anymore.

Not that I think about that a lot. Or think very far past making out. It feels indecent, even if we flirt with each other a lot and perhaps have been for months. I don't have much experience with this—I've never even kissed a girl.

But Ru hasn't either, and we'll both get to figure it out together.

Kim suggests a day out in our group chat. "*We'll get some lunch at Crosswalks, buy some new clothes for Rupali, swing by the ramen place for dinner and finish up with edibles and drinks at the dyke bar. If you tell Karla you're newly out, she might give us a free round."*

"Is that why you recruit?" Rupali asks. "*For the free drinks."*

"Yep!" says Tahani. "*And any future dykes you sign up for the programme earn us reward points, too."*

I'm going to have to assemble the outfit of a lifetime.

At home, I go through my closet and find The Dress. I bought it shortly after Ru got formally engaged. The price tag was high enough to necessitate a call to mum, and I had to pretend I needed the money for a Switch 2. At the time, purchasing The Dress was as much an exercise in optimism as in self-affirmation, because I knew I had a ways to go before I could fill it out properly.

The neckline plunges hard enough to go spelunking. The material is black and thin, verging on translucent. Although The Dress is long, it's held up by the thinnest of straps, because it doesn't weigh enough to tax them. I haven't tried it on yet—the size I got was aspirational. I didn't know how far into my transition it would be before I summoned up the courage to put it on, hoping that it fit me well.

But it's time.

The Dress envelops me like an omen, hugging me tight around my hips and curves. It shows off as much cleavage as it can while still covering my nipples, and it ends just at my ankles. My legs appear covered when I stand straight, but as soon as I start walking, my thighs emerge through the double slits. The fabric flows around them the way the deepest, darkest waves roil around moonlit vessels.

I'm not good at accessorising, but I have a silver pendant, a bracelet, and a nice perfume I bought myself over summer break. I also try my hand at a nice red lip and some eyeshadow. A new pair of black kitten heels on priority delivery completes the set.

It doesn't all come together exactly the way I pictured it, but I was probably never going to look as good in The Dress as I want to. I finger-brush my hair, freshly trimmed and styled yesterday, and I'm done. Sure, I'll have to walk around all evening in heels, but it's going to be worth it.

If this doesn't seal the deal, nothing will.

I elect to have a light lunch by myself and join the group after. The others don't go quite as all-out, but they're clearly trying to look good. Kim's wearing a tank top with a large gold medallion and has her beefy, toned arms on full display. If she swapped her miniskirt for some slacks and trimmed her ponytail, she'd absolutely kill the butch look. Tahani, on one of the aforementioned arms, wears a nice peach evening dress, a flower tucked behind an ear, and heavy make-up that matches Kim's. Really, Ru's the only one who didn't put much effort into her outfit—just a tee and jeans—but she looks good in anything, and we're planning on buying her new clothes soon.

But first, we have to indulge in a little theatre.

"Okay, but like, I still want to avoid getting in trouble," Ru says, without much conviction in her voice.

"Hence the undercut," says Tahani. "It won't look any different with your hair down."

Kim nods. "You can style it a bunch of different ways, too."

I nudge Ru with my shoulder. "It'll look good on you."

"Okay." Ru smiles. "Oh my gosh, yes, okay, I'm going to do it. I'm really doing this!"

The haircut doesn't take long. Kim pays, and as we walk to our next destination, Ru keeps rubbing the back of her head.

"My head feels so light. I can feel the air currents." She sounds amazed. "Anyone else want a feel?"

I can't see my own face, but I imagine it's gone completely red. I quickly look somewhere else, stammering out an "Um."

"Sure thing," Kim says, running her fingers through Ru's hair with a smile. "Gosh, this brings back memories. I still remember the feeling after my first side shave." She laughs. "The urge strikes me now and then, but I really don't like cutting my hair anymore. Even trims are hard."

"Mood." Tahani puts her arm around Kim.

"Can I make it look like a side-shave?" Ru asks, voice bursting with excitement.

"I'm sure you can," Kim says. "Should we try?"

Ru bites her lip. "Will it take time? No, forget it. I want to see what it's like with my hair tied up."

Tahani helps Ru put her hair in a bun, which looks so hot that I'd cross my legs if I was sitting down. I desperately, desperately need Ru to put on some dress shoes and a tux and put her arm around me, to make me an accessory on her wrist the way Kim does Tahani. I think about the four of us in the future, out and about as a pair of obvious and hot dyke power couples, and my whole body tingles.

Shopping takes less time than I expected. Ru has a blast strolling through the men's section with us, trying on shirts and trousers and jackets, but being both short and busty makes finding a good size off the rack difficult. She also insists she doesn't want Tahani and Kim to spend too much money on her. Eventually, we manage to talk her into selecting a navy blue blazer that looks good with her jeans.

I also surprise her by buying a pair of boots she keeps eyeing but doesn't ask to try on.

"Oh my gosh, Nichole, are you sure?" she asks, grabbing my arm.

My mouth is dry, and I badly need a drink, but I smile and nod effusively. "Yeah, I'm sure. They'll really butch up the ensemble, won't they?"

We hurry to a bench so Ru can put the boots on right away. They really suit her. She appears taller somehow, more dapper and handsome and broad in the shoulder. Maybe it's all in how she stands now, back straight and head high, canines bared in a wicked grin.

I'm staring. I'm lightheaded. I have to drop my gaze before I collapse.

Kim actually whistles. "Damn, girl."

"I know, right?" Ru puts her hands on her waist and swivels a bit. "All I need is a cute girl at my side to complete the look."

A noise somewhere between a hiccup and wet gurgling emerges from my throat.

Kim lets out a short, high-pitched laugh. "Well, something tells me you'll have one soon enough."

Tahani and Kim head for the bus stop. I'm about to follow them when Ru suddenly hugs me from behind. My knees almost buckle at the contact.

"Thank you," she whispers in my ear, earnest and grateful. I grab her hands and give them a squeeze, overwhelmed.

"Come on, we don't want to lose them." I pull her along so we can catch up.

The bus gets us to Tahani's favourite ramen shop five minutes before our reservation. The owner shows us to a small corner table and takes our orders. Ru and I follow Kim's lead and get shoyu broth with chewy udon noodles, but I go lighter on the toppings. We also realise we'll have to eat the food very, very carefully once it arrives.

"Note for the future, do not mix slurping with Saturday night clothes," Kim says.

Rupali shrugs. "Depends what you're slurping."

She winks at Kim, and everyone laughs. Kim says nothing and digs right into her food, but she's blushing profusely. I probably am too.

Ru's lips on mine are pretty much all I can think about. The rest of dinner is a haze, and I barely pay attention as Kim and Tahani tell us about the history of the dyke bar, *Street 13*, and the working-class dykes who started it. Instead, Ru's words keep replaying in my head. I wish I had the nerve to ask her how well I'd complement her outfit.

For 'dessert', we take a little stroll through a nearby park, avoiding the areas with benches. Tahani rifles through her purse while Kim casually glances behind us.

"It's the literal first time for both of you, right?" Tahani asks.

"Yup!" My voice is a bit squeakier than I want it to be.

"Yeah, give them a quarter each," Kim says with a chuckle.

Ru accepts a bit of cookie. "How much do you usually take?"

Tahani hands me my piece and shrugs. "Half to a third. Probably a third of one cookie tonight, since we'll be out and don't want to be knocked out flat."

I pop the cookie into my mouth and chew. It's dry and has chocolate chips, but also a hint of something else with a grassy aftertaste. I swallow loudly.

"Does it kick in quick?" I try not to sound too nervous.

"No, we just ate," Kim says. "We probably have a good hour."

"Yeah, we don't want to space out on the bus." Tahani zips up her handbag and checks her phone. "Alright, through the park for our next bus stop."

"I think that's the most illegal thing I've ever done," Rupali says in a low voice.

Kim giggles. "Thank you for announcing it. I almost regret to inform you it's not illegal in this country."

"Oh."

I don't really know what to expect. I've been tipsy plenty of times, and I figure this can't be too different. I walk cautiously and deliberately, heel before toe, and try to keep my wits about me. It's not until we're on the bus that I notice the strange heat spreading from my extremities to my whole body. My eyes really don't want to focus on any one thing. Much more calming to stare out the window and let the pretty lights bleed into each other as they blur past me. I reach out to touch them, but I can't.

The bus deposits us somewhere with cobblestones and faded street signs, an older part of the city. Tahani gently takes my hand and tugs on my arm, leading me slowly towards an establishment that's much grimier than the townhouses it's sandwiched between. I squeeze her fingers tight. I wish it was Ru's hand I was holding.

The bar itself is less crowded than I was picturing, thankfully. Kim talks to the bartender and leads us through the place, past barrels and drunks

and pride flags hanging from exposed pipes. I stumble through a series of tight corridors until we surface in an even less crowded spot, with a few pool tables. Only one of them is occupied. Tahani racks us up, and Kim hands out the cues.

I grip mine tightly, almost too tightly. My hands are so sweaty. There's a picture in my head, of me draping myself over the table, suave and sexy and showing off all the skin I can. For the first time, it goes past the kisses. My thigh would tense, beckoning. Unable to resist, Ru would slide her hand up my skin until she found my knickers and curled her thumb under the waistband. I let myself imagine luring her in, seducing her so utterly that she has no choice but to grab my hips from behind and have her way with me.

"You're up, babe," Ru says to me, and I almost drop the cue.

"Oh, um." I can't help stuttering. "Sure. I'm not that good, by the way."

Kim chuckles. "That's what the alcohol's for."

"To make you better at pool?" Ru asks with a smirk.

"To make you stop caring."

"Speaking of, our drinks are probs ready," Tahani says. "I'll go grab them."

"Oh, let me help with that!"

A second later, I realise I'm the one who said that. I blink, lean the cue against the table, and dart after Tahani.

She raises an eyebrow but says nothing. I follow her back to the bar, muttering "just thought you'd need help carrying them", and Tahani thanks me.

"You look good," she adds, picking up two fruity cocktails while I grab Ru's rum and coke and Kim's non-alcoholic cider. "Really pulling out all the stops."

"Thank you."

I close my eyes. The bar's not very loud, and I've had a wonderful evening, so why am I still so close to tears? Why can't I stop shaking and stammering, and why can't I just say the stupid fucking words I want to say?

Why am I like this?

"You're doing great, sweetie," Tahani says, as though she can read my mind. "You're pretty new to this too, aren't you?"

"Very." I let a few tears fall. "Tahani, am I pretty?"

"Nichole, you're a firecracker."

I laugh, and it's almost a giggle. Almost. "That's kind of you."

"It's true, Nichole," Tahani says, emphatic. "I know it's difficult to believe, when it hasn't been true all this time. But it's a facet of your life now, and it'll get easier to accept with time. One day, it'll even be mundane. A simple fact about you that you're used to."

I hiccup. "Girliepop, you sound crazy."

"I know." She rubs my shoulder with her fingers, still holding the drinks. "It'll happen, though. I promise. Just don't get discouraged."

"Hm." I look up at her with wet eyes. "I just want her to think I'm pretty."

"She does." Tahani rubs my shoulder again. "It's impossible to ignore how stupidly into each other the both of you are."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah!" Tahani rolls her eyes. "Nichole, she keeps finding reasons to grab you . Kim and I spent the bus ride betting if she'd ever stop staring at your thighs."

"Oh." I blink.

"You two are such teenagers." Tahani shakes her head. "It's fine, Nichole. Give yourself the time you need. Neither of you is going anywhere."

"Okay." I give Tahani a small smile. "I'll do my best."

"Attagirl. Now come on, love, these drinks are super cold."

She's right. I had this idea in my head of becoming a sultry seductress, ensnaring any girl with a glance. But it was silly of me to think I could transform from an awkward, shy nerd to someone who can charm the pants off Rupali overnight. These things take time, like Tahani said. She's right—Ru and I will both grow into it. I find my smile again, and I'm in the best mood I've been all evening.

Until we get back to the pool room.

The cues are on the table, forgotten and ignored. Kim and Rupali are otherwise occupied. They're running their hands all over each other's bodies, biting each other's lips, and kissing so loudly I can hear it over the music.

"FUCKING FINALLY!"

Tahani's scream makes the other group look up from their game and laugh at the spectacle. A few of them cheer and clap.

I remain in the doorway, just at the threshold. Doing my best not to drop

the drinks. I think my throat's closing up. It's difficult to tell. I don't feel connected to my body. Everything is shimmery and muddled. Like I'm underwater and can't stop sinking.

I'm so stupid.

I'm so fucking stupid.

CHAPTER 13
BEST LEFT UNSAID

Nichole

Things are awkward afterwards. I sip my cocktail, laugh at jokes, shoot some pool and, as soon as I finish my drink, announce I have to go.

"You sure?" Tahani asks, tilting her head. "You should wait to sober up a bit, at least."

"Oh, I don't think the edible hit me very hard." Which isn't exactly a lie. The pleasant humming under my skin all but subsided the moment I saw those two going at it.

Tahani and Kim exchange a glance. Kim hands Tahani her cue, steps forward and says, "Okay, if you say so. I'll show you to the entrance."

If I still had my drink, I'd be tempted to throw it in Kim's face. Instead, I plaster on a stupid grin and say thanks for knowing where the door is. I hurry into the night air, barely acknowledging Kim's "goodnight" with a nod, and make a beeline for the stop.

I don't let myself start sobbing until I'm seated in a bus and well on my way home.

It'd be one thing if I just misread all the signals. If I quietly kept it all bottled up and read too much into everything and missed my shot, like a

coward. But that's not what happened, is it? I didn't make up all the times Rupali led me on, all the things she did to make me feel like she trusted and wanted me. She practically grabbed my face and begged me to kiss her after the rom-com marathon.

What changed?

Why did she do this to me if she was just going to throw me away?

The bus trundles to a halt at my stop. I missed the signal, but luckily, someone else had to get off there too. Still crying, I get off and drag myself home to collapse face-first into my pillows.

No one saw me completely fall apart, at least.

It's not until the sun is directly in my eyes that I stir. Already late afternoon. I'm more of a lightweight than I used to be, and the weed mixed with the alcohol really knocked me out, I guess. I sit up and start checking The Dress. Didn't rip it, thank fuck.

There were plans to hang out at Tahani's today. We even had an open invite to crash there, in case we ended up enjoying ourselves a little too much at the bar. While Rupali certainly did, I didn't, and I don't think I'm up for going over and having to look them all in the eye. Not this soon. I attempt to come up with a good excuse in the shower and check my phone when I'm back in my room.

I have an unread text from Ru.

"Can I come over to yours this afternoon?" she asks. *"We can head over to Tahani's together."*

My hand trembles. A part of me wants to tell her I'd like to never see her again.

"Sure," I type, and hit send.

I get dressed in whatever pyjamas I can find, dread pooling in my gut. Maybe I should suck it up and put on some actual clothes so we can head over after we're done talking. I was rejected, but they're still my friends and I like being around them. I should put my feelings aside.

But it hurts so fucking much. I don't know how I can be expected to let all of that go so quickly, to forget what we promised each other overnight like Rupali did. I'm not made of stone.

There's a knock at the door, and it almost makes me throw up.

It stings even more when I answer. The door swivels open to reveal Rupali in all her majesty, one hand on her hip, grinning like an absolutely devilish idiot. She's wearing the blazer she got yesterday.

She's wearing the fucking boots I bought her.

I swallow a mouthful of bile. "Hi. Can I help you?"

Rupali cocks her head to the side and blinks. "Can I come in?"

"Sure."

I shamble back to my room, leaving the door open. The stomping of those fucking boots follows me. Taking deep breaths, I turn around and sit down on my bed. Rupali stops in the centre of the room, looking around.

"I haven't been here in a while," she says. "You've really spruced it up."

"Yeah, finally having the right endocrinal profile makes it easier to do laundry." I cross my legs on the bed. "What do you want?"

Rupali's eyebrows meet for a second, but she sounds unfazed when she speaks. "Just wanted to see you. We didn't get much time together yesterday, did we? The two of us, I mean."

I stare at my feet. "I guess not."

"You left kinda early, too."

"Yeah, well." I rub the back of my neck with a grimace. "I think that edible did hit me kind of hard after all."

"Me too, honestly." Rupali walks over and flops down on the bed next to me. "Really wasn't what I expected, but it was so fun."

"Sure."

"Made all the, you know, noise in my head go away." Rupali gestures around her temples. "I don't know how Tahani does it. It's difficult to get it to shut up. The guilt and whatnot. You know what I mean?"

I shrug. "Not really."

"Oh." Rupali glances around. "I guess you weren't brought up super religious, then?"

I shrug again and lean back on my hands. "Not particularly, no."

"It was nice," Rupali says. "Not having a voice telling me I'm going to hell for all this, you know? For a little bit, at least. Makes it easier to do some things."

My fingers curl and dig into the sheets. "I see."

Rupali laughs. “Yeah, um, not that it helps with being embarrassed the next day.”

“You’re embarrassed?” I ask, my voice a little too loud.

“Kinda.” Rupali leans back too. “I don’t make a habit of making out with girls at bars. New ground for me.”

“Your best friend’s partner, too,” I say.

Another laugh. “Gosh, yeah. I mean, I don’t think Kim would’ve asked to kiss me if Tahani wasn’t cool with it. I knew they were polyamorous, but hearing Tahani cheer made me realise how much.”

“Yeah, it was really something to see.”

My laugh isn’t as nervous and breezy as Rupali’s. More harsh and guttural, like a bark. I don’t have the dulcet fucking tones to titter, I suppose.

Rupali glances at me with a raised eyebrow. “Right. Anyway, Nichole, I wanted to ask you something.”

“What, do you want an audience every time you snog Kim?”

“Huh?” Rupali sits up, blinking.

Dimly, I’m aware I shouldn’t say anything I can’t take back. I already spoke my mind once, though. I want Rupali to hear everything on it.

“I can’t imagine why else you’d traipse over here the morning after and rub that in my face.” I laugh again, long and loud and bitter. “Sorry, was breaking my heart once not enough? Do you want me to stand at the foot of the bed while Tahani cheers you two on? Does seeing me cry do it for you?”

Rupali bolts up. “Nichole, what the fuck? What are you even saying? What’s going on?”

Tears run down my cheeks as I thread my fingers through my hair, still laughing as they clench into fists. “I don’t know what’s going on, Rupali. You tell me. You said you were torn up about your engagement. You told me you had this big lesbian awakening and you’ve always liked girls. But how lesbian can you be if you were just waiting around for someone big and strong and tough to stick their tongue down your throat?”

“Excuse you?” Rupali gapes at me, jaw open, eyes wide and glistening.

“You’re not excused.” I slam my hands down on the bed, sniffling loudly, shoulders shaking. “Hey, what the fuck did you jerk me around for? Was it

some kind of sick fucking game to you? Did you want a bunch of good girl points for pretending to be into a trans girl or something? It was more fun in the abstract, no? But not when you're actually having your big lesbian awakening. Gotta grab the nearest cis girl for that!"

"NICHOLE."

My hands fly up to cover my mouth.

Rupali stands tall before me, panting as hard as I am, her breaths shuddering. She gawps at me with an expression of pure disbelief.

"Is this what you've always been?" she asks, and my heart sinks.

"Wait, Ru, no," I say, shaking my head furiously. "Ru, I'm so sorry."

"No one's ever spoken to me like that." Ru glares daggers at me, and my cheeks grow hot. "Do you understand? No one."

"Ru, I'm sorry—"

"I felt so fucking stupid." Ru raises a hand to her head. "We figured you ran off because I kissed Kim. Tahani gave me a frank talk. I felt stupid, and I knew I made a mistake, and I wanted to come see you and apologise and ask you out properly, but I wasn't expecting all this. How did you even come up with half of that?"

I blink. "You were going to what?"

"Kim felt like an idiot too," Ru says, ignoring me. "Not because you had dibs on me or something, to be clear. For the record, Nichole, I almost pounced on you before everything went to hell with Kaal, and I felt like a fucking whore for it. I asked you if you wanted to spend this weekend with me. I thought I made it so fucking obvious, but every time I got close, every time I made myself say something as close to confessing my feelings for you as I could get, you deflected or changed the subject or ran the fuck away. I started to feel like I was fucking crazy."

"Your feelings—what?" I cock my head to the side. "Okay, like, I'm sorry I didn't read your fucking mind, but it's not like I've done this a lot either. Are you seriously blaming me for not deciphering your cryptic fucking hints?"

"If they were so cryptic, why did you *just* freak out at me for 'jerking you around'?"

"I mean—you—because—"

She's fucking unbelievable. Why did she think batting her eyelashes at me a few times was enough? Why was the onus on me? Aren't we lesbians —couldn't she have fucking spit it out?

I take a raspy breath. "You almost fucking kissed me while drunk, but then you didn't. You didn't say you wanted to hang out with just me. Was I supposed to magically know what you wanted? And if you like me so fucking much, why did you French the nearest person as soon as I left the room?"

"I'm so fucking glad I did," Ru says, twisting the knife. "It's the best decision I've ever made, clearly, because now I see who you really are. I never really knew you at all, did I?"

Fresh tears cloud my vision. "Meanwhile, I'm not that lucky. I'm stuck knowing exactly what you are, I'm stuck getting over someone who only saw me as girl enough to flirt with but not commit to."

Ru rolls her eyes and turns away. "If that's what you need to tell yourself to sleep at night. Sure, Nichole, I never saw you as worth committing to. That's why I spent so much time with you and tried to get you to realise I liked you. That's why I risked running into my fiancé or his racist boytoy to come see you."

"If you really wanted to be with me, you'd be with me," I say through clenched teeth. "There's a reason you could never bring yourself to ask me out but jumped on top of some cis bitch who looks brickier than I do, even if you pretend otherwise."

Rupali says nothing. Instead, she reaches down and unlaces the boots. I watch her, still weeping, as she wriggles out of them, leaving them on my floor, and walks away.

"I bought you those, they're yours," I say, wiping my nose with the back of my hand. "At least take some slippers with you, you're in socks."

"I want nothing associated with you in my life ever again," Rupali snarls as she slams my door shut behind her. Moments later, I hear her slam the front door as well.

She's gone.

My head feels so heavy. The tears have stopped, but I don't feel better in

the slightest. I lie down, slowly, and stare at my ceiling with watery eyes. My entire body is numb.

It's like the last six months never happened. All my progress, gone in an instant.

She left me, and we were never even together.

Time passes. My breathing is shallow, ragged, laboured. The yellow sunlight illuminating my room gradually bleeds red. Shadows pirouette across the surfaces in a slow dance, darkening with each twirl and tangle and step.

My phone buzzes. Then it buzzes again. And again.

I'd like to ignore it, but I have emotions now, and they're not quite as deadened as they used to be. Curiosity, panic, and a wild, insane hope all seize me by the throat, and I scrabble around my bedside drawer until I can pick up the call.

"Hello?" My voice trembles.

"Nichole, it's Tahani."

Relief courses through me. "Tahani, I'm so sorry."

"That's nice, I guess. Hey Nichole, what the fuck?"

I guess I'm not as cried out as I thought I was. "I didn't mean to hurt you all. You have to believe me."

"Hurt me?" Tahani asks, surprise in her voice. "Nichole. I realised my father doesn't love me when I was, like, seven. I've cauterised relationships everyone else takes for granted. I'm not hurt, Nichole. I'm pissed off that you're a fucking shithead, and that I gave you the benefit of the doubt because Ru liked you."

I don't know what to say.

"Oh."

"She showed up here in her socks. She wasn't coherent," Tahani says, "so I hope you can clarify a few things for me."

"Okay."

"Great. One: did you seriously call my best friend, who grew up believing she'll go to hell for wanting to hold a girl's hand, a whore?"

"She called herself that a few times, not me," I say, frowning.

"Right. You just made her feel like one for kissing my girlfriend last night."

I wipe my cheek. "Sorry."

"In the interest of fairness, I'm sorry too," Tahani says. "As much as I'm glad she finally got to act on her long-standing crush, Kim and I both think she acted impulsively. Dykes are messy creatures, and Kim and I are a bit too polyamorous even for dykes. I did tell her to be ready to apologise to you."

"I see. Thanks." Something Tahani said sticks out to me. "What do you mean 'long-standing crush'?"

"You are aware, Nichole, that Kim and Ru have known each other for longer than you've known either of them?" Tahani asks.

"Right. The GSA and stuff." I do remember them talking about it. "That makes sense."

"Yeah, none of us were scheming to fuck you over, Nichole," Tahani says. "I encouraged you and Ru because, like, I knew she liked you, and I mistakenly thought you were alright. She used to talk about you even before you came out. Meanwhile, Kim put aside her own feelings and said nothing, even after Ru finally gave up on making her doomed marriage work. Even after watching you fuck up chance after chance with Ru. We agree last night wasn't her best decision, but she's only human."

"Wow." I stare at the elongated shadows carving up my ceiling. "So everything you said to me at the bar gets thrown out the window because Kim decided I took too long to make a move."

"No, I meant what I said. At the same time, if you don't fucking act on your interest in someone, you can't be shocked they're not forever committed to you. And I don't think it would justify calling anyone a transphobic fake dyke, or—what was it you said? 'Brickier' than you, is that right?"

"I thought we were friends, Tahani." My voice sounds so miserably nasal and wet. "I loved spending time with you—I learned so much from you."

"Nichole, I grew up with Ru and I'm dating Kim." Tahani sighs. "But I'm glad you liked me enough to put up with my girlfriend."

I hesitate. "I'm not—I didn't—"

"We notice these things, Nichole." Tahani sounds unhappy. "We've lost plenty of friends because of Kim's detransition. Kim's never given you a reason to think she's secretly some kind of snarling transphobe. Sometimes discomfort is just discomfort, and you should try and get over it."

"Sure," I say, "I'll learn to be every bit as comfortable with detransitioners as they are with me."

"Again, Kim's not a right-wing propagandist, Nichole," Tahani says, "but you know that. You didn't say that because it was an actual, sensible point. You said it because you don't want to admit you're being an asshole."

I deflate completely. "Yeah, whatever."

"That's about what I expected from you." I can hear the scowl in her voice. "We were all so fucking nice to you, Nichole. Even Bobbie. And you responded to this whole debacle by trying to set Rupali back as much as possible."

"I wasn't," I say, sniffling. "I was upset and I said things I didn't mean."

"But you said them. And you said them to punish her and make her feel like shit. Not because they were true."

It's clear Tahani won't even consider my side, and I'm going to have to capitulate if I want to smooth things over at all. I groan. "Yeah. I did."

"Excellent. Glad you now understand how badly you fucked up, and how easily it could have been avoided." Tahani sighs. "You try to have a nice life, Nichole. Away from all of us."

She hangs up. I toss the phone aside and cover my eyes with an arm.

Kyle

I'm trying my best not to be mad.

We say nothing for the whole walk home. The instant I unlock the door, Jeff shoulders it open and stomps inside, making me drop my keys. I stand at the threshold and take a few deep breaths before bending down to pick them up. I hear Jeff slam his door shut as I enter the flat.

Unbelievable.

If he's going to act this petulant, I'll let him. I go to my own room without pitching any fits or making unnecessary noise, and settle down at my desk. I've barely flipped open my differential equations textbook when

the sound of Jeff's stomping feet heralds his door-flinging entrance. I look up from my problem set with a sigh.

"Come in," I say, in as flat an affect as I can muster.

Jeff glares at me with shimmering eyes. "Seriously? You were just going to let me stew?"

I close the textbook. "I'm happy to have a conversation, babe, but I can't exactly do that when you're throwing a tantrum."

Jeff laughs, shaking his head. "Of course. Go ahead, treat me like an unruly child. After all, why would my boyfriend take my pain seriously?"

"For fuck's sake." I pinch the bridge of my nose. "Can you turn the theatrics down a notch so we can just talk? Like adults? Please?"

"Oh, because we're all so *theatrical* and *dramatic* and *flamboyant*, are we?" Jeff snorts. "Sorry for not standing stoically at attention and speaking in my most gravelly mumbles!"

"What the fuck are you talking about?" I ask, holding a hand to my head. "Are you going to keep speaking in riddles, or will you tell me what the problem is?"

"You're ashamed of being gay. Aren't you?" Jeff asks.

I lower my hand and blink slowly. "I admit that's not what I was expecting you to say."

Jeff folds his arms and starts pacing. "I understand you can't talk about me to your family. I get that. I accepted that as part of being with you. But that doesn't mean you have to treat me like a dirty secret, or avoid meeting my friends at the gay bar—"

"Dirty secret?" I rub my temples. "I hold hands with you and kiss you in public all the time, Jeff, and we literally just hung out with your friends an hour ago."

"Yeah, at a GSA event planning meeting," Jeff says, throwing his hands up. "Not exactly engaging with the culture, are you?"

I gawp at him. "How the fuck is accompanying my boyfriend to a queer org meeting about a drag-themed costume party 'not engaging with the culture'? Seriously, explain to me what I'm missing here. Because from my

perspective, I was talking to Dennis about what I was planning to wear to the drag ball, and you got so upset that we had to leave."

That makes him stop pacing, at least. He looks at me, quiet, sniffling.

"You really don't get it?" he asks, eventually. "You—you called drag 'clown makeup', Kyle."

I slap my forehead so hard I swear I can hear it echo. "Okay, babe, I want to give you the benefit of the doubt here, okay? So I'll clarify." I lean forward in my chair and speak slowly and clearly. "I asked Dennis if he could help me figure out what I'm doing, especially with the heavy makeup. I asked him that because, as I was explaining, I want to look good and I don't want to look like a clown. I said that because I know drag isn't 'clown makeup' and I don't want to embarrass you. I want to look good for you, babe."

Jeff has the courtesy to appear somewhat embarrassed. He drops his gaze, shifts his weight from foot to foot, and mutters something under his breath.

"What was that?"

"Nothing." Jeff sighs. "This isn't about the drag ball, Kyle."

I lean back in my chair, blinking rapidly. "You're fucking kidding me."

"You just—you can't—you should have talked to me about it first." Jeff sputters at me, barely making sense. "You didn't ask me, you went to Dennis as if we—you didn't even think about how we're supposed to look *together*, Kyle! You didn't consider what I'd want you to look like, and you still haven't scheduled an appointment to cut your hair, even though I keep reminding you—"

I smash my fist into my desk, hard enough to hurt, startling Jeff into silence.

"Shut up about my hair." I'm breathing heavily. Glaring. Clenching my teeth. "Stop telling me to cut my hair. Stop. Just shut up about my hair."

Jeff nods, eyes wide. "Okay."

He looks so scared of me.

I turn away from him and open the textbook. "Please leave."

"Huh?" Jeff's voice sounds small. "Why?"

"I'm going to GSA meetings with you," I say, voice trembling. "I'm—you're not wrong, okay? I don't want to be—I don't want to act like I'm

ashamed of you, but it's a lot for me and I'm trying my best, and it's hard sometimes. And I'm sorry I yelled."

"Baby." Jeff's tone is so much softer than I deserve. "It's okay."

"No, it isn't." I pick up my pen with a shaking hand. "It isn't, but I have this stupid fucking temper, and I don't like—don't talk about my hair, Jeff."

"Okay, baby, I won't."

"Please leave me alone." I don't want to cry, but I'm crying. "Please, Jeff, I want to be alone right now."

"Alright." Jeff sounds unsure. "I'll order takeout for us tonight, okay baby? We'll have a nice dinner."

I don't respond. I start writing. A little later, I hear his footsteps before he quietly closes the door.

CHAPTER 14
YOU WERE ALWAYS MINE

Katherine

I see Nichole pop up in the guild chat more often.

That's my first sign that something's wrong.

More evidence for my hypothesis isn't difficult to come by. Nichole doesn't leave the house as much as I expect her to, and her groceries end up in the rubbish, unused, after a week. She doesn't bother going to class on Tuesday or Thursday, and her nightly visits to the corner store have resumed. Most concerningly, while she does clear out the garbage bins and clean the common areas when it's her turn, her own room remains untended and resembles the state of disarray it used to be in before she made new friends.

I think something's happened between them and Nichole.

My hypothesis is confirmed when I return home early from an evening lab. A few hours ago, Nichole entered the bathroom with her shower basket, just as I put on my shoes to leave. However, I can hear the water still running when I enter, along with a sound I can't quite place. I quickly drop my backpack on my bed and go to investigate.

What I find is Nichole, curled up on the floor of the cubicle, sobbing with her arms around herself.

I turn off the shower and fetch her a towel. Nichole continues to cry wordlessly as I drape it over her bare, quivering body, and begin to pat her dry.

"Go away," Nichole says.

"No."

"You don't—you aren't—" Nichole gasps, like she's struggling to breathe. "I don't want you here."

"That's fine."

That makes Nichole lift her head up and stare at me, eyes still watering. But her sobs quiet.

"I stopped talking to you," Nichole says, bluntly and with no preamble. "For months."

I nod. "I know."

"Then why—?"

I shrug. "Do you think you're getting rid of me that easily?"

Nichole falls silent. I rub her shoulders with the towel. When I move on to her sides, she starts laughing—raspy and sputtering at first, but increasingly clear and high and giddy. I grin slyly and laugh with her until she stops.

"Come on," I say, "you need to get up to dry off."

"Alright."

Together, we get her dressed and sitting on her bed, hair still wrapped up in the towel to dry. She watches me as I pick discarded spicy crisp packets and chocolate milk bottles off her floor, placing them into a fresh bin bag.

"Do you want me to hoover in here?" I ask when I'm done picking up the rubbish.

"No."

I'm not deterred. "Are you going to do it?"

Nichole rubs the back of her neck, not meeting my gaze. "Yes, I will. You can go now."

So I get the hoover and bring it to her room. I plug it into her free outlet and begin cleaning.

"Kathy!" Nichole shouts over the din of the vacuum. "Just leave it here—stop, I can do it myself."

I turn it off. "Do you want to do it right now?"

"Not really."

"Let me, then." I turn the hoover back on.

Nichole keeps watching me, crossed-legged, clutching her own ankles tightly. When I'm done, she whispers a barely audible "Thank you."

"I'm going to order a pizza," I say, wrapping up the power cord. "Do you want to split it with me?"

"Yeah." Nichole hesitates. "Bring it in here. And your laptop."

I smile. "Why my laptop?"

Nichole takes a deep breath. "We can watch *Kaguya* together."

My smile grows bigger. I pack the power cord into the hoover's slot and start wheeling it out the door. "I'd like that."

I order us a large mushroom pizza, because Nichole likes mushrooms and I can pick them off my slices. The movie's already downloaded into my media hard drive. I change into my *Gundam* print pyjamas featuring the lesbian protagonists of *The Witch From Mercury*. When I bring the pizza and laptop to Nichole's room, she's already organised her cushions into a more comfortable seating arrangement. She throws a blanket over us and we wrap ourselves around each other, arm under waist, legs entwined, as we watch the movie.

Like we've been doing since we were barely teens.

Time turns back, and also stops. It's as if we're ensconced in our own little pocket dimension, our own parallel world, starting the moment I invited myself to a slumber party in Nichole's childhood bedroom.

It's as if the past few months were a bad dream, and now we've awoken.

The next day, Nichole appears nervous when she asks me to spend the evening with her again. She isn't nervous on the days following that, and she quickly stops asking because it becomes routine. We eat together, clean together, text each other when we're apart in class. Mostly about the things we watch, but also about other things. How she looks in her new outfit. Whether she should put on heavier makeup. I tell her she's pretty just as she is.

CHAPTER 14

On the weekend, Nichole surprises me with a bottle of dark rum and a litre of diet cola. She asks if I'd like to drink with her.

"Sure," I say with a shrug. "It's about time, I guess."

"I assumed this would be your first time if you joined me," Nichole says, pouring the alcohol into clear tall glasses. "I'm going to give you a little less rum and limit you to two drinks, maybe three if you don't feel much. You've got to take small sips and pace them out, okay? No chugging the drink like you normally do."

I accept the glass and the instructions with a nod. "Got it."

"And don't forget to eat." Nichole points at the large pizza box on her desk. "I got us a plain cheese."

"Thank you, Nichole."

"What are we watching today?" she asks, settling into our pillow and blanket fort. "Aren't we going to run out of lesbian anime to watch?"

I scoff. "Nichole, we have only begun to scratch the surface."

We commence the first season of *Revolutionary Girl Utena*. Nichole taps my wrist halfway through the first episode, as I'm apparently finishing the first glass too quickly for her liking. She doesn't pour me my second drink until the third episode, even though she's finished three herself.

"You have placed too many restrictions on my alcohol intake," I say unhappily, pouting at Nichole. "This concoction may as well be the plainest of waters, for all the potency its staggered application can muster."

Nichole cocks an eyebrow. "You sure about that, babe? Because you're being more grandiloquent than usual."

"Pah. I am always a veritable font of circumcision." I hiccup and frown. "No, circumstance. Circumference. Circumlocution!"

"There you go." Nichole pats me on the back and downs her fourth drink. "You got there in the end."

I peer into my glass, pressing my eye socket into the rim to judge the remaining depth. "Yes, exactly, I am always this circumnavigational. You simply must mix me another, or I fear I may end this night sober as a mule."

"That isn't the saying."

"Why can you have a fifth one when I must haggle for scraps?" I ask.

"Scraps?" Nichole sounds amused.

I wave my hand dismissively. "Crumbs. Slivers. Mere, paltry drops of ale."

"I've never had ale." Nichole takes my now-empty glass and carefully measures a smattering of liquor. "Mead. I've always wanted to try mead."

"Fermented honey. Yes, I quite agree." I gaze off into the distance as I accept my glass back with both hands. "I do not understand why it is not a more popular beverage at most establishments. The very notion sounds mouthwatering."

Nichole is smirking at me. "You also stop using contractions when you're tipsy."

"Tipsy?" I snort loudly. "If you would be so generous to a poor waif, my fair lady, I may yet kiss the tips of tipsy's toes ere the end of this eternous hour."

"Did you slur your words there, or were you trying to say 'eternal'?" Nichole asks, giggling.

I giggle back. "You have divined my intent true."

Nichole shakes her head and gulps down another mouthful. "I can't believe you can be this cute."

That almost makes me drop my glass. I, too, swallow a copious mouthful as I grace Nichole with a sidelong glance. "Cute?"

"Oh, that shuts you up?" Nichole's smirk grows bigger.

"N-no." I struggle to think of something else to say. I fail.

Nichole puts her glass down on her bedside table. "You called me your fair lady."

I stammer. "D-did I?"

"Yeah. And you said you were a poor waif." Nichole turns her body to face me, propping her elbow up on the wall and resting her head against her hand. "Do I make you feel like a poor little waif?"

"Y—I mean, no!" The panic tinging my voice renders my statement unconvincing. "'Twas merely an expression."

"You've gotta tone it down a notch before I stop being able to understand you." Nichole laughs. "This isn't some kind of devious scheme, Kathy. I'm not you."

My face grows hot. I hide it behind my glass. "Sorry."

"I don't really care anymore." Nichole squints at me. "Did you mean what you said?"

My eyes dart about the room, avoiding Nichole's piercing gaze. "Maybe. Kind of. Yeah."

"We can be a lady and a waif," Nichole says. "For, like, a night. It's fine."

My heart begins to race. "For a night?"

"Yeah. It's allowed." Nichole's looking away now, too. "What was that little speech you gave me? It doesn't have to be a gay thing. Or a trans thing."

"Right," I say, my breaths coming quick and shallow.

"You seem to think I'm pretty, though." Nichole's nose twitches in an incredibly cute way. "Whenever I ask you, you say that I'm pretty."

"I do think you're pretty." I take another sip. "You're pretty. You're very pretty."

"You're not so bad yourself, waif." Nichole glances down at my chest in a way that makes my pulse pound in my ears.

With *intent*.

"We can be attracted to only women and also be attracted to each other," I say. "After all, we look like women."

"We sure do." Nichole's expression grows sharper. Hungrier. Her teeth more bared.

I put my drink down as well, unfinished. I find I do not need it to be intoxicated. Nichole's cruel sneer, her soft curves, her luscious locks and her plump, inviting lips are all narcotic in their own right. I'm shaking from the intensity of my cravings.

Nichole shuts the laptop with a snap. "Let's put this on the floor, yeah? Don't want to knock it off or anything."

"It is durable." I pick it up and toss it aside.

Nichole puts a hand to her mouth to suppress her cackling. "Fuck, babe, you're going to regret that in the morning."

"No. I won't." I make my voice clear and firm. "I will not—I won't regret anything. Trust me."

Still snickering, Nichole leans back, sidling up the bed. "Come and get me then, waif."

"Yes, my lady."

Crawling on all fours. Like a starved animal dragging itself to a fresh carcass, like a parched wanderer stumbling across an oasis, I climb up to Nichole and let her trap me in the vice of her thighs. Touching Nichole, settling into her embrace—these are sensations I've grown accustomed to, but tonight they feel different, novel, electric. I can practically see the static arcing between our legs, our arms, our chests—no, our *breasts* pressing together in a union of quivering anticipation. Flesh meets flesh, breath pours into breath, and lust fuels lust.

Nichole bites my lower lip, and my neck, and the soft skin under my ear, and I squeak and groan and exult into hers. She does not kiss—she devours, eager to taste me, to fit me into her gaping mandibles, to salivate over all I offer on her altar. Her fingers thread through my hair, tightening into a knot, and I yelp as she tugs.

"Okay." Nichole stops nibbling my jaw, making me whine. "Was that—"

"Good." I'm panting. "It was good. Keep going."

"Oh, great. Yeah." Nichole bares her fangs once more and resumes her wicked work.

Quicker now. Her eager fingers tug at my clothes, hastening to strip me, to lay me bare before her. They dig deep into my hips, my back, my rear, grasping firm enough to leave welts. My body is hers to enjoy, an offering I prostrate before her, and I yelp and squeal and moan as she explores every inch of me, rough and unrelenting.

I'm so wet.

Through her clothes, she is too.

Nichole pauses for a moment, adjusting her position. She urges me to place one of my legs over hers. I do so, and gasp at the result. Our most intimate parts are brought into closer contact, each pulsing and throbbing and twitching, almost in sync. Every movement is a trigger for an ensuing gush. Every sensation is mirrored, every pleasure is matched and amplified. My body pleads, and hers echoes.

My lady wraps her legs around me and I crest and fall and undulate, slithering like prey. I'm drooling, leaking, soaked, helpless before her. Her every touch intensifies my death throes, and I know that every gasp of life

may be my last. I only live and breathe and writhe in her cruel grasp because she allows it, requires it, commands it.

"Fuck." Nichole moans against me, lips hot on my breast. "Fuck."

Then her grip on me tightens further, and my body reacts on its own.

"Take it off," Nichole says, her voice urgent. "Take my shorts—take it off. I want to—I need to feel you against me."

I do as I am told, and I barely survive the attempt.

The softness and hardness of her penis, all at once, trembling and throbbing, but also flowing and pumping and pulsing fluid—it's overwhelming. If my pleasure was a trickle before, it now grows into a stream, then a raging river that becomes a crashing waterfall. I'm so fucking close. Nichole rubs herself against me, faster and faster, her cries growing louder than mine. The tide is unstoppable, and try as I might, I cannot hold back the sea itself—

"That's it." Nichole's voice is breathy. "Make a mess. Make a big mess with me."

I sound like a dying animal. Like I'm wailing as I drown. Like I'm losing my mind.

"More." Nichole keeps whispering. "More. Give me more."

I give her more.

I give her everything she demands.

"The more you cum, the better it feels." Nichole giggles. "It feels so—FUCK!"

I concur. "FUCK!"

And so we drown in each other, for what seems like an eternity. A lifetime.

Together at last, and for ever after.

Nichole

Waking up alone feels odd. Did I dream of a sleepover with Kathy?

It takes me a second to remember why my clit's so sore. I lie completely still, blinking rapidly, letting the memories of my flatmate and childhood best friend flailing on top of me like a gutted fish flood back into my poor,

aching cranium. Surprising how fun it was and how good it felt relative to how goofy it looked.

Does this mean I'm not a virgin anymore? Probably still am. What we did doesn't really count as sex, does it?

At least it didn't feel like having sex with a guy. Not that I know what that feels like, but Kathy was soft to touch, eager to please, obedient, and pretty to look at. I probably didn't need to drink as much as I did to get into it.

Wonder if Kathy needs to question her gender identity more than she has. Maybe Bobbie—ugh, why did I have to remember one of *them*—has a point about RCBG being a tranny torture chamber? Kathy could well be a girl caught up in the easy rationalisations Laura provides, unable to conceptualise herself as more than "a man transfeminised under patriarchy" or whatever. She certainly does take things at face value too much. I can't believe she still thinks *I'm* a guy.

Plus, that'd make what I did last night retroactively lesbian, which would be nice.

Though I don't know. Feels a bit off to call two trans women together "lesbian". Since I've let myself think of *them* first thing in the morning anyway, I suppose I'll note that Tahani and Bobbie are definitely a lesbian couple, no doubt about it. And they're two trans women—I guess Bobbie's non-binary or whatever, but still basically a trans woman. Tahani transitioned as a teenager, though. So that barely counts.

I rub my eyes profusely. Why can't this stuff be easy? If Ru wasn't so flighty, I'd be spending my Saturday night naked on all fours for a curvy butch tugging on my leash, instead of watching some incomprehensible anime older than I am in the hopes of getting my flatmate to rub her junk on mine.

Life just isn't fucking fair.

More memories from last night come back to me, and I let out a groan. I think Katherine said some stuff I rolled with in the moment, but it's making me cringe in the clarity of the too-sunny morning. Did I really let her call me "my lady"? And did she really moan something about wanting to cum

on me forever? I sincerely hope I'm misremembering, or making it up. Surely, no one would think to say that out loud.

This is too much. I sightlessly feel around for my phone on my bedside table and almost knock over two half-full glasses of rum and diet cola. Probably flat by now, but I'm still tempted to down them both. Won't get me close to a buzz or anything, but there's no point wasting the alcohol, right?

I get started on the first glass and open up the server. They're squabbling about weight cycling in the *nutrition-strats* channel again. I try not to peek in there too much—I don't need someone infecting me with their complexes about food. I decide to finally mute it before moving onto the actually interesting channels.

When I open up *general*, it's unusually active. It seems like someone's having a heated argument with a mod.

Knight of Knockers

Okay I'm just going to fucking say it. I can't believe you're still a fucking mod, and I can't believe you haven't been voted off for fostering such a bigoted environment in this server.

Bench Press Meta 2025

Lol cry more Laura simp

Knight of Knockers

See, that's literally what I'm talking about. You're such a fucking misogynist, and you've permitted an environment of festering misogyny to spring up under your oversight. Not to mention the stuff you say about trans women.

Bench Press Meta 2025

Aw, does someone's feelings get hurt when I point out, accurately, how much the trannies have fucked over the movement for LGB rights? Does someone get mad when she's told that she could have just been a fucking queer like the rest of us instead of demanding that governments and institutions and organisations all indulge her delusions about changing sex?

Knight of Knockers

If you're going to tribunal me, then tribunal me already. I'm past caring. But someone needs to call you on your hateful bullshit.

BigTittyFemboy

It's trannies who started the hateful shit, not us. And they started by watering down the word "hateful" to mean anything they don't like. Parents who were worried about their little girls competing with boys who can break their bones got called "transphobic" and other made-up terms because trannies couldn't face how crazy they sound to normal people, and now here we fucking are.

Bench Press Meta 2025

Gay activists appealed to straight people and met them halfway in order to have their rights recognised, and trans rights activists undid all that hard work in under five years. To the point that gay marriage is back on the chopping block. Force-teaming into the "LGBT" movement made all queers so radioactive that rational people aren't willing to defend us from crazy conservatives anymore, out of fear of being called bigoted if they don't fully toe the party line.

BigTittyFemboy

Yeah, enjoy the world you got us with your hysterical fucking theatrics.

Knight of Knockers

You're a rabid transphobe and you're only still a mod because you intimidate anyone who speaks out against you with tribunal threats.

Bench Press Meta 2025

Sure, everyone secretly agrees with you and not me. Keep telling yourself that, tranny-lover :)

Knight of Knockers

I'm logging out for the day. Piss off.

BigTittyFemboy

Lmao

Katherine, the Majestic

While I don't personally have any investment in this quarrel, I can't help but observe that @**Bench Press Meta 2025** relies on various talking points that are ahistorical at best and, less charitably, outright counterfactual when assessed in the documented context of the fight for queer liberation in the West. Not only is the distinction between "gay" and "trans" people a more recent construction than many think, "deviance" in sexuality and "deviance" in gender have always been interlinked and treated as the same kind of "malady" by a patriarchal, heterosexualist society. That's giving the maximum benefit of the doubt and ignoring how much of what he says is sourced directly from right-wing talking points.

Bench Press Meta 2025

Oh joy, Tranny Sephiroth is awake

BigTittyFemboy

Girl worry about whether your NTBV will literally fall in the next quarter's rankings and let the big boys talk politics.

Fuck me, why did Kathy have to get involved?

I sympathise with Knight of Knockers—and I really wish I knew her actual name—because the shit these lunatics say in the server makes my skin crawl. At the same time, there's literally no point in arguing with them. RCBG will not become a nicer, more welcoming place if the few trans women stuck here dedicate our time and sanity to yelling at sexist trolls all day. We'll just be identified and winnowed out that much more quickly.

Not that that would stop Kathy. If someone pokes at one of her bugbears,

she'll abandon all sense and reason to correct them, consequences be damned. While I can't deny that a part of me is weirdly touched by this display, it's counterproductive.

I'm about to close the channel and move onto posting my daily selfie—I managed to look cute in my PJs, finally—when the last person I expect to join the conversation sends a message I would never expect her to send.

Laura

Oh good, you're online. Hey @**Katherine, the Majestic**, respond to my DM request, tell me where you fucking live, and wait patiently by the door so that I can COME OVER AND FUCKING KILL YOU.

Katherine, the Majestic

@**Laura** Pardon me????

Laura

Oh, I'm all out of pardons, but I'm always sporting. I have two rapiers here. You can have one of them to try and defend yourself before I gore you where you stand, you *miserable, home-wrecking ingrate*.

Bench Press Meta 2025

My god the two most insufferable people on this server are fighting. Everyone grab your popcorn emotes.

Katherine, the Majestic

Oh no, what did Emmy do?

Laura

DO NOT INSULT ME BY PLAYING DUMB. Half of the break-up text was about you, and the whole thing just *reeked* of your over-the-top word-vomit.

Katherine, the Majestic

Emmy and I are both verbose, I really had nothing to do with the text! I didn't even know she was actually going to follow through on breaking up with you!

Laura

Care to explain what you mean by "follow through"? And don't you fucking dare edit that message.

Katherine, the Majestic

I wasn't going to...

I barely understand what's happening here. Why is Laura so mad at Katherine? She got dumped, I gather, but what could Katherine possibly have to do with that? Laura's rationale and view of the world is opaque and arbitrary at the best of times. Maybe Laura needs a punching bag, and Kathy makes a convenient one because she used to hang out with Emmy or whatever.

Laura

I'm waiting!

Katherine, the Majestic

Look, I'd be happy to hash this out in a more convenient medium instead of airing all our laundry in a public channel. If I accept your DM request as a show of good faith, can we be civil?

Laura

Oh, NOW you want to be civil? After you talked to me like I'm a living waifu pillow? Emmy excused your heinous fucking behaviour and acted like I was the one in the wrong, and NOW you want to be civil? You're lucky I can't do tribunals anymore or I'd mulch you into fucking paste.

Katherine, the Majestic

I'd love to apologise for my misdeeds, but I promise you that I did not influence Emmy in any way.

Laura

BULLSHIT. You were so obsessed with her that you started playing with her fucking Magic group.

Katherine, the Majestic

Did Emmy happen to tell you why I stopped? Why I haven't seen her in weeks?

Katherine, the Majestic

Cool, thanks for taking a breath. And while you chew on that, I'll also assure you that I'm not interested in Emmy in the slightest. In fact, I'm with someone else.

Laura

Lol, yeah right.

Katherine, the Majestic

@**Nickname**, my lady, would you please tell Laura about us and let her know just how devoted I am to you?

Laura

...did you seriously call her "my lady"?

Katherine, the Majestic

Yes, for roleplay reasons only. Not because she is a woman. Because she is not.

I reflexively smack my forehead so hard it hurts. Now why am I involved?

Not replying is an option. Though if I don't reply, Katherine's going to march over to my room and verbally ask me to do it, which means I can't sit here with my thumb up my ass.

But what she's asking for is bonkers. She wants me to tell Laura how "devoted" she is? And did we actually agree we were together in any way last night? I don't remember saying anything like that, but even if I did, I was five drinks in and shouldn't be bound by the stuff I said while drunk and horny.

Nickname

@Katherine, the Majestic I literally have no clue what you're talking about???

Laura

Well, that didn't take a fucking minute.

Katherine, the Majestic

@Nickname Babe, what? Why would you say that?

Bench Press Meta 2025

Holy fuck this is more entertaining than *Fruit Love Island* and I fucking love *Fruit Love Island*.

BigTittyFemboy

LMFAOOOOOO GET WREKT

Only in This For the Money

Okay that literally got exposed too fast for me to set up a betting pool. I guess we're sticking with whether Laura's actually going to kill Tranny Sephiroth.

Knight of Knockers

I'm still logged off but I do want to say that **@Nickname** would never settle for anything less than someone on her level <3 ;)

Well, that's great. Now I feel like a monster.

I don't have time to say or do anything else before there's a loud, urgent knock at my door. I consider not replying to that too.

"Come in," I say, against my will.

Katherine opens my door, holding her phone in one hand. She's uncharacteristically silent as she stands at the threshold, staring at me. I slowly sit up, wincing. Kathy makes no move to enter or say anything. The wordless question in her glistening eyes is clear enough.

"Hey babe," I say, my voice low. "Look, you sort of put me on the spot there."

"Put you on the spot?" Kathy asks, like she doesn't know what it means.

I present a question of my own. "I mean, did we talk about our relationship or anything like that last night?"

"Well, we—I guess—I suppose not." Katherine drops her gaze.

"It's like you said." I gesture towards my phone. "A public channel is a bad place to have these sensitive conversations. We still haven't had the like, important conversations, right? You know?"

"I thought—didn't you—" Kathy sounds like she's struggling to phrase herself. "Wasn't last night good? For you?"

This is frustrating. I thought I was clear it was a casual sex thing, and I wasn't expecting Kathy to be so intense and clingy. She'll only get more attached if I encourage her, too.

But what choice do I have? Be honest that I don't reciprocate her feelings and go back to being completely alone?

"Of course it was, babe." I stand up and approach her, keeping my tone soft and soothing. "I'm not saying it wasn't. That's not what I meant at all. What I meant was that we should discuss our relationship, you know? Do it right. Don't rush in. We've been friends for so long, and I don't want to screw it up, Kathy. I want to do it properly."

"Okay?" She sounds unsure.

"We slept together for the first time," I say, "and it was wonderful and amazing and everything I wanted it to be. But we did it before we even went on a single date. Don't you want to go out with me, Kathy?"

Kathy looks up at me, her expression pained. "I mean, I do. Of course I do, Nichole. I love—"

I interrupt her before she can get all the words out. "Me too, honey, and I'm overjoyed that you feel the same way. Why don't we grab dinner somewhere downtown tonight? I know this awesome ramen place."

Katherine is silent. I bite my lip, nervous, waiting for her to say something. Eventually, she nods.

"Perfect." I grab her by the shoulders and pull her into a hug. "I'm sorry for being slightly skittish, darling. But I know we're going to make this work."

"Yeah." Kathy puts her arms around me too. "We will. We have to."

"Mm-hmm." I nod enthusiastically, rubbing her back, and wonder exactly what I've talked myself into.

CHAPTER 15
BETROTHAL

Jeff

Things have been a bit strained ever since Kyle and I had a fight, but I've been working hard on the solution.

It's been an ordeal finding the various pieces I need. The top had to show off my midriff and match my other clothes, so I had to settle for a sleeveless one instead of short-sleeved like I wanted. At least I get to show off my arms, I suppose. I also found a long red skirt with gold patterns, but it's pleated, and the patterns include what I think is Chinese lettering, so it's not quite the right culture. The colours are what's important, though, and it looks great with the top.

A long, red scarf—I couldn't find good patterns—halfway to a shawl completes the set. I try a few different configurations in the mirror, hoping one of them will "click". Draping the scarf over both arms and letting it fall down my shoulders seems to give the best look. A bright red lip with gold eyeshadow brings everything together almost perfectly, too.

All of this trouble is downright easy compared to the odyssey that assembling Kyle's outfit has been. Even carefully laid out on my bed, it's a marvel, a thing of true beauty. A suit of soft creams and whites cobbled to-

gether from old clothes my friends don't wear anymore, lightly tailored to Kyle's dimensions. The jacket even has a ruffle pattern that resembles a skirt, instead of coattails, with a lovely little bow on the back. A soft pink frilly ascot adds a lovely finishing touch to the ensemble that I really think he's going to love.

The crowning glory, however, is something I crafted by hand, between all the preparations for the event.

In South Asian weddings, the grooms wear a kind of see-through "veil" called a *sehra*. It's a headdress with garlands of flowers attached to the front, which are supposed to fall in front of the wearer's face. I was able to fashion together a competent one, its garlands adorned with paper flowers I folded and coloured myself.

Extra? Absolutely. But I want Kyle to understand how much I care, to actually see and touch it with his hands. I understand now that I overreacted to him exploring his more feminine side, because I never saw him as that kind of guy, and it was ridiculous of me. There's nothing wrong with him having a bit of a soft edge, and I know the two of us are certainly going to look fabulous together. An elegant, bombastic, ostentatious and most definitely flamboyant couple.

With that satisfying thought, I turn my attention back to the cute girl I see in the mirror, wondering whether she needs gold hoop earrings. She should probably have a name, even if she's just a persona for a party. I've always liked "Desdemona", ever since I read *Othello* in high school. I really wanted to be cast as her in the play we put on.

I take a quick selfie and put it in the officers' Slack channel. "*Hey gays, my boyfriend helped me put together this culturally-inspired outfit, and it feels done, but maybe some big gold earrings would really sell it? Thoughts?*"

There's a few instant thumbs-up and heart-eyes reactions, and Quinn leaves a comment under the pic. "*Oh honey, that's breathtaking! The kitschy contrast between the hypermasculine and the hyperfeminine that you've managed to capture is making my queer heart a-flutter. You inspired me to bust out the fake beard for my get-up.*"

I make myself swallow the sudden lump in my throat.

Quinn is very astute. My eyes have started to water, probably from all the kitschy make-up. I dab at them with a handkerchief so I don't spoil the tastefully overdone face paint I slathered on. Would make the contrast less obvious then.

Another notification. I check it, see that it's Alex asking me if the live band has confirmed yet and whether anyone's kept track of how many tickets we've sold.

I close the app. I guess I'll take off this costume then. No need to risk spilling something on it. I'm about to reach for the micellar water when a sudden knock at my door makes me start.

"Hey, babe. Is whatever you want to show me ready?"

Kyle.

Kyle's here. For me.

Blinking through my tears, I watch the most dashing man in the world stride into my room, as if he just knows when I need him. I rush into him, smiling so wide it splits my face, and press my lips into his without a wasted word. I kiss him passionately, deeply, like a drowning woman kisses her first taste of air, lapping up his calming, nourishing, stalwart presence. I am safe, I am complete, melting into his strong chest and sagging in his arms, where I belong.

"Wow, okay," he says, gasping, when I let him breathe. "That was, wow. You okay, babe?"

"Yeah," I say shakily. "I'm fine. I'm alright now. I'm right where I'm meant to be."

Kyle laughs, and his eyes are so warm and comforting. "My arms, right." He kisses my forehead. "You look good, by the way."

"I do, don't I?" My tone is urgent, pleading.

"You're a vision." His eyes flick upwards and his expression changes. "Is that a bindi?"

"Hm? Oh, yes!" I was so focused on the earrings that I forgot I put it on. "I think it'll help people put together what we're going for."

Kyle looks puzzled. "What are we going for, exactly?"

I take his hand and lead him to the foot of the bed, chattering excitedly.

"Okay, so, I know it's not accurate, but it's supposed to be, like, an homage, or a heavy inspiration, which is why I was so careful about the colours. I thought about what you said and I realised that yeah, I was being weird, and it's not your fault, but I just had this idea in my head of how we'd look together as a couple, right? But you're totally right, the event is literally called *Drag Ball*, and it's not exactly camp if you turn up in a tux or something. Plenty of things are camp, though, and Bollywood is one of the most camp things ever, right?"

"Okay?" Kyle says, voice unsure.

"Right, exactly." I take a deep breath and keep going. "I'm sure lots of people won't like, *get it* get it, but we will, and that's who we're really doing it for. I'll show you how to put on some light make-up, and I'll make whatever adjustments I need to after you try it on, and we'll look like a beautiful matching set at the party. Like yin and yang."

"Is that why there's a Chinese dragon round the bottom of your skirt?" Kyle asks.

I glance down. "Yeah, that might throw people off, but hopefully there's enough other context clues."

"Very well might be." Kyle stares at the suit. "So, shot in the dark, but I'm guessing these outfits are Bollywood wedding inspired."

"Yeah!" I clap my hands together. "Aren't they darling? We're going to be gorge, babe."

Kyle takes a deep breath. "Sure. Hey, sweetie, I don't want to sound ungrateful or anything, but I gotta ask: did you, at any point, consider that I might have a little bit of baggage around weddings?"

My face falls.

"Oh."

"A bit. I mean, I pretend to be someone who's getting happily married pretty often." Kyle sighs. "I guess we're in luck. I can wear the engagement ring I have to make sure to put on every time I video call my mum. Do you want me to call my fiancée and ask if you can borrow hers?"

"Okay, I get it." I hang my head. "You don't have to be so catty about it."

"Catty? Me?" Kyle's tone of astonishment is almost convincing. "Why,

how could I ever sound catty, beloved? I'm your—how did you put it? Stoic gravelly mumbling hunk, was it?"

I cock my head to the side. "What exactly are you getting at?"

"I'm not getting at anything." Kyle runs a hand through his hair, shaking his head. "It's just strange sometimes, you know. You keep talking about my big, strong arms. How tall I am. It's all very interesting."

"I'm not supposed to talk about what I find attractive in my partner?" I ask.

"You can," Kyle says, "but it sure feels interesting to listen to you go on about my broad, muscular chest when your head is nestled between my tits."

I rub the back of my neck. "I figured it was best not to focus on them."

"Probably." Kyle shrugs. "But I don't know, babe. When I started dating you, I was so relieved. I thought to myself, hey, dating another guy will be so freeing. I'm not going to have to act a certain way, I'm not going to have to be 'the guy' in that way, because we're both guys. So this has been such an interesting experience."

"What are you saying?" I arch an eyebrow. "We are—obviously, we're both guys. I'm just a bit more fem, is all. Every couple has the fem one and the—every couple has someone who's a bit more fem."

"No, no, say what you were originally going to say." Kyle folds his arms. "So you're the fem one, which means I have to be the masc one?"

"The term is 'butch', actually." I roll my eyes. "But sure, keep lecturing me when you don't even know the basics."

"The basics of what? Being a bloody accessory to you?" Kyle asks.

"That's so fucking unfair," I say. "I've never once called you that."

"You treat me like that all the time," Kyle says. "You get upset at me for talking to Dennis about dresses, you say you want me to consult you, and then you bring me this without talking to me once. Didn't even give me a chance to remind you that I'm fucking Christian, babe."

My eyes grow wide momentarily, but I quickly recover. " I knew that—of course I know that, babe. But I also know that Bollywood is popular all over South Asia, that's all."

"Of course, you're so inclusive," Kyle says, voice dripping with sarcasm. "That's why you want to dress me up as Bhangra Liberace."

"Um—"

Kyle rolls his eyes and tuts. "You weren't supposed to understand that, don't worry."

"Okay, you know what, I'm sorry!" I throw my hands up, blinking back tears. "I'm sorry I tried to show you I care. I'm sorry I tried to show an interest in your culture. I should've known I'm a dumb white girl who was always going to fuck it up, and I'll never be good enough to get it right, and I'm a crazy unreasonable bitch because I like having a tall boyfriend. We should just put on frilly pink Disney dresses and elbow-length gloves and prance about holding hands and tittering."

Kyle closes his eyes and sets his jaw. "And what, exactly, would be wrong with us doing that?"

"Nothing at all!" I cackle, feeling hysterical. "Tell you what, why don't we go all the way and put on anime schoolgirl costumes, like our lovely flatmates? We can both be garish caricatures of femininity together and kiss each other and tell each other we're real girls with our massive fucking boners. That's what you want, isn't it?"

Kyle stares at me silently for a very long time. His face is blank, his eyes empty. I put my hands behind my back and rock back on my heels, ashamed. Shouldn't have raised my voice. Shouldn't have said—shouldn't have said any of it.

Finally, he speaks. "Can you help me put it in my closet?"

"Oh?" I look up at him, biting my lip. "So you'll—"

"I have a few days to make my peace with it, so sure," Kyle says. "It'd be a real slap in the face if I didn't wear it to the Drag Ball, after all. Real ungrateful. Would make me a real shitty boyfriend."

I worry my hands together and drop my gaze. "It's okay if you don't like it."

"I absolutely hate it, but I'll wear it for you on Friday." Kyle sighs. "And not for a second longer than I have to."

Katherine

As soon as my drink's ready, I pick it up and walk to the outside seating area of *Dorothy's*. It's mostly empty due to the cold weather, and I can settle down at one of the larger tables, sipping my hot chocolate. I pull out my phone to pass the time.

A part of me feels like I owe Emmy some sort of apology. "Not interested" is a complete sentence, but I certainly disregarded my "I don't date men" stance as soon as a sufficiently hot one came along, didn't I? To the point that I'm willing to put up with a lot of things I'm certain I wouldn't have tolerated if it was Emmy.

Not that Emmy would ever string me along like this. She strikes me as more of a chivalrous sort.

Nichole, meanwhile, is shockingly noncommittal about our relationship. She's happy enough to acknowledge we're dating, as long as it's in private. (Though she hates saying we're "boyfriends", which admittedly suits me fine. Bad enough there's one man in the relationship.) I remember reading about straight trans girls whose boyfriends are too ashamed to claim them publicly, and I remember rolling my eyes and wondering why they'd expect any better from men. Now that I'm in the same position, I fear I'm much more understanding.

Love will make you tolerate a lot.

Like saying nothing while your partner dresses in increasingly slutty outfits for the class she shares with her sort-of ex. I get that Nichole's trying to "win the breakup", as she says, but surely stalking her ex's friends on social media is counterproductive to that goal. Frankly, I think Rupali did them both a favour—being a lesbian enamoured with a man isn't fun in the slightest. Nichole and I only have a shot because of how close we are, how much history we have.

Her newest selfie pops up on my timeline as I scroll. Nichole has kept quiet about being on HRT all this while—wisely, in my estimation—but

that changed when she decided she needed to post her "thirst traps" publicly. Where Rupali can see them, I guess. To that end, I've been recruited into the role of the girlfriend that Nichole talks about incessantly but rarely posts pictures with. I have to be dressed very particularly, with plenty of input from her, in order to qualify for her camera roll.

I tried to discourage Nichole from pretending to be a trans girl so openly, to no avail. She apparently thinks having awkward conversations with her family and acquaintances is worth rubbing in Rupali's face what she's missing out on. At least it made it slightly easier for me to come out to the same people, but now I'm stuck pretending I'm a man pretending to be a trans woman around Nichole, when I'm really just a trans woman.

It's less easy than it sounds.

Maybe it'll be better after the Drag Ball. Nichole agreed to cosplay the leading couple from *Gundam: The Witch From Mercury* with me, and I hope being seen with me in a couple's costume in front of so many people will finally get her used to the idea of our relationship. I'm not sure what I'll do if it doesn't work.

You're not supposed to give your partner ultimatums, I think. I've been told it's a sign the relationship is doomed, whether or not the ultimatum is met.

Why couldn't she have just been a woman too? I put the phone down and hold my head in my hands. It brings tears to my eyes to imagine a world where Nichole came out to me as a trans woman, and I came out right back. We would be two girls, holding hands in lesbian cosplay, happy and in love.

Instead, I have this. Trying to make it work with someone I've known all my life, who I now realise I've always had feelings for despite my sexuality, and who keeps acting out because of the stupid competition I couldn't prevent her from joining.

"Crying already? Damn, that might be a record for me."

I straighten up, sniffling and wiping my cheeks dry. "It's not because of anything to do with you, sorry."

Laura drops into the seat across me. "Shame."

She's in that halter top that looks amazing on her. I take another sip of

my drink and keep my gaze steady at eye level as she squares away the rapier slung across her back. Waiting for her to speak.

"Thanks for agreeing to this," Laura says.

"Of course." I eye the sheathed blade nervously. "You're not actually going to challenge me to a duel, are you?"

"Depends on how this conversation goes." Laura's face remains impressively serious, so I have to hope she's joking.

"Right. I'm sorry, by the way," I say, "for how I spoke to you in the past. It was inappropriate of me."

"So was the stalking," Laura says.

My gaze drops. "Ah, I did not realise you knew about that. Yes, I apologise for that as well. I hope you will believe me when I say I only did it once and stopped immediately after."

"Sure, that makes it better." Laura leans forward, on her elbows. "Apologies accepted, but I still want nothing to do with you after this."

I nod. "Understandable."

"So." Laura exhales sharply. "Emmy."

Another sip. "Right. I'm not sure what I can tell that you don't already know."

"Do you know what her problem's always been?" Laura asks, narrowing her eyes. "Emmy thinks she's so clever. She thinks she's the cleverest bitch there is. She trusts everything she's consciously aware of, because that's the rational thing to do. Emotions matter, sure, but as long as she's perfectly aware of her own, she can 'account' for them. Whatever that means."

I nod. "I observed much the same, yeah."

"And because she's so clever, she sees things nobody else can see, of course." Laura groans loudly. "See, she knows all about repression and self-denial and being unaware of your own identity. Pretty much everyone in RCBG is a trans girl in denial, according to her. Some of them know and are hiding it. Most are just too stupid to realise what they really are. Can't hide it from her, though. Emmy knows. That's why she never had much of an issue ejecting whoever we wanted to eject from the server. Everyone's secretly a tranny."

I raise my cup so I don't have to look Laura in the eye. "Well, sometimes she's correct."

"She's correct about a great many things, which is why she doesn't know how dumb she can be about others." Laura sits up straighter. "Did she seriously always insist she's a man, Katherine? Even with you? In private?"

I choose my words carefully. "Emmy believes I am a trans girl in denial as well—ludicrous!—and often said as much. However, I never got the impression her own assertions of manhood were duplicitous, or motivated by a desire to deceive me because of the competition. She seemed honest."

Laura arches an eyebrow. "'Honest', did you say?"

Something about her tone makes me feel as though I'm in great danger. "I mean, to the best of my ability as a fellow contestant who has seen many dishonest, scheming trans women ejected for exploiting the competition—"

"Oh for fuck's sake, can we please dispense with the bullshit?" Laura rests a hand on her forehead. "You were right, bitch. I'm a woman, you're a woman. Congratulations on clocking me."

That certainly catches me off-guard. I let out a high-pitched wheezing noise as I choke back the rest of my sentence.

"I'm fucking immune and you lack the ability to prove it, anyway." Laura shrugs. "And also the desire, apparently. You really tried to be all chummy with me about it, didn't you?"

"Yeah." I clear my throat. "Sorry about that too."

"It was stupid, but it doesn't matter." Laura frowns. "What matters is that you sprung it on me when I was high on painkillers and low on patience, and my girlfriend cared more about what a kicked puppy you are than what a freak you've been to me."

"Sorry," I say yet again. "Also, I'd say I'm more of a kicked 'kitten' than 'puppy'."

"Noted." Laura drums her fingers on the table. "You said something about knowing she would break up with me."

I raise both my hands, palms open. "I didn't know she'd do it, but she did say some stuff to me before I turned her down. Sorry about—"

"Get to the point."

"Right." I take a quick gulp of my now-tepid chocolate to lubricate my throat. "She expressed that she was unhappy with the relationship—not all of it! She did talk about all the things she enjoyed, in too much detail, even. But she was fatalistic and said it wasn't going to last, because…"

"Because?" Laura asks.

"Because you're convinced she isn't a man." I sigh. "Emmy was very sad about it. She said she really tried to be a girl for you, but she doesn't have dysphoria like you do. Not in those exact words, but that was the gist. And then she mentioned how much she enjoys the sex you have. Ahem. Sorry."

Laura closes her eyes and slowly massages both temples. "That's it?"

"Huh?"

"That's why she thinks she isn't—is that seriously it?" Laura opens her eyes. "Do you know how much she enjoys what she looks like now? Do you have any idea how she reacts when I call her my pretty little princess? How much she loves having fucking *tits*?"

I glance around the seating area, unsure why I keep learning more and more details about Emmy's sex life. "She didn't get that far into her descriptions of—"

"You are literally telling me that Emmy, my pretty princess, my Emmy," Laura says, "thinks she isn't a woman because she doesn't have bottom dysphoria. That's it. That's the whole fucking reason she's decided that, logically and rationally, she can't be a woman."

"She also seems to think she's taking advantage of you." I almost mumble that too quietly to hear. "Because you're a lesbian. She feels bad about staying with you, knowing that."

Laura closes her eyes again as her hands clench into fists. I lean back, cowering.

"Fucking idiot!" Laura's voice is nearly loud enough to knock me off my seat. "Oh my god, if she's a man, then I'm bisexual. I don't care about her stupid gender, I only care that she's obviously a repressed MORON and keeps hurting herself because of it."

"That makes sense." I go back to sitting normally. "I confess, you and Emmy always seemed to have a healthy relationship. An enviable one,

really. I'm actually dating a boy on oestrogen, and you two don't have any of the issues we're having."

Laura stares at me wordlessly for long enough to make me self-conscious. I clear my throat again just to fill the silence.

"You agreed with Emmy when she said she's a man, didn't you?" Laura asks.

"Well, yes?" I wince. "You say that like I shouldn't have, even if it would invalidate how she self-identifies—"

"Oh my shitting fuck, you monumental fucking twat-stain." Laura buries her face in both hands. "Do you not understand how fucking scary it is to admit you're a tranny? Even though you are one? And you certainly didn't respect *my* 'self-identity', did you?"

"Well, I mean," I say, "I had reason to believe that in your case, you were deceiving the competition for your own—"

"Exactly, jackass, because everyone fucking hates trans women, and we're all aware of how much they hate us." Laura slams both palms on the table, eyes wide and unblinking. "So extrapolate that, doofus. Think about how much we're judged, how badly everyone treats us, how we grow up knowing that the cultural idea of 'tranny' is deviant, freak, pervert. In, like, every culture. I know, I've fucking studied it."

I nod slowly, unsure how to calm Laura down. "That makes sense."

"So lots of us latch on to any little reason to deny what we are, because otherwise we're this thing we've been taught all our lives not to be," Laura says. "Emmy thinks she's worked on her bullshit because she loves and accepts me, obviously, so she can't possibly think these fucked up things about herself."

"Well, to be fair," I say, "not wanting sexual reassignment surgery *at all* is a pretty good indicator that—"

Laura's arm moves faster than I can register, and she slaps me with the force and sound of a thunderclap. I do fall out of my seat this time.

"So," Laura says as I climb back up, "you don't have to need or want SRS to be a woman. Have you had SRS, Kathy?"

"No," I say, rubbing my inflamed cheek and flinching.

"Are you a woman?" Laura asks.

"Yes." I groan in pain. "I do want SRS, though."

"Good for you," Laura says. "Does that mean that you shouldn't be called a woman until you get it? Even though you're plainly seen and treated as one?"

"I—I guess not." I reach for my now-cold drink. "Sorry."

"You'd think we'd moved past this shit." Laura takes a deep breath. "What the fuck did you say to my girlfriend when she was spiralling and vulnerable, Kathy?"

I don't dare look up from my cup. "Not the same thing I said to you, at least?"

"You know what, I'm not kidding. Draw your sword."

"No, wait, I don't have one!" I raise both my arms and make my profile smaller, hoping she'll miss anything vital.

"Emmy doesn't have any friends who are girls!" Laura glares daggers at me, which is better than swinging swords. "She has so many complexes about this stuff. She thinks her interests are too nerdy, and she's only ever had guy friends—she's really fucking insecure, Kathy. I thought you'd help her come out of her shell, but you're telling me you fed all the bullshit she thinks about herself?"

I'm beginning to realise I don't treat my fellow trans girls very well.

Maybe I thought at least one contestant in the competition had to be a guy, out of sheer probability. Or maybe I let my jealousy get the better of me. It certainly felt more satisfying to agree with Emmy's self-assessment of her gender than it should have. Like I deserved to take something away from her, because she took Laura from me.

As if I ever had a shot with Laura.

I lower my arms with a sigh. "Okay. Yes. When you lay it all out, I've not been the best friend to Emmy, and I clearly have things I need to work on."

"You know, I figured you'd be alright for Emmy to hang with, because you used the femme strats excuse to publicly call yourself a trans girl." Laura shakes her head. "I forgot the server isn't the source of all the nonsense we think."

My whole body sags. "Obviously not."

Laura stands up. "Great. Thank you very much, Katherine. At least I

know about all the damage you did to my girlfriend, even if I don't know how to fix it."

"Yes, you do," I say softly.

"What was that?" Laura asks, eyes flashing.

I take a deep breath. "You are very correct about me, Laura. In more ways than you realise. But you have a blind spot too."

"Oh, this ought to be good." Laura places her hands on her hips. "Hit me, then."

I look up at her. "Have you ever told Emmy what you just told me? Have you ever said to her, in plain, simple terms, that she's right and you are, in fact, a woman?"

Laura's silence is all the answer I need.

I lower my gaze to the table, hugging myself and rocking back and forth. "I don't know as much as you, but I do know that—that a relationship where you can't be honest with each other, for any reason, isn't a relationship that can last. Maybe Emmy was wrong about why, but she still drew the right conclusion. You can't just pretend to be something you're not and hope things work out. You have to be—you have to be yourself. That's the only way."

Laura remains silent. I hear her pick up the rapier and leave without another word.

"Good luck," I say. To her or me, I'm not sure.

CHAPTER 16
BELLE OF THE BALL

Nichole

The new dress looks fantastic on me. Not as fantastic as The Dress, of course, but nothing's ever going to reach those heights.

This one's a lovely emerald, single-shouldered, low-cut and double-slit. It goes well with the symmetric piece I got for Kathy. It also doesn't hurt when I look at it, as a bonus.

Based on Tahani's recent posts, she and her entourage are going to be at the drag ball. Last week she posted photos from a trip to the thrift shop, trying on various jackets and trousers. Pretty ratty, frankly. I'll have very little trouble outshining them.

Assuming Kathy actually gets here on time. We only have so many hours, and I need to put as much lipstick as I can on the show pig I'm saddled with. I'm about to text her when she opens my door and enters my room, looking like she just woke up and crawled out of bed.

"Finally," I say, putting my phone away. "Have you seriously not showered yet?"

"I only have labs on Fridays, and they're biweekly," Kathy says, missing my point. "Nichole, can we talk?"

This again. I put on my most apologetic face. “I’m really sorry I misplaced my costume, sweetie, and I feel so bad. I know you worked hard on a couple’s set for us. But look what I got you to make up for it!”

I walk over to my bed and pick up a shimmering cerulean piece that matches mine. It’s gorgeous and elegant, and clearly more expensive than the silly costume she got me. I wave it about with a smile.

“Consider it a gift, babe.”

Katherine barely spares the beautiful cerulean dress a glance. “Isn’t there anything you want to tell me, Nichole? Anything at all?”

I put the dress down with a frown. “Kathy, I’ve apologised so many times.”

“Yes, for ‘misplacing’ the school uniform I tailored by hand, for accuracy’s sake,” Katherine says. “Are you going to stick with that story?”

My eyes narrow. “Do you not believe me, sweetie?”

Katherine sighs. “I found where you ‘misplaced’ it. In the building’s bin room, stuffed into a green plastic bag, along with what looks like a rather costly black dress.”

I fold my arms. “Alright, so you caught me. But can you really blame me?”

“Am I not supposed to?” Kathy asks. “Did someone else throw away the clothes I made for you?”

“You want us to dress in school uniforms that look like *sacks*,” I say, throwing my hands up. “For *Drag Ball*. And you wouldn’t listen to reason, because you got so attached to your idea, like you get attached to all your ideas. What choice did you leave me?”

“Did you think to ask me first?” Kathy doesn’t seem as angry as I thought she’d be. She sounds tired. “Before resorting to destroying my hard work and lying to me?”

I scoff. “Oh, because talking to you is so productive and fruitful. You’re always so straightforward, Katherine, and you’re never stubborn about doing things your way, fuck what I want and how I feel.”

“You’re right.”

“Yeah, I’m—hm?” I tilt my head, squinting. “What did you say?”

Katherine sits down on my bed, taking care to avoid the dress I bought her. “You’re right, Nichole. I have not, historically, been very straightfor-

ward with you. Nor have I allowed you much space to feel safe expressing yourself to me. I'm starting to recognise I haven't always treated you well."

I blink. I pull out my desk chair and swivel it around so I can sit down, heavily, with my elbows on my knees.

"Okay," I say after some time. "I'm going to be honest, I never thought you'd say any of that to me."

"That pains me to hear," Katherine says.

"Yeah." I rub my eyes. "Fuck, babe. I do feel bad about how I just went dark on you. But do you remember what happened right before then? Do you remember what you did?"

"Of course I do." Katherine stares at her own knees. "I timed the outing for when I knew your laser rash would be at its worst, and I relied on you going along with what I wanted to do. Like you always did. At least until you stopped doing things with me at all."

My jaw drops. I lean back in my chair as far as it'll go and stare up at the ceiling.

"You knew how bad I felt," I say to the room, feeling empty. "You planned —you *counted* on it."

"Yes."

"Why?" I hurl myself forward, eyes brimming, teeth clenched. "Why the fuck would you do that to me?"

Katherine's little smile looks pained, at least. "Because I got it into my head that I had to discourage you at any cost, Nichole. Hurt you for your own good. That's why. I know it sounds stupid out loud."

I kick off and let the chair spin around slowly. "You—you—" I sputter at her, wheezing. "Do you seriously expect me to be okay with that? To hear you confess you deliberately orchestrated one of the worst days of my life, that you purposely drove me to the verge of a public breakdown, and then to just be fine? To still—still—"

"I don't expect you to want to associate with me in any capacity," Kathy says, her voice almost a whisper.

I jump to my feet, tears pouring unabated. "That's great, that's lovely, that's awfully convenient. So what, you decided you're going to leave me

too and waited until now to do it? Dump me while telling me how much you love fucking with me, really make it sting, really drive my sanity off a cliff?"

"I did not love it." Katherine stands up too. Her eyes glisten and her cheeks are as wet as mine. "I twisted myself into justifying it and ignored how much pain it would cause. I didn't think about what it would feel like if someone did that to me. I didn't even have the courage to dress like that myself, over nine months into transition, and I made you—"

"You BROKE us!" I'm gesturing wildly, screaming in Kathy's face. "You fucking broke us, Kathy! Do you realise that?"

"I know." Katherine sobs. "I know, Nichole. That's why I've been letting you treat me like this. Because I know, and I feel like I deserve it."

"Treat you like what?" I stagger away from her. I can't look at her face anymore. "What, do you hate being treated to dinner before I let you cum in my mouth?"

"Like you're ashamed of me, Nichole."

I grab a tissue from my box and blow my nose. "What do I have to be ashamed of, Kathy? I fucking love that I screwed everything up with the girl who was actually there to console me during the breakdown you caused. It fucking rules that I made excuses for you and came crawling back, because I told myself you couldn't possibly have meant to do that shit to me. Told myself that you were just—that you—"

"That I'm just like that, and I don't know any better." Kathy's voice is emotionless. "You told yourself this is how I've always been and always will be. And after I did that to you, you decided you finally had enough. You only decided to tolerate me again when you didn't have anyone else."

I glance back over my shoulder. "Wow. Were you always only pretending to be oblivious?"

"No, not always." Kathy sobs so hard it spasms through her whole body. She puts her hand on my bed for support and takes a shuddering breath. "But I always knew you'd get tired of it, sooner or later. For good. That you'd move on to better things in a way I can't. Maybe that's why I felt like I had to stop you from—from—becoming who you've always been. Or from realising how much better you can do, once you're no longer held back."

We stare at each other quietly. Katherine continues to cry while I feel dried up and hollow. Emptied of both words and emotion, now that I know what my first and longest and most meaningful friendship really was.

"Nichole, I'm sorry," Katherine says, in a voice like she's choking.

"You are?" I ask.

"Deeply."

"Good." I turn aside and unzip my make-up bag. "Then take that dress I bought you and get out. Figure out how to put it on and how to look halfway decent in it, and show up for long enough to be seen with me in front of my ex. Then leave me alone for the rest of my life."

Katherine doesn't move as I start getting ready. "Nichole, please—"

I slam my brush down and turn my head to glare at her. "This is the only thing I want from you. That's it. There's nothing you can say or do to ever, ever fix things with me. I don't have the time to find an actual date, so act like someone I'd want to be seen with for the first time in my fucking life, and then leave forever. You understand THAT?"

Katherine stares into my eyes for a long time. Eventually, she nods and goes to pick up the dress.

I resume getting ready. I don't want to look at her for a second longer than I have to.

Kyle

The party starts in a few hours, and I'm doing laundry.

Probably not a good sign.

Things between my partner and me have been strained. More than they already were before he showed me the suit. What a grand gesture it was. Meticulously hand-crafted, "honouring" my culture, and delivered to me with the best of intentions, which means what I want and like doesn't matter anymore. If I don't wear the suit, I'm a bad partner. I'm spitting on all the love and care he showed me for petty reasons.

Most annoyingly, I actually think the outfit looks pretty. I'd probably love to wear it in literally any other circumstance.

I open the dryer and scoop out the warm fabrics with both hands. Cart the basket to a nearby folding table and get started. It's calming work. A metronome of soothing monotony, layering sleeve over sleeve, bisecting and flattening and stacking the clothes into a neat pile.

I'd rather do this all night than put the suit on.

I place both palms on the table and lean on it heavily, letting out a long sigh. I've been trying so hard to push all my feelings down, to tell myself it's just some clothes. I just have to wear them for a few hours to make my partner happy. Except these clothes adorn a steaming pile of bullshit I've been ignoring because—why, exactly? Because I torpedoed my farce of a marriage for this so-called relationship, and admitting it's not working means it was for nothing? Big deal. My relationship with Jeff never had a future anyway.

I don't get to be queer just because I want it.

I drop the stack of folded clothes into my basket and carry it upstairs. That's all there really is to life, after all. Getting on with the assured monotony of everyday existence, the drudgery of the obligate tasks no one enjoys but has to do nonetheless. There's little point expecting more, expecting any of this to result in a grand upheaval. People like me don't get to come out in a big, flashy musical number and throw off everything confining us.

That stuff's for Westerners.

I balance the basket on my hip with one hand and fumble with the keys. Somehow I succeed in not dropping everything as I shoulder the door open.

I'm greeted by a very strange sight.

The first thing I notice is the dirty pot on the stove, left on a burner that's at least been switched off, red sauce dripping and congealing down one side. Katherine sits at the dining table, the likely culprit, expected and surprising in equal measure. She hasn't pulled this nonsense in a while, and I've grown accustomed to her newfound diligence. She's wearing a gorgeous blue dress, its majesty ruined by a splattering of red sauce all over the thighs. An upturned bowl lies on the floor next to a mess of spilled noodles.

Katherine turns her face towards me as I kick the door shut and place my

laundry basket on the floor. Two streaks of mascara run through flaking powder, marring her cheeks.

"S-sorry," she says with a slight hiccup. "I didn't mean to."

"Okay." I walk towards her, which makes her flinch. "Easy, Kathy. We still have paper towels, right?"

"I realised I forgot to eat after I got dressed." Kathy's staring at the noodles on the floor. "Should've—all I can really make is noodles. Should've learned."

"Yeah, I see the paper towels." I step over the bowl and grab the roll. "If you toss that dress in the sink and soak it, we can probably still get the stains out."

"Screwed it up." Kathy half-heartedly throws her hands up. "Always screw it up."

"Kathy, dear, please listen to me." I get on my knees as I speak, ripping napkins out of the roll and scooping up the spilled food. "I want you to focus on changing and soaking the dress right now, okay? Forget about the other stuff for the moment."

"But you're cleaning it." Kathy sniffles, and I think I see fresh tears. "You're cleaning up my mess again."

"Yeah, sure am." I reach over and grab the rubbish bin, dragging it over to deposit my handfuls of soggy paper and spicy noodles. "Been a while since the last time, which I appreciate."

"You weren't supposed to," Kathy says, properly sobbing now. "I was supposed to—I wanted to stop. I'm sorry. I'm such a bad friend. Bad girlfriend. Bad flatmate. Can't be good at one thing."

I tear out more napkins and glance up at her. "Kathy, it's fine."

"No, it's not—"

"No, it really is fine." I sigh. "Clearly you're having a rough time, and you've been having a rough time for a while. It happens. You're not a bad person for struggling with cleaning, and I'm sorry I wasn't more understanding."

That gets her to stop trying to argue with me, at least. She coughs into her wrist, appraising me with watery eyes. "You're having a rough time too."

"Yeah, well." I wipe up more sauce from the floor, but it's going to need some water and the mop. "I deal with rough times by cleaning, so it works out."

"But I didn't want to make it worse."

I toss the last of the food into the waste bin and pick up the bowl. "Alright. Can you clean the pot and the utensils, Kathy?"

Kathy tilts her head to the side. "The pot?"

"I'll mop the floor while you clean the dishes," I say, standing up. "Then we can sort your dress out together."

"Isn't my dress," Kathy says.

I put the bowl in the sink. "Okay. We'll sort the dress out together after we clean up."

Kathy hesitates, then nods.

I grab the mop and fill up the bucket. We work in silence. Kathy looks a bit funny from behind, wearing bright yellow dish gloves with her formal evening wear, scrubbing dried sauce off a pot. I quietly run a sponge over the table and the chair she was sitting on and return to the bathroom before she's done.

She's much calmer with the kitchen cleaned and dishes drying on the rack. I convince her to change into her pyjamas and take her dress to the sink to try and rub off the worst of the stains.

Thirty minutes after I found her, we sit at the kitchen table together, enjoying warmed-up lentils and rice.

Kathy scoops up a spoonful, slowly and carefully. "Thank you, Kaalappan."

"I always have plenty of leftovers." I check the time on the kitchen clock. "Are you still planning on going to the party?"

Kathy lets out a laugh that doesn't quite reach her eyes. "I don't have much choice."

I raise an eyebrow. "Why not?"

Kathy stares into her bowl, stirring the contents slowly. "It's complicated. I have to atone for what I've done, and this is the only way."

"Okay, we're talking about the same event, right?" I ask. "It's a Halloween costume party with a drag theme. It's not that serious."

"The levity of the setting is somewhat at odds with my circumstances, yes," Kathy says.

I sigh. "Yeah, clearly. What's the matter?"

Kathy chews on another spoonful, staring off to the side. "Nichole and I are over, I think."

"I see." I drum my fingers on the table. "Me and Jeff too, I think."

"Understandable."

That makes me giggle. "And here I thought we made a cute couple."

Kathy shrugs. "Jeffrey has always espoused dubious views at odds with who he presents himself to be. It's why I prefer not to interact with him any more than I must."

"Everyone fucking called it but me, I guess." I put my spoon down. "Well, I did too. I just ignored my better instincts out of spite."

Katherine frowns. "Who did you mean to spite by inflicting Jeffrey upon yourself?"

I close my eyes briefly. "Me, I think."

"Then you chose a most effective means to do so."

"Alright, I get it." I shake my head, grinning at Kathy and chuckling.

"Are you not going to the party, then?" she asks.

"Honestly?" I make a sour face. "I'd have liked to. I was really into the idea of putting on a dress and learning how to do my make-up and having a nice night with my partner, surrounded by a bunch of queer people. But I'm not going to the party on Jeff's terms."

Kathy squints at me. "Interesting. You wanted to—I see. You seem to want to go, Kaalappan. Can you not still do that?"

"Not really." I put my hands behind my head, lacing my fingers together. "I don't exactly have a lot of dresses in my wardrobe, Kathy."

"But you've always—never mind. Would you go if you had the appropriate attire?"

Katherine sounds oddly excited. She's serious about this. I lower my hands and sit up straighter. "I appreciate the offer, Kathy, but you're not exactly my size, are you?"

"I am not," Kathy says, still excited, "but—are you familiar with the term 'serendipity', Kaalappan?"

"Um." I scratch the back of my head. "I think Kate Beckinsale was in that one?"

"Quite so!" Katherine jumps to her feet and holds her hand out. "May I show you the things your useless boyfriend neglected to, so you can have the night you always dreamed of?"

She sounds so sincere. I can't help but giggle at her infectious enthusiasm and place my hand in hers. "Sure, Kathy. Go ahead."

"Then come into my innermost chamber."

CHAPTER 17
DRAG BALL

Jeffrey

Our chosen venue is one of the uni's older dining halls, an unassuming single-storey building with wood-panelled walls, high ceilings, and an arched entrance. The rectangular vestibule leads to a spacious seating area with tall windows on all sides and a dais on the far end. The hall isn't far from the campus dorms and regularly hosts all kinds of events, from themed dinners to guest talks to swing dancing, and so seemed a good pick for the Drag Ball.

We're in high spirits as we begin to set up for the big night, clearing out the chairs and tables. Granted, I'm a little moody because of the trouble with my beau, and because Wendy won't be here. She more or less recused herself from helping out with the ball after our little tiff. But we all worked super hard on our costumes and sold so many tickets—the party's guaranteed to be a success. Alex and a few others raised a stink about possible overcrowding, but doesn't that show how lively and happening the event will be? I picture myself in the transformed space, brimming with elegant guests, as I rush to greet my sweet Kyle when he arrives and lead him to the centre of the dance floor. All eyes will be on us as we spin around in our regalia.

And then Dennis asks me where the decorations are.

What begins as confusion over who's in charge of them—was it supposed to be Wendy or Benjamin?—becomes a panicked scramble as we realise we don't have anything to put up. Alex paces about in his platform shoes, moustache bristling as he furiously texts Quinn. The rest of us disperse to procure what we can, scrounging up items from our limited supplies and throwing up everything from tattered old streamers to protest signs.

"Protest slogans are pretty camp, right?" I ask, applying blue tack to the back of a poster. "There were drag queens at Stonewall."

Alex rolls his eyes at me, his phone pressed to his ear. "Yeah, a drag-themed Halloween party really screams 'political rally'—hello, Quinn? I called because you didn't answer my texts. Say, where did all the proceeds from our record-breaking ticket sales go, exactly?"

He continues to shout into his phone as I affix the poster to the wall. It's a recreation of the "genderbread person", drawn by someone whose artistic skills are clearly aspirational. I stare at the multicoloured strand of DNA scrawled over the diagram's crotch and sigh.

"I feel like you should have told us you were using those funds to pay for expenses unrelated to the party," Alex says through gritted teeth. "Whatever, just get down here. I don't care, get ready as fast as you can then. Jeffrey just put up a poster of a hate crime, Kenneth and Benjamin are literally making a banner for the entrance right now, and half of us are blowing up balloons from last year's party. Get down here and pitch in. And where the fuck is Wendy?"

I suck in air through my teeth. "Oh, she's probably halfway across town on a date."

"Huh?" Alex turns to me, baffled. "Why?"

"That's what she does when she's mopey," I say, wincing.

Quinn does eventually turn up, thirty minutes later. It's hard to tell whether xe didn't have the time to finish xer outfit, or whether xer untucked white button-up and red tie over a pencil skirt and fishnets is intentionally slapdash. Xe's also wearing a fake blue goatee, as promised. I try my best to return xer smile with one that isn't a grimace.

"Alright, Alex, how shall my presence make all the difference?" Quinn asks, sneering. "Also, shouldn't the band be setting up by now?"

And that's when we realise we were so caught up with the decorations, we didn't even register the band's absence.

So with an hour to go before the party's supposed to begin, I make a quick phone call to learn that the band is not late, not on the way, and definitely not available. The manager is incredibly defensive when I chew her out for unprofessional conduct. She insists I never booked them for Halloween, even though I filled out the online form myself weeks ago.

"Hey, Jeff—or wait, is it 'Desdemona' tonight?" Alex asks, interrupting me.

I cover the receiver and glare at him. "Yes, or 'Desi' for short. What is it?"

"Is this the form you filled out?" Alex holds up his phone.

"Yeah, that's the one."

"Thought so." He turns the phone around and squints at the screen. "Did you put down the date as 31/10/26, by any chance?"

"Obviously." I click my tongue, impatient. "Can I get back to my call now?"

"Yeah, that's what I thought." He taps the screen. "The form uses a year, month, date format. You booked them for the 26th of October 2031."

I hang up the call immediately, staring at Alex. "What? What the fuck? Why would they do something like that? That's absurd!"

"It's actually pretty common, to avoid issues with different date formats." Alex shrugs. "Silver lining, we're definitely cancelling far enough in advance to get a full refund."

No need to panic. It's far from ideal, but the situation is still salvageable. There are speakers and a sound system I can plug my phone into, I think—if I can figure out how. A step down from a live band, sure, but most of this venue is a dance floor. We need music, any music, or the Drag Ball's going to be a total bust.

Thirty minutes left. None of the officers present know how to work the sound system. Wendy still isn't responding to my messages. Quinn makes a few sharp remarks before walking off in a huff. Alex pats me on the back sympathetically, which doesn't make me feel better at all.

Five minutes before the official start time, as Kenneth and Benjamin put

their banner up over the entrance, Dennis rushes back in to report that a sizeable crowd's already gathered.

"We may not have bought enough punch, or snacks," he says.

"Add it to the list." Alex sighs. "I told you we should have bought extra, Quinn."

"Oh, pipe down." Quinn rolls xer eyes and walks towards the exit. "I'll take Kenneth with me to grab the snacks for the meet and greets. No harm done."

"The snacks you refuse to restock properly? Those snacks? And xe's gone." Alex shakes his head. "Fucking perfect."

It's time. Partygoers begin to enter, and just keep coming. The space keeps getting more and more packed. I have to keep yanking the ends of my scarf from under other people's shoes as I work, cloistered into my little corner of the room. As I mop my brow with my rumpled and trampled scarf, I grimly note that the overcrowding problem will solve itself soon enough, when people realise they've paid five bucks to stand around in a sweaty, silent hall.

Quinn's right. I should have paid more attention to my duties. I didn't follow up with the band to make sure they were available. I let my fight with Wendy fester instead of swallowing my pride and making time for her like she wanted. Worst of all, I spent far, far too long crafting beautiful finery for someone who doesn't appreciate it one whit. If I dedicated myself to the things that actually mattered instead of folding paper flowers by hand, maybe this would be a real party instead of a disaster.

I hunch over, letting the tears fall. It's already getting less stuffy. People are beginning to clear out. Word will spread of the GSA's colossal fuck-up, if it hasn't already, and the only thing the officers will talk about tomorrow is who's to blame. Me, mostly. I'm certainly not going to remain an officer for much longer.

As I take a deep breath, ready to give up, I feel a soft hand on my shoulder. Likely Quinn, or even Wendy, here to tell me how much I suck. Time to face the lack of music. I turn around, and see the last person I expected.

"Need some help?"

She's cloaked in royal purple, in a matching blazer and bell-bottoms. Her black tube top shows off both her midriff and collarbones, and its many se-

quins glint in the dim lighting. Jet-black streams of gleaming straight hair run down her shoulders and back, and gold eyeshadow glitters on her warm, friendly face.

I try to say, "Tahani!", but only succeed in making a squeaky, strangled sound.

She bends down next to me, examining the tangle of wires I've spent the past fifteen minutes struggling with. "Guessing no one has a phone that can fit an older input jack like this."

That's it. She speaks to me in a completely even tone, not angry or hurt or vindictive in the slightest. And I never said a word to Tahani after my fight with Ru. I just ghosted her, vanishing from her life like she was nothing more than a too-clingy hookup. She has every right to punch me in the face right here and now, but she isn't doing that.

I take a deep breath and find my voice. "Yeah, that's the main problem."

"You remember the drag brunch thing we did last semester, for lesbian visibility day?" Tahani pulls out her phone. "Wendy showed me something fun. You have to download this janky app, but this thing actually has Bluetooth."

"Wait, it does?" I gawp at her screen.

"Yep. Could you press that button for me?"

I do as she says. A few tense minutes pass as we huddle around the equipment, waiting for the connection to establish. I breathe a massive sigh of relief when the pairing succeeds and a plain, ugly interface appears.

Tahani grins. "Wanna see something cool?"

She taps her phone before I'm done nodding. I gasp as a disco ball descends from above us, spinning slowly and lighting up the room with dazzling shapes.

"That's amazing," I say, giggling, giddy. I look away from the pretty lights and face Tahani with fresh tears in my eyes. "Thank you."

Tahani shrugs. "Don't mention it. Shall we get this party started?"

"Yeah." I bite my lip. "I'm sorry, Tahani."

"You can do better than that." She glances up from selecting the music and smiles. "It's literally been months, and that's all you have to say?"

My smile vanishes. An upbeat tune begins to play over the speakers amidst the clapping and cheering of the remaining partygoers.

"I'm sorry. I mean, I'm—"

"Take your time," Tahani says, cutting me off. "After all, what's a few more days?"

Nichole

I really don't want to remain in the flat after I get dressed. Inhabiting the same physical space as Kathy is unpleasant, and I don't want to be available in case she decides to barge in and talk to me again. So I decide to treat myself to a nice dinner at a little Italian restaurant not too far from campus. I can nurse a glass of wine, take my time with the dessert, and snap a few candlelit selfies to show off my fit in the server. That'll let me be fashionably late for the party, thirty minutes or so after it starts.

I'm ushered to a table quickly enough, but they take their sweet time bringing out the food. I order a second, then a third glass of wine while I wait. The lighting is also subpar, but my selfies turn out alright, and the rum cake is delicious. I leave a decent tip with a note on the service.

Walking in heels is trickier than it was before dinner. I slow my gait and work on my photos, carefully cropping them and applying subtle, almost imperceptible filters before posting them. By the time I reach the bus stop, I have more than my usual stable of admirers melting down in the comments. Knight of Knockers, who lacks subtlety on her best days, is downright vulgar. I don't think I'd ever actually want to spend time with anyone so into sword and sorcery stuff, but I enjoy the effect I have on her. I respond to her lewd declarations of love with little hearts, to keep her on her toes.

The sign says my bus is next, but it's been delayed by a few minutes. I'll end up closer to forty-five minutes late, but that's fine by me. It just means I'll keep Rupali waiting that much longer.

I carefully examine my reflection in the bus window, making sure my hair frames my face perfectly. Things are going as planned, and more than

fifty people confirmed I'm drop-dead gorgeous tonight. Maybe I won't even need Kathy to twirl me around to make Rupali seethe with envy. Who's to say I won't charm some dashing butch into slobbering over me as much as my dear Knight does? Tittering at the thought, I text Kathy—as insurance—telling her to be there soon.

The bus stutters to a stop. I hold my head high and strut off, ready to take the party by storm.

There's a line at the entrance.

I fold my arms and look around, frowning. I wasn't expecting this, but I guess the Drag Ball is an even bigger deal than I thought. I don't see Rupali, Kim or Tahani out here at least, which is a relief.

It's slow-moving, more of a bustling crowd than an orderly queue. I make my way to what seems like the back of the line and stand behind three muscly, bearded guys in evening gowns. Though I do my best to actively tune out their conversation, I get the distinct impression they're here on some kind of dare. The wait is a drag—and not the fun kind. Everyone is here with someone else or as part of a bigger group. They jabber endlessly. Some change their minds and leave, allowing me to move up. Others peel away and sit down on the lawn in little circles.

Most people here didn't even try to be fashionable, or even stay on theme for the party. There's more nurse uniforms and cat ears than ruffle dresses, and too many people who think a buff, hairy dude in a frilly tutu is the height of comedy. I'm at risk of friction burn from rolling my eyes so much.

I pull out my phone and try to find something to do, without much success. The server isn't that active on Friday nights, and I don't want to post on social media too much, since I'm supposed to be out having the time of my life.

My feet hurt.

I've been in line for fifteen minutes or so when I hear some kind of commotion at the entrance. A sizeable group walks out of the building. A few of them shout that the party's a shitshow. The crowd around me erupts into a low, dull roar of indecipherable murmurs. My head begins to throb. I'm able to make out a few choice words—"no dancing", "crap food".

The queue is thinning rapidly. But I know Tahani and Rupali won't be here for the party's sake, but to revel in the disaster. They seem to be getting their wish. My plan remains unchanged.

By the time I get to the front, they're not even asking for tickets anymore. The two people posted at the door stand off to the side, passing a metal bottle back and forth that I'm pretty sure isn't filled with water. I give them a small smile, step around the drooping hand-drawn welcome banner that's half peeled off the top of the doorway, and hurry in.

And so my big night finally begins, amidst revellers stumbling through a room cluttered with half-deflated balloons and signs saying things like "Hate Speech Isn't Free Speech". Everyone clearly drank more than I did, and the mood is confused at best, though at least there's music.

I may be wrong about Rupali choosing to hang around for this.

I drift towards the snacks and drinks table and pick up a plastic cup. The confections on offer are the GSA special: flat sodas, half-empty boxes of stale cookies, and the dregs of whatever freshly procured food they remembered to buy, which obviously wasn't enough. I place the cup back in its stack with a sigh and look to my left.

There she is.

Someone bought Rupali new boots. She's wearing the one blazer she owns, of course, and probably the one pair of jeans that go with it. I think the blouse is new, though. The colour's hard to make out, but I see that it's mostly unbuttoned. Daring.

She's dancing with Kim. One hand in Kim's hand, the other arm on Kim's tuxedo-clad waist, squeezing her so close Rupali may as well throw her legs around Kim, too. They're all over each other. And they're rotating slowly under the disco lights, laughing. Really laughing it up.

They got together, didn't they?

My lip curls, almost involuntarily. My hands clench into fists. I grab the bottle of flat Sprite and chug what's left, crushing it in my grasp. Rupali probably didn't even wait before she asked Kim to snog her again—only took her a couple of weeks to get over her marriage, after all. Kim was probably fingerblasting Rupali an afternoon after we broke up.

What the fuck am I even doing here? I toss the crumpled remnants of the bottle and check my phone. Kathy hasn't texted me back. Am I supposed to twirl and pirouette across the dance floor by myself and jiggle my tits in Rupali's face? That'll show her. I have to face the facts: Rupali has no reason to notice me and no cause to think of me, no matter how sluttily or sensually I dress. She's perfectly content with her big, beefy hunk who's twice her size.

I meant nothing to her.

"Enjoying the party?"

A person with a fake blue beard and a wardrobe that clearly threw up on them appears next to me. It takes me a second to recognise them—recognise *xer*, that is, as Quinn.

"Oh, hello," I say. "No, not at all."

"Naturally." Quinn smiles and gestures around xer. "My officers certainly did their best to cock everything up. May I offer you an actual drink? I confiscated these from two idiots who didn't have the good sense to be more discreet."

Quinn holds out a can of hard cider. I shrug and accept it.

"Sure. Happy Halloween or whatever." I pop the can open and raise it in a mock toast before taking a big gulp. "Not bad. Say, why do you want to share a drink with me, of all people?"

Quinn shrugs. "I was pacing about, trying to make the best of a bad night, when I happened to see you give my ex the stink eye. I guess I got curious."

"Oh." I stare into the can. "So not because I'm pretty?"

"I mean, you certainly are," Quinn says, laughing, "but I'm not actually as pansexual as advertised. Too much of a masc preference, I think."

"Sure." I take another big gulp and wipe my chin with the back of my hand. "Masc, like your ex."

Quinn's expression sours. "Not so masc anymore, I think. How exactly do you know—wow, it feels so weird to say 'her'. Time was, she'd sock you across the mouth for daring."

"That doesn't surprise me." I squeeze the can slightly, listening to the

metal crinkle. "Well, Quinn, your ex happens to be dancing with my ex. Who she's dating. Hence the, um, stink eye."

Quinn's eyes flash. "Rupali's your—and they're—I see." Xe sounds as unhappy as I feel. "Well. Dear Kim always did have a weakness for the pretty ones."

I squint at xer, tilting my head to the side. "What do you mean?"

Quinn takes a long sip before answering. "Kim and I were together for a while. Obviously, her detransition took me by surprise—she was the one who talked me out of my nervousness about top surgery, you know? But in another way, it didn't surprise me in the least." Quinn pauses briefly, drumming the side of xer can with xer fingers. "Kim was a lesbian before we got together, a gay man after we started dating, and a lesbian again when dear Tahani dropped by the GSA and caught her eye. She's not malicious, but the only thing constant about her is her complete lack of conviction. She'll be anyone for anyone else, if they're pretty enough."

I swallow my last mouthful of cider as Quinn finishes speaking. Kim and Rupali are still dancing, still laughing giddily, still wrapped around each other. Xer words resonate in my mind. They explain so much. I exhale sharply and put the empty can down.

"You're alright, Quinn."

"Thank you. I think." Quinn also knocks back the last of xer drink. "I'm sorry your ex cheated on you with Kim. Unfaithful sorts flock together, you know?"

"Yeah, that's—I mean, close enough." I squint in their direction. "I'm going to give her a piece of my mind."

"Maybe that'll liven this party up." Quinn chuckles. "I never gave Kim a piece of mine, as a kindness, but unsaid words leave such a bitter taste. Don't make my mistake."

"I won't." I nod at Quinn and almost fall forward, but I catch myself on the table in time. "I'll—I'll tell them."

"Good luck, friend," Quinn says, letting me use xer shoulder for support. "I never caught your name."

"I'm—" I cut myself off with a hiccup. "I'm Nichole."

"Good luck, Nichole."

I flit across the dance floor in a daze. The song changes in the middle of

my journey, and the same pair of men bumps into me twice, apologising loudly both times. I ignore them and keep moving.

Neither Kim nor Rupali is laughing or dancing by the time I reach them. I guess they saw me coming. Kim looms behind Ru, who folds her arms and regards me with an expression of pure pity.

I hate that. I hate her.

"I know what you are," I say.

"Hi, Nichole." Rupali's barely audible over the music, but she sounds exhausted. "You're very unsteady on your feet. Can we not do this?"

"I know what you are!" Louder this time. "Do you know what you are, Ru? Because I finally do."

Rupali sighs. "What's that, Nichole?"

"You're a fucking chaser." I fold my arms as well, matching Rupali's stance. "See, I figured it out. You liked Kyle more when the oestrogen kicked in."

Rupali lowers her arms. "Wait, what did you—?"

I raise my voice further. "You only liked me until I started to look and act like an actual girl. So you had to find yourself the next best thing, didn't you? An in-between."

"Right, we've been more patient than you deserve," Kim says in her gravelly tones, taking a step forward. "Leave us alone."

"Don't you dare touch me," I hiss at Kim. "Quinn told me how violent you are. You want to hit me so bad, don't you?"

Kim freezes.

"Nichole, please shut up and fuck off," Ru says, eyes blazing.

"Fine, whatever, waste of my breath anyway." I snort. "You know Kim, if you were going for drag, why didn't you wear what you normally—"

A soft hand curls around my waist. Another gently grasps my arm. I fall silent, surprised, and feel myself being pulled away from the woman who broke my heart and her bodyguard. There's someone beside me, leading me through the maze of dancing bodies, until we stop somewhere with enough room to stand. I turn to face my rescuer, blinking rapidly.

"Katherine?" I stare into her eyes. "Is that you?"

She made it. She came for me after all.

"Hello, Nichole," my dear Katherine says. "May I have this dance?"

I giggle and let her pull me close, putty in her surprisingly strong hands. "You can have it anytime, sweetie. I like this assertive side of—wait." I narrow my eyes as I take in her appearance. "You're wearing a red wig."

Katherine nods, swaying with me. "I was going to do as you asked, Nichole, but I foolishly spilled something on the dress. Our considerate flatmate helped me get the stains out, if you're worried about that. It'll be fine. Of course, that meant I had to wear my costume instead."

I groan. "You had one job, Kathy. Whatever, at least you did half of it."

"I certainly did," Kathy says. "And I came as soon as I could. You've had a lot to drink, Nichole."

"Actually, I haven't." I giggle. "But I think the rum cake had a lot of rum in it."

"Ah. Yes, those are meant to be shared, aren't they?"

The music is nice and slow. Soft, wordless voices echo in soothing melancholy, layered over melodic strings. Kathy and I are stepping on clouds, drifting through misty wisps. I wish she was taller so I could rest my head on her chest.

"You did it." I chuckle. "I can't believe it, but you saved my night after all."

"Indeed." Kathy squeezes my hand. "Nichole. When I arrived, I came looking for you right away."

I raise an eyebrow, wondering why she's telling me the obvious. "Yeah, I can see that."

"It took me a second, but I spotted you bumping into people on the dance floor," Katherine says. "I didn't realise who you were approaching until you were yelling at her."

"Okay, hold on. I wasn't yelling." I scoff. "I had to raise my voice to be heard over the music."

"You were yelling." Katherine is irritatingly insistent. "I had my qualms with what you asked me to do, but I went along with it because I didn't know what occurred between you and Rupali. I only knew that you were hurt."

"Alright." I shrug. "So what? Now you know what she did to me."

Katherine stops. Still holding me, still holding my hand, she comes to a standstill. I almost step on her feet.

"Don't you remember what you shouted at them not five minutes ago?" Katherine asks, frowning.

Why is she being so weird?

"I do, obviously," I say.

"So you remember outing our flatmate," Katherine says, "and you remember all the invective you hurled at them?"

"Are you serious right now?" I let out a cry of frustration. "Okay, I probably shouldn't have said that about Kyle, but I'm like wasted. I'm mad and drunk, it's whatever."

The music plays on, ethereal, surreal. People continue to dance around us. But Katherine doesn't resume our waltz. She lets go of my hand and steps away from me.

"I let you speak to me the way you do because I wronged you, Nichole," Katherine says, her voice low. I have to strain to hear it. "But I didn't make you this way. I didn't make you petty, and vindictive, and cruel."

"Katherine, wait." I reach out to her. "Kathy, please, stop. Let me explain. I'll tell you what really happened."

"Nothing could justify the things you said." Katherine drifts further and further away, out of my grasp. "I thought you treated me that way because of my transgressions. I didn't realise you treat everyone like this now."

"Kathy." My voice breaks. I don't remember when I began to cry, but my throat's closing up, and I can barely speak over the damn strings. "Kathy, no. You're my friend, Kathy. My first friend. Don't you remember?"

"I do remember my friend." Katherine takes a deep breath. "I miss her very much."

The music stops.

Katherine turns her back on me, like everyone else, and disappears into the crowd.

CHAPTER 17

~~Kyle~~ Rashmi

Is this really me?

Kathy left as soon as she finished helping me with the makeup—I declined her offer to walk to the party together. I needed more time. More time to look at my face, to get used to the idea it's my face and not an apparition or illusion or a mirage conjured up by years and years of unacknowledged dreams bubbling up into my waking fantasies.

I blink and she blinks. I turn my head, and she turns with me.

It's striking. My face looks defined, outlined, like I'm seeing it in high definition for the first time. All that poking and jabbing with mascara and eyeliner and eyeshadow, all that bronzer and blush and black lipstick that I was certain would look awful. But it doesn't. Katherine actually knows what she's doing, I must admit.

I'm beautiful.

I'm actually beautiful.

Did the hormones change the shape of my face? For how long have I had the option to do this? If I learned how to do this last year—if I just put in a bit of effort, brushed some curl cream through my hair and borrowed a dress, could I have spent all this time walking around like this?

Like I was never born wrong?

I step away from the mirror. I'm still not certain I believe what I'm seeing, but I'll have plenty of time to freak out about it later. Currently, I have a party to get to and a partner to confront.

Still not sure about the dress, either. I glance down nervously. Did it have to have slits up both sides and a neckline ending barely above my pubes? I'm going straight from baggy tees and cargoes to a dress so tight and showing so much skin that it barely feels like clothing. Surely I'm too curvy to wear something like this.

Also, since when am I curvy?

What's done is done, though. I breathe, slow and steady, trying to calm my nerves, and start walking. Open the door and leave the flat.

It's still scary, but I'm out.

About halfway to the venue, I realise I should have put on a coat. Less because it's cold—though now that I see how stiff my nipples are, that's also a consideration—and more that I didn't think I would attract this many stares. And the way guys *leer*—eyes bulging, unblinking and shameless—makes me shiver. I pick up the pace before I regret leaving the house.

It's such a relief to see the building. I hurry past gaggles of students lounging on the lawn, laughing and chatting, and push a drooping banner aside to enter.

There are guys leering at me here too.

They avert their eyes quicker, at least. I guess it's more obvious when we're in the same space and I'm not rushing past, never to be seen again. But it's definitely still happening. And unless I'm being paranoid, it's not just guys anymore. I keep catching all sorts of people looking at me sideways, their gazes lingering on me until our eyes meet.

Where the fuck is Kathy?

I scan the crowd for a familiar face, any familiar face. I'm even willing to take Nichole right now. Kathy's probably with her anyway, trying to work up the nerve to dump her. I keep moving, searching, and do my best not to dwell on why I'm getting so much attention at a Halloween party full of oddballs and novelties. I hope it isn't because my nipples are still visible.

Where is anyone? Anyone at all will do at this point, even—

"Oh, hello."

That voice stops me in my tracks and makes me wince. Guess I'm doing this sooner rather than later. Steeling myself, I turn around with a big smile.

"Hi, babe."

Jeffrey's clearly exhausted, clutching an energy drink with both hands and blinking up at me slowly. Still pretty in that outfit, I confess. Even with all the baggage. It's funny how you can only tell what it's supposed to be if you know what the intent is. The skirt doesn't look Indian or bridal at all.

Sadly, I'm aware of the intent, which is the whole problem.

It's a shame, in many ways. I hope Jeffrey figures it out soon. Why she's like this and why she can't get what she really wants out of me. She'll have to solve it on her own, too, but it's probably only a matter of time. The deniability stopped being plausible a while ago.

Not that I have much room to talk.

She wrinkles her nose, looking me up and down. "Well, you look good."

"Oh, thanks." I smooth down the dress. "Kathy lent it to me. Not hers, obviously. Still kind of a snug fit."

Her eyes flicker downwards. "It really is."

My cheeks grow hot. "Right."

She averts her gaze, staring off to the side. A girl to our left trips and stumbles into her friend, spilling their drinks. They both start apologising at the same time. I glance up at the ceiling, then at the floor, and clear my throat.

"So, listen," I say, taking a deep breath. "I know you wanted tonight to go differently—"

"No, I get it." She cuts me off with a wave of her hand. "Honestly, I expected this. I've been bracing for it."

"Ah." I suck in air through my teeth. "Sorry."

"It's fine." My ex sighs. "I thought about it. You were right when you said —well. The point is that I get it. I went too far. This was too much."

She gestures at her clothes, and I nod.

"Still a hell of an outfit, I'll say." I give her a small smile. "All that other stuff aside, it's—I mean, you're gorgeous. Beautiful. Elegant, some might even say."

"Knock it off." She rolls her eyes, but there's no venom in her words. "Don't chat me up right after dumping me, asshole."

"Fair enough." I raise my hand. "Have a nice night, babe."

"Ship's sailed on that." My ex sighs. "I hope you can have some fun, all dressed up. We have music now."

I head towards the dance floor, mostly because it's the quickest way to exit the conversation. I'm going to have to do something about the housing situation. Maybe Kathy and I could request a room transfer. I think about

moving out, setting up a new kitchen, and actually decorating a new bedroom. Leaving this whole sordid chapter behind.

Here the bulbs are dimmer, the music louder, and the people, I'm sure, drunker. Shimmering motes of light scatter about, bouncing off gyrating bodies and glimmering jewellery. Nails, hair, and lips of every colour dissolve into the gloom, only asserting their brilliance in fleeting flashes, a rainbow rhythmically pulled apart and remade over and over. I find myself at the centre of this blinking kaleidoscope.

Free.

I throw my head back, letting out a laugh that dissipates instantly, swallowed up by the blissful howling and stampeding and hollering of every other soul in this maelstrom. Every eye on me belongs to someone who can see me, truly see me, in a way I've never let myself be seen. A pair in matching dresses orbit me briefly, making me the fulcrum for their revolution. My hands reach for a heaven that can no longer hurt me, and my body moves on its own.

Once, when I was a boy, I woke up crying from a dream. It felt too real, too vivid to be a mere product of my imagination. I thought I caught a glimpse of another world. One where I wasn't an only child.

One where I had a sister.

We were twins, she and I. Siblings who shared everything, who understood each other in a way no one else did. She was my first and foremost friend, the person I could confide anything to without fear of judgment. She looked just like me.

Her name was Rashmi.

I never told anyone about the dream. I made myself forget it. Made myself forget her. I hadn't yet learned the words I shouldn't know, but even then, I knew I shouldn't want this. I shouldn't cry and ache and mourn a girl who never was and never could be.

But I remember her now.

I throw my hands wide, weeping, wailing, cackling, screaming, and I remember my name.

"MY NAME IS RASHMI!"

CHAPTER 17

The storm hears me, and welcomes me with thunder.

My face is drenched. Sweat or tears, I can't tell. My hands hurt from clapping, my heels throb in protest, and my throat is absolutely parched. But I don't care. This is the best, most alive I've ever felt.

Still, I could use a drink. I stagger away from the circle of people I'm dancing with, shouting a merry goodbye, and look for the door. How did I get so disoriented in a mostly featureless room? I stand on my toes for a better view, peering over the crowd, and my heart stops.

I lock eyes with someone I last saw a lifetime ago.

She's nothing like I remember, yet unmistakable all the same. She's dashing in her suit, handsome and graceful, arm in arm with an equally attractive woman in a tuxedo. Beaming, happy—I don't think she was ever this happy, in all the years I knew her. Smiling a smile that's the brightest I've ever seen.

A smile that quickly fades with recognition.

Pulse racing, head spinning, I try to take a step back. But I can't. I'm rooted in place, struck dumb, staring at the woman I love.

Rupali's face creases with concern. She looks away to speak to her date. The woman in the tuxedo glances at me, her expression inscrutable. Then, inexplicably, she lets go of Rupali and saunters away. Leaving Rupali to—

Rupali's standing right in front of me.

Every word I could, should and didn't say to her floods my mind at once, even as my throat feels more arid than ever. Where the heck are the drinks? Doesn't matter. Ru's expression is expectant, intrigued, and perhaps a bit bemused, which is much better than the "livid" or "irritated" I would have expected. That Ru's willing to talk to me at all is more than I'd dared hope. She's giving me an opportunity I can't afford to squander.

More bemused now. How long have I been staring at her? Am I smiling? Shit, am I smiling like a creep? I stop smiling. I haven't figured out the perfect thing to say yet—but nothing I say will be perfect. The important thing is we're talking at all. Talking honestly and as ourselves for the first time in a long, long time.

Not that we're actually talking, because I still I haven't fucking said any-

thing. I'm genuinely impressed Ru's still standing here, given that I've been gawping at her slack-jawed for like three hours. I finally open my mouth to ask, "How's it going?" and instantly launch into a coughing fit so horrendous it hurts my ears and leaves me bent over with my hands on my knees. Ru, clearly alarmed, starts rubbing and slapping my back, asking if I'm okay.

Kill me now.

Two minutes, one trip to the vestibule and half a bottle of the flattest Pepsi I've ever drunk later, I assure Ru I'm okay and half-heartedly attempt a smile.

Ru laughs. She laughs with her eyes closed, almost doubled over, one hand over her mouth. I can't help but giggle along with her until she's wheezing and needs a swig herself. It's an infectious sound.

"I've missed your laugh so much."

I blink and look at her in surprise. Ru regards me with glistening eyes, with a familiar tenderness that I don't think I've earned. She puts an arm around me and pulls me in, letting me rest my head against hers, and sighs.

"I'm sorry, Ru," I say, because that's all I can think to say. Because I don't know any other words to express the full range of regret and relief within me.

"For Jeffrey?" Ru shrugs. "You were the one who took the brunt of that mistake, babe."

"Ouch." I shake my head, chuckling. "Well, I'm still sorry I cheated."

"Eh, I caught up." Ru smirks. "Honestly, I probably did it more."

"Really now?" I raise my eyebrows, taking a step back. "Are we comparing frequency?"

"Quality."

I wince. "Oh, yeah, if you're talking about the hottie in the tuxedo—"

"Yeah, not even close." Ru folds her arms, the smuggest I've ever seen her.

I rub the back of my head. "So things didn't work out with Nichole, then? I've been wondering."

"Nope." Rupali grimaces. "I misjudged her. She's honestly a—"

"A dumpster fire, yeah."

Ru and I nod solemnly, in sync, before erupting into peals of laughter again. It's all so surreal and absurd, and oddly sad too.

"We haven't even got to the, well." Ru gestures at my body. Mostly my tits.

I cover my eyes with both hands. "Gosh. Surprise, Rupali, I'm trans."

"Cool," Ru says. "Is this a recent thing?"

"As of, like, two hours ago, yeah." I lower my hands, trying not to seem too embarrassed.

Ru clicks her tongue. "You got pretty far without—"

"I did. It's a whole thing." I throw my hands up. "Fuck, babe. Just, fuck!"

"I know."

"How much have we been hiding?" I blink away the brimming tears. "How much, how long, and what for? What was the *point*?"

"Hey." Rupali spreads her arms. "Come here."

I obey without hesitation. Burying my face in her hair, holding her close, letting her pat my back and squeeze me tight.

"Where do we even start?" I ask, sniffling.

"Wherever you like, darling," Rupali says, as if it's that simple. "We don't even have to start somewhere. Not right now."

"I wish we didn't." I take a deep breath. Ru's familiar scent, her warmth, and her maddening patience are all so calming. "Why did it have to be like this?"

"It's okay, love." Ru squeezes me again.

"I never got to just meet you." I'm crying into Ru's hair now. "If we were just two people. Two women. It could have been so much simpler."

"Do you want it to be?" Ru asks.

"I do," I say immediately. "But—"

Ru lets go of me and steps away. I peer at her, wiping my cheeks dry, my breaths suddenly shallow and rapid. "What'd I say?" I start to ask.

But Ru raises a finger to my lips before I can even begin to gather my thoughts, and I fall silent.

"Don't think I caught your name, gorgeous." Ru smirks at me, her voice playful, a mischievous twinkle in her eye.

I gawp at her, eyes wide, unblinking. Strangely lightheaded. She's never spoken to me like this before.

It takes me a second to settle my nerves enough to speak. "I'm—I mean, hello. My name is Rashmi." I give her a small grin, suddenly bashful.

"Pretty name for a pretty girl." Ru snickers, and my heart flutters at the sound. "I'm Rupali, dollface, but you can just call me Ru."

"Dollface?" I shake my head in disbelief, my jaw hanging open. Blushing profusely. "Excuse you. That's so—that's a lot of nerve."

"So's this."

Ru puts a hand on the small of my back and pulls me closer. Her other hand cups my face, and my eyes widen further as she runs her thumb along my lower lip.

"Are you seriously—" I pause, remembering to breathe. "Is this really how you talk to girls you just met?"

"Only the gorgeous ones."

She's so fucking smug. Running her hand through my hair, the other one up my side, and pressing herself into me like there's no one around. I glance about, cheeks hot, embarrassed but unable to stop tittering. Thankfully, the party's well on its way to winding down, but the building isn't exactly empty yet.

"Get a hold of yourself," I say to Ru in hushed tones, not a speck of chastisement in my voice. "What's come over you?"

"You," Ru says, practically snarling, and it's all I can do not to whimper. "Do you know how long I've wanted to do this?"

"Five minutes?" My giggle turns into a soft, breathy gasp as Ru's hands wander below my hips. "Damn."

"Longer." Ru's fingers dig into my flesh with an urgency. "Maybe my whole life."

I can't help it. I'm holding on to Ru for dear life, knees weak, one leg coiled around hers. My body gives way, compresses, malleable to her touch. Aching for more the more she grabs me, grasps me, gropes me. Her hot breath rumbles in my ear, her teeth and tongue a promise inches from my skin. My eyes roll back into my skull.

I can't stop the whimpers.

"Take me, then." My voice is caught between a hiss and a moan. "I was promised to you, after all."

My back collides with a wall before I register I've been pushed against it. Rupali's teeth sink into my neck as mine sink into her shoulder, muffling my cries. She mauls me with both hands, raking past the flimsy barrier keeping her claws from my breasts, and pushes her knee between my legs. My thighs clench around her while the rest of my body sags, a puppet held up on her ferocious strings. I wrap my arms around her, tugging at every thrust, letting her know how much I need her to come back, come back where she belongs and never, ever, ever go.

"Ru."

I'm panting, tongue out, eyes unfocused, struggling to speak through the sensations of Ru gnawing at my ear. Writhing on her lap. Completely possessed. Desperate to tell her what she means to me.

"Please, Ru. Please."

Trembling, spasming tremors. I need to tell her.

"Ru, I'm—"

I can't form words from the sounds escaping my throat.

But she answers.

"MINE."

My mind goes blank. Void of all thoughts save one, singular word that pours from my mouth as freely as my arousal stains our clothes. Yes, yes, yes, yours in every life and every world and every way.

"Yours!"

Every kiss, every touch, every moan and growl that escapes our lungs is a promise made anew, a vow sworn on our own terms. An acknowledgement that we are meant to be, not because it was ordained, but because we want it.

"I'm yours, Ru," I whisper in her ear. Her response leaves me incapable of speech.

EPILOGUE
WHAT TRULY MATTERS

Nichole

It's windy tonight. The roads and paved paths cutting through the sprawling campus greens are lit by fluorescent streetlamps. Helical tube lights burn ghostly white atop black posts, ensconced in fixtures styled to look like lanterns. They're energy-efficient, supposedly, but they always seem to cast too little light and too many shadows when dusk falls. Especially on the paths snaking between the haphazardly placed buildings, where the lampposts are few and far between, and the snarled, rustling trees are aplenty. More than one campus attack is reported every semester, carried out in the long stretches between flickering beacons, where darkness pools.

I think I'll be fine, though. Doesn't seem like anyone wants to be around me right now.

All this walking is making me hungry again.

Dorothy's will be open for a while yet. I can keep strolling through the campus greens for, like, twenty minutes before heading there to close out my night with an ice-cold orange juice and a giant fucking grilled cheese. Taking a late-night selfie there indicates a night well spent, too. Oops, we

lost track of the time and had to go to the only place still open! Maybe I'll find some stragglers from the drag ball to feature in the background.

No, not a grilled cheese. A slice of pizza toast would be more photogenic.

I need to kill another hour or so before it's late enough for me to snap "after-party" pics at *Dorothy's*. The computer science building gleams up ahead, a glowing cube comprised of floor-to-ceiling glass and polished steel that keeps its lights on at all hours. Don't need my student ID to enter the lobby, either. I can sit down for a bit, fix my hair, see if I can nail the "all danced out" look.

I hope Knight of Knockers is online. I'll respond to her DMs if she sends me one tonight.

The revolving door snags my dress on the way in. I think I imagined the ripping sound, but I can't be bothered to check. Doubt I'll ever wear this one again anyway. I'm almost tempted to switch to skirts as my main aesthetic. Dresses might be cursed.

At least the lobby's pretty much empty. Guess even the database dorks have plans tonight. I snag one of the good alcoves, with warm lighting and charging ports, and settle down on the bean bag chair. Sometimes I wish I could still do homework here occasionally, but the creepy stares and rude interruptions, even with my headphones on, really aren't worth the hassle.

I plug my phone into the charging cable and check the server. Good old Knockers is online, looks like—and she left more comments on my pics. Bit desperate, sis. She'll definitely bite if I toss her another bone. I sigh and sit up straighter, readying my smile.

I'm about to open my camera when the phone buzzes in my hand. A server-wide ping. I frown and open *general* to a flurry of activity. Messages pouring in faster than I can read them, many in all caps, all bursting with exclamation points. Every single one tagging, addressing, or otherwise mentioning—

"Laura?"

I roll my eyes with a scoff. Does she have to hog the server's attention now, of all times? Doesn't she have better things to do on a Friday night?

Scrolling up through the deluge is pointless. I pull up Laura's posts through the search and read her latest one with a frown.

> **Laura**
>
> **@everyone** If I could have your attention, please. I've been on this server for a long time—almost exactly three years. No one has come close to my NTBV in all that time. Nor has anyone come close to knocking me out, despite persistent speculation and accusations of womanhood since my very first quarter. I have the most knockouts of any RCBG contestant, ever, and I am the only contestant in the server's history to call Discursive Combat and win. The only one to call Discursive Combat, period, full stop. I have the global high score. I have immunity from tribunals. I am, by every metric and in every way that matters, this sport's reigning and eternal champion, a queen all but waiting for her crown.

She's also the reigning champion of being full of herself. I almost close Discord, appalled that the whole server's paying attention to this drivel, but catch the next sentence before I can thumb away and stop in my tracks.

> **Laura**
>
> So know that when I step down, I step down undefeated.

Step down? Why the fuck would she step down two months away from the grand prize?

The grand prize whose existence I have no evidence for, an annoying voice in my head reminds me. I ignore it to read on.

Laura

@isaacahedron I want to say this directly to you, my dear, sweet Emmy. In front of this farce that calls itself a competition, this "sport" that comes down to a matter of luck and genetics, I declare to you that I'm a woman. I'm a trans woman, and so are you. And frankly so is every dense, self-denying, scared little girl who blundered in here, whether she's calling herself a femboy faggot or cloaking herself in my debate strategies. As an aside, the whole tribunal concept is fucking stupid. You can't "prove" someone's a gender unless they admit it, so why admit it? That's the whole fucking problem. It's so easy to never admit it, to tell yourself you only care about big boobs or looking pretty because you're mastering epic fem strats, or expansive queer manhood, or whatever. It's nonsense. Stop hurting yourselves. Get a fucking grip.

Every word I read deepens my horror. She couldn't have just left quietly. Laura had to ruin things for everyone else on the way out.

Laura

And that's what you've always done, Emmy. You say you love me, but you use me to hurt yourself. You act like womanhood is a gift, an achievement, a privilege you don't deserve, but it's not. You don't need to fit some fucking criteria to be a woman, to be just as much of a woman as I am. I've always seen you as a woman, Emmy, and seeing you hurt yourself by denying it hurts me too. More than I can express. So I'm done. I'm out. I don't want to hurt you anymore. I don't want to win if this is the cost, because I love you, Emmy. More than anything, and definitely more than this stupid competition.

You fucking idiot. I raise a hand to my forehead, wide-eyed, and scroll to the bottom of Laura's nauseating rambling.

Laura

Call me, Emmy. Please. We can work it out.

Laura

tl;dr: Of course I'm a trans woman. Are you all dense?

I throw my phone aside, disgusted.

"Perfectly cut, borderline see-through dress, tits barely contained, and I can't even post them for fear of the femboy brigade." I slam my fist into the stupid bean bag. "Thanks, bitch."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Talia Bhatt is a lesbian fiction author from the Global South with a penchant for messy dykes and whirlwind passions. She also writes essays and non-fiction on radical transfeminism, best known for the hit collection *Trans/Rad/Fem*, and co-hosts the feminist podcast *Cracked Ivory*. For updates and more information about her work, visit https://taliabhatt.com/ or follow her on Bluesky https://bsky.app/profile/taliabhatt.itch.io.

Beth Leigh-Ann is the creator and co-author of the web serial *https://www.scribblehub.com/series/1584138/ranked-competitive-breast-growth/* on which *Estro Junkies* was based, the artist behind the satirical web comic *Pills That Make You Green*, and internet cognitohazard. Follow her on Bluesky https://bsky.app/profile/tpwrtrmnky.bsky.social.

ALSO BY TALIA BHATT

Fiction

Dulhaniyaa

Esha Arora is the last person anyone would've expected to acquiesce to an arranged marriage. But to her family's surprise and joy, when a good rishta for her hand comes along, Esha agrees to abruptly quit her MFA program in the States and returns to India to be wed.

That's when Billu, a cyclone in a salwar and the dance instructor hired by Esha's family, bursts into the monotony of her pre-wedding existence. Slowly, it dawns on Esha she isn't nearly as resigned to her fate as she thought—but can she un-make a commitment so easily?

Dulhaniyaa is a story of class, queerness, and the struggle to accept your identity when it comes in conflict with your family and culture.

Non-fiction

Brown/Trans/Les

How does one articulate a cohesive feminism when feminists themselves insist on decentering women?

Transmisogyny is far from the only force that is animated by epistemic injustice, however. Few cultures illustrate the truth of that assertion better than the land of Bhatt's birth, a nation dogged by internal contradictions and fractious violence along the lines of caste, class, religion, nationality, and more, before even considering the matter of sex.

In this text, Bhatt attempts to reckon with the questions that many feminists have long struggled to grapple with: Can feminism advocate for the plight of women without reinforcing the very category it seeks to interrogate? The answer, she hopes, is “yes”.

Trans/Rad/Fem

Second-Wave feminism is, today, nearly synonymous with transphobia. One may be tempted to conclude that the Second Wave, as a whole, has done irreparable harm to feminist, queer and trans politics, and must be discarded entirely. But is that truly the case? This series of essays aims to reconstruct and reintroduce the radical feminist framework and boldly makes the claim that transfeminism, far from being antagonistic to radical feminism, is in fact its direct descendant.