

And now for something new! This is going to be a multiple chapter story of an undetermined length. But most importantly, this takes the cake of my most ambitious commission yet and I can't be happier to share it all with you! Commissioned by **Kasarberang**, this is my first time working with them and it's definitely an interesting premise. That all being said, this story is going to feature *niche* kinds of tastes! (Kinks of the milk and milking variety...) But ABDL themes nonetheless!

So without further ado, I wish to present to you a new series!

**Bonus question:** Would you like for me to start including expected fetishes/kinks in these preambles? I can't say I'd do it all the time, but only when it features something I'd consider notably outside my usual sphere that my own stuff taps into.

---

# Making Amends

Commissioned by Kasarberang

## 1 - Happy Birthday

It was a rainy kind of day.

Dark.

Cloudy.

Wet.

Soaked shoes.

The first thing he did the moment the bus doors opened was taking a daring leap forward, a jump just to cross the gap between the metal roof above his head and the taught cloth awning of the all too familiar convenience store.

“Brrr!” the clerk imitated his shivers from behind the register. “Don't tell me you forgot your umbrella again?”

“H-heh... what can I say?” Luckily she didn't mind wet shirts being wrung out on her floor. “Guess I forgot to check the weather?”

Resting her chin on her hand, the woman rolled her eyes.

“Don’t you have one of those widgets on your phone? The thing that can warn you about the weather?”

The boy’s mouth drooped.

“A what-dget?”

“You’re kidding, right? Daniel, package slip printer extraordinaire doesn’t know how to check the weather?”

“Yes I do!” Daniel tried to deflect, but it was written all over his face. “I *do* know,” he doubled down, trying to dust off the rain that’d already soaked through his shirt.

“Uh-huh,” the clerk nodded bemusedly. For a second the woman looked outside from the side display windows, covered in layers of expired or soon to be expired adverts. Numbers for pin-up boys that didn’t exist and all the cheap escorts that the majority of this community could never afford. Need the countless dozen different lottery pools be mentioned, too?

“Come on,” she gestured her hand, leaving her desk and detouring to lock the front door.

“Jess, it’s fine, I don’t need any—”

“It’s either I get to dry you off or I kick you back outside into torrential downpour?” she spoke her taunt quite simply, and Daniel went quiet.

Leaking through the fluorescent hum in the shop was the rapid-fire of pitter-patter smashing into sidewalk, street, cars and umbrellas, the last of which Daniel did not have.

“Well?” Jess smiled expectantly. It wasn’t even a question at this point.

With a huff, Daniel trudged on forward to the back room, drenched shirt, jeans and all.

Jess came in from behind, reaching up into a cabinet. “You obviously came in here for a reason...” she turned around, rubbing her hands with a mostly clean cloth.

“I...” Daniel grunted, trying his best to balance the climb up onto the metal stool, and just as things were about to go sideways, Jess’s large hand found itself up against his back.

“Got it?” she asked as she pushed regardless.

Finally making it to the top, Daniel parked his wet self on the stool. “Yeah...thanks... And *no*, I didn’t come here to get dry, I—” he stopped the moment Jess friskily swished through his wet head of hair all over, mopping the towel through.

The cloth came up temporarily just so she could see his face. “I’m still listening?”

Then his nose had a tickle. “...A...achoo!” a sudden meek sneeze escaped him.

It wasn’t part of the original plan, but now Daniel’s nose was being wiped for him. “Bless you!” She wiped, then suddenly frowned. Ugh, wait; don’t tell me she had you working outside on that loading dock?”

Damn it. For just a friendly face Daniel shopped from on the semi-regular, either he spoke too much about his life or had simply come across a too-attentive one.

And so, naturally, he deflected. “I can handle it, Jess...”

“Says who? Your body?” He must have been showing the right body language, because preemptively his nose was already being pinched with the towel. And like the mind reader Jess somehow was, Daniel erupted another tiny, muffled sneeze.

“You should *talk* to your boss, Daniel. You know you shouldn’t be pushing yourself so hard?”

“I can *handle* it, Jess. I know what I’m capable of...”

All Jess did to respond was slightly sigh, and Daniel was suddenly a mind reader himself. The ‘Okay, but I think differently’ sigh. The disagreement sigh. The thought of being doubted alone was already making him uncomfortable. Annoyed.

“It’s a woman’s job, Daniel.” Boom. Bombshell dropped. “She should have you at a desk where you don’t have to worry about catching colds because you forgot your rain stuff!”

“I don’t need a stupid desk job...!” Daniel finally swatted away Jess’ arm, yet immediately the guilt bit him right back. He couldn’t bring himself to look up at her. “I’m sorry, I just...I know I’m capable...!”

Jess leaned against a nearby shelf, quietly plucking her fingers for a moment. The topic was then promptly changed. “So, what else brought you here? Snacks? Actually, we got another delivery of those cream pops you like~?” she grinned temptingly.

Why did Jess have to use trigger words like that? Instant cravings from his sweet tooth. It was a natural law. If cream pops existed, Daniel acquired said pops. Always. Almost always.

“Uhm...maybe next time. Am I dry now?” Carefully, he watched where his feet were going to land as he slipped off the stool. Jess looked ready to catch him but was just a second too slow.

“Next time?” Jess tilted her head. “You *always* get them when we have them though?” A hand came on her hip the moment it stuck itself out. “Daniel, what’s wrong? I’m sorry about what I said; don’t let that affect anything, please?”

“It’s not that. It’s nothing. Really. And no, I promise, I’m not upset with you... But uhm...I was here to grab dinner?”

The corner of Jess’ mouth tucked in on itself.

“The usual?”

“Yeah, if you have it?”

He watched the towel in her back pocket swish like a tail. “Just a second.”

They came back into the front, Daniel being not even close to dry, but far more damp than wet.

Jess’ head turned around while she looked for what she needed. “Anything fun going on this week?” It wasn’t a given Daniel would be back this week, so they always used times like these to catch up. The strains of being just acquaintances.

“Uhm...nothing real important, I guess,” Daniel muttered as he strolled across the rainy, wet rubber stress mats, watching the rows of cold drinks, beers and waters like it was modern decor. Well, it sort of was.

A noise of intrigue hummed from the clerk’s mouth. “So something *is* going on? Well, *I* bet that it’s something important?” Jess challenged while she took a step stool over to an even higher shelf. Daniel had parked himself on a turned over milk crate beside her, staring high up at her. Snug jeans and a bright pink uniform with a baseball cap for personal touch. Stylish.

All Daniel did was shrug. “A call from my mom tonight? She usually calls the night before my birthday.”

“What?!” Jess raised her voice, stammering as a thousand packets of food rained off the shelf she just spasmed her arm unto, yelping as she grabbed it to keep steady. “It’s your birthday tomorrow? And you didn’t think that it was the *least* bit important to mention?!”

It was just another day, wasn’t it?

“It’s not that big a deal...is it?”

“Of course it is! Would have been nice to get some notice?” Jess sighed while she reorganized her newly made mess. “Sooo? What’s it gonna be? Lucky 21? Time for some drinks, huh?”

“No...20, actually.”

“Psh. 21’s overrated, anyway.” Jess always knew how to find the right spin anyway. “Big two-oh! Congrats, buddy!”

Her shoes clapped the moment they hit the floor. Carrying a packet in hand, she took the longer route to the register, stopping by the freezer section along the way.

Daniel opted for the optimized route, still taking him the same amount of time to reach the same destination. The next step was always embarrassing to ask for, which is why he was glad Jess usually understood what to do already. And yet there wasn’t any footstool for him to use. “Uhm...Jess? Where’s the uh...”

The register was already dinging its gratitude for being fed a lettuce of green. “Don’t need it today,” Jess said as she finished making her pocket just a little bit lighter.

Daniel’s hand was already stuffing into his pocket. “Jess, it’s fine, I can pay for it! You don’t—”

“--Have to give you a birthday present?” She rolled her eyes. “Accept a *little* kindness, Daniel. Accept a gift! It doesn’t make you any less independent. Promise.” She came back from behind the counter just to take a knee, holding out the plastic bag from a reachable height.

And right as he reached for it, Jess tugged it right back.

“And if you come back tomorrow, I promise there’ll be another box of cream pops with your name on it?”

He bounced the toe of his weathered shoe off the floor awkwardly. That did sound tempting, but making the trip for something so silly...it made him feel...silly.

“Thank you, Jess.” Daniel smiled, accepting the bag.

“...Actually, can I walk you home?” Jess looked outside again holding her elbows. “We’re still sorta in that darker sooner rather than later phase...” Then she seemed a bit uneasy. “There’s been some women walking around here lately that I don’t like the look of...”

“I’ll be fine, Jess,” Daniel assured, already guilty enough for cutting into her time. “And uhm, and...thanks again for the...cream pops...” a small smile overtook him.

Jess smiled right back ten-fold. “Of course! I put those aside *special*, by the way! You wouldn’t believe all the kids coming to—” she caught herself a bit too late. “I mean— *everybody* likes them! Uh, me too, even? They go super fast, is all I mean. Like, uh...really.”

He didn’t have a place to look other than the floor. Maybe it was time to find a new vice.

“Um...I’m gonna go...”

“Mhm.” Jess nodded somewhat solemnly, already aching from the fuck-up she’d just made. “Oh, sorry, let me get that...” she came forward to unlock the door.

Daniel started to push the door open.

“And Daniel? You know you can come to me if you’re having money troubles, okay?”

He was quiet for a moment. “Sure. Thanks, Jess.”

“Happy birthday, bud.”

---

“Mom? Hello?” Daniel held the buzzy phone against his ear, sat at his grand table for one-and-a-half. It was both big yet somehow simultaneously on the small side. Big for him, small for society.

It didn’t help either to have a noisy boiling pot of water on the nearby stove. With his limited amounts of furniture optimized only by circumstance from owning such a small studio apartment, Daniel sat perfectly underneath the yellow ceiling light. He had one window over the sink and another on the balcony in the adjoining living room, but it hardly meant much on a day when natural sunlight was practically nonexistent.

Just another one of those dreary days.

“Mom? Are you there?” he tapped his foot impatiently, watching the stove. His noodles were going to need to go in soon...

“Danny?” A voice materialized through the static. “Sweetheart, are you there?”

“Yes? Hello?” Daniel called back. “And wait, Mom, please! I asked you to stop calling me that?” It sounded like the reception was evening out. “Call me by my actual name, please.”

“Hello?” his mom repeated, finally on the same page. “*Daniel*,” she sounded quite displeased to be using that name, “you’re always going to be the son that I raised, you know?”

“And I’m always gonna be Daniel...” he sighed right back. “How’s everything at home?”

“Your father’s doing good. I’m still working late at the plant, but retirement is on its way soon enough!”

“That’s good...” Daniel traced circles on the fake wooden table. For as long as he could remember, his mom had been the hardest worker he’d ever known. Then a crude, uncomfortable memory slapped him upside the head.

*Second* hardest working...

“Oh! Your father actually started some volunteer work at the gardens, you know? Remember? The one I’d take you and Rose to all the time?”

The same place he was always forced to hold hands with a certain someone? By no fault of his mother, mind you. “Yeah,” he couldn’t have sounded less enthusiastic, “I remember.”

“It’s nothing too physically intensive; which is good! Goodness, it always worries me half to death thinking about how you lift those boxes all the time at your work!”

“Mom— I told you; they just have me put shipping labels on them. No lifting. I promise.” A very unfortunate promise that he couldn’t even break if he wanted to. Contractually he was prohibited from engaging in “mild to intensive” hard labor. Or in other words, anything that a woman in a high place deemed as unfit for a man. He was already sulking. Just because genetics favored the opposite sex, that shouldn’t discount him from being able to try...

The moment he was maybe feeling a bit “bold” or “dangerous” would surely lead to an instant report to HR by one of his coworkers. In a warehouse full of women, even your coworkers were somehow your supervisors. The same recounted story circulated by the few that were left went like this:

Get reported. Get put on probation. Miraculously fail probation somehow. Get terminated.

Sure there were desk jobs, but for every aspiring man just trying to make a living, there were assuredly five more women with just as much drive, positive social stigma, physicality, and brains to do twice the work in half the time. It was a cruel reality poor Daniel was always trying to disillusion himself from.

The “dream” was independence. Self-sufficiency. Living and working on his own, and making something special out of it. And yet, sitting in his one-bedroom studio apartment, preparing to dine on cheap ramen with his half-melted dessert sitting in the freezer, the “dream” couldn’t feel any more nightmarish.

“As long as you’re safe...” his mom said pensively. Somehow she was the breadwinner and caregiver. Dad was capable, kind and caring, but something about Mom, or maybe even something about society itself had decided from day one that there would be a superior sex, and the writing was certainly on the wall. “Any plans for your birthday tomorrow? It’ll be the weekend, right? Why don’t we get you a plane ticket and you fly up for the weekend? Your dad and I would love—”

“That’s okay, Mom.” Daniel declined. “Besides, I could afford it if I wanted to...”

“Of course you could!” His mom was always quick to be his support, shielding him from her own comments the moment he openly suspected doubt. “But living on your own does get expensive, you know? Your dad and I just want to help out however we can, is all.”

“...” Daniel exhaled through his nose.

*Help.* He was always the one getting it.

Always being offered handouts. Charity. Given that extra push to make it the extra mile. Always, like without it there would be no way to entertain or humor any of his dreams or desires. Living on his own was only possible from the start by getting his own mom to co-sign for his lease. It was officially a matter of financial credibility, but find any man making a high five-figures, and they’d still say the same. That’s what the articles said, at least. Just hitting low five-figures was a rough exertion for Daniel...



“I appreciate it, but I don’t need help, mom. I’m fine.” Maybe they could talk more if all their conversations didn’t have to go like this. He sometimes talked to his dad, but even he was cut from a different cloth. The same as mom. The kind that believed in the roles Daniel didn’t want to accept.

Families were difficult for all kinds of reasons, especially when the love was still there, somehow still possible despite the social politics that sunk its fangs into every society across the globe. As incapable as Daniel suspected his mother thought he was, she still was the reason he was alive, and she was still a part of his life in every way from childhood and even up to now.

But even family wasn’t immune to triggering animosity, which is in part a big reason why Daniel liked limiting contact as of late.

He curled his toes, gripping his phone tightly the moment he heard her ask.

“Have you heard from your sister at all, lately?”

“Mom, please?” It was the first time over the phone that Daniel didn’t try to not sound upset.  
“Can we not talk about her?”

“Daniel, she’s your *sister*. She cares about you, you know?”

Why? Why did it always go this way? Had not all roads lead to Rome, certainly all conversations ended with Rose. Ended precisely because Daniel never wanted to continue anything to do with her. Anything that reminded him of— Of nothing. Remind him of nothing. The perks to living from home; absolute freedom to walk away from stuff like this completely.

Daniel furrowed his brow, knocking his knuckle impatiently against the table.

“It’s about to be *my* birthday, isn’t it?” Daniel in a heated moment quipped. “So *why* does it still have to be about her? Why can’t it be just about me, Mom? Why do you *always* have to bring her up? Can’t...can’t we just have one conversation without bringing her up? I—”

“Daniel, I—”

“I don’t care! I told you! I just don’t want to talk about her. I don’t care,” he looked around his tiny kitchen, finding no escape. “I just don’t...”

“Daniel, your sister—”

“Mom!” he cried in instant disgust. What didn’t she understand?!

Yet his mother came right back with just as much vigor, if not more. “*Danny!* I haven’t said anything these past years because I was hoping by now you two were going to figure things out!”

“There’s nothing to figure out...!” Daniel groaned. Figure what out? How to get over who Rose was as a person and just live in an eternal shadow? A second layer of clouds made their timely arrival, casting another shroud of darkness on the modicum of light reaching inside his apartment. How ironic.

“Do you know I talk with your sister every week?” Great, now he was being compared to her timeliness, too? Daniel called once a month. Apparently Rose did that better, too. “Everytime. All the time, she’s asking about you?”

“Why, just to know how much better she’s doing than me?”

“Because she *cares*, Danny! *I* care! I barely get to hear from you out there, and I worry because it...it feels like I’m the only person you can rely on, but even then you hate doing that!”

“Because I don’t need to rely on anybody!” Christ, why wasn’t he just hanging up already?

“But everybody needs a support system, Daniel? You’re no exception?”

“I *have* my support system, and I don’t want Rose as a part of it.” Daniel fumed. Maybe he didn’t have a system or maybe he did. He didn’t care. He just wanted to finish a conversation that didn’t end with a premature hanging up.

His mother sighed over the line. “Have you at least been reading her text messages?”

Like it was a moment of pride; a chance to brag about his sobriety, Daniel said, “No, I’ve had her blocked since last year.”

“*DANIEL!*” They were half a country apart and even that couldn’t stop the hairs on his neck from standing. “You *blocked* your own sister? Who has been nothing but kind to you since you were kids?”

“Yeah,” Daniel scoffed, finding his bravado again. “Easy for you to say? You weren’t there when she teased me! Humiliated me, treated me like a dumb ba—”

“Stop,” his mother interjected, “you are my handsome young man, and Rose is my beautiful daughter. May...maybe there was some kind of misunderstanding when you were kids; maybe something was going on that I didn’t see, or I didn’t realize.” And it had only taken her twenty years to *maybe* realize it. “It’s clear that something’s bothered you for a long time,” Daniel could hear her sniffing on the other end, the guilt weighing in her voice, “and I’m *sorry* that as your mother I couldn’t see that...! But sweetheart, please! Rose *cares* about you! She’s your older sister that wants nothing but to be a part of your life!”

He was half surprised that it wasn’t followed up by pleas for him to finally just drop everything and come home. Start anew. Start something domestic. He loved his mom, obviously, and that’s why it made it so much harder to hear those things from the people that you love. But despite the recycled topic, tonight’s conversation felt different and much more pointed. Usually it was about *all* the things that Daniel was or wasn’t doing. Tonight it was just one thing only, and it was the worst of things.

His mom must have been waiting for something, but Daniel was too much of many things to say anything back. For a split-second the sound of his mom in tears was enough to inspire guilt in himself, which he was quickly trying to suffocate with long-held grudges and animosity for his sister. Something. Anything to keep how he felt the same.

“..Daniel,” he could hear his mom wipe her nose, “Just unblock her? You don’t have to talk to her if you don’t want to, but don’t shut her out like that. At least just read some of her texts, okay? You’re a big boy; you’ll decide in the end what you want to do, but I want you to think long and hard about how you feel about your sister when you read some of her messages. Just think, okay?”

Hanging his head from the table, he murmured, “...My noodles are almost done...” Letting the silence say the rest, he stared at the unopened package of his would-be dinner on the counter. “I should go.”

“...Alright then.”

“Talk to you tomorrow.”

His sad, heartbroken mother sniffled again. “Goodnight, honey. I love you.”

After one last detached goodbye, he hung up, expecting the sweet release, or somehow the blockage in his lungs dissipating. He paced over to the sink window, prying it open with a tired creak. He waited for the breath of fresh air, but it never came. It all felt warm and stale. Bad, like the sickness he felt was from within.

The window stayed open and droplets of rain slowly started to collect on the windowsill. Daniel was back in his chair, only leaning over to turn off the one of two burners on his stove.

Repeatedly, he tapped his foot repeatedly against the leg of his table, willing himself, trying to, daring in any way to find the strength. Find the courage to just *kick* it. Flip it in a fit of confused, aggravated rage. Do *something* to vent. But he didn't. A tired whine left his mouth as he slumped on the table.

Ramen hardly sounded appetizing now, somehow even less than it already was with it being a near-daily source of nutrition.

It wasn't time for bed, but everything in his body and in nature seemed to say otherwise. With an empty stomach he slumped on the couch that always stayed pulled-out, slipping underneath the covers. Articles of clothing vacated the premises, namely pants and socks.

It wasn't boiling anymore, but the still-hot pot of water sat unattended on the stove and the single-serving packet of noodles remained unopened.

He tossed and turned; the pillow was warm on both sides, and the rain did nothing to calm him. Nothing was soothing him. Nothing could calm him down.

*"...Fuck! Fucking fuck!"*

He cursed under the covers in a whisper-y rage. Why was he angry? No, he knew *why*, he just didn't want to accept it. To acknowledge it. It all sucked. It was all dumb. All stupid. All unfair. So, so very unfair. A dumb urge to throw out those cream pops was already welling up inside of him, yet the thought of Jess somehow finding out made his heart ache.

What was he supposed to do to calm himself down? What...?

Then his eyes fell on it. Just beyond the horizon of his own hubris was the flat, quiet device sitting on the nightstand next to the couch-bed. With just a few seconds of quiet contemplation, he quickly spun the other way on the springy mattress.

*This is stupid! I'm not. No. Not ever. Never. I'm not listening to her. I'm done. We're done. I don't want to talk to her, and I sure as hell don't want to see her. Not at all. No. Fucking. Way.*

But he was already staring at it again, helplessly dictated by nagging guilt. Before he knew it his shaking finger was sweeping through his contacts.

And there it was. The list wasn't long, so in no time his finger was hovering over it.

'R'.

*Rose.*

He didn't know any other, none aside from the flower itself, which had just as many thorns. Childhood memories flooded his brain the closer his finger drew to the screen, overwhelmed by anything and everything to do with her. From kids to pre-teens, and from teens to young adults.

He shouldn't, but he wouldn't. He couldn't. He couldn't not do it. Not after hearing his mom like that. The curse of family. The curse of loving someone too much. A slave to his own compassion, Daniel flinched the moment he unblocked her number.

Immediately, he chucked his phone at the nearby pillow in the corner like it was a live bomb. No hard-hitting noise, so it assumedly landed safely. Whatever. Maybe it would've been for the best had his phone been broken right then.

But it was done. There was no turning back.

And so, Daniel crashed back into his poorly-made bed, calming down finally with a conscience kept at bay long enough for him to comfortably close his eyes. The rain was peaceful once more and his pillow was cool and soft. He slept, taking in all the white noise. The pitter-patter from the rain coming in from the kitchen window, the sounds of the cars and city above and beneath him, and one other thing, as well.

The constant, repeating hum and buzz from his phone.

Ding.

Ding.

Ding.

Ding.

Ding...

Every notification for every text. Every missed call, message, and note. A year's worth of communications. A year's worth of trying to reach him. All from one person. All from his big sister.

Rose.

---

The next morning was at least better than the one prior, but mother nature still had yet to finish sweeping away the rest of her sky soot.

It was going to be a day like any other, except without work. One less thing Daniel could use to his advantage to pass the time in order to make it to bed just to repeat it all over again. He could be searching for a new job, picking up a hobby; anything productive and worthwhile.

An ordinary day, yes, but his birthday nonetheless.

Starting off with his best foot forward, Daniel marched to the kitchen in a slump, using both hands to lazily swing the front of his fridge open.

Barren, no, but frugal, yes.

With his final half-serving of milk in hand, Daniel came over to the counter for his favorite off-brand cereal; Whole-i-o's. And just as the name advertised, even a knock-off product like this put holes in his wallet.

The box was light and lifted with ease. Convenient, because that meant breakfast would be that much quicker. A perfect pairing with the puddle of milk he had left, out came a delicious pile of cereal dust with a generous handful of actual in-tact cereal pieces.

Grabbing a spoon from the strainer, Daniel gave it a good, sterilizing wipe with a dry paper towel before digging right in.

It didn't taste bad, and it counted as food, and that's what mattered most.

Having satisfied his most basic and manageable hierarchical need, Daniel went for the bathroom to satisfy the next, only stopping once he heard a ding from the corner of the room.

Then a sinking feeling had hit him.

He was on call today, wasn't he? That same moment he tried to visualize his work schedule, but nothing was coming to him. Shit.

The perks of being a working man meant having to work twice as hard just to earn something even remotely close to his better half. Daniel was chasing a dream that was already a regular, weekly deposit in the bank accounts of his supposed peers. More often than not, a forklift driver could be conveniently relabeled as a forklift parker the moment gender became part of the equation. Systems engineer became a file recorder and a teacher was an education assistant.

There were no wage gaps because all people under the same title were paid equally. And naturally, other jobs were paid more than others, some less, vice versa.

As little as he thought of it, even Daniel didn't want to work on his birthday. Forget that; work on the start of a weekend. But there would be no exceptions and no excuses. By the scrutiny of having to work twice as hard, Daniel tensed himself as he approached his discarded phone.

As soon as he brought it to life he remembered what it was doing there in the first place.

*FROM: ROSE (103)*

There was a new message today, but not from his boss. He quietly stared at the daunting, 3-digit number, then dropped his hand by his side.

It wasn't until a short trip to the bathroom and one lukewarm shower later that he even looked at the phone again, feeling himself tense up every time he glanced. The intimidating aura radiated from the device.

But finally, after a long year of running, compounded with many more of indifference and animosity, he bit the bullet with a sigh and ripped off the bandage.

Open now was his small list of contacts, and a once gray name was now teeming with black, digital life.

The moment he opened her messages, time for the abandoned one-sided conversation resumed. Beginning from the last text she'd successfully sent and Daniel promptly ignored, his phone automatically sprinted to the bottom-most recent message at a neck-breaking speed, blurring past all the unanswered wellbeing checks, casual hellos, pictures of animals, food, and places; tiny factoids, family gossip and more.

Just as quickly as the conversation moved it came to an instantaneous halt on its most recent message. A message from today. Fifteen minutes ago.

*ROSE: Happy B-day! It's okay if you don't respond, but I want you to know that your big sister is always thinking about you! I mentioned it a while back, but in case you didn't see it, I'm living in the same state as you now!! Also, just talked to Mom. BE NICE TO HER!! We don't get to see you a lot, so stuff like that matters, you know! If you're up to it, give your big sis a call so she can wish you a super-duper special happy birthday! XOXOXO*

Daniel squeezed his phone as he read the message. How could she be talking to him like that? Pretending like things were normal between them? His entire life he'd been either her plaything or poor little brother to pity. It wasn't fair. Not a single bit of it.

Living with Rose was always an exercise. Always a struggle. When he was with her he wasn't himself. He couldn't be. When Rose wanted to play, Daniel had to play. From the moment she was speaking sentences, Daniel was always subjected to her "playtime." It was always the same, treating him like a kid, or the brother that could never grow up. The humiliation she caused from all the times she babied and belittled him. Forcing him to hold her hand on the way to school, always getting in the faces of other boys and girls the moment he started looking uneasy around them. The moment he even thought of making a friend, Rose was right there to vet out anyone she didn't approve of, and Daniel's near-empty list of phone contacts was telling enough.

By the time Rose graduated ahead of him and was already preparing for a higher education, far too much damage had been done to his reputation.

*The baby brother.*

*Big sister's special little guy.*

*Rose's flower.*

He'd become untouchable for no reason other than his own sister's demeanor. He carried a heavy stigma of being sheltered and pampered, unapproachable on account of a helicopter sibling. A stigma lasting him through the best time of his life to meet people and make long-lasting friends. She could be more of a mom than their actual mother. At times, Rose hardly even felt like a sibling.

And on the days that it wasn't straight humiliation, it still persisted in achievements. Rose was gifted. She's *still* gifted. Daniel may have ghosted her for a whole year, but he knew that didn't change. She was great and it was a universal, God-given truth. And yet, no matter how hard



Daniel tried to be himself, individualize, or find his own place in the world, there Rose was, always taking to the same interests as him.

If Daniel liked running, Rose excelled in sprinting. When Daniel tried out for swimming, suddenly Rose was diving. Checkers meant chess, tee-ball meant little league. Whatever Daniel did, Rose somehow always did it better. And maybe, maybe after so much life spent in her shadow, Daniel could've found something to latch onto for just a sliver of uniqueness, had it not been for Rose's most crushing quality.

They weren't siblings. It was simply the superior and inferior. And in the same breath Rose achieved greatness, she would be right alongside Daniel, killing him with kindness as she gently encouraged him to conquer his mole hills while she sought out literal mountains, acting like what he did mattered just as much. Acting in the same, patronizing way that she always did.

Rose took championships, and Daniel took participations, but somehow his big sister would always insist on sharing the same shelf. Daniel's one meager award always had three or four of Rose's always there to smother him. It just wasn't fair.

But that was the past, and this was the present. His feelings hadn't changed and he couldn't let go of what once was simply from the fear of it never being acknowledged. Those texts she sent him, as Daniel scrolled through. All happy, peppy, doting and loving. His sister shined so brightly that she couldn't even see her own reflection.

The moment he forgave any of it or tried to make amends, the cycle would repeat. Rose would find some way to sneak her way into his life again, passively suffocating him with her insurmountable success. He just wanted to be left alone. He didn't want the pain of being forced to compare himself. To endure the jealousy of a sibling born with all the right genes, too loving to not pity the leftovers.

But if he grit his teeth and made one dreadful, stupid phone call, just maybe he could at least find away to placate his mom and maybe even his sister. Acknowledge their love and let it be just that.

Or maybe, if he was lucky, he'd be calling at an inconvenient time right now? Just miss her by chance? Then never talk to her again, living with the self-satisfying excuse that he tried at least once.

After a long thousand yard stare at his phone, he was suddenly pacing the tiny apartment with the phone held to his ear.

*Don't pick up...don't pick up...*

One buzz. Two buzzes. Three. Four? Yes!

The monotone, synthetic voice was already apologizing on his slothful sister's behalf.

Maybe luck was on his side, being his birthday and all. Cheeky, he tossed the phone aside, now with a whole birthday ahead of himself.

And then his phone immediately started to ring. Anxiously, he peered over.

INCOMING CALL: ROSE

Of course it wasn't that easy.

He could ignore it and stick to his pathetic plan. Or, he could just suck it up, be a man that he wanted to be and just get it over with.

Finally, he picked up the call, right before the final buzz.

The airwaves were live, but silent from both ends. Was she actually there? Did she butt dial him? Good enough for him. Two failed calls? It had gone from a meager victory to a lifelong legacy.

And just as he was about to pull the phone from his ear, a familiar female voice spoke on the other end.

"...Daniel?" It couldn't be misplaced and it couldn't be mistaken.

Only in the company of himself, Daniel was already bringing his knees together.

*Why am I so nervous?*

"R...Rose?"

Instantly the phone was held at arm's length. His sister must have been trying to kill him by the sheer volume of her star-struck shriek.

"Oh my gosssshhh! Daniel!" he could hear her overjoyed giggling. "*Daniel!*" she said it again, like she was high on just the mouthfeel of his name. "I can't believe it! We're...we're actually talking!" and the joy in her laughter couldn't be misplaced.

Daniel's mouth tightened, already awkward and unsure of what to say. It was easy to talk behind Rose's back and act like he hated her, but even Daniel had never mustered the nerve to directly confront his sister. Ever. Maybe he had a making in his own demise, but Rose was a strong personality regardless.

"Eh? Danny?" Rose called in a concerned voice. "You're there, right? You didn't hang up?"

A complex sigh left the boy's mouth, and Rose laughed in return. "I'm here..."

"Thank God! I was gonna be in tears if that's all I got! It's been so *long*! I don't know if you've been getting my messages, but it's so good just to hear your voice!"

Daniel was rubbing his elbow awkwardly, still unsure of what to say. "Mhm..."

"Well don't just 'Mhm'," she mimicked him in her best 'guy' voice, "--me! How have you been? Good? I've been great, but now I'm *perfect* because I get to talk to you!"

And there she went, talking like he was somehow the light of her life. She always did that and Daniel couldn't even fathom a single reason why.

"Yeah...well..." he huffed, "here I am..." Here he was on the phone, but not in person.

"Oh! Did you read my message this morning? We're in the same state now! Mom mentioned you were here, so you can't even imagine how excited I got when my work told me I was coming here!" she squealed giddily. "I've been here for about a year now!"

A year. A whole year in the same state as him, and Daniel hadn't even noticed. Granted, he could have known, had he cared enough to read.

"That's cool..." he gave another dead-fish response. Was it about time for them to hang up, already?

"More importantly, *HAPPY BIRTHDAY!*" she cheered and Daniel was back to holding the phone far away, only pulling it back once he heard her giggling. "I can't believe I finally got to do that! Ehehe, that feels so *good* to do!"

"Thanks..."

Then she sounded fast and to the point. “Do you have any plans tonight? Are you up to anything? No drinking, *right?*” While he figured the last part would normally be a joke, he knew when his sister wasn’t joking. She reminded him of Mom whenever she suspected that he was up to something that he shouldn’t be. Rose always was big on rules.

“No, no drinks. Just...” Just what? Nothing? Absolutely nothing fun? Rose probably celebrated birthdays in nightclubs or fancy restaurants. Daniel celebrated with cream pops from the freezer. “Meeting with friends,” he lied. “We’re...gonna go see a movie.”

“Nice!” Daniel could hear her smile through the phone. “What movie? Can I give you some money for a ticket? As a present?”

“No, I’m fine, I don’t need anything. You don’t have to get me anything, either.”

“But I *want* to?” she immediately insisted. “I haven’t had many chances to spoil my little brother, you know?”

Yes, and for good reason.

“Rose, it’s fine. Thank you for wishing me a happy birthday,” he was already feeling emotionally exhausted from just listening to her. “I’m fine though.” Please let this call end.

A disappointed sigh came from the other end. “Fine...” Rose relented in a pouting tone. “Well? What movie are you going to see?”

Shit. A simple question that Daniel had no actual answer to.

“Uh...” he stalled as he quickly tried to look something up. “The...uhm...S-Space Warriors...? Space Warriors, yeah. The, uhm, the sequel.”

“Ah!” she sparked with revelation. The one from a few months back? Huh! I didn’t know they were doing a re-screening of it! Cool!”

They were? Daniel read a little bit harder this time. No they weren’t. So much for front-page search results.

“...Yeah...”

A contented noise was made on Rose’s end.

“...Hey Daniel?”

“...Yeah?”

“Look, I... There’s...there’s a lot I want to talk about. So much stuff I wanna say, but...I know now that I can be a little bit much...”

Daniel didn’t answer to that.

Rose spoke without any of the influx of emotion she had earlier, tempering into something much more genuine, or at least to the core. “But, I’m just really glad I can talk to you right now. *Really* glad.”

“It’s...” and it was sort of true, “It’s good getting to talk to you too, Rose...”

“Really...?” he heard her snuffle. “That’s...that makes me really happy!”

“...Good. Well, um...”

“Huh?” She suddenly gasped. “Sorry! Are you busy right now? Did I catch you at a bad time?” Rose asked worriedly.

Without anything better to say, Daniel leaned in. “Uh...yeah, sort of...”

“Okay, okay! That’s fine. We can chat later. Oh! Danny? Uhm, it’s okay if you weren’t being...honest. I just wanna know. Are...are you really up to anything tonight?”

Ouch. A bad memory was a whole collective of them when Rose could sniff out his lies. It was like trying to hide a wet bed from his mom as a kid. Nigh impossible with wet pajamas, wet sheets and none of the skills to actually wash your own sheets.

So with a reluctant sigh, trying not to look any more pathetic, he admitted, “No. I’m not.” He braced himself for the judgment.

“Then...well, I was wondering... Maybe you’d wanna come over tonight?”

“Come over?” he asked, and Rose repeated.

“Yeah! My house? Oh! We could do a birthday dinner for you! At my place! No need to go out or anything; just a way for us to catch up! See each other! Please? You don’t even have to worry

about getting home! I have plenty of guest rooms,” *plenty?* “So you can stay the night, okay? The weekend, even!”

And in a Rose-like fashion, quickly, things were starting to snowball.

“W-wait, stop. Slow down,” he barked as commands, and Rose giggled sheepishly. But that was right, Rose did live within traveling distance now. But was he really willing to see her? They just started talking again not but fifteen minutes ago since a year prior. Now she wanted to take things to the next level already? But worst of all, he already admitted to his lie. He knew that if he refused, Rose would see it in no other way than him refusing her for no other reason than distaste for her.

Daniel sighed again. “Dinner, you said?”

“Yes!” Rose was teeming with enthusiasm. “Yes! Oh my gosh! I can give you my address! Pack an overnight bag too, okay? For the whole weekend! Promise me you will? I’m gonna be home by 5, so plan for it, okay? Or come early! Oh! I should probably call back home to make plans...”

And quickly she wasn’t even talking to Daniel anymore; rambling off while he was forced to hear.

“Rose?”

“Oh! Sorry!” she chuckled, “I got a little carried away. It’s the first time I get to throw you a birthday party!”

“Rose, it’s not a party...” Daniel mumbled with a warm face. “It’s *just* dinner. No gifts. Nothing. Just dinner. Okay?”

“Whaaaat?” Rose moaned disappointedly. “But it’s your *birthday*, Daniel!”

“No, Rose. It doesn’t matter.”

“Alright...” While she may have sounded disappointed, certainly the beast had not been killed. She sounded like a dog playing dead.

“Ah! But you’re busy, right? Sorry! Go! I’ll send you the address as soon as we hang up.”

So this really was happening... “Okay... Sure, yeah.”

His sister was always a ball of affection. She wore her emotions on her sleeves like it was armor. And with one last battle cry she made another giddy noise.

“I can’t tell you how excited I am! Tonight’s gonna be the best birthday you’ve ever had! *Promise!* Oh, and that’s right! You’re gonna get to—” and so she started to say, but then was cut off.

Daniel could hear a faint noise on the other end, as if someone was talking.

“Oopsies,” Rose sheepishly chuckled. “Sorry, Danny! Gotta go! Don’t tell anyone I was taking a break when I wasn’t supposed to!”

She was skipping out on work? Just to talk to him? Not only that, but his mind was finding a way to derive jealousy from it, somehow. His sister could just take unannounced breaks like it wasn’t going to end with an intensive discussion with HR. Like it wasn’t putting her integrity into question and her livelihood at risk.

“Uh, yeah, sure. And uh, sorry about calling you while you’re at work...”

“*Don’t be!*” A stern voice came back almost immediately. If it wasn’t Mom doing the scolding, his sister always seemed to take after her, even if it wasn’t her place to do so. “Bleh,” she laughed, “now I gotta go finish my boring job knowing you’re coming over tonight! Agh! Okay, big sis is all charged now! I gotta go for real! Sending the address in just a second! Bye-bye!”

She was his sister, his flesh and blood, and yet her overfamiliarity, kindness and concern all at once was still somehow too much for him to bear even through a digital medium. When did things become this weird? Even in their time apart Daniel still thought of Rose as his sister, just one that he preferred to steer clear of. She spoke to him like there wasn’t a hatchet that had yet to be buried, nor the judgment for him being the one to ghost her completely.

Like he wasn’t a spiteful, insecure, little brat.

Sitting in silence for just a little longer, as promised, an address was sitting in their conversation box. And for the first time in a long, long time, Daniel sent a message back.

DANIEL: Okay. Got the address.

And not a minute later,

ROSE: Awesumm! Bring ur appetite for tonight!

DANIEL: Okay.

Another mountain conquered, or mole hill, depending on who was watching and who was asking. Just to see, he searched for the address on his phone, frowning. Service was always spotty here, “here” being the entirety of this city. Though, that was the value of a “value” plan flexing its atrophied muscles. Affordability is king, after all.

There was hardly a descriptor or concrete result on his sister’s address. Somewhere on the edge of the next city over. All it described was an empty radius of green. Weird, but not unexpected. Nothing worked out for Daniel as of late. Not even his birthdays.

The problem though was certainly being the next town over.

*No car.*

Truly, Daniel was a lover of nature and a fierce advocate for the environment. Private transit was far beneath the young man with only the future generations in mind. Certainly, it was his desire for a cleaner place.

Certainly.

Certainly not because he couldn’t afford a vehicle.

Certainly not because he had no license.

Certainly.

---

“So what was stopping you from telling me about this yesterday?” Jess pulled onto yet another winding turn. Over an hour of driving later and not only was their poor, raggedy city of poverty and prejudice on their backs, but so was the entirety of the state metropolis they’d just reached the outskirts of.

Jess was squinting just to see the top of the hill, “I think we’re starting to get to the forest-y part?”



“This wasn’t a thing until this morning...” Daniel stayed skeptical, watching the shadows of leaves cascade over the car and windshield. “Are you sure this is the right way?” He turned his head. “Isn’t the city behind us?”

Jess’ arm was suddenly on Daniel’s shoulder, gently forcing him back into the seat. “Hey, eyes forward. You’re lucky I didn’t have something safer for you to sit in, you know?”

“Jess, I don’t need a booster seat,” he rolled his eyes. Another reason why Daniel in his “sagely” wisdom did not want a car.

“Well the law says you do,” Jess bit right back, but sighed, checking the rear-view mirror herself. “Just be glad that nobody saw us... And I’m not sure about the address,” she gave the screen on her console a sideways glance. “It says we’re going the right way? But also, really? A whole *year* since you’ve seen her?”

“Yeah...” Daniel never divulged in the details. “It’s been kinda busy for us both...”

Jess didn’t prod. No more than a cheeky comment. “A-huh. Well, you better not give your sister any trouble, understood?”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“I’ve seen the way you get, Daniel. You can have a little bit of a temper...”

“No I don’t!” he raised his voice in retaliation, yet immediately blushed the moment Jess grinned with her eyes still on the road.

“Case and point, buster. Look! I’m not trying to make fun of you. I just want this to be a good night for you?”

“Why though?” What pony did a good acquaintance have in this race?

“Cuz it’s your birthday, duh. I know what goes on in your day-to-day, Dan. Maybe I like living vicariously or something, but I don’t know; maybe a win for you almost feels like a win for me...”

Both parties were quiet for a bit longer, but only until they came up on their next attraction. Their heads turned on a swivel, trained on a wide, wooden carved sign mounted on mortared stone.

“What did that address your sister give you say again?”

Daniel fumbled with his phone for a moment. “Uhh...Mountview?” Was it not just some figure of speech? A cool, but deceptive way of describing a big apartment? He didn’t keep tabs on his sister like she did for him. Despite the distance and lack of communication, by the time she was getting her master’s, he had about figured that a private complex for the well-established and fairly-accomplished would someday fall into her lap.

But if it did, clearly it had gone right between her legs in favor of something much bigger.

After the final hill and one more turn, bringing the horizon behind them up above the vast majority of the city’s buildings that were dwarfed by the colorful skyscrapers, Jess’ car rolled down a quiet, quaint road of freshly paved asphalt between lush green grounds and healthy trees.

“Hear that?”

“Hear what?” Daniel looked from window to window.

Jess grinned. “That’s the point.”

And stopping to actually figure out what she meant, Daniel had a double-take.

There wasn’t anything to hear. Not the city, at least, and that was the biggest part. The last time he was free from the noise of cars, construction, yelling and beeping was when he was tens of thousands of feet in the air, slumbering away in the turbulence-ridden airplane that landed him here.

And instead of an urban cacophony, there was a new kind of traffic all around them. Chirps and rustles. Gentle breezes scraping pebbles along the meticulously brick-laid sidewalks that were illuminated by warm, intricately metal-casted lamp posts following down the winding street.

“Thanks again for driving me...” Daniel was only half aware of his words, too busy marveling at the scenery. There was a place like this in this state? A charter on the map known for being a simultaneous shipment hub *and* shithole. He’d come for the money, not the glamor. But as cool as it was, it didn’t solve the address part. Could Rose possibly have given the wrong directions?

“No problem...” Jess was similarly distracted, though much more focused on the empty road. They had the entire road to themselves, but the eeriness one might feel just wasn’t there. Simply quaint and warm, like they were parked at the precipice separating reality from this tiny pocket of fantasy in a cold and hardened world.

They slowly strolled along, spotting street signs and address numbers, leading off to places that the privacy of a bird-chirping forest would not allow to be seen unless they were brave enough to venture deeper.

“Oh– there it is,” Daniel followed Jess’ finger over the wheel where she pointed, sitting up as straight as he could to get a good view. It was just a sight of another road though. It had no painted lines as they transitioned from public property to private. The road still had its lamp posts and the trees were close on one side, yet vines all tangled and intimate with the tall brick wall was on the other.

From their vantage point they had no hope of seeing that the wall went nearly twice as tall as what they could see, lined with spiked iron bars that were hiding in plush, chubby green bushes following the perimeter. Even now they were slowly and gradually ascending on an incline.

And finally they pulled into a clearing before a dark green metal gate, intricately engraved with curves and cuts that seemed to radiate financial power by sheer visual and presence alone. The doors themselves alone must have been a few years worth of rent, as far as Daniel was concerned. His wallet quivered just from its owner staring at them.

And the bewilderment wasn’t found on just himself. Jess’ just as bewildered whistle filled the car. “Your sister has a gate?” Daniel could only shrug.

“It’s been a while since I last saw her...” Were they being expected? They had to know, right? He checked his phone for the time, surprised to see that it still had yet to reach 5:00. Staring out the window, the tangy orange sky seemed like it begged to differ.

Jess rolled down her window then pressed on a convenient button-speaker box installed on one of the mighty brick posts.

“Uhm...hello?” she spoke into the inanimate object. “Is...is anyone home? I have a special delivery!”

And the package right next to her in the passenger seat gave her a dumbfounded look.

Laying her finger off the button, Jess rolled her eyes. “It’s a joke, Daniel!”

Then the box buzzed back.

A calm, simple voice spoke. It sounded automated in the way it had such little emotion. “Please leave the package by the gate. Thank you.”

“See?” Daniel frowned with an accusing look. “Now they think we’re delivery people!”

“Relax, relax!” Jess shushed him as she tried to reestablish negotiations.

With her finger on the button she tried once more. “Uhhh...hello? Uh, sorry about that! Bad joke. I’m here to drop off Daniel? For his sister?”

The speaker only gave back silence, leading to a shared look of uncertainty between the two. All until a loud metal latch made them both jump. Immediately the gate in front of them began to part, sliding on motorized wheels until all but the metal edges were still peeking from the brick posts and bushes.

And with newfound confidence, Jess turned up her nose with a haughty grin. “See? Easy enough!”

If only the enthusiasm was infectious. “Are we sure this is even the right place?” Daniel’s hands didn’t leave his lap as they drove beyond the gate. It was a long path that led up to a...a very...very large house.

“Holy shit...!”

Large was simply not a large enough word to describe it. Two floors? Three? A lawn as big as the block his street was on. Intricate fixtures lined the path like welcoming arrangements. Perfectly trimmed bushes dotted the gardens they passed by; spheres, prisms, perfect six-sided cubes and all.

Small extrusions lined the walls of the home where alcoves formed and tall bay windows overlooked likely not only the property itself, but the highest points of the city still visible from so far away. A gentle, guzzling fountain sat in the center of the cul de sac driveway just before the front door, giving the water a wonderful shine with pristine clarity, all in thanks to the light buried beneath it.

It wasn’t a castle, but it wasn’t a modern home of strictly marble, sharp edges and minimalist fixtures either. It was the perfect blend between what millionaires yearned for and how the nobles of storybooks used to live.

On that striking note, it was nothing Daniel had ever seen in his life. Ever. He was used to the rough city streets; stained and graffitied buildings with female gangsters roaming around at

night. A place where the only sounds of nature he heard were the moans of his upstairs neighbors reaping the emotional rewards of sex over and over again through paper-thin walls.

“...What does your sister do again?”

Hardly a thought even came to him. Didn't she study science? “No idea...” And certainly, whatever she did, surely it was notable enough to be allowed breaks on impulse...

But the short trip through wonderland could only last for so long, as they'd reached the turnaround and that was that.

Flexing her fingers off the wheel, Jess sighed. “Okay...! This is it!”

“Okay...” Daniel gave back with only a fraction of the same certainty.

They'd both said their lines, but neither one moved.

“...Actually, how about I go up with you?” Jess planted a hand on his seat. “Just to make sure I'm not dropping you off at some random rich old woman's place?”

He was confident at least in handling himself, even if part of that was born from ignorance. Yet the unexpected sight of a massive home on the edge of the city and seeing no faces whatsoever, well, it left him feeling cautious.

But his seat belt retracted in a slither. “Yeah...sure.”

Right as he reached for the duffel bag in the back seat, Jess caught it first. “Ah! I've got it,” she smiled, then put on a curious look as she lifted it with ease, testing it like a dumbbell. “You don't pack much, do you?”

“I'm just staying the night...” Yes. Just one night and nothing more. Had he brought his own car, Rose wouldn't even be getting what he was forced to prepare for. Had he the wheels and legal ability to take himself where he needed to go, there wouldn't be any duffel bag. There would be no overnight stay. Just a quiet hour-ride home spent in the company of himself. Not at the expense of such a caring person like Jess.

Daniel hopped out first and walked up the concrete steps. Stopping just once for Jess to drape the bag over him like it was a backpack. Tugging it in place, he carried it on his back like it was a scabbard for some kind of chunky, bent-out sword.

Soon he started to slow his pace once he came face to face with the entrance of almost otherworldly proportions. People didn't make doors this big, did they?

And yet they did. "Whoa! Those are kinda big, huh?" Jess, testifying as his witness, remarked the same exact way with intrigue as she followed behind up the steps.

Daniel reached for the handle, but even on his toes the handle just fell out of reach. Reasonably shocked and strained, he wordlessly looked up at Jess, scratching his cheek as if to indicate something he'd rather not put into words.

After a small pat on the head she said, "I gotcha." While it was a big door, it was just that to Jess. Not Daniel levels of big. Reaching forward, she pulled back the metal knocker installed on the door, positioned even higher than the knob was.

The loud clash of metal against wood made the boy flinch, pensively awaiting something. Had they just performed a summons? Someone? Something? Wait, Rose was still at work, was she not? Or on her way? Didn't no one but her live here?

"Uh, Jess?"

"Yeah, bud?"

And before he could cast his doubts, all uncertainty was dashed away the moment he heard the door slowly swing open.

With his nerves as shaken as his knuckles were tight, he burst aloud, "Oh, wait! I forgot my phone!" Not a second later he was hopping off the step and jogging back to the car.

"Wait! Daniel!" Jess reached out too late. "At least until we meet them!"

But he was gone, looking through the passenger seat until he found it. With his phone in hand. In both hands, he busied himself with the screen just to keep his eyes anywhere other than what'd just come to the door.

However, blinded by his dedication to stay shy, Daniel kept on walking. Stumbling for just a half-step, but moving forward uncontested and with ease.

Uncontested until he *was* contested.

"Danie-!"

Too late. Daniel stumbled back on his bottom, phone leaving his hands and scraping along the entrance steps. What gives? Did they close the door again? Whatever wood it was made of though, it certainly had a soft exterior...

Daniel rubbed his head, standing back up.

“I’m fine, I’m fine...” he muttered as he found his legs again. But apparently the door hadn’t been closed. An entire white scape was all he could see inside. Daniel clutched the sling of his overnight bag with both hands, staring into the bright, white void that flooded the mansion's interior. But only when he noticed the massive shadow blanketing him from above did he back up in stunned shock. Twice his size-- no, more, even?

The void was not a void, but in fact a fine, snow-white cloth, adorned on the wide hips of a female stranger with hair just as faded and bright as the white accents on her generous skirt. Her waist-high apron danced with its ruffles along the edges and complemented the black uniform underneath it. A giant female stranger with a chest so large that her breasts alone had overshadowed the stupefied boy. Her long lashes drooped for just a moment, and the woman tilted her head with a curious look aimed down at him.

Daniel wasn’t saying anything, and neither was Jess. The indentured servant was of a mighty caliber in every way imaginable. Curves, inches, bust, and behind. Even to Jess she was big and tall, yet to Daniel, he was witnessing the emergence of a titan, like he was suddenly four-years old again.

Another lovely reminder of his genetics. Men by default came smaller on average than their female counterparts. If only insult hadn’t been added to injury, putting Daniel not only at the lowest percentile, but a statistical anomaly at that. And somehow, he’d come face-to-face—no, face-to-thigh with a pureblood amazon. It was the 101% meeting the 0.01%.

How poetic.

He nearly thought the ground was shaking as he watched her descend from the heavens, squatting low as her bountiful skirt bundled and collected just above her leather strap and buckled blocky heels.

But there was no earthquake, and there were no tremors. Just sheer intimidation felt in full force by the tiny, anxious boy.

Her face was expressionless, almost like a doll's. The way she tilted her head nearly made him wince in instinctual fear. Was he just a moment away from being completely and totally cannibalized?

Then she leaned in close. Very close. So very close, Daniel was so transfixed on her face above that he never noticed the sneak attack her breasts had made, bumping right into his face and making him stumble back once more.

Finally there was a tinge of expression once she raised her brows the ever slightest, but the tension was broken the moment Jess caught Daniel from behind.

“Whoa! You good?” Jess helped him straighten out.

“Y-yeah...” Daniel looked up at Jess, trying to remember what normal looked like again. “Yeah, I am...”

When he looked back, the maid's expression had reset and she was rising once more, straightening out her uniform.

Since Daniel was too shell-shocked, Jess had taken the lead. “Um... This is Daniel? Is his sister here?”

“R-Rose,” Daniel added, and the maid responded by looking down at him, “My sister? She...she gave me this address...”

After adjusting her hairband, she gave them her attention again. “Yes, Rose mentioned you were coming.”

And instantly, the tension had been cut in half. It didn't make the woman's unexpected size any less startling, but it put Daniel at ease somewhat, and Jess appeared to feel the same.

“Welcome,” the maid gave a small, reserved smile.

Daniel stepped back on reflex once she crouched nearby him again, flinching as she reached for him. He opened his eyes as his duffel bag was lifted off of him, watching the swap from his entire torso, having his sense of size completely warped as it suddenly looked like just a large handbag hanging over the maid's shoulder.

“Is this everything you brought?” She smoothed out the strap on her shoulder.



“Y-yeah...”

“Come in,” she gestured, stepping to the side.

And already from the entrance Daniel was taken aback. Cream, polished floors with an intricate tile design warmed by an immaculate chandelier hanging from above. The tasteful wood-accent wallpapered surfaces were decorated by all kinds of artwork and other trinkets. What in God’s name kind of success did his sister have?

Daniel stumbled forward, too frazzled to even remember the right way to walk.

A sudden afterthought reached his ears. “What? No goodbye?”

Spinning on his heel, he saw Jess still parked at the entrance.

“W-wait, you’re...” Not coming?

Obviously. She wasn’t invited. An uneasy feeling was setting in now. He was just supposed to wait here with this stranger until Rose got back? What if this was all still some ruse? What if the real Rose had been taken and murdered, and this emotionless, psychotic maid was just hand-delivered her next victim?!

“You’re gonna have so much fun, I bet!” Jess grinned cheekily as Daniel gave her a look that said nothing short of wanting her to stay.

“Uh-uhm...” He wanted to ask her to remain, but he knew he couldn’t be selfish. He’d already been so demanding already. Somehow, a person he only knew through buying cheap ramen dinners and frozen sweets was willing enough to drive him over an hour across the state just to get him somewhere he’d never even been before. Fuck calling her an acquaintance. Jess was a true friend, through and through.

She raised her eyebrows expectantly. “How about a ‘goodbye’?” Jess chuckled, and the maid watched silently.

“B...bye...” and in an awkward motion, he gave a small, sheepish wave.

“Have a good time, and happy birthday!” Jess said once more, and before Daniel could see her reach the bottom of the steps, the maid blocked his vision as she followed her out the door.

The maid turned her head back for just a moment, saying, “I’m going to see your friend off.”

“O...Okay...” Daniel quietly answered, watching her leave with his duffel bag as well.

The massive door was closed, and Daniel stood there alone. All by himself in the deep, seemingly infinite confines of nothing short of a master-class mansion; idolized and imagined by every piece of fiction imaginable, yet never actually realized until now.

Quietly, pensively, he awaited the return of the maid he was simply supposed to trust. In the midst of his faithless and baseless prayer, born only out of fear, he could hear the same leather work shoes tap-tapping their way across the stone and to the door.

Tap-tapping.

And a voice.

“He’s here now? Really? Inside?!” The thick, wooden gates mistaken for doors made the sounds muffled and quiet, but that alone wasn’t enough to misplace the far too bubbly and emotional tones he’d already figured the maid to not have. Unless, she really did harbor a beast within herself...

He gulped as the metal trigger keeping the door shut was reeled back by the turning knob and the heavy block of wood swung open.

It was the maid who had opened the door. It...was the maid talking? Confusion ensued, but only for a second before it evaporated into nervous shock.

It was none other than a harmonious coo that came from an auburn-headed giant that rushed inside the moment the maid stepped aside. A fiend just as big yet not even remotely as docile or deferred came storming in with speed and momentum. It all happened so fast and with such primed emotions, Daniel reflexively yelped as he immediately opted for flight.

Just as he tried to turn his muscles failed him and locked up all over. He stumbled and fell, panicking for his dear life as he was about to be complete and utterly destroyed...!

And in a loud, shameless cry, she cheered his name.

“*DANNY!*”

He was off the ground as soon as he had hit it, rocketing off the floor, still trying to prepare himself for the inevitable moment he would soon leave the stratosphere. He went high, but not

nearly that high. But twistedly, as high as the maid, to which he was looking square in the face now. On equal footing? *Straight* at her?

The moment he looked down at the floor so far away from his feet, he quickly pulled his head back up, hit with a sense of unease in his heart. Heights were never an easy thing for him. After all, his genes made him well-acquainted with the ground.

“Danny?” The mystery voice spoke to him again, and Daniel was still coming to terms with somehow being able to fly now.

“Yooo-houuu?” the angelic voice beckoned once more, but Daniel was too distracted by the hand holding him against...someone’s hip.

And right before that person could give his cheek a loving poke, Daniel finally turned around to see his captor.

Using her free hand to move a few strands of hair out of the way, with a wide, rosy-cheeked beaming smile, an almost unrecognizable face shone down on him with nothing but absolute delight in its purest form.

And in a mindless stutter, feeling his heart jump with each gentle bounce the woman gave him in her arms, Daniel muttered, “R...Rose?”

“Yes, Rose!” the stunning giant giggled again, pulling Daniel into an almost bone-breaking hug. “Oooohh~!” she squealed contentedly, “you don’t know how *long* I’ve wanted to do that for!”

She relented, pulling back apart enough again just to smile at him some more, but Daniel wasn’t smiling.

Who was this? This was his sister? This was Rose?

Rose was tall, but he didn’t remember her as this big?

“Is something wrong?” She tilted her head, and at the same time she adjusted him in her arms, so did her massive bosom adjust itself.

Was Daniel just misremembering things? He tried to rack his brain, but there were no fond memories he had held onto. He remembered her being big and as tall as mom, but he was never around for this. Not a second growth spurt, obviously.

And yet once her smile relaxed, he spotted the most defining thing about his sister.

A tiny, black speck, not even mature enough to be called a mole. A black dimple? A beauty mark. It was one of many features his sister had, but certainly the most distinguishing in a moment like this. Unless this imposter truly studied their role, this was in fact Rose.

“Look at you!” Rose still continued her affectionate fawning, admiring him from head to toe. “Did you get bigger? You look so handsome!”

“C...Can you set me down...please?”

“Hm?” Rose did so, gingerly lowering him to his feet. And the moment she let him go, Daniel was already regretting it.

The moment she straightened back out, the moment he could see yet another example of disparity.

“Rose?” the maid came over, “Should I start getting dinner out?”

“Oh!” she gasped, “I almost forgot! Yes! Please!”

And before the maid departed, Daniel had seen it perfectly. The maid was a giant, but so too was his sister. He couldn't tell completely from being so close, nearly seeing more breast than actual face, yet whether one had heels or the other was in flats, it was a difference of inches when comparing red apples to green apples. They were a different shade, but they were certainly the same amount of mass.

Without Jess for reference, his perception of size and reality was hitting a fast downward spiral.

Just as he turned to look for someplace to sit, a small dresser by the front door seemed much higher than it should've been. A stand holding a vase nearby; the stand looked taller than him? A vase from that height had concussion-giving potential to a boy like Daniel.

“Most importantly...!” Rose broke her brother's train of thought, dropping down to her knees with a subtle bounce in her upper body.

Her arms opened up to a wingspan that rivaled apex aviators, flashing her open hands.

Gesturing for a hug, Rose couldn't have sounded happier when she spoke.

“Happy birthday, Danny!”