

Old Fashioned

On an otherwise uneventful Friday afternoon, Parker was sitting in the office contemplating the relative merits of purple hair. On the one hand, it would be complexion-flattering without any additional mods. On the other hand, purple hair was very early aughts. But that was a long time ago, and maybe purple had gone so far out it was in again? Presumably the catalog wouldn't be showcasing it if nobody wanted it, so it must be at least a little bit fashionable. Not that being fashionable was usually one of Parker's main concerns. Perhaps as a moody teenager but not so much now that Parker was a mature, emotionally balanced twenty-something with a tolerable amount of disposable income.

"What do you think?" Parker waved the catalog over the cubicle wall.

Irritably, "I think your break ended five minutes ago."

"I came in early," Parker lied, swishing the catalog back and forth in enticement.

The only response to this blatant attempt at distraction was a fit of piqued silence and some aggressively staccato typing.

"Oh, come on," Parker pleaded. "My cycle ends next Saturday."

"For god's sake." Alex's head poked up over the top of the cubicle, followed momentarily by the remaining top half of Alex's body. Alex was tall and slender with a platinum chin-length-of-the-moment bob, a nose and cheekbones that were too exquisite to have been modded, and impeccable, flawless skin. This otherwise unearthly facial perfection was marred only by Alex's eyes: One iris was pale green while the other was a deep muddy brown, and their combined effect was so disconcerting that even after working with Alex for several years, Parker still couldn't stop staring. Why Alex didn't just get the mismatch fixed was a mystery: Eye color was one of the most basic biomods and dirt cheap to boot.

"Let me see it," Alex said impatiently, hand out for the catalog. Tattoos peeked out from beyond the cuffs of a perfectly work-appropriate sweater, half a drawing visible on each wrist. Alex wore sweaters to work every day and the sleeves of all of these sweaters were precisely the same length, meaning that Parker had never seen the full inking on either of Alex's wrists. On particularly insomniac nights, Parker would lie in bed and try to guess what the complete tattoos looked like. A dolphin on the left wrist, perhaps, or maybe that was the bottom half of an old-fashioned vacuum cleaner. An integral sign on the right, maybe, because Alex was a big actuarial dork.

Alex's mismatched eyes scanned the catalog then considered Parker analytically. Parker tried not to fidget. "It'll make you look older." A clinical assessment, with no indication of exactly how much older Parker would look or whether looking older was a good or bad thing, and therefore entirely unhelpful.

Parker grabbed the catalog back. "Well, I need to do *something* different." Parker had been feeling restless.

Alex sighed a sigh of the long suffering. "Why? Your biobase is fine. Leave it alone."

"You've never seen my biobase," Parker said, stung even though Alex probably thought 'fine' was a compliment.

"I've inferred it. You hardly ever change anything significant, and you always cycle back to certain features. Your eyes are almost always brown, your skin tone never varies more than three degrees from cauc-median, and the most you ever do to your nose is tilt the end up a little bit." Alex paused, then added grudgingly, "I'm not sure about the freckles."

"Modded."

Alex hummed in a tone carefully regulated to offer no opinion on freckles, modded or otherwise.

"Maybe I should go red," Parker suggested. "To match the freckles."

"Biomods are a waste of money. Save your credits." Alex sat back down and started typing again, conversation apparently over.

"Biomods are only a waste of money for people who look like you," Parker shot back. "And anyway, what else am I going to spend my credits on?"

"A temporal mod?" Snippy. "Isn't your paper due next week?"

"First of all, temporal mods cost a fortune. Second, they're completely unreliable, and with my luck I'd probably end up looping through middle school. And third,"—smug now—"I don't need extra time, because I'm almost done."

Alex's typing went momentarily silent. "How are you almost done? Two weeks ago, you didn't even have a topic." This, peevishly. Alex's final paper before Fellowship had taken six months of careful, assiduous research into statistics, risk theory, behavioral economics and the historical flight patterns of migratory water fowl. The paper had been a masterpiece, or so Parker had concluded from reading the précis, which was the only part that had been even marginally comprehensible according to Parker's somewhat attenuated standards.

Parker stood up to lean over the cubicle wall, arms folded along the top. Alex's cubicle was spotless as always, flims neatly stacked and user-locked, three styli lined up in a row to the left of the vboard, and not even a single stray coffee mug in sight. Alex was pathologically allergic to disorder; Parker fought daily against the urge to do something like leaving a gum wrapper on the floor just to see what would happen.

"I found a book on actuarial mathematics," Parker said. "From a hundred years ago."

Alex blinked slowly, unimpressed. "I don't think actuarial math has changed significantly in the past century."

"And that's where you'd be wrong."

"Interest is interest," Alex said, eyes drifting into holospace and fingers tapping on the vboard.

"Contingencies are contingencies. Faster AIs haven't changed any of the underlying theory. Can I get back to work now, please?"

"No. Listen. This book was amazing."

Alex shifted back out of holospace and looked at Parker, green eye luminescent in the pseudo-sunlight shining from the windows in the cubicle walls. "Amazing," Alex repeated. "You found a book on actuarial mathematics that you thought was amazing."

"Yes."

"Amazing."

"Yes! You're not the only one who likes your work, you know."

"No, I'm just the only one who likes to actually do it," Alex said pointedly.

Parker huffed and sat back down, stowing the catalog and opening a random project file. "Fine. But see if I tell you about all the cool stuff I learned."

"Oh no, I won't get to hear about the cool actuarial history. Whatever will I do?" Alex said, tone flat.

Parker resisted the urge to curse, if only to avoid a dock in pay for using offensive language in the office, but it was a close call.

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"I don't know why you even asked," Jordan said later at The Old Fashioned, after Parker had downed two fortifying drinks. "Alex is a dork."

Riley took significant issue with this statement. "Alex is *gorgeous*." Riley had had a crush on Alex since they met at a party during Parker's first year out of college. To Parker's knowledge, the crush was still unrequited and Alex remained oblivious to the infatuation.

Jordan conceded the point, somewhat. "A gorgeous dork. The two are not mutually exclusive."

"But in this instance," Riley said, "gorgeousness is more relevant."

"Being attractive doesn't make you more qualified to offer an opinion on hair color," Jordan said.

"Anybody can be gorgeous with enough mods. But you can't mod away dorkishness."

"Alex isn't modded," Parker pointed out. "I think even the tattoos might be real."

"Beside the point."

Riley called for service with a wave. Their server had neon green hair, pink eyeshadow and orange lipstick: a tragically brilliant combination ironically complimented by a fuchsia mesh top and heavy black combat boots. Riley had picked this bar for its extensive menu of historical mixed drinks, and the last round had been something called a pisco sour, which had not been to Parker's taste at all. Riley now ordered three gin rickeys and a bowl of mixed nuts, heavy on the Brazils. The waiter looked unenthusiastic about the Brazil nuts and disappeared into the crowd, perhaps to return eventually with their drinks, perhaps not. It was that kind of bar.

Riley squinted at Parker. "I think you'd look good with purple hair. But you might have to get rid of the freckles."

"I like the freckles," Jordan said, possibly just to maintain character and be difficult.

“But with purple hair?”

“Hmm.”

Riley and Jordan sat and contemplated Parker’s head in silence while they waited optimistically for the nuts and drinks, which took several minutes longer to appear than they reasonably ought to have.

“There is a slice of lime in my glass,” Parker announced when the server had distributed the drinks and unceremoniously dropped a bowl of nuts in a puddle of condensation in the middle of the table. ‘Heavy on the Brazils’ apparently translated to one large Brazil nut in the center of the bowl surrounded by a sea of peanuts and cashews with a smattering of hazelnuts to keep it interesting. “Is this another sour drink? Why do you keep ordering sour drinks?”

Riley shrugged. “I just liked the name. It’s like that book. Riki Tiki Whatever. Have some nuts.”

Parker had some nuts but left the Brazil for Riley. The nuts were very salty. The gin rickey turned out to be tolerable.

“My point,” Parker said presently, after most of the nuts were gone and Jordan had ordered some zucchini sticks from the same unenthusiastic server, “is that Alex wouldn’t give me an opinion on my hair and then didn’t even want to hear about the cool book I found.”

Jordan and Riley exchanged a significant look. “The cool math book,” Jordan said.

“Yes.”

Jordan and Riley exchanged another significant look. “Parker,” Riley said carefully, “there is no such thing as a cool math book. Even for an actuary, that’s super nerdy.”

“You’re an *accountant*,” Parker said.

“Accountants are demonstrably less nerdy than actuaries.”

“You’re both nerds,” said Jordan, who was a graphic designer and had the piercings to prove it: three in each ear, one per nostril, and a diamond stud at the outmost edge of each eyebrow, which Parker hoped were mods and not actual piercings on Jordan’s biobase. “And only the nerdiest of nerds would try to quantify who’s nerdier.”

“You forget,” Parker said, pointing a salty finger at Jordan, “that we met in statistics class and I know you can calculate values of the normal distribution to three decimal places in your head. I don’t care how many piercings you have. You’re a nerd.”

The zucchini sticks arrived shockingly promptly. Parker wondered if the order had perhaps been meant for another table but there seemed to be little benefit to suggesting that to the server’s departing mesh-covered back. “I will deny possessing any nerdiness to my dying breath,” Jordan said, and cut a zucchini stick in half. “But, fine. Tell us about your cool math book.”

“You wouldn’t understand it anyway. That’s why I wanted to tell Alex.” Parker finished the second half of Jordan’s zucchini stick, which was only marginally less salty than the nuts, and then downed the rest of the gin rickey, which tasted better the more Parker drank. “So, you think purple?”

“Yes,” Riley said, at the same time Jordan said “no.”

“You’re no help,” Parker said, and waved the server over for another round of drinks.

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Parker woke up sneezing the next morning, nose tickling from a bright beam of sunlight streaming from the window propped up inelegantly against the dresser, a testament to a year's worth of good but ultimately unrealized home-decorating intentions. Parker's mouth felt roughly as if a cat had deposited something small and furry in it. Someone else's cat. Parker's own cat Archi preferred hunting for the occasional feral stylus in the wilds of Parker's apartment.

Following a vigorous tooth-brushing, Parker's mouth tasted somewhat less disgusting but the jury was still out on whether getting out of bed had been worth the headache moving had provoked. An inadvertent glance in the mirror while rummaging in the medicine cabinet for aspirin proved traumatic to a degree requiring immediate restorative therapy in the form of a long, hot shower. While gingerly lathering up the shampoo, Parker contemplated hair color, the issue of which had never been satisfactorily resolved, Jordan and Riley at various points of the previous evening each supporting purple or red, but never the same color at the same time. Parker tried not to take it personally, although it seemed the least one could expect from one's best friends was a coherent, consistent opinion on one's hair color and perhaps a sensible reminder not to drink quite so much on the Friday night before the final Saturday one had available to work on one's Fellowship research paper.

The pounding of the water in the shower did nothing to ease the pounding in Parker's head, and the double dose of aspirin might as well have been candy for all the good it was doing. This was a world-class, grade-A hangover; the sort of hangover old people rhapsodized about when discussing their misspent youth; the sort of hangover that won first-place ribbons in hangover competitions. It would have been fine on an ordinary Saturday that could be spent lying miserable and repentant in bed but was problematic on a Saturday that was going to require many hours of intense intellectual activity.

The sensible thing to do would be to reset, but Parker's cycle was ending in a week anyway and resetting now would be a waste of credits that could be better spent on other things, like more interesting mods. Alex's matter-of-fact assessment that Parker always tended to hover around the same features was irksome but also accurate; that was exactly why Parker was looking for something different. It was tempting to spend a stupid number of credits to show up at work with violet cat eyes, a pug nose and skin a solid ten degrees darker than usual. Or maybe *taller*, though height mods were prohibitively expensive and Alex probably wouldn't even notice a height differential unless it was something insane like 10 centimeters, which would eat up the remainder of Parker's annual budget for discretionary mods. In any event, resetting was out but perhaps the headache would prove to be motivational.

Parker dressed for the day in faded old jeans and a comfortable yellow tee-shirt with 'Don't Panic' scrawled messily across the front in a large, cheery font, then padded barefoot to the kitchen for the first of doubtless many cups of coffee and some breakfast. Archi emerged from the ether where cats live when no humans are watching and meowed petulantly until Parker broke off a bit of stale toaster pastry to share: cherry, no frosting, because Parker was a purist.

It was now nearly 11 o'clock and past time to get to work. In a fit of stubborn masochism, Parker activated the large picture windows set into the living room wall; sunlight streamed into the room as obnoxiously brightly as it had in the bedroom, glinting off the floor and highlighting several weeks'

worth of dust on the furniture. The living room was sparsely furnished with a large nondescript rug of indeterminate hue, a modern coffee table, two chairs that looked more comfortable than they felt and a battered wooden end-table where Parker stored all of Archi's toys.

At the moment, the coffee table held a single antique book: an actual *book*, rectangular and squat and looking bizarrely out-of-place on the crisp cadmium-streaked glass tabletop. The book's red paperboard cover was smooth, but the yellowed pages were nubby to the touch like sheets stretched tight around the corner of a mattress.

Parker had a ritual for writing research papers which required a precise – Riley called it weird and obsessive – configuration. The coffee table was banished to the corner of the room, out of the way; the red book took the place of honor in the center of the rug. Around the book Parker spread out a circle of 12 flims, arrayed like the hours on an ancient analog clock. Next was to find four styli, one for each cardinal direction. This was tricky because Archi's obsessive stylus-hunting meant that most of the styli entering the apartment ended up in hidden corners only a cat could access. Parker found one stylus stuck between two almost-empty cereal boxes in the kitchen cabinet, another trapped under the base of the lamp on the bedside table, a third buried in a pile of dust under the back corner of the couch, and the last wedged in the small filthy slot between the toilet and the shower.

Fortunately, each stylus worked when cleaned and tested. Parker placed them carefully inside the circle then settled into a cross-legged position with some necessary items in easy reach: a second cup of extra-caffeinated coffee, a pitcher of water, the bottle of aspirin, and a bowl of mixed dry cereal for snacking – the dregs from the two boxes in the kitchen cabinet.

Sunlight slanting through the room landed on the flim at two o'clock, clearly a sign. Parker pulled that flim closer, picked up the eastern stylus and opened the red book to the first chapter, Introduction to Multidecrement Analysis. Taking a fortifying handful of frosted oats, Parker started working.

Some hours later, the bleating of the comm dragged Parker out of a deep research fugue. The red book was spreadeagled on the floor, napkin-shreds inserted at strategic points to serve as bookmarks. Eleven of the flims were sorted according to some mysterious classification scheme in two groups of three and one of five. Parker turned out to be sitting on the last one. The western stylus was missing; Archi was nosing around the empty cereal bowl looking smug. The sun had nearly set.

The comm rang again. Parker's head pounded in tetchy syncopation. "What?"

Riley sounded far too perky for someone who had matched Parker drink for drink last night. Riley had probably reset. "Are you done yet?"

Parker cursed impolitely and wriggled around to retrieve the twelfth flim from its inglorious location.

"This is what you get for putting things off until the last minute like always. I take it you aren't coming out tonight?"

"No." Parker stood up and stretched, then carried the empty cereal bowl to the kitchen along with four empty coffee mugs that had accreted at some point during the day. "Where are you going?"

"Back to the Old Fashioned. Jordan has a thing for the server."

Parker rinsed out the dirty dishes and opened up the refrigerator, which held very little of interest. "The one with the pink top?"

"Mmm. Just Jordan's type, you know."

Parker did know. The mesh and combat boots probably would have been sufficient on their own to get Jordan's attention, but the server's attitude of ineffable boredom must have clinched it. "I have no food," Parker complained, staring at the stubbornly empty fridge. Archi came into the kitchen and wound around Parker's legs, meowing piteously. Parker shut the fridge and poured some kibble in a bowl. "I need dinner."

"Have some eggs," Riley advised. "Protein is good for the brain."

"I don't have any eggs."

"A shame. Do you at least have a research paper?"

Parker glanced to the living room. The afternoon was a blur, but all evidence pointed to some serious work having been completed. Especially the fact that Parker had been sitting on the twelfth flim. That was pretty definitive. "Yeah, I think so."

"Hmm." There was some kind of rustling over the comm. Riley was probably getting dressed to go out. The persistent headache muted Parker's envy to a tolerable level. "If you were anyone else, I'd be skeptical, but then I remember senior year and that time you wrote three papers in a day and a half and I think you'll probably pull it off." More rustling. "What'd you decide about your hair? My vote's still purple."

"I didn't decide. Maybe I'll go green like Jordan's server."

"Not Jordan's server quite yet."

"Ten credits they've exchanged numbers by the end of the night."

"Sucker bet," Riley breezed. "Jordan always gets their numbers. You'd look terrible with green hair."

Parker sighed. "I know."

"Purple," Riley advised sagely, and disconnected.

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"Well?"

Alex did not look up from the flim. "Still reading."

"How can you possibly still be reading?"

Alex's eyes flicked up briefly. Green and brown irises looked equally unimpressed. "It's been 15 minutes. It's a 10,000-word paper."

Parker leaned over the cubicle wall. "You read insanely fast."

"Not that fast," Alex said. "And I'll finish quicker if you stop interrupting me."

Parker sighed and sat back down, opening up an arbitrary spreadsheet and poking at it. A hundred years passed at a glacial pace. "Well?"

"I'll tell you when I'm finished." Alex infused those six words with an artful blend of irritation and disapproval, two subtly different negative reactions.

"But—"

"If you ask me again, I'm going to stop reading altogether."

Parker muttered something nasty softly enough that the monitoring program wouldn't pick it up and poked some more at the spreadsheet. Strangely, hitting random keys on the vboard produced results that seemed no less reasonable than entering carefully vetted actuarial assumptions, though perhaps that was simply because Parker had slept a grand total of five hours over the past two days and couldn't properly focus in holospace.

Another hundred years passed. Parker was now entering words into cells meant for numbers just to see the spreadsheet's error-checking protocols freak out.

"I'm done," Alex announced.

Parker stood up so quickly that holospace didn't disengage, and the world went orange and floaty for a disorienting moment. When Parker's vision cleared, Alex was flicking through the flim thoughtfully, slender fingers scrolling down the side-ribbon. "Well?"

Alex took a moment to answer. "It's interesting."

Parker's head met the top of the cubicle wall with a despairing thunk. "You think it's terrible."

"No, I don't."

"You said it was *interesting*."

"It *is* interesting."

Parker flopped forward, arms dangling forlornly into Alex's cubicle. "Interesting is the most anemic adjective in the history of adjectives, except maybe for nice."

"You can't call a research paper nice. That'd be stupid."

"Interesting isn't much better! It means you couldn't think of anything else to say."

Alex blinked slowly, looking baffled, then spoke in a manner that would have been appropriate for small obtuse children. "I said the paper was interesting because it is."

"You hesitated. I saw you. You had to hunt for a word because you didn't want to hurt my feelings."

Bafflement morphed into perplexity with a slow shift of muscles around Alex's eyes and an accompanying little forehead crinkle. "Your feelings?"

Upon reflection, Parker was forced to concede the implausibility of Alex ever considering someone else's emotional state before speaking, which meant use of the word 'interesting' might have been legitimate. Parker perked up. "You really think it was interesting?"

Alex sighed. "I just *said*—"

"But you meant it? Actually interesting?"

"Yes." Exasperated now, Alex glanced back at the flim and scrolled down the ribbon. Text flashed by in a blur. "Where'd you find that book? It's not in the index."

"It wouldn't be. It's an actual book."

Alex stared silently, mismatched eyes wide. "... You mean"—floundering—"hardcopy?"

"Mmm. There's this antiques store downtown we like; you'd know it if you ever came out on the weekends. We go all the time. Riley loves it. You remember Riley?"

Alex nodded after a moment, cheeks tinting the lightest shade of pink, which was *very* interesting. Parker was going to have to tell Riley, who was still crushing hard when the opportunity presented itself even though Parker could think of few people less crush-worthy than Alex unless all you cared about was ethereal good looks.

"Anyway," Parker continued, "the owner knows I'm an actuary and came across this book and saved it for me. There's a market for old books, but, you know, novels and history and cookbooks. Not textbooks."

"Not actuarial textbooks, at least." Alex hummed thoughtfully. "I never realized how different everything must have been back then."

"Right? Can you imagine living in your body all the time?"

"Language," Alex corrected with a frown.

"It's not a curse word," Parker said, reassured in this assessment by the lack of response from the monitoring program. "But fine. Biobase."

"Mmm." Alex tapped on the flim distractedly with a perfectly manicured finger. "You really wrote this in two days?"

"Yes."

"Impressive."

The compliment was slight and grudging, but Parker took it anyway because compliments from Alex were so far between that getting from one to the next usually required a passport. "Do you think it's good enough? Will I pass?"

Alex frowned down at the flim then looked up at Parker, who was still hanging over the cubicle wall. "Oh, you'll pass. It's more than good enough. It's incredible."

~

The Old Fashioned was very loud when Parker's friends went to celebrate the submission of the Fellowship paper. Riley had preordered a cake, which appeared after several rounds of drinks and was delivered with a lackluster "Congratulations" by the server Jordan was doggedly pursuing. The server –

Jamie, apparently – was wearing another mesh top, this time royal blue with lipstick to match. Jamie's hair was now neon pink instead of neon green. The combat boots were the same black monstrosities. At some point in the previous week, Jamie had acquired new eyebrow piercings: two diamond studs very much like Jordan's.

"I'm in love," Jordan said dreamily after Jamie had apathetically delivered a round of gin rickeys with a side order of terminal ennui.

"Facial piercings are not a good foundation for a relationship," Riley said, slicing the cake. It was a conventional yellow cake with chocolate frosting between the layers and white icing upon which "Congrats Fella Parler" was prematurely scrawled in messy purple script.

"Fella?" Parker read out dubiously. With a good deal of squinting, the 'l' in 'Parler' might have been a 'k' after all, but 'Fella' was unmistakable.

"I called it in," Riley said. "The music was so loud my comm started vibrating in sympathy. We're lucky they got any of it right. Do you want a balloon?"

"Is that what that blob's supposed to be? Yes." In Parker's opinion, the only reason to eat cake was to have an excuse to eat the icing. The alleged balloon was a red misshapen dollop of pure sugary deliciousness.

"Jamie and I have a deep and meaningful connection," Jordan said, grabbing a plate and digging in.

"Jordan," Riley said firmly. "You had one date. You came *here*. Cake?" This to Alex, who was sitting at the end of the table seemingly still somewhat puzzled to have been asked to the party or else just surprised at having accepted the invitation.

Alex took the plate with the appearance of someone who had never seen cake before and was doubtful about the long-term side-effects of ingesting it, but eventually took a small bite, followed by a larger one when the first proved non-lethal.

"Good?" Riley asked, leaning closer than was strictly necessary.

"It's very sweet," Alex said, which wasn't truly an answer to the question but was good enough for Riley, who looked ready to lick any extra icing off Alex's lips. Based on the resulting blush, Alex seemed somewhat amenable to this course of action. Clearly Riley and Alex were going to be a thing someday soon. Parker was uncertain how to feel about this development but thought if there were any side benefit to be had from one's friend potentially hooking up with one's colleague, it might be finally finding out about those tattoos on Alex's wrists. Frustratingly, Alex's after-work clothes were as precisely unrevealing as Alex's work clothes. Parker wondered if they were bespoke, and if so, why that indulgence was acceptable when biomods were not.

Jordan coughed meaningfully. "So, Alex."

This caught Alex mid-chew, so answering took a moment. "Yes?"

"Do *you* understand Parker's paper?" Jordan pointed a hazardously icing-smearred fork in Alex's direction.

Alex flinched away from the dirty tines. "I didn't at first. But I did after I read it a few times."

Behind Alex's back Riley mouthed "a few times" and made a peculiar face, the meaning of which was unclear to Parker. Jordan clearly still thought Alex was a dork; Riley wasn't trying to refute it but perhaps was trying to sell dorkishness as a feature rather than a bug. This supposed, of course, that reading someone else's Fellowship paper multiple times was a sign of dorkishness rather than innate masochism. Parker wasn't prepared to weigh in on that particular issue.

"It's fantastic," Alex added grudgingly. "I wish I'd written it."

Parker gaped, for an instant deeply regretting not having a comm that automatically recorded conversations. Those few seconds of audio could have been Parker's morning alarm for the next several years, or maybe a comm chime or the doorbell, or even the signal when the dishwasher finished running. So many possibilities to be forever unrealized.

"It'll probably win an award," Alex said with a scowl, taking a grumpy bite of cake.

Parker coughed modestly. "It's not going to win an award." Alex's exquisite Fellowship paper had won an award but not the most prestigious one, and Alex was still piqued about it. The honor that year had gone to Avery Appelget, whose paper on hierarchical stochastic block models had been so full of complex equations that Parker suspected the review committee had given the award rather than having to admit they didn't fully understand the math. Parker only remembered Avery Appelget's name because Alex would sometimes use it in lieu of swearing so as to avoid tripping the office's language monitoring programs.

"It might," Alex said stubbornly, taking another bite of cake. The slice was nearly gone now and Alex was casting shifty glances at the serving tray as if contemplating asking for another. Parker wondered if the sugar was to blame for Alex's unusual bout of magnanimity or if it was simply proximity to Riley.

Meanwhile, Jordan was out of alcohol and waved to call Jamie-the-server over to the table.

"No more sour drinks," said Parker, eyeing a remaining inch of gin rickey. "Get something sweeter."

After a quick consultation with Jamie, who seemed only marginally less bored when speaking to Jordan, a round of the bar's signature old fashioned was put on order.

Jordan watched with adoration as Jamie melted back into the crowd, then turned to Alex. "So, tell me what's so amazing about the paper in a hundred words or less. And *you*"—this to Parker, accented with a stern finger—"keep your mouth shut. You already tried to explain it to me and it was gibberish."

Affronted, Parker sat back and took a surly sip of gin rickey.

Alex sat up straighter, as if to lecture. "Well. How much do you know about actuarial theory?"

"I know Parker can tell me how long I'm going to live," Jordan said for the millionth time in their acquaintance.

"That's not—" Alex began while Parker muttered, "Oh my god, shut *up*."

"Kidding," Jordan said as if that made it okay, which it did not. "I know a little bit. Probability and stuff."

Alex nodded. "We use probabilities to assign a value to an uncertain event, like an accident or a future payment. Sometimes we're just figuring out the likelihood it'll happen and other times we want to know

the value. And we use all sorts of factors to determine the likelihood of events that are associated with people. How old you are, where you live, what your job is, all that sort of stuff. But it turns out that back when people spent all their time in their biobases, actuaries used a whole different set of risk factors. And that's what the paper's about."

"That doesn't sound amazing," Jordan said after a moment.

"You only gave me 100 words to work with."

Parker again regretted not having a comm that recorded conversations, because it would have been handy to verify the sneaking suspicion that Alex's explanation had in fact been exactly 100 words.

"It's just – we've forgotten a lot," Alex said. "We only spend time in our biobases when we reset, and so we've forgotten that life was very different when people lived in them all the time. If you drink too much, you'll get a hangover, but you're never going to catch an illness. You only get sick if your biobase malfunctions. People used to get sick all the time, though, just from being around each other."

Riley and Jordan considered this for a moment. "Well," Riley said eventually, "that doesn't seem so great."

"No. And there were a lot more ways to die accidentally. The outworld didn't have safety protocols programmed into the streets. You could get hit by a car. We just take it for granted inworld that things like that won't happen. So that's what Parker's paper is about. All the ways life was fundamentally different that we don't even remember. It's astonishing, really."

Riley gazed at Alex with such a sappy expression that Parker had to mentally recalibrate the estimate of how quickly they would get together. Jordan made a face and ate a last bite of cake, leaving behind a plate heinously full of uneaten icing. "I guess that math book was kind of cool after all."

"I told you it was," Parker said, still a bit annoyed at 'gibberish.'

At that moment, Jamie arrived with the old fashioned, each adorned with a slice of orange and a cherry so red it looked fake. Parker took a sip and found it pleasantly sweet as promised.

"So, Parker," Riley said, picking at Jordan's abandoned icing. "Your cycle ends tomorrow. Are you ready?"

Parker took another sip of the old fashioned, feeling ambivalent. "Maybe."

"You're not still dithering about your hair, I hope," Jordan said. "Honestly, either purple or red would be fine. Or even green. You'll look good no matter what."

"That's what I said," Alex volunteered, earning a favorable glance from Jordan that boded well for Alex's future with Riley. No one lasted long with Riley who didn't have approval from Jordan, no matter how big of a crush Riley had.

"That is not exactly what you said," Parker pointed out. "You said my biobase is fine."

"Your biobase *is* fine."

"But you've never actually seen it," Parker said slowly, the germ of an idea taking root and sprouting. Alex had a plain way of speaking that helped cut through the noise and clear Parker's head. "The paper is making me think, though. About my biobase and my cycle."

"What does your paper have to do with your cycle?" Riley asked.

"Well, the paper's about things we've forgotten, right? Maybe I should change more than my hair. You know, try something really different. Get some custom mods."

Alex sighed heavily but Jordan looked intrigued. "What kind of custom mods?"

The nascent idea crystallized into a plan. It would certainly be different. "Maybe some gender mods historically associated with my biological sex."

"Um," Riley said, after a long moment of bewilderment. "What's biological sex?" Jordan looked equally puzzled. Alex, who evidently did not find Parker's brilliant idea especially interesting, snagged another piece of cake when nobody was looking.

Parker took another sip of the old fashioned. It was unusual. Parker liked it. "Well," she said. "That might take a little while to explain."