# A Tavern Named Keep

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# A Tavern Named Keep

by hanktalkin

Summary

In a small uni-town in New Mexico, DeGroot Keep serves liquor and succor to an eclectic yet loyal group of patrons, and has for many years. The Keep owes its success to its equally colorful owner, who always seems to know what you need—whether that be a stiff beer or a word of advice. But, between setting up his patrons or sifting through his friends' problems, will Tavish remember to take care of himself?

# Chapter 1

Nestled between the Law Offices of one B. L. Tarch and the perpetually-closed Geranium Germinated Wheat Bakery, there sits a modest little Tavern by the name of *DeGroot Keep*. One wouldn't be blamed in mistaking the *Keep* for…anything else really; the structure is made from a homey, tan stone that gives it the air of a snug residential building (and indeed, its proprietor does live in the room above the tavern, but we'll get to him later.) Fresh green paint trims the windows and roof, never a flake nor chip as a point of pride. Although the tavern's name hangs above a pair of heavy wooden doors just off the street, this sign is only a formality, as the true entrance to *DeGroot Keep* (as transcribed by its sole employee on a borrowed flashcard and taped to the door) is procured from the eastern side, down the hall to the right. This esca of a front door can't be breached even if one tries; within, the *Keep's* largest and most impressive wooden table blocks the entirety of it, crouching like a curmudgeonly boulder. Nicknamed the Elephant, (both for its girth and the fact that sixteen dancing elephants are carved into legs), the monstrosity can only be moved by four fairly-fit adults working in coordination, which is a big ask for the patrons of the *Keep*, so there the Elephant sits. This is actually one of the *least* egregious examples of the business's fire and safety hazards.

To truly access this strange example of an alcoholic establishment, one must pass through the repurposed gap-between-buildings, underneath the pergola, and betwixt two stone sea-serpents if they judge you worthy. The spot of shaded greenery one finds there is something to marvel at, though few do. During the day it is shaded, and as the sun goes down, hanging lights guide potential customers to the *actual* front door.

This is the journey of one truly haggard prospective patron, newly jet-lagged and irate from the front door's runaround, grumbling to himself with a distinct Australian accent as he pushes inside. Tavish, as well as the handful of early customers hunkered in their normal pods, look up at the bell's ring.

"Aye there!" greets the bartender, as genial as they come, slipping into the smile he reserves for courting the uninitiated to his place of business. "Welcome to *DeGroot Keep*! What can I get for you, stranger?"

The newcomer startles. Hearing a thick Scottish accent in the deep reaches of the southern United States usually does that—in Tavish's experience—so he's just glad that the man's forgotten to be sour-faced for a second. It's not so odd that it distracts him for more than a moment, though, and he drifts closer to the bar. "Beer."

"Coming right up!"

Tavish moves automatically, bottles sliding behind the bar with a practiced ease, acting on hunch as sizes up the man before him. He's not paying attention to the bartender's hands, instead finally getting hit with the sheer unorthodoxy of the tavern's décor, the Elephant not the least of it. This is perfectly fine for Tavish, who begins the process of rimming a glass tumbler.

“Flight just get in?” he fields, as his customer gazes around in bafflement.

“…Yeah.” The man’s frown—before with an air of perpetual irritation that was more aimed at the general world rather than Tavish in particular—grows slightly suspicious. It tugs him enough out of his beguilement. “How’d you know that?”

“Just a guess.” Tavish shrugs. “You can wear the sunglasses indoors all you like lad, but it wouldn’t hide those bags unless you had a bag o’re your head.”

There is a moment, a moment where Tavish tenses, knowing that not everyone would take brusque ribbing from a stranger with anything more than offense, but then the stranger fully processes what’s been said. He laughs. It’s an abrupt little thing, more of a bark really, but the tension between them breaks, and the Australian sits down.

“Your drink, sir,” Tavish says as he slides it towards him.

“…This isn’t a beer.”

“ ‘S the same price.” A half grin curls up mischievously. “Humor me.”

The man, now sitting at one of the vinyl-clad bar stools patterned to resemble a vintage bottle cap, takes a hold of the mixed drink and knocks it back. After a second, he sets it down, licking the corner of his mouth.

“Bloody hell,” he says. “That’s a damn good drink, mate.”

The hunch, now confirmed, eases back into the twinkle of Tavish’s eye. “Well they don’t call me the greatest bartender between the 106$^{th}$ and 107$^{th}$ longitudes for nothing! I do my best.”

Snorting, the man says, “Mick Mundy.”

“Tavish DeGroot,” Tavish replies, taking the offered hand.

“DeGroot,” Mick hums. “As in *DeGroot Keep*, then?”

“No actually, complete coincidence. Bought the place from a woman named Dee Gertrude Roots, her pride and joy it was, founded it in the 70s as a swinger’s club. Anyway, terrible thing happened to the ‘ole girl: ‘twas the day of her retirement, and right as she hands me the keys, that there moose-shoe hanging above the door comes free ‘o its nail. Dropped on her noggin, and killed dead right there.”

Mick turns to stare at the comically large horseshoe christening the *Keep’s* doorway, before glancing skeptically at Tavish. “You’re fucking with me.”

“ ‘Course I’m fucking with you. *‘As in DeGroot Keep?’* Bah, what sort of half-brained question is that?” But Tavish says it with such teasing humor that Mick can’t help but laugh too. Tavish’s starting to like this man, now that he’s getting a good feel for his ins-and-outs.

Gesturing with his half-finished drink, Mick admits, “DeGroot or Roots, you’ve got a real weird bar on your hands.”

“Tavern,” Tavish corrects seriously. When Mick raises an eyebrow, he blisters, “ach, you’re as bad as the Americans, can’t tell a bar from a pub, let alone a proper tavern when you see one.”

“Don’t let him start draw ‘n quartering you for that,” a voice speaks up from beyond Mick and Tavish’s conversation. “Trust me, ain’t no one in the world makes the distinction but him.”

The three men near the door, whose exchange Tavish has been listening to with half an ear, have noticed that Mick has settled into an amicable conversation, the fact that it’s gone on reasonably long marking him as ‘the alright sort’. The regulars around here know better than to crowd any new faces, lest their enthusiasm chase them off. Tavish has a business to run, after all.

“And that’s what’s wrong with your bloody country,” Tavish points at the interrupter. “No one cares but me! When the day comes you’ll all slide into the ocean, except for I and the Keep, the only ones who bothered to remember that words mean things.”

Ignoring him, Dell speaks right on past to Mick. “Bet he told you he was the best bartender in the county too,” the customer-swiping bastard says, elbowing Mick in the side. “He mention he only won that competition because the other contestant had even fewer eyes than him?”

“You just have to ruin everything for me, don’t you Conagher?” Tavish asks, and Dell laughs.

They quickly round-table the introductions, Dell the only one to reach out and shake Mick’s hand. Mikail stoutly offers his name before retreating back into silence, but when it comes to Dr. Ludwig’s turn, he states abruptly, “and *I* am a free man!”

Mick falters, but to his credit, it’s only momentarily. “Congratulations? Got ‘ta say though, you got balls mate. Most people don’t offer up when they’ve just been out of prison.”

“*Prison?*” Ludwig says, eyes immediately narrowing behind his spectacles, snapping into suspicion in an instant. “Who told you about that? I want names!”

“I uh,” Mick says, obviously taken aback. Thankfully, Dell always has his thumb on the pulse of whenever something farcical is about to go on.

“What Doc *means* to say,” he assuages, “is that he’s been freed from the institution of marriage, not the institution of…institutionalization.”

Ludwig’s mood is gone as quickly as it’d come. “Ah ha ha, yes. Silly misunderstanding. Excuse my slip of the tongue.”

Still looking like he’s been swiped at by a wild animal, Mick cautiously says, “…roight.”

“But yes, the papers came in this morning! As of today, I am a free man.”

He proves this by spreading out said papers across the booth’s table, and reciting in glee the legal severances which he had been granted over a multitude of affidavits and certifications. Tavish, having the misfortune of not being able to move from his post, knows Ludwig’s been

doing this for the past hour and a half. Mikhail and Dell have shown him saintly support however, the later patting him on the shoulder as he launches into another gleeful discussion of alimony. They've retracted back into their corner, for which Mick is grateful.

"Eclectic lot you got," he tells Tavish. "Setup to a joke, isn't it? A German, a Russian, and American walk into a Scotsman's bar."

"*Tavern*," Tavish says. "And you haven't seen the half of it. Wait until you meet-"

The bell tinkles, heralding the arrival of Tavish's only employee and their begrudging chauffeur.

"You're late," he tells Pyro.

The bout of muffled, frustrated yelling he gets in response is directed at Jeremy, who puts his hands up in defense. Pyro points at their roommate furiously, laying the truth bare.

Tavish raises a brow at the sputtering man. "You slowed down just so you could stare at the track team's arses?"

"It's a student crossing zone!" Jeremy caterwauls with the trod upon hallmarks of an argument carried all the way from campus to the bar. "I *had* to slow down. And, y'know, maybe while we were *stopped* I looked, but I was-"

Pyro throws their hands up in exasperation and walks behind the bar.

Mick, meanwhile, has been gazing at Pyro nonstop since they stepped in the door. Tavish doesn't blame him. It's not every day you see someone in a fully flame-retardant suit tie on an apron and then put a little chef's hat on their head.

"Jaw off the floor, lad," he says to Mick, not unkindly.

Realizing he's staring, the Australian self-consciously follows the command. "…Sorry."

" 'S alright. They get that a lot."

The person in question doesn't even notice the conversation has fallen on them, shuffling to the back kitchen in preparation of the upcoming dinner rush.

"…They wear that all the time then?"

"Yeah," Jeremy says, swinging into the stool on Mick's right. "It's cool though. Believe it or not, Pyro's not even the 4$^{th}$ weirdest person at TFU." Jeremy pauses, as though just registering who he's talking to. "Who are *you*, anyway?"

"Scout, be nice," Tavish warns.

"What? I am being nice! I'm asking who this chucklenut is, ain't I?"

"Mundy," Mick growls, already deciding he's not going to like this kid.

“And I’m Jeremy, but everyone calls me Scout, so there, now we’re all acquainted and shit.”

“They call you *Scout?*” Mick asks dubiously. “*Why?*”

“Uh, ‘cause it’s my name, duh.”

“What kind of name is Scout?”

“What kind of name is Mundy?”

Tavish, feeling that occupying the new guest is handled for a little while, (assuming Jeremy doesn’t annoy him to death), gracefully withdraws from the conversation in the horizontal direction—sliding down the bar to where his second most care-intensive client is.

“Lassie,” he says, gently jostling her shoulder, “it’s 5:19.”

“Urg,” Pauling says, lifting from the gentle cushion of her folded arms and into the buzzing light of the *Keep*, illuminated as it is by the faux-stained glass filtering down from the ceiling. Her cats-eye glasses are ever so slightly out of place, much like the stray hairs popping up from her bun as though they too have just been woken from a nap.

Another bartender might be concerned to find a woman passed out on his bar after only one gin and tonic, but Tavish knows that this particular woman is only held together by stress and paperclips. Before she’d come through *Keep’s* doors, she’d been going on thirty hours without sleep. It was no wonder that she’d walked in, taken her usual, and then immediately slumped over in her favorite chair.

“Wuzz…” she grumbles, then shoots up like a jack-in-the-box. “5:19? I told you to wake me up at 5:14!”

“I know, but you were just so exhausted looking, I thought you deserved a wee bit longer.”

“It’s not about *deserving*.” The papers that had provided a barrier between wood and face are gathered quickly, slotted into clipboards and shuffled into her accordion bag. “It takes sixteen minutes to get from here to The Facility at a brisk walk, but to get there in eleven I’ll have to punch that up to a light jog and then I’ll be sweaty, and the Administrator will notice because she always notices and-”

A stray paper flutters away as Pauling fails to put it in its appropriate folder.

“*Crap*.”

That’s not the end of Pauling's troubles either. As she makes her break towards the door, Jeremy scrambles out of his chair and into her way. “Yo, Miss P!”

“Scout. What is it. Kind of in a hurry.”

Jeremy, with his cap a little crooked as he rubs the back of his head, inevitably does not take the hint and says, “yeah you’re always in a hurry, that’s why it took so long to tell you, I wanted to bring it up when it was *new* ‘n all-”

“Scout. Talk faster.”

“I just uh,” he flounders. “I got a new bike. A scooter, like yours, just because you make it look so cool, and when my car broke down I figured I could make it, uh look cool...too,” he finishes lamely. “So like, in the future if you ever want to talk about bikes and stuff?”

There is a heavy, prolonged movement of air. A sigh if a sigh were on the inhale, sucking all the aggravation out of the tavern like a straw sucking up Gin and Tonic. “That’s great Scout. We can definitely. Do that.”

“Really? That’s great! I mean uh, that’s cool.” He notices that he’s still blocking her exit. “Sorry, let me just uh…” With that, he scoots out of the way, and Pauling is off at a light jog.

Tavish waits until the bell has longs stopped ringing before frowning at Jeremy. “I thought you were over your crush on her.”

“What?” Jeremy seems genuinely startled. “I am! Like wayyy over it, over the moon about it.”

“Not what that means, lad.”

“Point is I’m not into her.” He puts his hands in his pockets. “I just still want to be her friend, okay? That so freaking hard to believe?”

“With you, a bit.”

Mick, watching the exchange with amusement, snorts. Jeremy glares.

“Glad Scout didn’t chase you away,” Tavish says, done with his sworn Pauling-attending duties and free to return to his other customers. “Now that Pyro’s in, we should have the kitchen up and running soon. If you’re staying around that is?”

Mick pauses, and takes a good hard look at the interior of *DeGroot Keep*. His eyes go up to the inlaid stone ceiling, festooned with glass lamps and beaded tassels that are now doing the heavy lifting as the daylight fades. He takes in the decoration: the murals of lonely bagpipe players inlaid to the wall as if they were tiled there, the stringless harp hung above the bar, the mounted deer head with a cigar in its mouth. His attention hovers on the group of new acquaintances, still carrying on their warm conversation in the corner.

“Sure,” he says. “Why not?”

Tavish smiles. “Here’s the menu,” he says, sliding the laminated square toward Mick.

**DeGroot Keep (** *all tax included* **)**

- **Flaming Burritos $11**
- **Shrimp Flambé  $16**
- **Cheese Saganaki $10**
- **Steak Diane $20**
- **Bananas Foster $7**

- **Crème Brule $7**
- **Baked Alaska $11**

“He lets Pyro write the menu,” Jeremy says fondly, swinging back into his place beside Mick.

“Aye. And if you ever order a Swedish Glogg, it’s my solemn oath to let Pyro know so they can light it on fire themself,” Tavish says with a wink.

“I don’t even know what a Swedish Glogg *is*,” Mick says, pouring over the menu in bewilderment.

“Would you like to find out?”

He blanches somewhat. “Maybe some other time.”

At that, the words burrow themselves somewhere warm in the vicinity of Tavish’s heart. *Some other time* meant the future, meant that even if this stranger was only here for a little while, he’d be back again. The thing is, Tavish likes people. As much as he likes drinks, as much as he likes being a business owner, there’s something special about the way you connect with someone over a bar, one that he’d never gotten anywhere else. He likes this collection of people he’s accumulated, the way ‘regulars’ don’t quite describe them. Because the *Keep* isn’t a normal tavern, not really.

As Pyro swoops in to take Mick’s—and eventually Jeremy’s—order, Tavish moves a step back, sliding into the background as he uses the moment to drink it all in.

“Hm. New recruit.”

The voice comes from Pauling’s old spot, now a bit shadier than before. In it, a much larger man sits as he contemplates the stranger at the far end of the bar, a bottle of beer before him. He must have snuck in with his spare key, even though Tavish has told him a thousand times that ‘avoiding populated thoroughfares’ isn’t what it’s for.

“Jane,” Tavish laments, though there’s no true reprimand in it. “You don’t need to get your own drinks,” he says of the beer.

Jane draws it closer to himself, as though Tavish might try to take it away. “…Didn’t want to bother you.”

“I’m your bartender, lad. It’s my job.”

Tavish begins the task of retrieving a mug from the lowest shelf, and pouring Jane his usual. As he does, he watches Jane watch the gaggle up front, a look of concentration crossing his already stern features.

“What’s he about, then?” Jane asks as Tavish pours until the beer’s head is just about to crest over the edge.

“Dunno. Haven’t gotten that far yet.”

“But you think he’ll stick around.”

Not a question. “Well, I have a good intuition about these things.”

Jane tilts his head in Tavish’s direction. “Undoubtedly! Your talent for acquiring fruitcakes and weirdos is unparalleled within the state of New Mexico.”

“Aye, that’s how I found *you* dinnae I?”

To that, Jane only grins, and takes a sip of his beer.

And well, he’s not wrong, is he? Tavish takes a look around at the cozy little community, chuckling as Jeremy inserts himself into Dell’s side of the booth and makes a nuisance of himself, thinking about how he could get Pauling to possibly slow down for a few minutes next time. It’s nice to have a group of people he can count on to always be around, not the least because they’re paying him to make them drinks. It’s nice to have folks to look after.

As a few more people come in through the *Keep’s* portcullis, he once again remembers to be grateful for everything he’s got.

# Chapter 2

“I think it’s about time we put our heads together on this, lads,” Tavish says lowly to the three men before him, cleaning out a glass as casually as he can.

Jane, who has no concept of an inside voice and would attempt to fistfight the word ‘discretion’ if given the opportunity, replies, “PUT OUR HEADS TOGETHER FOR WHAT, MAGGOT?”

“For *something discreet*, Jane. You know, a secret mission?” Tavish says, trying to urge the ranger back into a state that isn’t turning every head at the bar, including the two people he’d been watching very intently before fielding the suggestion. “I think it’s time we all did something about Doc ‘n Mikhail.”

“Yes, I see,” Jane ruminates, thankfully lowering his voice down to his own personal version of a whisper. (Still above speaking volume, but Tavish will take what he can get.) “It is about time we ‘did something’ about the Kraut and the Ruskie, so that they are ‘taken care of’, and ‘the operation can proceed smoothly’.”

“I’m really starting to regret teaching him air quotes,” Jeremy says, one elbow on the bar and the other tilting back his beer.

“If you really need someone taken care of, I’ve got some pretty good rates,” Mick offers.

Jeremy eyes him, suddenly dubious. “…What exactly you doing for work in Teufort again?”

“That’s between me ‘n the blokes that pay me.”

“I really should not have to clarify this, but I did *not* mean having them killed.” Tavish sets down his glass and leans on the bar. “I mean *do something* about the two of them. Y’know. *Together*.”

“Together.” Jeremy’s mouth is a flat line.

“Yes, *together* together. I mean, just look at ‘em!”

Near the admittance to the auxiliary room (which due to being half a floor below the rest of the bar and grotesquely dominated by the Elephant, is almost never used except on particularly busy nights and when Tavish rents the *Keep* out for events), the pair of doctors are deaf to the world. It's an amazing sight: Ludwig not the least bit twitchy, not shuffling papers in his hands, not occupied with some experiment. He’s wholly enraptured by whatever Mikhail is saying, watching the way his mouth moves as he gestures one giant hand through the air with ease. A casual acquaintance of Ludwig’s would be flabbergasted to see him interrupt not *once* during the entire winding conversation, to value the words of another person so highly. When Mikhail says something amusing, Ludwig laughs uproariously, and there’s the barest twinge on the Russian’s face that lets one know he’s pleased about it.

Jeremy turns back to Tavish. “I don’t know man. Doc and the Professor? Kinda a zebras and horses thing there.”

“A *wot*?” Mick asks.

“A uh…cats and dogs living together you know? Or maybe like pigeons and really bad tempered grizzly bears living together.”

“The nurse keeps *doves*, not *pigeons,*” Soldier declares ever so helpfully, slamming his fist down. “Pigeons are a noble species, who risk life and wing to carry messages between their fellow combatants, driving themselves to extinction out of pure patriotism! I will not have you confusing them for that man’s glorified pillow stuffers.”

“Pretty sure they’re the same species,” Mick says.

“Lads,” Tavish stresses. “Can we focus?”

“About them having the hots for each other?” Jeremy looks over his shoulder again. “Really?”

“Dunno,” Mick muses. “I can see it.”

“What do *you* know, you’ve only been here two weeks.”

“They give each other longing looks sometimes. Oi! Like that!”

Ludwig has reached behind him, taking a beer off the seashell-inlaid standing table. As he takes a sip, Mikhail’s mask of attentiveness slips just for a moment, and he stares at his friend while the other man is distracted. It’s an utterly at peace expression, like nothing in the world quite matters the way they do.

“That was definitely a longing look,” Mick states triumphantly. Tavish gestures at him in vindication.

Jane squints. “…Are they not already dating?”

“Uhg,” Jeremy scoffs. “Fine, I’m out-freaking-voted. But that doesn’t mean it’s *our* job to get them together.”

“Oh come on, they’ve been dancing around each other for ages,” Tavish protests. “At the very least do it for your own sanity, if it’ll stop them making moon eyes at each other.”

“Ages?” Mick raises an eyebrow. “Didn’t Doc *just* get divorced?”

“Aye, but they’ve been separated for four years now. And if I’m being honest, I think he’s been in love with Mikhail for at least three of those.”

“Scout’s point still stands!” Jane says. “If they cannot tell each other how they feel then that is their own failing.”

“Oh c’mon Doe.” Tavish leans over the bar, gently nudging his friend in the side. “This is for the sake of *true love*. Don’t tell me there’s a more noble, patriotic cause than that.”

The omnipresent, wide-brimmed hat that’s already covering a good portion of Jane’s eyes is pulled even farther down his face. “Hrmm. Fine. You make a good point. Consider me drafted into your inane scheme.”

“Like you don’t love an inane scheme.”

“So we’re just skipping from longing looks to straight up ‘true love’?” Jeremy asks. “Y’know what, I don’t care, shenanigans or whatever. Just promise me this won’t take too long, Pyro has this gay-ass club thing that they want us to go to tonight.”

“A gay club?” Tavish more betrayed than surprised, though there’s certainly that too. “You’re stepping out on the *Keep*, boyo?”

“No! Not like a clubbing club, like a school club. Mumbles is like, vice chair or something, and I’m supposed to be there for support.”

“So it’s…what?” Mick asks. “A GSA?”

Jeremy's oncoming distress plays acutely across his face. “Aw man, c’mon there’s already so many letters, I can’t memorize any more.”

“GSA?” Jane rubs his chin. “Goose Savant Academy? Generous Squid Association? Gyration Saves America?”

“You’ll get to your club just fine, Scout,” Tavish assures. “This shouldn’t take long after all, they’re practically making out with their eyes whenever they look at each other. All they need is a little nudge.”

With his kill squad assembled (to ‘kill’ the awkwardness that has haunted *DeGroot Keep* for nearly half a decade, that is), Tavish shuffles behind the bar and pulls out an assortment of utensils, spare stock in case the usual table-fare runs out, but now being put to good use. He puts a ketchup bottle on one side and a mustard on the other, then splits up the silverware into pairs of two.

“Mundy and I will talk to Mikhail, try to get him see reason. Scout ‘n Jane, you handle Ludwig. I have a feeling he hasn’t even admitted to himself yet, so what you have to do is persuade him there’s a get-together tonight at the *Keep*. When we convince them both to show, we all amscray, and force them to face their newly realized feelings for each other. Eh? What do you think?”

“Why’re Misha and Doc matching things but the four ‘a us are a knife, a fork, a spoon, and a pepper shaker?” Jeremy swirls his finger at the assembled objects.

“Well there isn’t a fourth silverware, now is there?”

“Spork,” Jane, Mick, and Jeremy all say at once.

“Screw the lot of you,” Tavish says. “Are you in or no?”

“Eh, why not.”

“Fine. Sure.”

“Affirmative!”

“Fantastic! Mundy, let’s go try to pin Mikhail before he heads to his next class.”

“Godspeed soldiers,” Jane salutes as the bartender slides out. “Do your duty, and should you fail, make sure your end is glorious! Preferably also bloody: such as detonating a hand grenade and taking out several doves with you, bringing them along to the cold, unforgiving grave. I want this to be a *closed casket* twenty-one gun salute, maggots!”

Tavish smiles. No matter his penchant for getting things off track, Tavish finds it hard to stay mad at Jane. “Aye aye, sir.”

As the pairs split, Jeremy and Jane breaking away to pursue Ludwig out the *Keep’s* front door, Mick watches them depart thoughtfully. “He wasn’t *really* in the army, was he?”

“That’s his business, and I wouldn’t dishonor him by talking behind his back,” Tavish says firmly. “Though, do yourself a favor and don’t ask which wars he’s fought in. You’ll catch a headache, right then and there.”

“Fine,” Mick holds up his hands in surrender. “Won’t hear a word from me. Though that’s not a military uniform in the first place, is it?”

“The one he always wears? Nah. For all the things Jane may or may not be, he *is* employed by the forestry service. He’s a park ranger up at Valles Caldera Preserve.”

“Really. Huh. Where’d you even find a bloke like him?”

“It was more like he found me.” Tavish rubs his neck. “It’s…complicated. But we’ve got a mission to do, so why don’t we stay focused, eh?”

It’s apparent Mick’s noticed the obvious change in subject, but thankfully he doesn’t press it this time around. And a good thing too, Mikhail is slipping books into a satchel that looks like it’s straight out of a 1950s boarding school novel, complete with a brass button he closes with a satisfying *snap*.

“Oi, wait a moment there professor,” Tavish says. “Wanted to chat with you before you headed out for the morning. You ‘n Mundy here never got properly introduced.”

“Were introduced,” Mikhail grumbles, knocked out of a morning routine that is all but sacred to him. He wakes up, he buys coffee and a sticky bun from the shop down the street, he brings it to the bar (which Tavish allows because. C’mon. *You* try telling Mikhail “Heavy” Zakharov he’s not allowed to bring carry-ins) and then he converses with Dr. Ludwig until it’s time to head for TFU. To be broken from this lockstep onsets a bad mood. “Mikhail gives his name. Is all you need to know.”

“Oh there’s more to you than that big guy.” Tavish pats him on the arm, which comes up to about the bartender’s head. “I think Mick’s proving himself to be a decent fellow to have around, aye? You don’t have to avoid him.”

“Mikhail does not avoid,” Mikhail says, clearly avoiding Mick’s eyes.

The Australian, uncomfortable with his whole place in this charade, gives Tavish a look of *where the bloody hell is this going?*

*Just stick with me*, Tavish’s own look shoots back. To Mikhail he says, “c’mon lad, open up a little. Why don’t you tell us both how you got your teaching job, eh? That’s a nice little ice breaker.”

Mikhail eyes him as though, somewhere, deep in the animal part of his brain that lets us all know that someone is trying to scam us out of our portion of the kill, that this is about to lead somewhere he would not like. However, proving that is going to be difficult with how earnestly Tavish is looking at him.

He sighs. “Fine. Mikhail tells.” To Mick he says, “in Teufort. There is university. Mikhail is tired of looking for many jobs in many places, so he walks in and says ‘you will give me this’. Hale says he likes Mikhail’s gumption.” A rumble that might be a slightly mellowing laugh washes from the back of his throat. “Tried to fire Mikhail once, and Mikhail tells him that is good office, is good job. If he wants Mikhail gone, will have to remove him. Tried to. Mikhail won. Hale amused by this.” Mikhail thinks on this a moment. “Hale is strange man.”

“…What do you *teach*?” Mick asks, as customarily perplexed as people are when they find out Mikhail earned tenure by winning a wrestling match with his dean.

“Eighteenth to Modern Russian Literature,” Mikhail replies.

“They offer that? At *Teufort*? I’m pretty sure they don’t even offer calculus.”

“Do now. When Mikhail demand job, he say, ‘you will have this, and Mikhail will teach’. So class is taught. Not big surprise.”

“Ah mate,” Tavish butts in, vibrating from the anticipation of the undirected tale. “You skipped the best part! After all, how’s a bright lad like you end up in a place like this? You could’ve gone anywhere, but you stayed in Teufort.”

Discomfort rises in Mikhail’s shoulders once again. “Like said. Was tired of looking.”

“Oh dunnae try to pull that on me,” Tavish says. “Before you were busting down Hale’s office door, you strolled into this town on a whim. When you wandered into my bar, you said you were just passing through, and it was only a few drinks in before you were in love.”

The empty coffee cup just about shoots out of Mikhail’s hand as he jerks, squeezing it like a Bug Out Bob. “W-what? What is little man talking about?”

“With the *Keep*!” Tavish says proudly, both superficially oblivious and acutely aware of Mikhail’s reaction. “The tavern’s an alluring mistress, I can understand how she convinced a

wayward traveler to stay, even when he had better prospects elsewhere. Even I'm a bit in love with her."

Tavish pats a nearby support beam proudly, so covered in years of black paint it's gone smooth.

"…Da. *Keep* is good place." The awkwardness is practically sweltering. "Maybe...*was* part of staying."

"I still remember that day you know," Tavish grasps the distant memory with his eye turned heavenward, in a rigorous performance of reverie that Mick can't help but think he's laying it on a little thick. "So *shy* you were, 't was almost funny. Doc didn't notice though. Just struck up a conversation with you right away, the two of you chatting away for *hours* over in the lower bar area."

"Everyone is equally 'shy' to Doktor," Mikhail admits. "He talks, expects people to listen."

"Ah, but good company is the keystone of the *Keep's* charm," Tavish says. "After all, it takes a truly special place to make a man give up the hunt and decide this backwater town is worth sticking around for."

Mikhail opens his mouth, hesitates, then closes it again. "Da."

"Ah, but you have to get to morning classes. Sorry we kept you so long professor. Glad you 'n Mick got more acquainted."

With that, Tavish wraps a firm hand around Mick's upper arm and frog-marches him away from the slightly bewildered Russian. You can practically see the gears turning in the man's head, his flimsy paper cup now a crumple in his palm as his concentration is elsewhere. As the pair watch discreetly over their shoulders, Mikhail shakes himself, quickly disposes of his breakfast remains, and flees.

"That's it?" Mick asks. "I thought we were going to confront him about confessing his feelings or something."

"That'll be enough," Tavish assures, still watching the door. "Mikhail's a smart man. And the thing about smart men is that once they get something into their head, they think on it until it drives them crazy, like a mutt with a chew toy. He'll be back."

"D'ya not consider yourself a smart man?"

"Goodness no! I, lad, am a *worldly* man, much more practical. I'll give you this advice: never date a man who's insane enough to go back for an advanced degree."

"I don't really date."

"Ah, then maybe you're wiser than all of us."

"Still not so sure that's going to get him to *do* anything," Mick says. "It honestly sounded like you were negging him."

“Trust me on this, alright?” The chiming of the bell brings Tavish to the reality that there are still many pressing concerns to be handled before tonight. “And while you’re trusting me, excuse me as well. My Most Valued Customer just walked in.”

She is not, by most definitions of the word, the customer Tavish values most, but it’s an indubitably good idea to treat her like she is. Helen steps cleanly over to the bar, placing herself upon a stool with just barely enough time for Tavish to slip into his usual position himself. They arrange themselves to their spots, like actors before the curtain rises.

“Miss Helen,” he greets studiously.

“Mister DeGroot,” she sniffs coolly back. “Gin on the rocks, if you would.”

“Daring today, aren’t we?”

“I pay for you to serve me drinks, DeGroot, not for your glib tongue.”

“The glibness is free o’ charge.” With a flourish, he finishes pouring her usual, sliding it away to be snatched by a well-manicured claw. He sets about to business with, “your star employee fell asleep at me bar again yesterday.”

“I am unsurprised. She once told me that she finds mattresses overly soft, and that they must be ‘up to something’.”

“Is that something getting people to sleep?”

“I assume so. Miss Pauling is not fond of the activity.”

“She might not have such anxiety about falling asleep if her boss wasn’t putting the load of ten assistants on her,” Tavish says. “Cannae ye lay off the girl, just a tad? You know she’d jump off a cliff if you told her to.”

“If I did, it would be for good reason.” Helen’s already quite narrow face sharpens to a point keen enough to draw blood. “Miss Pauling is aware of our duty, and what is at stake if we fail. The Facility must persevere, even as we burn ourselves out to keep it alight.”

An eye roll seems the least that spiel deserves. The Facility, in the Proper Noun of it all, is mostly known around Teufort as TF, in reverance to its complete inscrutability of purpose. Helen likes it that way. She’s very gloat-y when she knows something you don’t.

“Don’t start torching all your employees in the street, lassie,” he says dourly. “Think of the smell.”

“We must all *make sacrifices*, DeGroot.” And oh boy, here we go. “I, more than anyone. There are games that are played, behind the scenes, above the clouds, games of power and money that you cannot even fathom the rules of, and it is our job that you never have to. It may not be moral, or right, but it is *necessary*, and you should thank Miss Pauling for what she does so that you all can keep living your pitiful little lives.”

“Pitiful little lives?” Tavish raises a brow. “The kind where one has a gin on the rocks at eleven in the morning?”

Helen purses her lips at him. He refills her glass.

“Pretend all you like, you’re just as mortal as the rest of us,” he goes on. “Pauling too. She thinks the world of you, you know.”

“I treasure her for her loyalty.”

“I mean on a *personal* level, Helen,” Tavish says. “Whatever goes on in The Facility I won’t hazard to know, but Pauling believes in it because you do. Just make sure her devotion isn’t misplaced, aye? That’s all I ask.”

Helen doesn’t respond, but nor does she go off on another dismissive rant about the unwashed masses or whatever, so Tavish will take this as a win. Another comes thirty minutes later when Jane returns and relates that Dr. Ludwig will ‘report for duty’ at nineteen hundred hours. There’s plenty of time but also plenty to do, and Tavish sets to work on making the best ‘get these sorry excuses for lovebirds together’ bash he can strangle a chicken about. Jane isn’t on duty today and keeps him company, a complimentary beer to thank him for his troubles while he moseyes on about how the true American way to confess your feelings is to do so while crossing the Chesapeake while your foot is raised majestically on the bow in total disregard for boat safety. Tavish tries to tell him that’s not what that painting is about, but he’s having none of it. The ambiance continues in comfortable companionship as Tavish pulls out all the stops: streamers, tiny umbrellas, everything he needs for when the *Keep* hosts a special event. By the time Ludwig comes through the door with the evening slithering on his heels, he is not the first patron to be struck by the tavern’s transformation.

“Why is everything so…moody?” he immediately asks of the new lighting.

“National Candle Appreciation Day,” Tavish says stoically. “Doe assures it’s a very important American holiday. I wouldn’t want to offend any ‘o my customers by not dressing her up for the occasion.”

It speaks volumes that Ludwig doesn’t immediately pounce on the bald-faced dishonesty of this, first and foremost the fact never has the holiday come up in all the other years Tavish has kept *DeGroot Keep* on its wheels. Ludwig merely shakes his head, as though clearing his ears of buzzing jingoistic bees, and takes a seat at the bar. Whatever Jane and Jeremy said to him must have taken a real number. He’s practically jittery as Tavish mixes a few teaspoons of honey into his drink, not noticing what’s right in front of him.

“For courage,” Tavish says as he sets it forward.

“Courage?” Ludwig gapes at it, then lifts his eyes to his bartender. His mind calls back to his mysterious encounter earlier today, and for the first time wonders who could have put those two idiots up to it. “Are you-?”

Whatever threads of suspicion he was about to pull on will go uninvestigated, as the moment is heralded by Mikhail banging open the door. Ludwig turns, the silhouette of the Russian glowing slightly as a light rain follows him inside, the sunset setting the backdrop afire. Mikhail is equally nervous, his eyes scanning the bar for whom Tavish could reasonably guess.

"*Gott*," Ludwig gulps. He swings around, downs his drink with several fearsome chugs, then rises while wiping his mouth on the back of his hand.

"Doktor," Mikhail says, locating where the doctor has been milking that courage to the best of his abilities, like the bartender has the key to salvation. "I have been looking for-"

"Misha there is something I need to talk to y-"

They both cut off abruptly.

"Doktor can say what he wants to say."

"No, no you can go first I just-"

"Something Mikhail should have said long time ago-"

Sputtering into silence once more, Tavish looks on and summarizes that he's never seen two men more terrified of each other. They're now hopelessly caught in a veritable web of indecision, candlelight flicking around them, once again unaware of anything else as they stand paralyzed by the full recognition of the thing that they've been unknowingly cultivating between for years.

"…Could I steal you away for a moment, my friend?" Ludwig says sheepishly, finally, blessedly breaking the awkward silence.

"Yes. Can…Yes. Is good idea."

And they part from the bar, pulling aside down the half-stair for a long awaited conversation.

The rest of the revelry spins on. Some—like Tavish—spare a glance at the pair of old friends hashing out something clearly of import and leave them to their business. Others don't notice at all so weirded out are they by the sudden change in décor. Pyro is in the second camp, wandering about like a Dalmatian puppy during its first snow. Jeremy is oddly disinclined, having shown up with Pyro and promptly slunk to a corner, an uncharacteristic glumness about him. Before Tavish can even wonder at that, Dell appears for the impromptu party.

"They're getting along even better than usual," Dell says as Tavish passes him a Blu Streak, indicating the two men forgotten by the revels. "If I didn't know any better I'd say-"

With no grace, no planning, no care, Ludwig lunges upward and kisses Mikhail on the mouth.

"-*Oh*," is all that comes from Dell's mouth, (so apparently that's what he'd say if he didn't know any better.) "I guess…heh…I guess they're really getting along then- oh." His jaw

works silently for a moment as the vigor of the kissing increases. “Oh. *Really* getting along… over……there.”

Tavish pops an elbow on the bar and puts a chin in his hand. “Ah, isn’t love wonderful?”

Dell’s face has gone completely red, but despite himself he can’t look away. Tavish does not have this problem, and when he’s satisfied with a job well done, he peels himself from the engineer and heads further down the bar to congratulate his fellow conspirators. However, Mick’s on a job tonight, and it appears Jeremy’s slipped out between now and the last time Tavish saw him. He’s checking around some of the tables near the restrooms when he feels a slap on the back.

“You did good work tonight, sergeant!” Jane greets him warmly.

“Thanks lad,” Tavish says as he pats the hand that’s moved to his shoulder.

To his surprise, it doesn’t leave. After a moment, where Jane’s brow is furrowed in concentration, he rumbles out, “no, I mean it. This was a good thing you did. You’ve made your comrades…very happy.”

Tavish locks eyes with him, what that he can with the brim of the ranger hat in the way.

“I do try,” he says slowly. “I’d do the same for everyone if I could. Barkeep’s job is to make sure you’re all as well off as you can be.”

There is a brief, indescribably odd second (that hours later Tavish will still not be sure how to describe and therefore will put out of his mind entirely) where Jane looks like he’ll say something different than what he does.

What he ends up with is this: “that is the spirit! Now! I recommend you return to your friends and bask in this glorious victory. And maybe also keep your chef from putting their fingers in the ambient lighting.”

“Aw shite.” Tavish turns to see Jane’s sizing of the situation is correct. “Really should have known that would happen.”

“You cannot be perfect Tavish. No one expects you to be.”

But Tavish is already rejoining his customers, taking Pyro’s hand out of the nearest candle and being regaled with various drink orders. Jane sighs. He goes to join him.

# Chapter 3

Above the façade front door of *DeGroot Keep* is an unreachable third floor, its purpose assumed by those who walk the streets below to be some sort of attic or perhaps storage space, if they wonder about it at all. What Tavish conceals above the stairs in the back of the kitchen is actually, in fact, his apartment, boasting one room and a claustrophobic little bathroom added sometime during the 20th century. It's space enough for him: there's a desk computer, a bed, a half-sized bookshelf crammed with fantasy paperbacks, and a tinkering table whose purposes are better left undisclosed. (Privacy is not the only reason the kitchen stairs are hidden. Such is the lot of men with less than legal hobbies.)

If you were to ask if he wants for anything, he might complain that he isn't able to move the coffee maker upstairs, but requests for further elaboration would be met with a dispassionate shrug. The kitchen isn't so far, and what he lacks in elbow room he makes up for in convenience; everything he needs in the morning is only an arm's length away. The way Tavish usually starts his day is by getting his shower in, shaving, and dressing all within the span of a half-hour, barely moving outside a few cubic meters.

The way Tavish does *not* usually start his day is with the unhallowed ringing of the landline he uses to make international calls to his mother every Saturday. The digital clock reads 6:46 in the watery light from the circular attic window, but it could be the witching hour for all Tavish wants to get out of bed. But out of bed is the only place he can silence the infernal thing, so up he gets.

"Hello," he grumbles his barely contained contempt into the receiver, rubbing rheum from his eye.

On the other side, there is heavy breathing.

A sterner man would have assumed he was being punked. A less stern man would have gone and grabbed the rosary from his dresser drawer and warned that he feared no evil spirits and he was well trained in the art of dispelling the profane. However, Tavish merely lapses, standing there in the middle of the room wearing nothing but his boxers, listening as the heavy breathing is intercut by the occasional apologetic mumble and several egregiously incomprehensible attempts at explanation.

The cold floor is biting him through his socks. He sighs, and pinches the bridge of his nose. "Just tell me the station number, I'll be there in a few."

There is a grateful keening noise, and the morning is sacrificed to a long and troubled drive that does not help the barkeep's ever-present hangover. He's been told once or twice that a businessman shouldn't sample his own wares, but in all fairness he's been an alcoholic a lot longer than he's been a bar owner. On the ride back to the *Keep*, he hushes Pyro several times, assuring them he's not mad and can we just save the explanations for when we're back home, aye?

However, as soon as they reach the tavern Pyro chooses that moment to clam up entirely.

“Oh come on now duck,” Tavish tries to coax. “We’re already bleeding Mayor Piggycorn dry here, the least you can do is tell me what went wrong.”

Mayor Piggycorn—originally named for the construction paper horn taped to his head, and then renamed by the sticky note saying ‘Pyro Bail Fund’—still has a few quarters jingling around in his belly, but only just. Tavish slips the bank back onto the shelf.

“I’ll tell you what went wrong!” Jane, present when they’d arrived despite the fact that both people with the authority to open the bar had been gone all morning, says as Pyro futzes with their hands. “Your cook lights things on fire when they’re in a bad mood, and they also light things on fire when they're in a very good mood.”

Accuracy notwithstanding, this is clearly *not* the time, and Tavish shoots Jane a withering glare. To Pyro he asks, “can you at least tell me what sort of property you damaged?”

They mumble something. It sounds like ‘dumpster’.

“Ah well that’s not so bad.”

Silence hangs for a few seconds. Jane is right though, and it doesn’t take a genius to figure out this isn’t a good mood sort of burning.

“Pyro,” he says firmly. “What’s eating you.”

As though the words can’t contain themselves anymore, it all bubbles out, hand waving and muffled cursing like this morning’s phone conversation. They quickly grow frustrated with the inadequacy of this mode of communication, and switch to sign language.

“<It’s Scout! He’s been avoiding me and I don’t know what I did wrong!>”

Tavish sighs. It’s a sighing sort of day apparently. He should have known Jeremy would be the source of more Pyro troubles.

“<He’s just stopped…hanging out with me. Whenever I go home and he’s there he pretends he doesn’t see me unless I say hi first. And then he’ll *say* hi but he’ll just go back to playing whatever and he never invites me to join anymore and I feel really awkward asking for a ride so I’ve just been walking everywhere.>”

They take a moment, shoving their hands in their armpits as they try to calm down. Tavish walks over to put an arm around their shoulders, glaring at Jane until he looks properly abashed.

When they’re breathing steadier they try again. “<Last night I asked him if he was mad at me. If I had said something to make him angry, and he got really defensive and said nothing’s wrong. When I said all that stuff I just said to you, he *did* get mad, and said that he needed to…*Think* about things? And then! He just left! He went out and didn’t come back to the apartment last night and I was pissed at him for lying to me but also scared that he’d never

come home and so I went to the Lecture Valley Dolphin Shack and set their dumpster on fire.>"

Tavish shares a look with the outside of Jane's hat. "Ach, well…it wasn't right of him to lie, but sometimes we tell our loved ones nothing's wrong when we don't want them to worry."

"<That's stupid.>"

"Aye, but Scout's a stupid kid."

Pyro looks at the ground. "<He's *my* stupid kid. I just want things to be normal between us and not weird and awkward.>"

That phrasing clicks something into place in Tavish's mind.

"<I don't want to go to class today,>" Pyro admits after a while.

"That's fair. Why don't you go sleep it off in the back room, alright? I'll bring you something in a bit."

Pyro collides with his stomach, wrapping him in one of their famous hugs with a muffled *thanks Tavish* to his chest.

"Ah, no need for that. Off you go."

Pyro does, and Tavish sets about making the forcibly delayed breakfast, though now for three. He may not have his chef's talent, but there are plenty of things a bachelor can make that can't be screwed up *too* badly.

"…You come away from that thinking the same thing I did?" he asks, cracking six eggs into a well-oiled pan.

"Unless it is a composition of the national anthem as sung by the Western Meadowlark, I find that unlikely."

Jane, who's followed him into the kitchen, leans against the countertop. The place is neater than Tavish left it last night, the man to blame playing with the raccoon-shaped salt & pepper shakers as he waits for the eggs to cook. Every once in a while he breaks into the Keep—the untidiness of Tavish's 'fortifications' apparently driving him crazy—and attacks the place in a frenzy until it can pass muster. It was disconcerting at first, but after a few times of finding the back of the bar perforcedly reorganized, Tavish figured that it was worth the small security flaw. Plus, Jane always hangs around after. Tavish pities any *real* burglar that tries to storm the place.

"I mean Scout and Pyro," Tavish says, pushing down the toaster. "You remember how Scout went with them to that club the other week?"

"My memory is that of a hippopotamus, but I do not see the relevance."

“Just thinking.” Tavish idly chews the inside of his cheek, a habit his dentist has railed against on more than one occasion. Tavish’s reply is always that moriscatio buccarum is probably on the kinder end of things he does to his body. “Scout went on a lark it seems. I can’t imagine what would drive a wedge between the two of them, you know how they’re like together.”

“Hooligans, bordering on hippie-dom.”

“I mean they’re affectionate,” Tavish says. “Do you ever get the feeling…maybe there’s something more there?”

Jane shrugs. “Possible, I guess.”

“And he said he needed to go think about something,” Tavish muses. Now that he’s on this train of thought it’s hard to stop. “Ah, poor kid. Must be rough thinking you’re straight this long and then suddenly discovering you’re in love with your best friend.”

Soldier grumbles something that Tavish misses. Before he can ask him to repeat it, the toaster pops, and Tavish runs over to arrange the finishing touches. When he slides the platter in front of Jane, the ranger immediately attacks it with the salt.

“What?” Tavish balks, the highest offense in his pitch. “You’re nae even going to try it first?”

The accusation is met only with a grin. Jane lifts the peppershaker (a black raccoon with white stripes, to differentiate it from the saltshaker’s white raccoon with black stripes) and proceeds to upend it over the eggs as well.

Tavish huffs, then turns to where he knows he’ll have at least one connoisseur with taste.

“Feeling better, duck?” he asks, sliding a plate and a glass of orange juice on the back room’s lone folding table.

They mumble something through blankets and gasmask. Nothing will get better with Jeremy gone, it seems.

“Don’t worry mate. I know just what’s got to be done.” With that, he leaves so that Pyro can eat in privacy.

Jane narrows his eyes as soon as steps foot in the kitchen. “*What’s got to be done?* You better not be up to what I think you’re up to! That crap with Mikhail and Ludwig was supposed to be a one time thing.”

“Ah…overheard that did you.” Tavish resists the urge to rub the back of his neck: he’s got nothing to be ashamed about, this is a *good* idea. “Well it makes sense, doesn’t it? They love each other to bits, maybe they just need a nudge in the right direction.”

Jane still looks unconvinced.

“At the very least you got to admit this time is important!” Tavish says in exasperation. “Pyro’s heartbroken, Scout’s gone rogue, and I’m not resting until I get them to make up.”

"…"

"Nothing you say can convince me otherwise!"

Soldier dips his toast in yolk.

Tavish makes a noise of disgust, and leaves to get his tavern ready for another night of romance.

The first, and most important, preparation is to get Jeremy to show up. He shoots the boy a text, aiming for the weakness that he knows all college students in general—but athletes in particular—share: the promise of free food. There *is* technically an event happening at *DeGroot Keep* tonight, and Jeremy can have the leftovers if he comes. None of it a lie, per say, but Tavish fails to mention that the event in question is a date between him and his roommate.

"This looks familiar," Dr. Ludwig says as he sits at the bar and marvels at the candles. "You're not setting up another pair of your patrons, are you?"

His chuckle dies on his lips as Tavish quickly passes him his beer and says nothing.

"You *are*? Mein Gott. You never let up, do you DeGroot?"

"Oi, it worked out for you, didn't it?" Tavish says. In a careful change of the subject before Ludwig can ask *which* patrons, he adds, "where is Mikhail, anyway? You two are going somewhere tonight, right?"

"Indeed we are." Ludwig puffs up. "We're heading to see the opera in Las Vegas."

"…Las Vegas?" Tavish raises an eyebrow.

"Fine, you caught me. Las Vegas, New Mexico."

"I take it the opera was Mikhail's idea?"

The offense on Ludwig's face is clear. "I happen to quite enjoy opera music. We planned this together."

"Didn't mean anything by it, Doc." Tavish holds up his hands. "It just seems like neither of you would have the, er, temperament for it."

"Then perhaps you know less about us than you think." Outside, a pair of headlights flash. "Ah, that's him. Auf Wiedersehen DeGroot, good luck with… whatever the hell this is."

Shaking his head, Tavish is just about to scoop up the doctor's empty beer when Pyro tugs on his shirtsleeve.

They look despondent, their mask-lenses are one step away from drooping like a cartoon character. A finger points at the kitchen, then at the side door, the universal expression of, "I'm heading out now."

Tavish glances at the (limited edition, Birds of the Southern United States) clock and sees that it really is getting late. But Jeremy still hasn't shown, and Tavish rushes to stall.

"…Actually, I was hoping you could run the lower bar for a bit? Just to take some of the pressure."

Somehow, Pyro's shoulder's drop further, and Tavish fends off a wave of guilt. But, loyal soul that they are, they plod down to the street-level.

Only needed on truly busy nights, the inventory of the lower bar is locked up tight since it can't be watched from all angles. Usually Broderick, (Tavish's authentic DeGroot heirloom suit of armor) mans the area, which means Pyro has to shove him aside in order to unlock the liquor cabinets. They do all this with the grace of the mortally condemned.

This isn't going well. Tavish checks his phone to see that Jeremy never even responded, not even one of his indecipherable emojis. Before long he's become glued to his screen, checking it every thirty seconds as the hour hand slowly moves towards the Belted Kingfisher, and one by one the late stayers trickle out. Tavish has never had a problem with barflies, (it's not the most lively part of town), but for once he very much wishes he'd have some sorry slob that he can't unstick from the bar with a spatula, if only for the excuse.

But enough time ticks by that Pyro approaches him again, and the bar's now empty enough that he can't deny them their request. They slink out the door, and a blue pick-up truck rolls to collect them.

There has to be some way to fix this. After closing the tavern he retreats to his quarters, desktop illuminating his face as he fails to turn on any other light in his bedroom. He hunts for Jeremy's Facebook, though right away he can tell it won't bring him any luck. The last post was months ago, a captionless picture of he and Pyro with their arms slung around each other's shoulders. They look happy.

He sends a *you alright lad?* text. Though, when he sees the timestamp reading 3:01 AM, he realizes that's an auspicious statement. He lies in his bed and fails to go to sleep.

Whatever time the knocking starts is *far* too early. Having only gotten a total seven hours of sleep the past two days, he'd been planning to open the *Keep* late to recuperate, but another repetitive auditory signifier of modern home living has thrown that out the window. Speaking of windows. Tavish's mood is not improved when he looks out the porthole and sees that the knocking is coming from a lone police officer at his stoop.

"Christ, what did they do *now*," he murmurs.

*Hair of the dog*, he reminds himself. *Hair of the dog*. He pulls out a spare scrumpy bottle from underneath the bed.

"Not even at the right door, there's a bloody *sign*- canae help you, officer?" Tavish yells out the true entrance. He's still in his raccoon slippers (he's known Jane for many Smismasses now), and he has no interest in going outside. If the idjit wants to ignore perfectly readable advisories, that's his business.

The officer sticks his head around from the front. “Excuse me. Are you the owner here?”

Owner? Probably wouldn’t be asking if Pyro had gotten themself in trouble again. Keeping his general distaste for coppers out of his voice is easiest done with one word answers, so he says, “aye.”

“We’ve received complaints about an improperly parked vehicle on your premises. It appears someone is illegally habitating within it.”

Tavish feels habitating probably isn’t a word, but he’s already getting worked up. “Complaints? Is it that Classic Rock ‘n Roll bar down the street? Bloody *goat-humper*s. Those Classics have always had it out for me and my lads.”

Whether it’s the fact that Tavish burps halfway through his tirade or the volume of the denouncement, the officer looks quite pained. “We’ve had complaints from a *variety* of sources, sir.”

Tavish grumbles something about pain trains in station town, before the cop’s opening line finally catches up with him. “Someone’s *living in a car* in my parking lot?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“What in blazes-”

Slippers or no, Tavish charges into his rarely used back lot, usually traversed only by delivery trucks and the odd trash collector.

In it, is a camper van.

“Oi, open up!” He slams on the camper’s door. “I don’t know who the hell you think you are but if you’re going to squat at my *house*-” With the creaking of someone swaying the suspension with each footstep, the door opens. “-Then you- Mick?”

Mick Mundy does an adequate impression of Tavish a few minutes ago, and blinks groggily. “Yeah?”

“What are you *doing* in that thing?”

Mick looks behind him briefly. “Livin’ in it.”

“In my *yard*?”

The cop cuts in, “Sir you can’t take up residency, regardless of the nature of the vehicle, on businesses lining Main Street or Teufort’s six main thoroughfares."

“Really?” Mick asks. Tavish facepalms.

“ ‘Fraid so,” he continues, surprisingly straight-faced. “With the exclusion of national and state parks, parking an RV for more than 48 hours is similarly not allowed.”

“Hm,” Mick nods. “Guess I’ll go to one of those then. Is a camper van after all.”

Tavish facepalms with the other hand.

He can’t even bring himself to chew Mick out before he packs up his van and leaves. The incident with the traffic cop was hardly a good start to his morning, and it doesn’t improve with the opening of the *Keep’s* doors. He goes for the harder, close-to-paint-thinner stuff he keeps in the custodial closet just to stave off the mounting stress of dealing with law enforcement. Jeremy has texted him at some point in the night, a noncommittal assurance he’s fine. Tavish again asks if he wants to swing by the *Keep* tonight, to which he gets a *yeah sure, whatever*.

There’s little time to plan. Tavish has to make sure things go right this time, has to make sure Pyro stays long enough, has to get *Jeremy* to stay long enough, has to also find a way to get Jeremy to admit his feelings. Which, easier said than done. It depends entirely on whether he’s come to terms with things or not, and if he’s just shutting down and shutting everyone out it might not even be *possible*.

Too many variables. All these unknowns are killing him.

Jeremy didn’t say when he’d swing by and Tavish has finished off his good stuff. The candles are back, and Pyro’s mopily tending the kitchen, but-

Fuck. Someone’s vomited on the bathroom floor. He doesn’t have the heart to ask Pyro to do it, even with the wonderfully convenient rubber suit, not when he made them stay late yesterday for basically no reason. So instead he has Pyro take his place at the main bar and goes to face the music.

It smells awful. The bathroom’s décor is one of his prouder works; it’s all vintage advertisements, wallpapering not only the walls but the low, sloping ceiling as well. Normally it’s a pleasant little place to have a pit stop, but right now it’s just-

Eugh. Words don’t do it justice. It’s-

Guh-

Very difficult to breathe in. His head is starting to feel light and the mop keeps slipping out of his hands as the booze rises to his cheeks-

Tavish wakes up.

He is in his bed and the blinds are drawn and it seems like it could be anywhere in that ephemeral hour between the end of sunset and the beginning of sunrise. He can, after all, see and he can most certainly feel, and what he feels is pain.

“Ach, me head…”

The voice that says these words is *coming* from his head, the central locus for all his pain. It was a mistake to say them, for any reaffirmation of the self is overshadowed by the revelation that his throat is also worthy of commentary.

“Here.”

Jane is handing him a glass of water. The time to question is not now, because Tavish has never seen anything more beautiful than the glass he flimsily takes out of Jane’s hand. The cool rush of water does a little to ease the pain. His mind can wander now, to realize that he’s wearing the same pair of pants but a different shirt, and the only reason he can assume is that he threw up on himself. That or he landed in the other drunkard’s sick. He doesn’t want to think about the latter.

“I’m guessing that was a real bender I had just now?” he dares to ask once the water is gone.

“If by ‘just now’ you mean ‘last night’.” Jane’s mouth is a thin line, and Tavish groans. In an attempt to reassure, Jane adds, “we cleaned and closed the tavern up. You don’t need to worry about anything.”

Nothing but the loss of income from a night’s work, but even Tavish knows that’s too bitter to fling at the man who helped his sorry arse through a binge, especially when any outgoes are his own damn fault.

Memory does come crashing back to him though. “Damn it, urch, did- did Scout come in last night?”

“For a little.” Jane’s frown only deepens with this line of questioning. “He left with all the hubbub going on.”

“Damn it all,” Tavish groans. “I’m still trying to fix things with him and Pyro. If I can just get them in a room together-”

The feeble attempt to sit up is cut short, Jane moving the short distance to the bed and pushing until he falls back down. The firmness in his voice is unmistakable when he says, “*this is not a nudge.*”

“I…” But that’s all Tavsih can muster. He averts his gaze guiltily.

They’re still like that for a moment, frozen in the orange-tinted light that now more obviously asserts itself as dawn, Jane with one knee on the bed and Tavish knowing that he’s right.

“I just want everyone to be okay,” he admits finally. “That’s not so wrong, is it?”

Jane retracts his hand, but now won’t look at Tavish either. “I know you do. Dammit, it’s impossible *not* to know that you want to make everyone around you happy, with your smiles and your jokes and doing everything in your fucking power to light up the whole damn world. I know you want to solve all their fucking problems. But you need to remember to take care of yourself too.”

Tavish hesitates. He takes care of himself plenty, doesn’t he? At least as well as he always has; it’s not like this particular scenario of drinking himself to unconsciousness while on duty is all that unusual.

He doesn’t want to entertain that that’s exactly what Jane means.

“I will,” he says because it’s the path of least resistance. “But you can’t tell me this whole situation isn’t an issue.”

Jane growls, but acquiesces, “…I don’t like seeing Campfire all put out. It’s a bad look on them.”

“So I *need* to find out what’s up with Scout. If only to get my cook back from blues town,” Tavish reasons.

“Then why don’t you just *talk* to him,” Jane says, throwing up his hand. “Don’t bring Pyro into it at all! Damn it Tav you’re *good* at talking to people, it’s what you do all damn day. Just ask him what’s wrong.”

Again, Tavish hesitates. “Do you really think it’s that simple?”

Jane shrugs. “Could be. If anyone can make it simple it’s you. *Not* as evidenced by your actions today, private.”

Oh hell, now out come the *private*s. That’s Jane’s equivalent of a mum using your middle name when you’ve gone and done something dumb.

“Alright, I’ll try it.” He tries to sit, and is pushed back again.

“*Not now*,” Jane tells him. “Now you are going to catch up on sleep, and open the bar late. Am I understood?”

Tavish grumbles, but there’s no arguing with him. “Understood.”

He does feel monumentally better the next time he wakes up, though it’s nearing noon by the bedside clock. Jane’s gone, but he has several messages from Pyro asking if he’s alright, one from Dell who probably who heard from Pyro, and one from Pauling saying she’ll be dropping his cook off at six. Tavish rubs the bridge of his nose. As though he needed the extra guilt, somehow Pauling’s been roped into this as well. Poor lass has enough on her plate.

However, there’s one person Tavish needs to check in with more than anything.

Jeremy’s hoodie is uncharacteristically disheveled as he comes peering in through the front door, not the least because it’s still far too warm to be wearing such outerwear. He checks around each individual corner, making sure they’re as alone as it appears they are. Maybe he really is avoiding Pyro.

“Ey there lad, you’re looking glum,” Tavish greets when Jeremy finally slinks up to the bar.

“Mmm. Yeah.” He folds his arms and rests his chin on them.

Well, it’s better than yelling *nothing’s wrong* and running off into the night. Tavish slides a drink toward him. “Something new I’ve been working on. Tell me how you like it. Oh, I almost forgot.”

Next to the club soda he keeps several cans of room temperature Bonk!, which he saves when he knows Jeremy needs a pick-me-up. After pouring a toxic layer on the top of the drink, Tavish adds a crazy straw (the straws are technically Pyro's, but Tavish knows which of the two of them enjoys them more.) Blithely, Jeremy eyes the concoction before him. Then he slides his whole body to meet the crazy straw and slurps.

"Hey, pretty good man," he finally concludes, and to Tavish's relief there's a bit of warmth back in his voice.

"Glad to hear it."

"Yeah it's like…spicy. But not like hot spicy, more like uh…"

"It's probably the ginger beer."

"Oh yeah, yeah that's it. The ginger." With the termination of this statement, his thoughts catch up with again, and the contemplative half-smile is chased from his face. Instead, he lowers his gaze to the mahogany wood beneath his palms, and begins to trace patterns in the condensation rings.

"…Okay lad, you got tae tell me. What's eating you?"

Jeremy flinches. "Nothing."

"*Nothing?*"

"Nothing's wrong. Nothing that…nothing that I want you to know about anyway."

Tavish dries a glass. The squeaking of water on wood continues. He tries, "c'mon lad-"

"*Stop,*" Jeremy hisses. "Just stop with the *lad* crap. It's. Freaking hell it's too much to talk about all at once. And I can't even *think* when you keep…"

"Just start at the beginning."

"Okay, fine. You know what? *Fine*. So Pyro's gay president or whatever and they finally get me to come to their stupid school club and…I meet people there. Lots of people, and it was *kinda* weird at first but then it got easier and this one girl started talking to me and it turned out she was really cool."

"And you, what? Have a thing for her?"

In the fastest turnaround, Jeremy's eyes narrow, staring daggers into the barkeep. "What the *fuck* man? Just because I make jokes sometimes doesn't mean I'd actually ever *step out*. Jesus. I ain't that kinda-" He makes a frustrated growl. "Anyway, don't be an asshole, alright?"

"…I have to admit, you've lost me."

"*How* could I have lost you? I started from the beginning like you said!"

“For one thing I thought this story was going to end with you realizing you have feelings for Pyro.”

To describe it as ‘incredulity’ would not be doing it justice. It was more like Jeremy had just walked into his home only to find that every single piece of furniture had been nailed to the ceiling and a group of cats were asking him what he was doing in their house.

With the cautiousness of a person who senses they’re being tricked, Jeremy says, “Pyro and I have been dating for six months.”

“I…*what?*”

“How did you not freaking know that?” Jeremy sounds as flabbergasted as Tavish feels. “You helped us move in together for crying out loud.”

“Move in to be *roommates*, I didn’t know it was a…” Tavish makes a vague gesture.

“We do all the couples shit, though. We’re always hanging out, and going to movies together, and I drive them to work, an’-” Ticking them off on his fingers, Jeremy stops abruptly, guilt wrinkling his features. He shoves his arms back against the bar and buries his face in them. “An’ I run out on them. And I’m an ass who yells at ‘em when they’re just trying to help.”

As delicately as he can, Tavish says, “I’m sorry lad. I guess I er…didn’t understand the situation as well as I thought. But hiding from me isn’t going to help either.”

“Psh. Ain’t you just proved you don’t know *anything*?”

There’s some mild indignation at that. “Well when Pyro takes you to meet their gay friends and you come back with an identity crisis, what am I supposed to think?”

Jeremy grits his teeth. “It’s *not* a sexuality thing.”

“Then what the bloody hell else could it…”

When Jeremy looks up, there is jaggedness, laced by the angry tears that are pricking at the corner of his eyes, and once again Tavish realizes what colossal idiot he’s being.

“Oh,” he says. “*Oh.*”

“Yeah, *oh*.”

There are many sounds Tavish has grown used to when tending the *Keep* all alone: the tick of the clock, the water heater jumping to life every now and again, the various strung-up seashells that rattle sometimes even though there’s no draft. Now, midday light filtering through the frosted windows, he hears a drip where the kitchen tap hasn’t been turned all the way, and the scrunch of Jeremy running his hands fruitlessly through his hair.

Tavish throws aside the rag he was using to clean, and makes the long walk around to the other side of the bar. He slides a stool closer, wraps an arm around Jeremy’s shoulders, and squeezes them together.

They don’t shake. Or if they do, it’s with frustration.

“Freaking…” Jeremy croaks eventually. “Freaking unbelievable. Like I *can’t* be, for fuck’s sake. You’ve *met* me. I can’t be, you know. That.”

Tavish does not want to upset this, not when the walls are just starting to come down. Gently, he asks, “and why can’t you be?”

“Because everyone would freak!” Jeremy lurches to a sitting position. “Everyone I know, all my classmates, my family, the guys on the team…oh fuck.” He groans and rubs his face. “I didn’t even think about that. I…I can’t get kicked off the team. I’d lose my scholarship, and my grades are slipping and Ma already threatened to sick my dad on me if they didn’t pick back up and-”

“Hey, hey calm down…mate,” Tavish is quickly realizing dropping haphazard *lad*s into this conversation hasn’t been helping. He squeezes a little tighter. “That’s all a bunch o’ maybes right now. Don’t think that far ahead. Just breathe.”

Jeremy does, out slower but shaky. “I can’t. I can’t not think about it. The more I think and the less I’m sure and…would they even let me play on the girls’ team? Ah *Christ*.”

His hood has come down at some point in the panic. And his face may never have gotten to the point of true tears, but his eyes are still red. Still furious.

Tavish squeezes him tighter, and to his surprise, Jeremy hugs him back, snapping on like a barnacle. “I’m usually better at not thinking about whatever I don’t want to think about. Shit, what’s wrong with me?”

“Nothing’s wrong with you mate. You can work through this. You got lots of people who want to help.”

Jeremy draws in a breath. “…Yeah.”

“Why *are* you avoiding Pyro?” Tavish asks. “I don’t mean to be cold, but all things considered they’d have much more insight into a gender crisis than I would.”

“That’s…that’s the problem. Shit.” Jeremy draws back, retreating again to guilt and a focus on the tavern floor. “This…this is going to make me sound like a huge asshole okay but, when they first came out to me I wasn’t…I’ve been a real shithead at some points in my life, you know? Not always this cool and awesome ally and stuff. When that was first going on I said something like ‘haha me too’ and then like…fuck I don’t know. Made an attack helicopter joke or whatever.”

“Attack…helicopter?”

“Never mind,” Jeremy waves him off. “Anyway when all this started I didn’t want them to think I was…making fun of them again. Somehow. Or just playing around.”

There’s a beat. When it’s clear that he isn’t going to continue, Tavish says, “no offense mate, but that’s total malarkey.”

Jeremy grimaces.

“You’ve been friends for *how* long? And you’ve changed a lot in that time, they know you’re not that person anymore. If you talk to them, really talk to them instead of pushing them out, they’re not going to abandon you during something this serious.”

“I know, you’re right, I know.” Rubbing his face, Jeremy finally straightens his shoulders. “I was just scared. Not that I’m scared *now* or nothin’!”

At the return of the more familiar bravado, Tavish chuckles. “O’ course. The Scout I know isn’t afraid o’ anything. *If I were from where you’re from I’d be dead,* ‘n all that rot.”

“That’s right.” A bit of a smile passes across Jeremy’s face. Then it twitches, spinning more contemplative. “And…as long as we’re saying things about being Scout…uh. Just um. Just don’t call me Jeremy right now. I’m still like figuring things out, but since you guys always call me Scout anyways…”

“Can do. Anything else I should keep in mind?”

“I…no. Not yet. If that changes I’ll let you know. But you can spread that first thing around, tell the other guys and stuff. I’m sure they’ll…”

Tavish claps a hand to his shoulder. “I’m sure they’ll understand,” he finishes the thought.

Scout smiles, and Tavish makes him *promise* to go talk to his partner before they start moving on to burning whole restaurants.

# Chapter 4

“Alright lads,” Tavish says, sliding forward a napkin holder and a small bottle of hot sauce, “this one’s Helen and that one’s Miss Pauling.”

Mick and Scout groan.

Dell, whose quest to finish his after-work beer without issue sees that as increasingly unlikely, lowers it. “Am I missing something here?”

“DeGroot wants us to play matchmaker again,” Mick says, eyeing the tobasco like it might bite him.

“Like getting Doc to talk about his sex life wasn’t scarring enough the first time,” Scout grumbles.

“You’re all acting like I had you do a caber toss with a live hornet’s nest,” Tavish says. “And I never bloody asked you to talk to him about his sex life.”

“Well he still volunteered it free of freaking charge!”

“Let me get this straight,” Dell intercuts. “The reason Misha and Ludwig started making out in the middle of the bar that one night is because you set them up?”

“Ye make it sound so nefarious,” Tavish says.

Dell shakes his head. “Well, it’s definitely an accomplishment, I’ll give you that much.”

“It kinda is,” Scout admits. “You know, for a straight guy, you are weirdly good at hooking up all your gay friends.”

Tavish spreads his hands out magnanimously. “Everyone has their talents.”

“I don’t care how talented you are,” Mick points the knife that had been dissecting his shrimp flambé, “you’re not going to be able to pull on Helen what you pulled on those two drongos. That sheila eats cactus spines for breakfast and spits out the flechettes at passing prams.”

The company’s eyes turn to the piranha in question, a dry martini in one hand as she scours the tavern for even the faintest iota of something that doesn’t displease her. She has the aura of someone who knows she could get every person in the room under her employ in a matter of hours, and a viselike grip on her drink that indicates she would eviscerate anyone she couldn’t.

Tavish rotates back. “Ach, she’s not so bad once you get to know her.” He receives dissenting murmurs in reply. “Oh come on now! Can’t I get at least *one* of you to help smooth things out between Helen and Miss P?”

“I gotta say my interest is piqued,” Dell hums thoughtfully.

“There we go!” Tavish claps his hands together. “Now, I think our first step should be-”

*DeGroot Keep*, ever-sensitive beast that she is, knows when something momentous is about to occur. It is not conscious, but when the door slams open and the wall-mounted swords rattle in their sabers, every person in the tavern freezes in their cups and turns toward the young woman about to make the greatest announcement of her life.

“I quit!” Miss Pauling yells at full volume.

Two-dozen heads glance at Miss Helen who, like they, looks as though she’s been told that the sun is purple.

Wildly, Pauling repeats, “you hear that Helen? I quit!” She says it with such unrepentant glee, of which her audience has never heard the likes of before, and are shocked further still when she begins to laugh.

The laughter, speaking of years upon years of pent up underappreciation, bursts forward like a stampede of wild horses, unlike Pauling herself who has turned and fled joyously out into the street, manic whooping chasing her all the while.

“Oh,” Tavish says. “Okay.”

Dell whistles. “Never thought I’d see the day…”

“…Anybody else scared to look at Helen?” Scout already has a hand up, side pressed to the bar and strategically blocking the administrator from view.

Tavish, like all reasonable men when told not to look at something, looks. But where he expected a seething, vengeful harbinger, Helen only looks confused, no trace of the lightning quick rebound she’s mastered in even the most dire straits. Tavish, who’s never met a woman he’s more convinced is a steel automaton come to life, finds this infinitely puzzling.

This is not, however, the Keep’s only spectacle for the night.

Where Pauling once stood, a well-dressed man enters, out one problem and in another. His upper lip is curled in utter superiority, his black hair slicked back as though its gel is the only thing keeping it attached to his skull; the look of controlled arrogance could rivals Helen’s, except for the fact that (while she considers most things beneath her) she does not exude disgust while looking around a simple tavern. This stranger sizes up Tavish’s pride and joy like it’s the greasiest spoon he’s ever stepped in, instead of being merely kitsch.

This is the first obvious sign. The second is when Scout yells, “aw crap!” and promptly rolls full-body across the bar top and into the under bar.

“Oi!” Tavish says, now with a tangle of baseball player around his legs. “What the bloody hell was that about?”

The look Scout gives him from the floor is of disdain wrestling with mortification. “That’s my freaking dad, that’s what it’s about.”

Ah.

Tavish glances up at the stranger who, having finished his initial scan of the establishment, is now walking over to the bar itself. From what Tavish knows of Scout's ongoing academic situation (not to mention all the labels back-and-forth they've been doing lately) he completely understands why they might not want to be seen by the elder Mr. Fortier at this precise moment.

"A glass of whatever passes for your finest in this place," Scout's father says by way of greeting.

"…Are you trying to order a glass of wine?" Tavish ventures a guess.

"Yes you simpleton, wine, and if you cannot handle that much then perhaps you should rotate out with one of your more competent coworkers."

Hm. It's been awhile since he's considered throwing a customer out on their arse within the first twelve seconds of meeting them, but strange times do abound.

The bastard isn't making himself popular with the others either. Mick—who caught a laser beam of distaste as the stranger sat down—is returning the favor, lip curled in his direction. However, Dell was close enough to the scuffle to hear at least part of Scout's hissed warning, and his face has folded itself into something frighteningly stern. The engineer is slow to anger, but Tavish thinks he might be seeing the beginnings of it.

The Keep's finest does not spend more than ten seconds in Mr. Fortier's gullet before he makes an exaggerated gagging noise.

This lasts for eleven seconds. During this time, the act of three men honing their spite into a veritable orbital strike is practically audible.

When he's quite finished, Mr. Fortier takes two fingers and deliberately slides the glass of wine away from himself, returning to glaring at the front of the house with frightening purpose.

Tavish grits his teeth. That curb-kicking is looking pretty good right about now, but he might as well give the snake one chance. "Looking for someone?"

"Yes, my son. I was told he frequented this establishment, though it seems I was misled."

"What's-"

"Proof you should never trust hairdressers," Mr. Fortier continues before Tavish can even assemble the syllables. "Incompetent. It appears I will have to go to the registrar after all, and God knows how inept those secretaries will be. It is a disgrace that these events were allowed to get this far, no doubt the fault of that defective institute that this whole pathetic town is leaning on."

Dell, who's working his way toward his 12th PhD at that 'defective institute' while still putting in full time at the oil field, breathes in hard through his nose.

Scout, similarly, lets out a growl only Tavish can hear. Discreetly as he can, Tavish sneaks a glance at them, and to his surprise they're sporting an expression that puts Mick's open sneer to shame.

"Honestly, why I allowed this is a mystery." Good Lord does this man ever stop blustering? "His scholarly pursuits weren't always a disappointment you know, at least when I had my say in the matter. Yet when I put forth my selections for respectable universities, the boy's mother vetoed me!"

The glance-sneaking is no longer subtle. Scout's face is turning bright red as they're involuntary made to listen to the conversation above them, one hand scratching nail marks in the liquor shelf. Tavish is starting to worry they might do something they'll regret later.

"Scout…" he says softly.

"-I swear, the only thing more disgraceful would have been somehow winding up in community college."

"That's all *your* freaking fault!"

Scout's return to the scene is so sudden, so bombastic, that Tavish is nearly bowled over with their sudden verticality. In fact, Mr. Fortier *is* knocked over, though from shock and mismanaged weight on his barstool.

"Jeremy?" he says, shaking his head as he lifts it from the floor. "What on Earth are you doing behind there?"

In a skillful rendering moot of the subject, Scout hops the bar and lands on the other side. "The only reason I couldn't go anywhere else is because you'd only cover half of it!"

To his credit, Mr. Fortier recovers quickly. He stands and adjusts his tie, saying, "what I provided would have been more than sufficient if your mother cared enough to add a single cent. I am no longer paying *child support*. My contribution to your education was a gift, a gift with the condition that you would not *fail your way out of this glorified diploma mill*!"

"Yeah well I would have failed my way out of whatever snooty shithole you'd've picked too, so the least you can do is stop bitching about it."

Those that hadn't cleared out in anticipation of Helen's oncoming meltdown are beginning to trickle away now, except for a few stragglers seeing if anything exciting will happen. Maybe they're the wise ones, since when Tavish looks, the administrator is nowhere to be found.

"That is besides the point," Mr. Fortier snaps. "I came to see if you were in need of assistance, and clearly the trip was necessary. Already I've seen that your leisure hours are spent in this place, you're beginning to show signs of malnutrition, and you obviously haven't had a haircut in weeks."

That sputters Scout to a halt, whether having forgotten it or merely that they were meant to be hiding it, their hand jumps to the stray hairs curling around their ears.

Thankfully, their second trip across the bar has realigned them with allies. Mick moves to put an arm around Scout's shoulders, and Dell has had just about enough.

"If you've come to see if Scout's alright, you've a funny way of showing it." He moves in between Scout and their father, leveling a glare at the taller man's lightly stubbled face.

"*Scout*?" Mr. Fortier's anger almost seems eager to jump to a more unfamiliar target. "My son does not need nicknames from a den of *drunks*."

The fingers of Dell's left hand curl, and Tavish is just beginning to think that as a responsible bar owner he should maybe do something about all of this when the engineer says, "you're bothering our friend, and I think it's best if you get along now."

"I will not take instruction from the likes of you," Mr. Fortier hisses. "And I will not be questioned on my parenting from a illiterate, mouth-breathing, *redneck*-"

Dell socks him right in the chin.

Both Scout and Mick leap back, the former saying, "holy shit Dell!" A startled laugh erupts from them in sheer disbelief. "Haha, oh my God. You actually freaking punched him."

Tavish does some quick mental calculations and decides to pick up a cleaning cloth and turn the fuck around.

For the second time tonight, Mr. Fortier struggles off the (reasonably clean) tavern floor. "How dare you-"

Doing his best impression of someone who's just heard a startling noise, Tavish rounds on the scene. "Oi! No fighting in here. The pair of you take it outside."

"The pair of-" Mr. Fortier squawks. "But he punched me."

Tavish shrugs. "Well I didn't see it. When in doubt, throw the louts out." This Tavish has just made up, but he's immediately very proud of it. "Go on."

Scout's father will protest this for a bit longer, but Dell humbly nods his head with a, "real sorry for all the trouble," before bowing out. He doesn't wink, but the grateful smile he fails to hide tells all.

After a few low not-quite-threats, Mr. Fortier departs too, bristling all the while and pointing at Scout, "we will speak later."

When the tavern's finally empty, Scout lets loose with a long held breath. "Whew. Thanks for that guys."

"Anytime," Tavish offers.

"Y' gunna be alright, Roo?" Mick asks.

“I think yeah. That shit bought me some time at least, I gotta go home and figure out what the hell I’m going to do about,” they wave their hand recklessly. “Him. But uh…might leave through the back door if that’s alright right with you.”

“Be my guest.”

By the time true night has heralded in Jane at the end of his shift, blessed silence has crept into every cranny of the tavern, comforting Tavish and he flips the last of the chairs onto its table.

“You missed a hell ‘o a day today,” he informs the ranger. “Romantic entanglements, family dramas, an exchange ‘o fisticuffs: was like the old classics come to life!”

“Fisticuffs! Without me? The *gall*.” Jane reaches behind the bar and helps himself to a beer.

“Aye, but that’s not the craziest part. Miss Pauling quit.”

Jane pauses in his attempt to liberate the pry-off with his bare hands. “She did not.”

“She did! Came right in here, smart as you please, and told Helen right off. Didn’t even say why, just had her piece and skedaddled.”

“Ridiculous.” He shakes his head. “Miss Pauling is the most hardened warrior I know. She has more gumption than the rest of this company put together; she’s no quitter.”

“It’s hard for me to believe too.” Tavish finds a spot beside Jane, indulging as well in a final drink of the night. “To be honest, I always thought she was too infatuated with Helen to ever leave her.”

“Maybe that’s why she had to go. Maybe it made staying too hard.”

Tavish opens his mouth, but the necessary commentary doesn’t arrive. The refrigerator hums in the room beyond, and he breaks the silence with a different topic, “Scout’s da showed up at the bar today.”

“The French one?” Jane blinks.

“Is that the only thing you remember about that whole situation?”

“Negative! In fact, I think the worming frenchiness can go very far in explaining the entire cesspit of issues roasting over there. Spinelessness is in that family’s DNA.”

“If you saw the argument I had, you wouldn’t be calling afoul on spinelessness.” Tavish thoughtfully sips his beer. “It seems one of those immutable facts of life that no matter how many generations we go down we’ve never quite cracked the code of healthy parenting.”

Jane doesn’t respond. Jane doesn’t respond for a while, and Tavish is so caught in picking a bit of broken skin around his fingernail as an old unpleasantness settles in his stomach that he doesn’t even notice. When he finally glances Jane’s way, he frowns, knowing he’s been staring at him.

“What?” he asks, already defensive and lying to himself that he’s not.

“You’re thinking about it again.”

Damn him. Tavish hadn’t even glanced at the battered, samurai themed calendar pinned to the bar’s back wall, but the reminder of the incoming date must have been clear on his face. Brushing aside what was supposed to be the last drink of the night, Tavish reaches over and endeavors to give it some company.

“Are you okay?”

It’s so soft, so straight to the point that Tavish could be forgiven for thinking he had imagined it. But when he looks up, the concern is there, and he finds he can’t meet Jane’s eyes. “I’m fine. Haven’t had any more incidents since the vomit thing.”

“Are you sure? Because the last time it was this bad with the anniversary of his death coming coming up-”

“-You found me with one foot off the overpass bridge, I *know*, I was there.” He regrets it as soon as it leaves his mouth. “Ach I’m sorry, you don’t deserve that. I just…I really am alright Jane. I haven’t been slipping up.” Jane eyes the beer in his sweating palm and he adds, “much.”

“…Acknowledged.”

And it’s a relief, because although Jane knows when to push, he also knows when to back off. After a while, Tavish says, “I don’t think I could have asked for a better stranger to walk past all those years ago. I really mean that Jane. I wouldn’t be anything without you.”

The breath through his nose is sharp and stinging, and Jane’s eyes lock forward while the rest of him tenses back. His mouth works silently for a moment, and Tavish hurries to fill the gap.

“And if you ever need me, I’ll be there for you. Aye?”

This snaps Jane back to attention, but not in the way Tavish would have thought. In fact, he seems almost angry. “Don’t. Don’t do that.”

“Do what?”

“Try to find something to help with.”

“Again with this! What’s so bloody wrong with helping people?”

“Because what I need is something *not in your power to give*,” Jane whips the words at him, something painful and unarticulated caught in his throat. “And I’m not accepting charity from you until you first learn to ask for things for yourself. Now, if you really are ‘not slipping up’, then you will get rid of that drink and turn in for the night.”

It feels as if he’s just been scolded, but over *what* Tavish has no idea. He was going to bed anyway, though, so he makes a *pah* and heads for the stairs, if only to get away from the

mood.

Not before finishing the beer, however. He bloody pays for these things.

He’s still thinking about the argument in the morning, if it really was an argument. He’s perfectly aware that most people have issues beyond his means. His is goal isn't to grant wishes, dropping them over his friend’s heads like some glorified delivery boy; all he wants to do is provide support where he can, nudging them on toward their goals. Jane should at least be able to talk to him about whatever’s going on.

This occupies him to the point that he nearly breaks a dish from scrubbing so hard, and he forces himself to take a deep breath and put it from his thoughts. Practicing mindfulness and all that.

It’s pure luck that he’s out of the kitchen when the unwelcome visitor returns. There is the usual soft dancing of light as someone passes by the stained glass, then the true shadow when it appears in the door’s glazing, surrounded by oaken grapes carved straight from the wood. As opposed to his first appearance, there is nothing grand about Mr. Fortier’s reentrance. In fact, he more or less slinks into the *Keep*, crawling onto a barstool with little fanfare. A plump bruise has manifested across his right cheek—it seems the meeting with Conagher wounded his pride after all.

He half lays on the bar and says, “gin,” his tie undone and his suit ruffled.

“You still owe for the wine yesterday,” Tavish says matter-of-factly, not making a move to help.

The Frenchman grumbles something, then reaches into his pocket and slaps a couple hundred-dollar bills onto the bar. Tavish shelves his morals and gets the good man a gin.

“Surprised you came back,” Tavish says as he pours, “let alone that you thought you’d be *welcome* back.”

“Despite my best attempts, this is the only place I know Jeremy can be found,” Mr. Fortier says, deflecting the first accusation and ignoring the second. “I cannot simply give up. Not now that I know I wasn’t imagining things.”

“Why not? You don’t seem all that keen to be here.”

Mr. Fortier glares over the colorless liquid rolling in his glass, digging into Tavish with offense just barely held in check. “I have several contracts waiting for me in San Francisco at this very moment. Before this, I had chartered a private flight to Cancun that would have consisted of all-inclusive beverages and a much needed four-hour nap. Believe me when I say if I did not want to be here I wouldn’t be.”

Tavish shrugs. “Scout’s under the impression that Ms. Deramo sent you.”

“*Sent* me,” Mr. Fortier scoffs. “My ex-wife, a byproduct of raising several *monkeys*, does not believe in coddling. She couldn’t care a lick about our son’s education, or any crisis he may

be experiencing thereof."

"I find that hard to believe, Mr. Fortier."

He waves the hand away. "Please, you aren't one of Jeremy's boorish high school friends, the formality comes across as sniveling. My name is Crue if you must."

"Well Crue," Tavish says as he applies one of the dozens of refills the man has prepaid for, "it seems it's going tae be right difficult to give your kid any help if Scout doesn't *want* help, you ken?"

A deep and prolonged sigh escapes from the exasperated father. "I am aware. But how can I simply turn around and go home? You know Jeremy quite well, yes? And can you tell me, looking me straight in the eye, that nothing has occurred within the past month that I should be concerned about?"

Hesitation comes swiftly and obviously. Thankfully, Tavish is saved a crisis of loyalty by the smack of a door and the demand of, "DeGroot! Your assistance is required. Now."

Helen is not one for entrances, let alone dramatic entrances, and the surprise is enough that Tavish misses a beat.

"My what now?" he asks, but Helen has already clambered into the seat next to Crue, much to his surprise. Elbowing people out of the way while completely ignoring them is *his* modus operandi.

"Do not play coy with me," she says. "I know what you do here."

"…I tend the bar," the bartender says.

"You deal in information. In advice. I require your counsel in getting Miss Pauling back."

If Tavish were the sort to comment on a lady's appearance, he'd say that Miss Helen does not look great. After years as Pauling's unofficial caretaker, he knows the signs of a night without sleep, both by the darkening under her eyes and the few escapees from her impossibly stiff hair.

Tavish, with affected dispassion, pours more gin into Crue's glass. "Sounds like something I could help with. Assuming, of course, you've completed step one of admitting to yourself that 'getting her back' doesn't mean entirely in the practical sense?"

Helen bares her upper lip, which is one of the most expressive emotions he's ever seen on her.

"If not, well," he shrugs. "Brain Drain is a serious issue in our modern age, and there are experts who dedicate their whole lives to studying how to reverse its effects. In that respect, I'm out of my depth."

"The idea that I would admit to something so…*pedestrian* is ridiculous," she spits. "Miss Pauling is an essential employee. She cannot quit. It is…it is *not allowed*. My personal

feelings are inconsequential to the grand design."

"Ah, but that is not saying they are nonexistent," Crue cuts in mildly, having found himself in the middle of the conversation and welcoming the distraction. "Perhaps examining one's motives might narrow down your courses of action."

"And who are *you*?" Helen says, as though truly not having noticed him all this time. "Why should I listen to your pathetic insight, someone who-" She sniffs the air. "-Has such little propriety he smokes *Gauloises Blue Way*?"

Without missing a beat, Crue says, "rich coming from a woman still wearing heels from the Manolo Blahnik collection of last year. *Fall* of last year, even."

"To profess expertise on *shoes* when yours are clearly the inferior leather version of-"

"Helen," Tavish snaps. "Focus."

The bit of liveliness she'd gained by having someone to trade bitchy quips with quickly dissipates. She perches one elbow on the bar and rubs her temple.

"My feelings," she says, "as I have discovered these past eighteen hours, may not have been entirely professional. But that matters little. What matters is that I convince her to return. She is irreplaceable."

"That so?" Tavish lifts an eyebrow.

"Her work speaks for itself. All of the good The Facility has done in the past eleven years could not have been accomplished without her, without her conviction. Her pragmatism is sound, and her ability to improvise is unparalleled. She is the most intelligent, beautiful, hard working woman I know."

"…Helen," Tavish says wearily.

"And I cannot continue without her. I must get her to see reason, to understand she was loved and appreciated-"

"-Helen!"

"*What*?"

"Don't you think," Tavish's beleaguered voice asks, "that calling her 'the most intelligent, beautiful, hardworking woman you know' sounds like a…" He motions her to continue the sentence.

"A what? The opening lines of a promotional announcement? A description for a hit?"

"*Something you should tell her in person*," Tavish presses.

There is a noise. A petulant, disgruntled noise that had never festooned the walls of the *Keep* ever before or ever since, and until that very moment Tavish didn't believe the CEO of TF

was capable of making. She glares at her current elbow supporter as though it will tell her otherwise.

"*Now*, Helen," Tavish adds, this time a little gentler. (He's fed up, not completely heartless.)

"Yes. Hm. Now is the best time I suppose. Before she seeks other employment."

Tavish thinks Miss Pauling could first do with a good scrumpy-coma as opposed to a new job, but that's neither here nor there. "There's a good lass. Off you go."

As Helen hadn't ordered a drink, she had nothing to down in one gulp before turning heel out the door. Instead, she settled for Crue's.

"Garce!" he swears, but she's already gone.

Tavish pats him lightly on the arm. "There there. I won't take it out of your tab."

Crue sighs, but offers no more complaint, no doubt resigning this to just another footnote in his terrible day. They sit in silence for some time longer, Crue failing to lower the waterline in his drink, and Tavish at least pretending to do his barman duties. Noon comes and goes.

"So," Crue finally offers what's been on his mind. "You are seen as a dealer of advice among these people?"

"Aye, it's a reputation I've accrued. You looking for some?"

"I obviously need it." This flirting with self-reflection is gone before Tavish can process it, and Crue continues, "if I am to provide…fatherly support, then first I must get Jeremy to speak with me. Considering you knew my name, I can assume you and he are friends, and it would be remiss not to ask if you could perhaps…parlay with him? On my behalf?"

"I'm not telling you where Scout is," Tavish says.

"I am not asking you to. But anything you can offer is better than what I have."

Tavish thinks on this. He taps his chin, initiates a brief staring contest with the cigar-twirling deer, then pulls out his phone.

As Crue perks, Tavish says, "I'm *warning* you're here, in case Scout wanted to stop by and winds up thinking better of it." He holds up a finger. "I *will* mention that you're acting all regretful, and that it seems like you've come in peace. Everything else is up to Scout."

"Merci. That's all I ask."

Part of Tavish, a very small part he's trying to ignore lest it cloud his judgment and try to make Scout's decisions for them, hopes it all works out. There's a long history there, more than just money and parental spite, but he also knows that if anyone could use another leg for their support system right now, it's Scout.

So when classes are done for the day, and the kid is the first to appear in the evening rush—striding to the little booth Crue has scuttled into and depositing themself with a suspicious but not outright hostile frown—he's grateful. One by one regulars and little knots of familiar faces stream into *DeGroot Keep*, each paying their respects as flashes of surprise before moving on with their night. Through all this, and the general hubbub, Tavish almost misses when two flicks of purple join the influx.

He's serving drinks to the crotchety old man who runs the law firm next door when he spots them, and can't peel himself away until later in the night. When he does finally grab a moment, he's stopped by Dell.

"That something we should be worried about?" he asks, jerking his chin at the familial disentanglement.

It hasn't risen to shouting again. Crue, the bright bruise still blooming on his face, has spent most of the time with his head lowered, taking in whatever Scout has been telling him. Scout is harder to read, back turned toward the bar, but Tavish swears the tension has gone out of their shoulders as the evening went on.

Tavish hums. "I think they'll be alright."

"You sure about that?" Dell presses. "I know how easily family crap can suck you up again, all honeyed words and promises to do better."

"Then we'll keep an eye on it," Tavish says. "Besides, I talked with him. He's a right pillock, but he isn't all bad."

The grunt Dell gives is dubious at best.

"And we only hated him on Scout's behalf, aye? If they decide to forgive him, it's our duty to do the same."

It again looks like Dell might fight him on this, but after a moment his shoulders sag. "I s'pose you're right. Y'know I hate when you're all morally upstanding about these things, makes a man feel bad."

"Morally upstanding! Can't say I've ever been accused of that before," Tavish chuckles. "But if you'll 'scuse me, I have a different ado to check up on."

With a drink in each hand, Tavish escapes to the lower regions of the tavern. Either by chance or by Helen's follicle-melting gaze she can direct at anyone passing within her sphere of influence, the room of cushy chaises and stalwart suits of armor is uninhabited.

Save for a pair of women that is. Pauling is fast asleep, her head nestled against Helen's shoulder and a line of drool leaking into the woven tweed of her jacket. As Tavish enters, that terrifying glare of the remaining lass is leveled solely at him.

"You will speak of this to no one," she hisses.

Despite the venom in her words, when Pauling snorts in her sleep, she reaches up and fondly tucks a loose strand of ink-colored hair back behind her ear.

Tavish smiles and, setting down two glasses each garnished with an indigo cherry on the table next to them, he says, “wouldn’t dream of it.”

# Chapter 5

“Now! If you turn your pathetic civilian eyeballs that have never witnessed the horrors of war to your right, you will see the nesting grounds of the Lesser Prairie-Chicken.”

Those actually paying attention to Jane’s tour as he guides their overlarge hiking group through the wilds of Valles Caldera National Preserve rotate their binoculars as indicated. This group includes Miss Pauling, (her tongue sticking out of her mouth as she scribbles furiously in her newly purchased *Billious Hale’s Field Guide to North American Birds, and How To Break the Spine of Every One!*) Mikhail, (two wrist straps hack-jobbed together in order to hold his disposable camera in place), and, surprisingly enough, Scout, (practicing how fast she can capture each specimen in her sketchbook before they fly away. Already she has six birds, two burrowing rodents, and one ‘yeti’ (at Ranger Doe’s suggestion.))

“*Tympanuchus pallidicinctus* is a fearsome foe to meet in its natural habitat,” Jane goes on. Every time he speaks, the various bits and bobs of navigational equipment dangling from his neck jingle; the compass clatters into the magnifying glass, which swings into the pocketknife, which knocks the binoculars, so on and so forth. Hearing even Jane’s famously robust voice over it all is a struggle. “The caldera is their hunting ground. They climb to dizzying altitudes in order to locate prey up to eight times their size, then dispatch them quickly by dropping objects of significant weight. When it reaches terminal velocity, the pathetic maggot-sucker is turned into gibs on impact!”

“*Object of significant weight*,” Mick, a significant amount of woodsman’s supplies strapped to his back as well, repeats suspiciously. “Like *what*?”

“A rock! Or perhaps even a coconut!”

“A *coconut*? What would a bloody coconut be doing in the middle of the bloody desert?”

“This is not a desert, it is an *elevated watershed meadowland!* And maybe the coconut rolled here!”

This debate never makes it to Pauling, who remarks cheerily as the two squabble on, “this really *was* a good idea, getting us all out of Teufort for a bit. I pretty much never get to go anywhere with nature. Or fresh air. Or sunlight.”

Before Tavish can comment, Scout is already pouncing like a Lesser Prairie-Chicken on an unfortunate bobcat.

“Yeah yeah, me too,” she says. “Just like, never get out you know. Never any grass where I was growing up except the abandoned square where my brothers and I would play baseball, and now I’m too busy with school but hey! We’re out here now ain’t we? And look, I got a little bird book too. Except I’m drawing in mine instead ‘a writing, I don’t got the way with words you do, but isn’t it cool we match?”

Scout holds up her sketchbook with blithe expectancy.

*Such* blithe expectancy, there really is no possible way Pauling can respond with anything approaching the same level of zeal. “Yeah, Scout,” she says. “Really cool. Super awesome that we both…own books.”

This lukewarm response does not, in fact, curtail Scout’s enthusiasm. “It is, yeah. Books are *great*, huh? For like, carrying around, and, uh-”

“Thanks for suggesting this, Tavish,” Pauling says quickly and altogether too loudly. “Now that Helen only has me working forty hours a week, it’s *crazy* how much free time I have, but I probably would have spent it all glued to your bar if you hadn’t said something.”

“Tavern,” Tavish corrects. “And true, I think everyone here lacks a chance to stretch their legs every now and again. Though I cannae claim this trip was *entirely* with ulterior motive.”

He glances back.

Lollygagging behind the rest of the pack, Crue and Dell are at it again, bitching something fierce about the way Dell parked his truck. Or maybe they’ve moved on to something different by now:  whether it’s pronounced pecan or pecan, is light a wave or a particle, if bears shit in the woods or not. Although Crue has slipped comfortably into the *Keep’s* social structure for the most part (accepted as long as he’s helping Scout through her transition and he doesn’t have the balls to insult one of Tavish’s drinks again) there’s still one critical rub.

That rub being Dell Conagher.

What the hell is Dell’s problem Tavish can’t figure, and good Lord he’s tried. Usually the man’s about as mellow as a hog in a mud puddle, but something about the pompous stranger just drives him crazy, picking fights that even *Jane* wouldn’t have thought of, (and picking fights is that man’s personal pastime.) When asked, all Dell would supply is, “hell I don’t *know* DeGroot. He’s a snake is what he is. It just gets under my skin.” Crue is no better, always jumping at any opening Dell gives him, as though he’s got a pent up backlog of critiques and is just waiting for an outlet.  Acutally, now that Tavish thinks about it, that might not even be an exaggeration. He’s certainly less critical of everything than when he first came to Teufort, save for their dear engineer.

Tavish had fallen to his default assumption about these sorts of interpersonal relationships, and (rather *optimistically* ) contrived a situation where Crue and Dell might be able to work out their differences. A little time out of town to see the more palatable sides of one another.

“At the confessional: was trying to see if I could set Dell and Crue up together,” Tavish says. “Thought they might make up if they made out, bit of fresh air to jog the hormones.”

“*What?*” Scout gags, whatever she’d been trying to commiserate with Pauling quickly forgotten. “Actually, no, no don’t answer that. I’m *out*, freaking *gross* man.”

With a fading mumble of ‘yuck. *yuck*.’, she swiftly departs, her poorly fastened sleeping bag swaying as she peels to the front of the pack. The vanguard consists of Mick, Ludwig, and Pyro, (who immediately shows their girlfriend the cool bug they just found), but it’s clear that Mundy is the true spearhead of the operation. Despite their residents ranger running

commentary on the various flora and fauna of the reserve, (currently informing Mikhail how pre-agricultural societies in the valley used obsidian tools since all their rocket launchers were lost in a volcanic event), Mick has been the one navigating the group down various hiking trails, now leading their post-lunch return to the camp ground.

“You really think you can hook Crue and Dell up?” Pauling asks.

“Nah, that’s a bust. I think they honestly just hate each other.”

But, since the bartender playing cupid is apparently still novel for some people, her question catches Mikhail’s attention. He asks, “DeGroot is now matchmaker?”

“He certainly tries,” Jane barks, annoyance at least in part for the theft of his audience. “But we all need to face the facts that that man is not as smooth operator as he claims to be; he couldn’t pin a tail to a donkey, let alone people who have *legitimate* unresolved sexual tension together. I told him not every pair of bickering canucks secretly want to swap spit, but he did not listen!”

“Canucks?” Pauling asks, baffled.

“Canadians Miss Pauling! The both of them!”

“I’ll be honest Jane, most of the time I can see where you’re coming from, or at the very least the other side of the canyon you jumped to get there but…Canadians?”

“Yes!” Jane slams a fist into his open hand. “Conagher lacks true American volatility! All attempts to construct complex machinery should spontaneously combust *at least* six times before bringing them onto the field. Obviously he’s a Canadian spy, sent here to assassinate our president, the man who wields the great American sword the Mayflower which he drew from the Liberty Bell on the morning of his sixteenth birthday!”

“…And Crue?”

“They speak French in Canada, don’t they.”

Despite the fact that he was rather brutally just called on his failures as a Casanova, Tavish can’t help but chuckle. “Ah, that’s a good one.”

“A good one?” Mikhail repeats doubtfully.

“Aye,” Tavish smiles fondly. “Ah, listen to this one. Hey! Jane!”

“What?” Jane snaps, putting down the binoculars.

“I can never keep track o’ American politics. Who *is* the president, again?”

Jane snorts. “Damn stupid question, private! It’s Lyndon B. Johnson, god rest his soul.”

And thusly, he returns to scouring the meadow. His two closest travelling companions exchange silent grievances, while the third keeps pace merrily.

"…He doesn't *really* think Johnson is still president, does he?" Pauling ventures to ask.

"I'm surprised you're concerned about *that*, when he's also fully aware that Johnson is dead," Tavish says pleasantly.

The bubble of cheer is short lived. While they've been debating Canadian-ness and monitoring black-footed ferrets, Mick has been grinding his teeth to near audible degrees, growing increasingly irate as he leads them back to the campground. Each fork in the trail comes with several minutes of indecision, the whole party stalling as he glares furiously at the map in his hands. His breaking point comes in the form of Scout asking, "hey, we getting a move on this *century*, chucklenuts?"

"We'd already be back by now if *he* hadn't ruined my bloody map!"

Mick whirls on Jane with the tensile strength of a slingshot. Jane, ever difficult to read with his hat pulled down, hardly reacts. He cocks his head, and eyes the half-crumpled map being shoved in his direction.

"The brochures they give you down at the front are crap," he says, not a drop of defensiveness in his voice. "I made some corrections."

"You vandalized it is what you did," Mick growls. "Fucking took it out of my pocket while my back was turned, you *knew* you were sabotaging us you sneaky ratbag."

"Oi!" Tavish cuts in, stepping toward Mick. "Let's not have any of that. A vandalized map is one thing, but accusing Jane of trying to sabotage us is another."

"Exactly!" Jane barks. "You should be *thanking* me, Bilbo. I put no less than twelve agreeable shortcuts through the preserve, ones that would have us setting up our tents this very minute if you had taken them!"

"It's scribbles to nowhere! I can't even see the actual trail anymore under all the markings," Mick snaps. "Half of it isn't even a path, just a shitty drawing of a raccoon."

Before Jane can reply, tight lips dawning on reproach, Dell and Crue finally catch up, no doubt shocked that another argument could dare to overshadow their own.

"What the hell's gotten into ya'll?" Dell says, quickly noting the stances Jane and Mick have found themselves in, the rest of the party gathered around like sports spectators.

"That map again no doubt," Crue says airily. His general demeanor shows he's just about at the end of his rope and also probably dying for a cigarette. "The bushman is convinced our feral simpleton here has been trying to impair our return to civilization. Personally, I think even that is beyond him."

Jane's face hardens. "You have been spreading lies and slander, gossiping about me *to the Canadian of all people?*"

"Oh don't get self righteous on me you piker," Mick spits. "If you didn't do it on purpose, then you did it because you're an idiot, which is even worse. To hell with this." The map

lands on the ground with a softer *plap* than the drama of the situation demands. “I can find my own way back.”

“You are not properly qualified to traverse this valley, not without a guide,” Jane says. “You will get lost, and a lost civilian is not something I cannot allow! It goes against my ranger’s oath.”

“There is no bloody ranger’s oath!” Mick throws up his hands. “And I’ve spent months in the outback with nothing but a rifle, a waterskin, and the clothes on my back. I know how to handle myself in the wilderness, and I’m better off without following your lunacy into a sinkhole.”

“Ridiculous! All the sinkholes are on the north side of the preserve.”

“And the offer goes to the rest of you,” Mick continues. “If you’d rather get back to the road before night falls instead of camping in the middle of the mountains.”

The assembled shook themselves at being addressed, as though having forgotten that they were breathing entities with a stake in this.

“How dare you!” Jane blusters. “I have worked at this park for twenty-four years! No one knows these woods better than I do.”

“And yet one of your ‘shortcuts’ does lead directly into the lake,” Ludwig says thoughtfully, having picked up the discarded map. To Mick, “you’re sure you know the way back from here?”

“Positive,” Mick says without hesitation. “And you’ve heard the bullshit he’s been spouting all day. You can’t trust that he has a better handle on geography than he does on anything else.”

“The bushman has a point,” Crue says, as though the outcome matters not at all, as though Jane’s not gone frozen while the rest of the party debates among themselves. “If there is an expert in surviving barely civilized conditions, it is he.”

“As much as I hate to agree with Crue on this,” Dell says, and Tavish would punch the air in vindication if it were under literally any other circumstances, “it ain’t healthy to sleep in places where any ‘ole critter wandering these parts might stumble across ya. Personally, I’d like to do all that we can to get to the designated camping area.”

One by one, the votes come in, the protests are half hearted at best, and Jane no longer moves. He just stands there, any emotion stripped from him as he calcifies under something worse than humiliation.

Alright. This is terrible. Tavish can still salvage this.

He claps his hands together, all big smiles, and says, “so we’ll be splitting the party then, eh? No worries, we’ll both take our separate ways, and then meet all back at the campsite tonight. Sound good?”

No one agrees at first, wary of the sudden change in tone.

Tavish doesn't let the awkward silence linger. He pats Jane warmly on the shoulder. "Looks like it's just you and me, lad."

Whatever frozen state Jane had found himself in, he breaks out of it, staring wide-eyed at Tavish. "You…?"

"You sure you don't want to come with us, pally?" Scout asks, in all the tact being Scout will allow. When Pauling elbows her, she mutters, "oof."

"Nah, I'm good," Tavish says through false cheer. "No one knows Valles better than Ranger Doe here. I trust him more than anyone."

The subtle dig is not lost on Mick who, as the two parties split and the far larger one trickles back down the way they came, glances at Jane and mutters something about 'mental sickness' under his breath. Tavish is glad he mutters it. If he'd said it aloud, Tavish would have broken his nose on principle.

Another hand comes to touch Tavish's, but when he glances over, the words Jane obviously wants to say don't come out.

"Let's go," Tavish supplies instead. "The sooner we get a move on, the sooner we meet up with them, aye?"

Jane nods. Jane then takes them on a journey.

Tavish hasn't been home in years, and either the highlands weren't as tumultuous as this or he's gotten severely out of shape in his old age. He soon understands Mick's anxiety, for while he'd thought night was still several hours away, the light disappears quickly as they hike, sweat on the back of his neck cooling as the shadows stretch.

They keep walking.

It seems they'll go one direction, then the next, they double back again to the point where they may as well be going in a circle. At first Tavish tries to keep track of where north is, but it's hopeless when they get to the more thickly wooded part of the hills. Yet they keep walking, and Tavish worries about their friends, and Jane takes them on a winding expedition that no man would think to keep imprisoned on a map.

And then they arrive at the campground.

There's only a few other spots taken, one of which is Mick's van. None of the pitched tents belong to the *Keep's* constituents. The last of the sun's light disappears down the gap in the trees where the road cleaves them in two.

"…They're not here," Jane says.

Tavish can see that perfectly well, but he says, "aye. Must have taken a longer way than we did."

Jan straightens. “We should go look for them.”

“Ach, they’ll be fine,” Tavish says, waving an errant hand at the woods. “They have the camping equipment. As long as they were canny enough to start setting up when they realized they weren’t getting back in time, they’ll live.”

This statement hangs awhile as crickets chirp in the hearty bluegrass planted by the registration office. In dawning realization, Jane says, “we *don’t* have the camping equipment.”

“Aye?” Tavish thought that was fairly *if A then B.*

Jane’s face screws up with something, but whatever it is escapes from his body before forming. “Come on. We can stay at my place for the night.”

There’s no chance to acquiesce, for Jane is off, and Tavish has to power walk to not be left behind. Before true dark comes the desaturation, the draining color from the little off-road passage tucked behind the roaring utility boxes, turning the world grayscale until night is sure of itself. The staff-only road winds up the hills slightly, hidden away so no campers stumble across it, and at the end is the ranger residencies, a handful of stationary trailer homes nestled modestly against the greenery. Long grass caresses against the tin walls of Jane’s home as he unlocks the door.

“The ‘ole cardboard Tetris?” Tavish asks of the abode’s interior. When Jane grunts in confusion, he elaborates, “what’s with all the boxes?”

“Oh. Just reorganizing.”

Jane’s hand lies flat on the fridge door, staring at something pinned there by tiny tequila-shaped magnets. (Jane isn’t the only one with a penchant for themed Smissmas gifts.)

Tavish is still puzzling over the crated possessions when he hears him ask, “why didn’t you go with the others?”

When Tavish glances over his shoulder Jane is staring right back at him. Tavish blinks. “Er… why…would I?”

“If I’d gotten us lost, we would have been stranded out there.”

“I suppose, yeah. But seems unlikely, doesn’t it?”

Jane stares at him a half moment longer before turning away. “You put too much faith in me.”

“Is putting faith in my friends another thing I shouldn’t do now? Along with the cardinal sin of ‘helping people’?” Jane doesn’t respond, and Tavish sighs. “Lad, everyone else ditched because they’re a bunch of easily distracted ninnies who followed the newest piper that came to town; but why on Earth would *I* leave you?”

Jane swallows silently. It’s hard to tell in the dark, but it looks like he closes his eyes.

Half bitterly, Tavish says, “I know I’m not supposed to ask you if anything’s wrong or whatever, but if something’s happened that makes you think we’re not on the same team, you’d tell me, aye?”

The paper under Jane’s hand comes off the fridge with a clatter, and he stuffs it in his pocket. The only thing he says is, “I’ll get you a spare pillow.”

Tavish lies on the couch that night—the sounds of pure, unadulterated nature outside so different from the pitiful attempts of urbanization of Teufort—and hopes their friends are doing okay out there.

You can put a soldier in the middle of a middling national park, but you can’t take the soldier out of the man. No time is that more apparent than at 5am, when Tavish awakens to the sound of a showerhead turning on. He pulls the loaned pillow over his head and attempts to go back to sleep, but this is comically fruitless, as no more than twenty minutes later the flagpole ceremony commences and a bugle blares through the rangers’ residences. Tavish emerges from the trailer bleary-eyed, and is too numb with sleep to do anything but watch Jane hoist the scrap of color notch by notch above the still unconscious roofs. No doubt the occupied ones have owners that are used to this by now, or at the very least are wise enough to spring for some earplugs.

One of the doors slams open to the clamorous denunciation of, “Doe!”

The man (who by the slightly larger size of his accommodations and the fact he’s taken on the burden of dealing with Jane, is probably the warden), storms across the yard with a pink bathrobe pulled tight around his shoulders.

“Fool!” the hollering, nearly as bad as the bugle itself, continues. “Cease! Cease at once, how many times have I told you to get rid of that screeching contraption from the pits of hell?”

“This month? Eleven.” Jane scratches behind his ear. “And I will tell you the same thing I have told you each of those eleven times: this is our duty as Rangers of the National Park Service! It says right in the handbook to honor the flag every morning.”

“That does not! Include! The trumpet!”

The warden is in the later stages of completely wasting away, his gaunt face losing a year with every minute in Jane’s company. He rubs his incredibly tired eyes with the hand not holding together his robe.

“Fah! This is your last warning, Doe. If I catch you playing that thing one more time, it. Will. Be. Your. Doom!” The warden spins on his (now dust covered) slippers and stalks back into his trailer.

“I will not bow to your threats, wizard!” Jane calls after the slamming door. “You cannot crush true American spirit! Not even with pink slips!”

“Wizard?” Tavish hums, suppressing a yawn.

“Yup,” Jane says. “No proof yet, but as soon as I do the forestry board will have him out of here like that.” He snaps his fingers.

Tavish nods. “One less thing to worry about, then. Ready to go rescue our friends?”

“…The friends who ditched us and followed some urine-drinking civilian to the middle of nowhere?”

Tavish thinks about that for a moment. “Hm. Breakfast first?”

“Yeah. That.”

When they finally catch up with the missing chunk of their party, it is two hours and several rounds of bacon later. All things considered, it could have been much worse; Mick’s navigation might have led them to the other side of the volcanic lip, or down to the wrong stretch of highway. As it is, the group had gotten close, but not close enough, and they’d set up camp only a moderate hike up the Redando trail.

Tavish and Jane arrive to a campsite slowly deflating. That fact that every half-minute, someone shoots Mick a dirty look is unmissable.

“I take it you lot didn’t have a pleasant night,” Tavish asks of the nearest wayward soul.

Mikhail grunts, and sullenly goes back to stuffing his tent in its bag.

Pyro, at least, is happy to see them. They bound up and cheerfully sign, “<this sucked! I’m sorry Jane, I promise to believe you the next time you tell me about Most Shrews.>”

*Most Shrews?* Tavish mouths silently.

“The venomous and completely shredded cousin to the Least Shrew,” Jane explains. To Pyro, he signs, “<apology accepted, Smokey. We all have to learn by falling on our asses every now and then.>”

“Can say that again,” Tavish remarks, looking around. Nearly every face is drooping and sleep deprived, and *they* didn’t have their eardrums shattered at five this morning. “Was it really that bad?”

“It was *cold*,” Pauling says as she walks up, tugging at a fashionable sweater that looks very new and very much like her *au courant* partner bought it for her. “And after everyone paired up, it was only Crue and Dell left, and they were *not* happy about it. They were arguing all night. Or at least I think they were. Mick snores *really* loudly.” If it were possible for her to slouch even more, she would.

“…Now that you mention it, I haven’t seen either of them around.”

Tavish takes another look. There are Ludwig and Mikhail packing up the cooking supplies, Scout spinning in circles trying to scratch a bug bite on her back, Mick shunned to the corner where he’s distinctly Not Looking at the new arrivals; but no Fortier or Conagher.

“I’m going to go check in on them,” Tavish excuses himself.

So it’s only Tavish there when the tent entrance is unzipped, a lone bartender who peaks his head in and sees…There’s really no way around it. He sees the pair of mortal enemies *cuddling*.

Crue’s teeth are chattering in his sleep, and it’s all *clearly* intentional because the two sleeping bags have been zipped together so Dell can wrap his arms around the leaner man. Even as Tavish stands there, gawking, the morning chill from the open tent flap blows in and Dell groggily opens his eyes. It takes approximately four seconds for him to become awake, realize he has a shivering Crue pressed to his chest, and notice that Tavish is standing over them both with the most *I told you so* expression a human face can manage.

“Aw *hell*,” he swears.

“Sorry to bother you,” Tavish says, putting his hands up in surrender, a motion that does not neutralize all other signs of smugness. “Just delivering the wakeup call.”

“I swear it ain’t what it looks like,” Dell tries, then reconsiders. “Damn it. Shouldn’t even bother. You’re all full of it now, ain’t you?”

“Don’t know *what* you’re talking about.” Tavish takes a step out of the tent. Now that Crue has begun to stir, he says, “I’ll sooth the other’s worries. But swing by the *Keep* when we get back to civilization; I have a new drink I’d love you to try. As a way to say congratulations.” He winks, and lets the flap fall closed, ignoring the curses that follow him out as he leaves Dell to deal with whatever Crue’s personality is like in the morning.

# Chapter 6

Two mugs spring with amber liquid, the tap gushing with the satisfying rise in pitch as each one fills. Practiced hands kill it at just the right time, the foam heads perfectly proportioned, settling briefly before Tavish tops them off. He drops a curly straw in one, and slides them forward.

Dell's beer is parted from the bartender's hand for approximately half a second before the engineer grasps it firmly and takes a mighty gulp.

"Trouble in paradise?" Tavish asks as Pyro double takes at the man beside them.

The mug slams back down, and Dell wipes his mouth on his sleeve. "You could say that, yeah."

"Well come on then," Tavish says, cocking a hip and leaning sumptuously on the bar. "Tell 'ole Tavvy your woes."

"So long as you never call yourself that again, sure. Why else come to a bar but to unload relationship troubles?"

"Truer words never spoken. C'mon spill it, Conagher. First month is always when the heretofore unknown character flaws come bubbling up, and Fortier had a wagonload to begin with."

"Hell." Dell rubs the bridge of his nose. "For one, I think Scout's still mad at me."

A froth of consoling noises comes from Pyro's mask, as well as a rubbery pat on the back.

"Alright, maybe she isn't, but it sure *feels* like it. And I know I should be giving her time to get used to the idea of me and her dad uh…" He clears his throat. "Seeing each other. But that don't make it any easier."

"She'll come around, Dell," Tavish assures. "But 'for one' makes me think that isn't all?"

Dell rubs a hand over his freshly shaved head. "I…it's hard to explain this one. More than it's just a feeling, not anything he's said or done but…Seems like he doesn't want to *go* anywhere with me. Most of the time when I suggest some place the two of us could spend a nice night at, he goes on grumbling about Teufort being a backwater whatever. But sometimes I wonder if it's more than that. That he doesn't want to be seen *with* me."

Tavish's opinion of Fortier is low enough that he thinks 'yeah that tracks', but quietly, and to himself. Instead he says the proper thing as both barman and friend of, "ach *no*, don't go thinking that. Prissy as the man is, he did make the decision to be with you, and he'll honor that." He better. Otherwise he'll have fifteen stone of Scotsman putting a boot up his arse the next time he walks through the *Keep's* door. "I think you're jumping to an uncharitable interpretation of events."

“Maybe. I got a cousin’s wedding coming up, and I was hoping to bring him along, but if he’s going to get cold feet…”

Pyro gesticulates something.

“Wadda you mean? Like a chance to get him used to the idea?” Dell asks, to which they nod. “Trying things out at a small gathering might just work…Hey DeGroot, I assume we’re having a going away party for Doe sometime soon, right?”

And just like that the world shifts, the axis of the Earth tilts another 2.5 degrees, the conversation of the same old help-your-friends-fix-their-hearts slips from Tavish’s grasp as he struggles to comprehend what has just been said to him.

“A…a going away party?” he repeats stupidly. “Going bloody *where*?”

The two spines in front of him straighten, and don’t do much to hide as their topmost vertebra twitch just enough to exchange bewildered looks with one another. Cautiously, Dell says, “his new job up in Minnesota? Didn’t he tell you?”

The underlying accusation of *wouldn’t you be the **first** one he’d tell?* as clear as day.

“Is this…?” Permanent? For certain? All the things Tavish wants to know but they’re all butting heads to get out the door first. He whips his head around, to shout across his tavern to the man in the far corner, ‘oi Doe, all of this true?’ but the words catch in his throat. Instead, he hastily says, “‘scuse me lads,” and puts every ounce of concentration into moving his legs across the floor.

His heart does not have the aptitude to panic. Years of the drink have persuaded his blood pressure to never get too worked up over itself, and this morning’s draught still sloshes heavily in the stream. So if his body doesn’t respond to the signals his brain is sending, the ones stumbling along to conclusions he’d never even seen the edges before, then he can thank it for getting him from one side of the *Keep* to the other.

“You’re moving?” he says before he’s even greeted, before the others at the table even realize he’s there. Its bluntness is unfamiliar in his mouth.

He doesn't get a chance to see Jane's reaction. In that instant, two newcomers (the bell still tinkling) appear at the table, and Mikhail is shouldering into the conversation with, “DeGroot. Mikhail needs advice”

“Pah,” another voice comes elbowing past him. “Such as ‘what ingredients shall I put on my sandwich today?’ *I* am here with a true emergency.” Helen, having just fought her way over who could squeeze through the front door first (and having lost rather spectacularly) puts both hands on the table. “The board is forming an inquiry into the exact nature of my relationship with Miss Pauling. This is a matter most urgent.”

Mikhail growls in a way that indicates he’d very much like to simply knock her aside again, “is own fault did not think of this when starting relationship. Live with decision. Mikhail has *real* issue.” He pales considerably. “Doktor talks about moving in together.”

“And?” Helen hisses. “Either you do or you don’t, DeGroot does not have time for such petty *frivolities* when the entire reputation of The Facility is on the line!”

“Listen, would you two mind coming back some other…” Tavish says, but is promptly ignored.

“Is not this thing you just said,” Mikhail counters. “Is dangerous. Too soon. Doktor wants to pick up with commitment right where he left off. Cannot make him see this. *Need* advice, is DeGroot's fault in first place.”

“I think *fault* is-” Tavish tries.

“I have equal claim to his time, as this whole- “”””dating””” -business was certainly not *my* idea!”

“Ach, one at a-”

Although not prone to fits of panic, this does not make Tavish immune to being utterly overwhelmed. Mikhail and Helen are looking to shed blood right in the middle of his nice clean floor, their blame is loud in his ears, and Jane is just feet away. Inches. Agonizingly close and—to Tavish’s drawing dread—wearing a look of guilt on his face.

Jane stands. To Tavish's relief, this is apparently to disrupt the conversation. He says, “you two keep at that. DeGroot’s superior officer needs a word with him.” His hand finds Tavish’s upper arm, and the barman does not resist when he is gently marched away from the indignant pair. Before Helen can muster a demand to return, they’re already in the cramped room below the stairwell.

They’re barely alone for more than a second before Tavish blurts, “you got a new job?”

And what can Jane say but, “…yeah.”

“Oh.”

They stand there, too close to each other where a single pull string light casts the tiny landing into contrast. He’s still breathing heavy, and he wants to ask *why didn’t you tell me?* but it’s increasingly obvious that *this* is why Jane didn’t tell him. Because he’s freaking out, because normal people don’t find out their best friend is moving out of town in a perfectly natural and adult change in careers and immediately feel like they’re going to die. He struggles, once, twice, three times to school his expression. He smiles. Friendly, congenial bartender here at your service.

“Where to?” he asks conversationally.

Jane won’t look at him. He struggles to look anyone in the eye on normal circumstances, but the proximity makes it all the more palpable. “Up at Chippewa. There’s an animal sanctuary there that had an opening.”

“Ah, that sounds nice. I know how much you like working with the rehabilitation cases.” It hurts, it hurts so much but he forces out, “I’m really happy for you.”

“Really?”

It isn’t a *really* of surprised hope. It’s an accusation, *disappointment*, and Tavish knows for certain that Jane did keep this from him because he knew Tavish would make this horrid, embarrassing, *thing* out of it.

“I…”

Tavish tries to swallow around the lump in his throat. Don’t cry. Don’t cry you sappy, useless *drunk*. You’re making it bad enough as it is. Who cares if it feels like all your organs are shutting down one by one? Doc always joked how your liver would go any day now, the rest of them might as well toddle on after it.

“That’s all?” Jane asks doubtfully. “You’re *happy* for me?”

Jesus why does he keep pushing this? It compels some of the truth out through Tavish’s teeth. “Well…no. I’m not happy. But what am I supposed to do, try to talk you out of it? Throw a fit every time something doesn’t go my way?”

Jane snarls something. His profile is stony, and Tavish is afraid of it, knowing he’s seeing it for now a finite amount of times and afraid he’s doing it *wrong*. That he’s not appreciating his best friend right, not appreciating him enough. *Tick tick tick* the seconds go by, and Tavish is wasting it as his mask slips further.

“No,” Jane finally admits. “No, but sometimes I wish you weren’t so damn selfless.”

“The hell is that supposed to mean? Look lad if you’ve found a better job, and you’ve made your decision, I won’t try to guilt you out of it-”

“That’s what I mean!” Jane yells, and the silence that follows is so deafening that the outburst must have reached even the front of the house. “That! Perfect, noble, so goddamn *observant* about every little problem that wasn’t yours, yet you couldn’t figure *me*.”

“What?” Tavish asks. “What was I supposed to be seeing?”

“You‘ve diagnosed every lovesick private who’s ever walked into this tavern, but you still couldn’t see how much I was in love with you.”

Somehow, that silence is more powerful, more terrifying than anything that came before it. It reaches deep under Tavish’s skin, pinning him with tenterhooks until he can’t move, can’t think, can’t cycle the air that’s caught in his lungs.

“Twenty goddamn years.” This, it seems, is mostly to himself as Jane stares at the single mop leaned in the corner. He shakes his head. “Everyone else, clear as day. Me? Not a damn clue.”

“Jane I. I don’t think I…”

Jane holds up a hand. “You don’t need to say it maggot. I’ve thought through this conversation as many times as I’ve knocked myself unconscious with a shovel. I know you can’t love me like I love you.” Something wry—nowhere near a laugh but dry enough air

squeezed through lungs as pained as Tavish's—indicates something might have been amusing, once, a long time ago. "To be honest, I didn't think I was capable of it either. Not when we met. But here we are, I'm the one who's fucked, and it's been too damn long Tavish I can't live like this anymore. So I looked up that sanctuary in Minnesota and applied for the position."

The admission hangs.

"But," Tavish says, "even if I- if we- at least you could stay for the *Keep,* aye? We're like a family here."

Jane shakes his head. "They're not my friends. They're yours. I'm just the owner's lunatic buddy they tolerate because they like *him* so goddamn much."

"That's not…" It's not true. And if it's true, then it's because disrespecting Jane is as good as disrespecting Tavish, because Jane's part of his life. *Is* his life. "Jane you're…"

"…I didn't know if I was going to tell you before I left," Jane says. "It was probably the honest and American thing to do, to tell you, but there is cowardice in all of us. I'm sorry. For everything. I need to go pack."

Tavish doesn't stop him when he steps past and through the plain black door and into the kitchen. What can he say? Already committed as he is to not talking him out of it, still reeling from…from being blind. For not knowing. He finds himself in the kitchen, and it's by accident when overhears the commotion from the tavern proper.

"-That you are all ungrateful MAGGOTS," Jane is saying. Tavish has heard him rant before, heard him deride each and every person now clustered awkwardly around him on an individual basis, but he's never heard something like this. "That man in there has done everything for you! He has listened to your woes, he's wiped up your big sobby tears when no one else would, he's guided you to love and support and what have you done for him in return? NOTHING! You take and you take and at the end of the day all you want is more of what he already gives you. You are nothing but a clat of writhing, steaming, WORMS, and when I am gone you WILL treat him better."

Jane's voice cuts off sharply. Tavish can only see him from the back, the slope of his shoulders, the way his uniform cuts a silhouette in the fading light from the stained glass.

"You better," he says softly.

And then Jane is gone, seashells clattering, and Tavish still hasn't said goodbye.

The assembled patrons are all in various stages of shamefacedness, some stepping from one foot to the other, some staring anywhere else but at the bartender who's just appeared at the kitchen door with an expression that tells that his whole world has just ended.

"Tavern's closed for the day," he informs them emotionlessly.

It’s a rash thing to do, but he doesn’t care. How could he care about anything anymore? The supposed family doesn’t wait around to be told twice.

That night, he drinks himself to unconsciousness in record time.

When he wakes, he thinks ruefully that this is the exact opposite of what Jane’s been telling him all this time, about how he needs to take better care of himself. And really *needs* to now that Jane will be gone. No one looking after him but himself anymore. That’s the only thought that stays his hand as he reaches for the spare whiskey in the bedside table, makes him draw it back and use it to wipe the dried drool from his mouth. Jane won’t be there on his favorite stool anymore, flashing Tavish a smile on busy nights. He won’t break into the kitchen out of misplaced paranoia, he won’t convince Tavish that a drive out of town won’t kill him as long as there’s a new rib place on the other end. There will be a hole in Tavish’s life where Jane once was, and that is all that awaits him in the foreseeable future. Fuck. Why couldn’t he have seen it? Not that Tavish knows what it’s like to fall in love with someone who doesn't-

Well let’s face it. Tavish doesn’t know what it’s like to fall for someone, *period*. But he can imagine how painful that would be, and if it’s already gone on too long, already become too much, there’s no way he can ask Jane to put up with more of it. Christ, how many times has he botched a relationship because he’s fallen short? Granted, it’s always been with lassies, and lassies he was already dating, but it’s still the same mistake in different packaging. *What I need is not in your power to give* is what Jane had told him once, and he had been right, though not in the way he’d thought.

Tavish gets up, but doesn’t find it in him to shower. He wraps himself in a blanket and stares at the opposite wall, eye unfocused as he processes the fact that while Jane had the misfortune of falling for him, in the end it’s Tavish’s fault that he’s losing the most important person in his life.

The self-pity wears more heavily on him than the alcohol ever could. It’s only his errant bladder that finally forces him to move, and when he returns he sees the unread message flaring on his phone screen. Pyro’s contact information is a single flame emoji.

*i know you kicked us out of the tavern but it’s really important that we see you today. can we come over?*

Tavish doesn’t know who *we* is, assumes it's them and Scout, and naively replies sure. *We* turns out to be every person he’s ever met.

It seems that way at least. It’s mostly the regulars, more than there were last night, and Tavish sniffs out an ‘intervention’ faster than it takes for you to say scrumpy. But they’ve already seen him take one step into the tavern, and he can’t back out now. What is he going to do? Run out of his own place of business and hide in his room?

They’ve arranged themselves around one chair in particular, doing a right poor job of making any of this look natural, though Dell smiles sympathetically at him as he sits down. Crue smells like smoke and Tavish can practically hear the argument of ‘you better put that out before we go in there’ that must have occurred right outside the tavern door. To Tavish’s left

are Pyro and a squirming Scout, more chairs behind them to support others who weren't even there to bear witness to the events last night (since, Tavish is beginning to suspect, that's what this is all about.)

"I'll warn you lads," he says to a neutral spot in between Mikhail and Ludwig's heads. "I'm no stranger to interventions, and I'm a tough nut to crack."

(The joke doesn't go over particularly well.)

Even to himself his voice sounds oddly flat. Ragged. He watches the exchange of worried looks, and a whisper into Helen's ear.

"This isn't meant to be a fight, partner," Dell says. "It's a gathering of concerned friends, who are going to help if they can."

"Doe was right when he told us off," Mikhail says. "DeGroot does good things for all of us, and we do not help him when he needs us. Now we help."

"Ach don't let him get to you," Tavish bats away. "I'm fine. I do what I do for the love of it, you don't need to worry about me."

Pyro makes a distressed noise that belies otherwise.

"No offense lads, but you really don't know the half of it." Tavish truly isn't in the mood to relay the argument to a new audience, no matter how sympathetic.

"We can guess." This comes from Mikhail. "Doe moves. Heart breaks."

Aw Jesus. He thought he could do this, sit and bear as his closest friends try to 'help' through all this, but having it said so plainly cracks the modicum of resolve Tavish has managed to collect. "It's not…" he tries, but to his horror the pressure he's been holding back since the news rears its ugly head. It's bulbous and angry behind his eye, the reality that Jane's not moving on a whim, that this has been coming down the track for ages, that it's irreversible. He can't make him come home. "Bloody hell."

The whimper peters out into a true wail of distress, because Tavish is nothing if not some weepy idiot, just as Jane always said he was. The weight of everyone staring isn't enough to keep him from sobbing, and he throws himself into the nearest waiting shoulder to blubber his woes. The shoulder turns out to belong to Helen.

She stiffens like a possum playing dead. Tavish can't stop crying though, and he feels an utterly flat palm come up to pat him uncomfortably on the shoulder. "Ah. Hm. There there."

"Oh for Christ's sake. Here."

The mellower voice of Dell commands Helen aside, and he peels Tavish off her and into his own waiting arms. Tavish transfers to the hug gratefully. He hears chairs scoot closer as he makes a mess of Dell's shirt, the uncomfortableness audible. Well they can all suck it. If they didn't want to see a grown man cry they shouldn't have staged a bloody intervention.

“Hey pally, oh whoa okay yeah I know it sucks,” Scout says from somewhere behind him. “But it ain’t too late. You can still tell him.”

“Tell him?” Tavish lifts his head miserably. He assumed that sentence was going to end with ‘convince him’.

Crue groans, “*yes* you-” He’s elbowed sharply by Scout. “…You poor soul,” he finishes with a healthy veneer of sarcasm.

“We have talked a bit amongst ourselves,” Ludwig picks up this truly baffling train of thought. “Yes Ranger Doe has found superior employment, but he does not seem terribly excited about it. I find it unlikely that he knows your true feelings for him, and if you were to confess, he might see fit to stay. Then things can stay right as they are, all without *DeGroot Keep* falling into disarray!”

“Okay, ignore that last part Doc said that made us all sound like selfish assholes who only care about the bar,” Scout glares at Ludwig. “But yeah, intervention stuff. It’s obviously killing you, keeping it all balled up inside, so go shoot your shot while you still got it.”

“Hold on now,” Tavish says, righting himself and looking at his friends incredulously. “You all came here, put aside your differences and all that, because you think *I’m* in love with *Jane*?”

A collage of faces—some bespectacled some not, some incredulous others exasperated—all glance around the tables shoved together at the center of the room.

“Well…yeah?” Scout says.

Tavish is struck silent, looking between his friends. And suddenly he feels very, very foolish. “I don’t…”

“You don’t need to give us an explanation, mate.” The new voice is shocking, mainly because Tavish didn’t even realize Mick was here, pressed as he is against the corner. Even more so for the fact that he doesn’t even *like* Jane. “We’re just offering advice. And support. We hope you’ll at least try to sort things out.”

Every single person he knows thinks he’s in love with Jane. He wants to ask *why? What makes you think that?* but part of him realizes that he already has the answer.

He stands, his chair scooting a tuneless note on the hardwood floor. “I need to go. Now. I-thank you.”

There is a chorus of *no worries*, and *good luck*s, various hands patting him on the back as he struggles through chair legs to get to the door. He’d spent years wasting time, he wouldn’t squander any more.

His car starts on the second try, a beaten old thing because even if he isn’t as careless about taking his poison behind the wheel anymore, he’s still afraid he’ll forget one of these days and doesn’t want to wreck something shiny and new. It gets him where he needs to go, and

where he needs to go with every fibre of his being is the preserve on the edges of town. His car growls, and screeches up to the mountain as Tavish takes every turn at 15 over.

He does not park in the visitor area. He doesn't even stop at the end of the drive, even though the signage clearly indicates the two tracks of beaten dirt with the line of grass between are for park vehicles only. Only when he's in the semicircle of trailers does the car finally come to a halt, dragging lines in the gravel and expelling him, panting, from the driver's seat.

Jane is not packing. He has no box in hand, no bit of furniture over his shoulder. When Tavish's car had come barreling in he'd been stood in the clearing west of the homes, up a wide grassy path, just watching the sun set.

Tavish runs. The urgency has meaning, even if it's to him and him alone.

He stumbles to Jane, straightening the words, knowing he *will* make this count, and says, "you want me to start asking for things? Fine. I'm asking you to stay."

Jane looks at him. The orange light behind him casts him heavenly, his expression of surprise the gold against his cheeks, the red along his shoulders. The same grass that clawed around his home whips at his ankles, the breeze shaking it and random leaves about. The expression doesn't change, still stoic and without hope as he looks at the wheezing bartender who's followed him on this pointless attempt.

The lack of reply does not deter Tavish. "Please Jane I…I can't say I know what you're going through, what I've made you go through all these years," he says. "I don't know if I love you. But I do know that I can't imagine my life without you in it. I've never asked myself what I need, and what I need is…is you Jane."

He takes a few steps closer. The run up the western hill really has taken the wind out of him, or maybe its heart that refuses to stop its galloping pace. Either way, when he stands in front of Jane, he can't seem to catch his breath.

Jane's shoulders, still brushed with that blushing light, lift. "I don't know what you're asking me."

"I'm asking…I'm asking to be yours."

Tavish reaches out, forgetting boundaries, forgetting everything, and touches Jane's cheek.

Jane's so warm underneath the pads of his fingers, and it doesn't feel wrong the way he thought it might. The way it's been other times, when he's forced himself to at least try to exercise the most perfunctory of romantic duties. There is no repulsion of unwanted closeness. It's wholly right.

Until Jane brushes his fingers away. "I know you don't really want that. Goddammit Tavish, I know the way I love you isn't the way you...want me around. I can't stay. I can't keep fighting this one-sided war all by myself."

"It doesn't have to be one-sided," Tavish says. "Maybe we can't be like every other lovey dovey happy couple we've put together, but maybe we don't have to be."

"I..." Jane glances back at the sunset, then to his trailer, the boxes lying abandoned outside.

"Isn't it worth trying? If neither of us really want you going, isn't it worth it to try something a bit unorthodox?"

"You're really mean this." Jane asks it flatly, more seriously than he's ever looked at Tavish before, which is saying something. "Being with...*me*."

"If I'm going to be selfish for just once in my bloody life," Tavish says, "I sure as hell want it to be for keeping you."

"Then...Okay," Jane says.

"Okay?" Tavish says. He'd hoped—but also hadn't dared to hope. Had only been concentrating on making sure his words came out in the right order, that he hadn't even considered what might happen if they actually worked. "Even though…"

Jane draws back just enough to put a hand over Tavish's mouth. "Okay," he repeats.

"Oh," Tavish whispers through the fingers when they finally part.

They return to the *Keep*, and they are heroes coming home to the castle they've built.

Those he'd left behind are not waiting like solemn sentries, to Tavish's immense relief, but they are milling about his tavern with a grimness that immediately disperses on seeing Tavish and Jane enter in together. There is an unspoken and collective sigh of relief, and then they resume whatever it was they were doing before but now with actual enthusiasm.

(What they were doing before was mostly being served Swedish Gloggs by a giddy and unleashed Pyro.)

"Why in Abraham Lincoln's name is everyone staring at us?" Jane grumbles. It is, oddly, the most comforting return to normalcy Tavish experienced.

"I'll tell you later," he says. "Right now, I just want to grab a pint and find somewhere quiet to sit down for a bit. Professor Zakharov, Doctor Humboldt," he nods respectfully to the pair of doctors as they pass, who in turn raise their mugs in salute.

"Fine by me," Jane grunts. "Better than thinking about all the stuff I have to unpack."

"Ah, that's always the worst end of the packing process, isn't it?"

"And don't think I've forgotten *whose* fault it is that I now have to extract all my worldly possessions from a bunch of two-foot cardboard cubes after moving exactly zero miles!"

"You have my sincerest apologies."

It feels good to say it so easily. The slight undercurrent of tension that's run between them for years is completely absent, a tension Tavish knows he must have noticed but had ignored all the same. The way he can simply reach up and squeeze Jane's shoulder like he did ten years ago is staggering.

There is an argument, toothless, jocular, from the table belonging to Mick, Scout, and Crue.

"Just saying you could *totally* spring for it," Scout rambles on, thoroughly heedless to the pulsing vein in Crue's forehead. "Considering you got loads on the side 'n all…"

"What you are suggesting would cost the *entire* payout from one of my contracts," Crue scorns.

"…What exactly do you do for work again?" Mick eyes him from across the table.

With the clearly enunciated syllables of a man daring you to challenge him on it, Crue says, "I am a dentist."

Tavish chuckles, and leaves them to it. Approaching the bar nearly causes Pyro to vibrate out of their suit, head whipping back and forth with a series of mumbles that is unmistakably pleased. Before Tavish can get a word in, they disappear underneath, humming and clattering about in the various bottles.

"They were hoping you'd come back together," Dell explains. "I mean, so was I, but they've been practicing mixing something special, just for the two of ya'll."

When they arise, they have a bottle of cognac in hand, which they promptly upend into a pair of glasses.

"…You've been sneaking peeks at my recipe book haven't you, you little devil?" Tavish asks as the mix appears before him. The only reply he gets is a filter-strained giggle.

The last bit of bitters applied, Pyro ushers the drinks into each of their hands and shoos them off.

"This one of yours, then?" Jane asks, eyeing the drink as he follows Tavish deeper into the stronghold.

"Is not on fire is it? Just one of my little experiments. Though I'll be honest, it'll be odd to try the finished product when I didn't mix it myself."

The lower level beckons. Helen and Pauling are momentary obstacles, partially blocking the half-flight's entrance. When she sees them, Pauling flashes the biggest double thumbs up ever seen between the 106$^{th}$ and 107$^{th}$ longitudes.

When they're close, she prompts, "behind you ma'am," to her partner, tugging on Helen's arm to get her out of the way.

"What?" Helen interrupts herself, midway through a sentence about the inefficacy of assassins these days. "No, this is the only spot in this whole dreary bar that has lighting *not*

reminiscent of a dungeon. We are perfectly-"

"Helen," Miss Pauling says. And Tavish never thought he'd see the day. Miss Helen, terror of Teufort, is obediently led away by her 5' 1" girlfriend.

The lower bar is free for their leisure. Tavish sits in one of the couches, and immediately there is warmth around him, an arm snaking forward and clutching the front of his shirt.

When he turns his head, Jane stutters, "I uh. Sorry. I've just always wanted to…"

"No apologies necessary." Tavish lifts his free arm and drops it around Jane's shoulders.

It still doesn't feel wrong. He hasn't hit that invisible barrier that always seems to come up when he gets like this, and that both thrills and terrifies him. The idea that it could be waiting for him in the distance, but also that it might not be waiting for him at all.

"Merasmus is going to be pissed at you," Jane notes absently.

"That so?"

"Mm. He was really looking forward to getting rid of me."

"Ah. Well if he tries to seek his supernatural revenge, he'll have another thing coming. I can beat a wizard any day of the week."

"If you think you're going to be dueling any wizards *without me*, then you are a hippie and a fool, DeGroot!"

A smile springs over Tavish's face. He raises his drink for Jane to toast. "I'd never deny you that honor. He comes rolling down on clouds and thunder to have the bar brawl of the century, you'll be the one I call to have my back."

"Damn straight."

Jane clinks their glasses together, and they swill in unison.

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