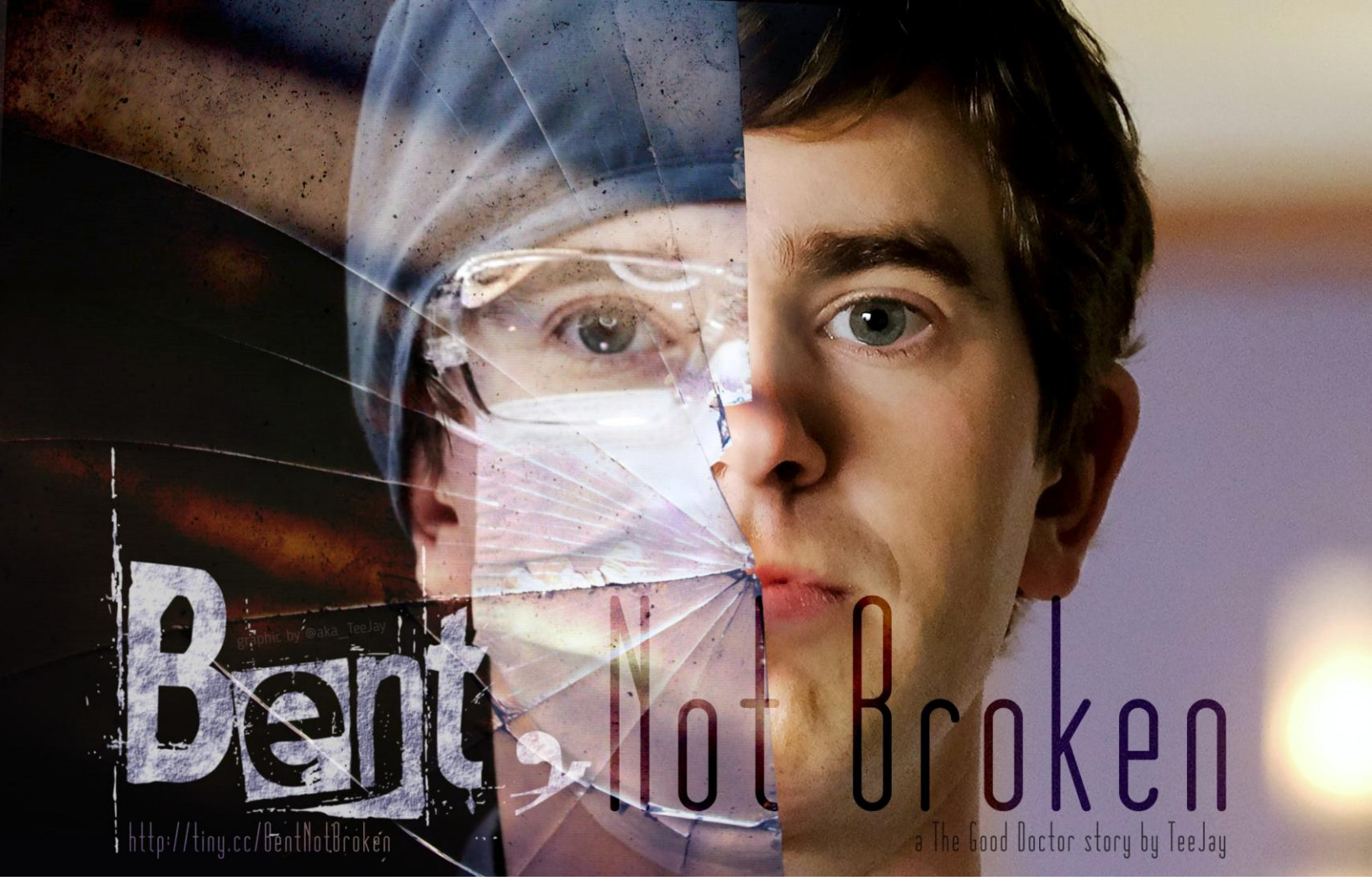


Author: tj_teejay (AO3 – Tumblr – Instagram – Reddit – E-Mail)

Author's Note

I started writing this fic some time in February 2022, and it was initially meant to be a short little piece of pure angsty and whumpy h/c indulgence. And then it grew and grew and grew, and now we're in novel-length territory again. I totally blame my fandom friends NiceNiceDevice and Daniela for it, because they kept throwing all these epic and cute and wonderful story ideas at me that I couldn't resist working in, and now we have this beautiful disaster of a longfic right here.

I will utter a warning that this one will be a doozie in more than one way. Steer clear if you're not into whump and perhaps somewhat descriptive medical details.

WARNING:
This story is set between seasons 5 and 6 and will thus contain spoilers for season 5.

Please do not share or upload this fic anywhere without the author's permission.

Summary

In the blink of an eye, Shaun's life takes an unexpected turn. This is the story of how he and his closest friends and family deal with that and what that means for Shaun's future, at the same time making new discoveries and friends along the way. Set between seasons 5 and 6 and compliant with season 5 canon.

MindMeister Mindmap

Chapter 1: Seconds are so dear

Just another ordinary day in another ordinary week for Shaun.

With the upheaval of the Ethicure changes behind them, and St. Bonaventure restored to former glory, things at work had normalized—no more unwelcome and annoying distractions, his colleagues were all happy and back to form.

Shaun had performed another lead surgery yesterday with both Asher and Jordan that had gone well, he and Lea were happily married, Lea and Jordan's gut sensor project was moving along. Life was good.

He held on to the handrail on the bus as it took a corner. It wasn't too crowded, but crowded enough that he hadn't found a vacant seat. He tuned out the light chatter of a couple next to him, looked out the window to track the route they were taking.

Coming off shift, he had to admit he was both tired and strangely wired. He'd been on-call a lot lately, and today had been a busy shift with much to do. He'd barely had time to eat, kept getting paged to handle one minor emergency after the other, had had to manage surgical complications, do a few surgical ER consults. He was looking forward to quiet time at home to unwind and let the hubbub of the day fall away.

He felt his phone vibrating in his pants pocket, reached f—

Brakes screeched, passengers gasped, Shaun looked up, saw movement out of the corner of his eye, a loud noise, felt the jolt of the impact of something hitting the side of the bus, realized too late he should be grabbing on to someth—

He felt his body being hurled through the air.

He hit something with a sickening thud.

Then everything went black.

+-+-+-+-+

"We need o neg down here, three units!"

"Out of the way!"

"Where is the portable x-ray?"

Aaron hurried through the ER hallway. It was pandemonium. Patients were hurriedly being wheeled through on ambulance stretchers, doctors and nurses in blue disposable gowns were passing in fast strides between treatment rooms and curtain areas. There were voices and hubbub everywhere.

Shaun. Shaun was here somewhere. They'd called him, told him to come down right now.

He stopped a nurse whose face he recognized by the upper arm. "Shaun Murphy, where is he?" he asked.

"Over there." She pointed at a treatment room.

Aaron fastened his step, walked in without preamble, trying to prepare for the worst, hoping for the best.

It wasn't the best, he could see that right away. Shaun was lying on a gurney, doctors and nurses tending to him with hurried precision. A monitor next to him was flashing his vitals on the screen. "Thiopental 140 milligrams," someone issued. A nurse started preparing a syringe.

Why were they giving Shaun muscle relaxants?

He stepped closer, saw the blood matting Shaun's hair and streaking all the way down the right side of his face and ear. His eyes were closed, he lay motionless.

"Someone give me a status," Aaron demanded.

He recognized Dr. Lapointe, a third year resident who looked up at him. "Dr. Glassman," he remarked.

"Status!" Aaron bellowed.

Lapointe quickly recounted, "LOC on scene, GCS 6, vitals stable, head lac, dislocated shoulder, possible rib fractures, possible concussion, several contusions, he's being fast-tracked for a CT after we've reduced the shoulder."

"Forget the shoulder," Glassman ordered as he stepped next to the gurney, "I want a CT now!"

"Do you know this patient?" Lapointe asked.

Did he *know* this patient?! "Dr. Shaun Murphy, fifth year surgical resident at this very hospital, and you better damn get him into that CT *now*!"

Lapointe nodded and hurried away.

Aaron looked up at the monitor. Vitals were in normal range and holding steady, oxygen sat was good, no intubation. "Any internal bleeding?" he inquired.

Another doctor Aaron didn't know responded, "No indications of that so far."

"Get me Dr. Ortiz," he barked at one of the nurses who looked like he wasn't doing anything vital at that moment. These were all young residents. He wanted someone more senior on Shaun's case. "Now."

The nurse hurried out of the room too. An endless minute or two passed with Aaron staring at Shaun's vital signs, watching the nurses and resident adjusting IVs and meds, then Ortiz, a stout woman in her early 40's, came in.

"Aaron?"

"He is one of ours." He pointed at Shaun. "I want you on this case."

"Yes, that's Dr. Murphy, I'm well aware." Ortiz was studying the tablet she held in her hand. "I'll see to it. We'll take him to CT now. I would want to reduce the shoulder before we do so to assess possible damage."

Aaron's ER rotations were a million years ago, he knew he should trust his colleague's judgment. He lifted his arms, stepped away from the gurney, watched them pop the joint back in its socket with an ever growing knot in his stomach, his adrenaline still soaring.

Ortiz nodded to her staff. "Take him up now."

Aaron watched them wheel out the gurney, followed close behind. Dr. Ortiz' voice stopped him. "Aaron. Let my team do their job."

"He's—" He had to swallow against a lump in his throat.

"Like a son to you. I know. But you know we have excellent doctors here. He's in good hands."

He nodded, his instinct to accompany Shaun up to CT not lessened one fraction, but he fought against it. He took his phone out of his pocket. "I should call his wife."

He stood in the now empty treatment room, dialed Lea's number. A nurse pushed him aside as they wheeled in another patient. He walked off to the side of the hallway just when Lea answered.

"Glassy, what's up?"

"You need to come to the ER." He dry-swallowed. "Shaun's been in an accident."

There was a moment's silence. "I'm coming. How bad?"

"Bad," he said, then corrected, "We don't know the full extent yet. He's unconscious, he's getting a CT now. You know what, meet me in radiology."

"I'll be right there." She hung up.

Lea's eyes were wide and panic-stricken when she walked up to Aaron a few minutes later. He was waiting in the hallway where the imaging rooms were. "What happened? How is he?" she asked right away.

"Bus accident, mass casualty. I don't know the details. He has a head injury, shoulder, ribs. He's been unconscious the whole time. They're checking for the extent of the injuries now, but his vitals were stable. I'll go check, wait here."

He left her standing outside, fully aware it wasn't polite, but Shaun was his primary concern.

Heads turned when he entered the observation room but no one said a thing. Lapointe was there, as was another resident whose name Aaron couldn't recall. Shaun's lower body was sticking out of the CT. Imaging wasn't available yet.

The wait was endless, no one dared talk. Aaron tapped his fingers on the back of the chair he stood behind. Finally the brain scan loaded onto the monitors. Fluid buildup inside the skull on the right side was clearly visible. Aaron let out a shaky breath. It wasn't unusual with this type of injury. It wasn't alarmingly severe, wouldn't necessarily require surgical intervention at this point.

The residents both looked at him, knowing he was the most senior, most experienced physician in the room. Lapointe spoke up, "I'm not seeing anything beyond moderate cerebral edema, consistent with the head injury. Would you concur, Dr. Glassman?"

He nodded. "Yes."

"Okay, we'll move on to the torso if you agree. Vitals are still stable."

"Go ahead," Aaron confirmed, then left the room. He'd seen what he needed to see, and Lea was waiting outside.

She turned to him immediately, her face still taut with subdued panic. He explained, "Moderate brain swelling, which is most likely causing the loss of consciousness. They're checking the chest and shoulder now. I'll have to speak to Dr. Ortiz, but the head injury wouldn't require surgery at this point."

He saw the lingering alarm on her face, gently touched her upper arm. "Hey. That's good news."

She let out an audible breath. "Okay. What about the rest?"

"He had a dislocated shoulder, there may be some secondary injuries. Potentially broken ribs, we'll find out. They should also see any internal bleeding on the scans, but there were no immediate signs of that."

"So what happens now?"

"He'll be monitored in the ICU, they may induce a medical coma for a few days to help with the brain swelling. If they find internal bleeding, he may need surgery."

Her voice was shaky as she asked, "Is he… is there a risk he…"

"Might not make it?"

She nodded in silence.

"With brain injury, there's always a risk." He saw her eyes filling with tears, tried to keep his own rising apprehension in check. "But Shaun's a strong and healthy guy. You know he's a fighter. Let's stay positive."

He gently guided her a few steps away. "He'll make it through. The way he does with whatever is thrown at him. Cause that's Shaun, right?"

She gave him a forced chuckle. “Yeah. That’s Shaun. When can I see him?”

He motioned to the right. “We should go to the ICU, he’ll be taken there next.”

She lingered. “I wanna see him.”

“You can see him in the ICU. Right now they need to run diagnostics, make sure they catch everything.”

Her face contorted briefly, and he considered pulling her into a hug. He resisted. “Come on,” he tried to offer as gentle encouragement.

“Okay,” she said in a low voice.

+-+-+-+-+

Lea was hovering near Aaron the whole time, the waiting seemed endless. She knew he was nervous too, though he tried his best to hide it. They had told him what room Shaun was going to be in, so they sat there on the cushioned window seat.

They both sprang to their feet when Shaun was being wheeled in, the bed being set up. Lea stole a glance, had to try not to flinch at all the dried blood on his face. They hadn’t cleaned him up yet, the ugly reddish brown streaks looking garish and sickening against his pale skin.

Aaron must have heard her sharp intake of breath, he gave her a look that she figured was supposed to be reassuring. It did nothing for her.

People were fussing with Shaun’s equipment—fastening a nasal oxygen cannula to his head, arranging IV stands, clipping things to his fingers and chest. She could see purple bruising all over the right side of his torso. It looked painful and terrible. Shaun never moved once, had his eyes closed. There was a knot in her stomach the size of a lemon.

Aaron was already studying Shaun’s chart, was scrolling through the information there. He looked up when a middle-aged woman entered the room. “What are we dealing with?” Aaron asked her.

“Brain edema from a head contusion, indicated for a non-surgical approach as it currently stands. I would consider medically induced coma to be on the safe side—now a case for Neuro. The shoulder dislocation caused a rotator cuff tear, we’ll have Ortho consult on whether it requires surgical repair. Two hairline rib fractures on the right, treatable conservatively with pain relief. No internal bleeding. The head lac will need sutures.”

Lea wasn’t sure she had fully understood all of it, but she thought she had gotten the gist of it. All things considered, it sounded like it could be worse, though the brain injury worried her.

“Okay,” Aaron confirmed.

The woman turned to go. “I’ve already called for the consults, we’re handing Dr. Murphy off to Critical Care now who will also determine further medication regimen. Is there anything else you need from me?”

Aaron shook his head. “No. Thank you, Ana.”

She gave him a curt nod, then left. Aaron hovered by the foot of Shaun's bed while a nurse was still tending to Shaun's setup. Lea sidled up next to Aaron, tried not to let the dread eat her up. "What happens now?"

He let out a long breath. "We wait."

The nurse left, vital signs were flashing on a digital screen next to the bed. Shaun was connected to a gazillion IVs and tubes. Tears shot into her eyes, and it was all she could do not to let her knees buckle right there. "That's it?" she said in a choked voice.

His voice was gentle. Low. "Yeah."

She hastily wiped at her cheek. "Can I touch him?"

"Best on the left side. His right is pretty busted up."

A sob escaped her lips as she moved to his left side and gently took Shaun's hand that had a pulse oximeter clipped to the index finger. She let her thumb gently stroke the back of his hand, wondering if he could feel it.

"Shaun, I'm here," she whispered. She looked up at Aaron. "Is he in pain?"

He shook his head. "No, I don't think so." He pointed at the syringe drivers next to his bed. "Some of those are pain meds."

"Why?" she asked. "Why is it always Shaun?"

"That's not a question you should ask."

"He's already been through so much. He doesn't deserve this."

"No, he doesn't."

"Why was he on that bus? He could have waited until I was done with work, I should have asked him to—"

"Don't," Aaron said gently. "Don't do that. This is not your fault."

"Yeah, I know." She let out a sigh, couldn't tear her eyes off Shaun.

Aaron brought her the chair that was standing in the corner of the room, put it so that she could sit on it next to the bed. She kept holding his hand, kept rubbing gentle circles over it.

Time stretched on, as did Lea's apprehension. Nurses and doctors came and went. They asked her to leave a few times when they did further blood draws, exams, sutured his head wound, cleaned him up, placed catheters and intubated him for the medically induced coma. Aaron took her to the cafeteria, bought her a coffee that tasted of desperation and overwhelming worry.

She was barely holding it together, and he knew it. She thought he was probably just as close to crumbling as she was but stoically holding on, holding her up – for Shaun.

It took several hours, daylight had waned, but finally Aaron joined her by Shaun's side, sinking into a second chair on the other side of Shaun's bed with a weary, exhausted sigh.

"Okay," he said with a beaten finality.

The ventilator rhythmically pumped air into Shaun's lungs, and Lea couldn't stop staring at his bruised face, contusions and scrapes all over his right cheek and down his jaw, a nasty cut on his eyebrow, a purple bruise on his temple. She wished she could take all of his pain away, could magically make him recover.

She could feel Aaron's eyes on her, so she tore her gaze from Shaun's face and looked at him.

"I've spoken with all the physicians, so here's the full picture. The brain swelling is the biggest concern right now. He's now in a medically induced coma so that the brain can heal and the swelling go down. We'll be monitoring that closely. Hopefully it'll only be a few days, but these things are hard to predict.

"He's got torn tendons in his right shoulder, but the consensus was it won't need surgery. He'll be getting a brace for that, once he starts moving. Two of his ribs, also right side, have hairline fractures, that will be very painful for a while, and doesn't help with the shoulder injury since the brace will wrap around his torso. We'll have to see how that works for him. Lots of painkillers, he'll probably hate it.

"The stitches on the head wound will be removed in a week or so, the bruising should resolve on its own. The shoulder injury will require some work. Shoulder brace, exercises, PT. It'll be a few weeks, but it shouldn't cause lasting damage. I know that'll be a concern for him." He sighed. "I know it's hard, but now all we can do is wait, hope he heals fast."

She squeezed Shaun's hand a tiny fraction. "You hear that, Shaun? Heal fast, okay?"

More silence ensued, only interrupted by the rhythm of the ventilator. Aaron was the one to eventually break it, and the question surprised Lea. "Do you think we should tell his mother?"

Lea immediately felt the resentment rising up in her chest. "Oh, you mean his jackass bio-mom who couldn't give a shit about her teenage son and did nothing at all to protect him and his brother from a violent, drinking, bullying father?"

"Yeah, well, when you put it like that…"

"Are you seriously thinking about contacting her?"

Aaron shrugged. "I don't know. She's still his mother."

"No, she's not. She gave birth to him. He hasn't talked to her since that trip, I actually doubt he's so much as thought about her since."

"Didn't he want to invite her to the wedding?"

"Uh. No. That was just Shaun being Shaun. Some wedding book said you had to invite your parents to your wedding, so he went with that. We talked about it and he was perfectly happy not to have her there. In fact, I think he much preferred it that way."

“Okay.”

“Think about it. You tell her about this, and she’ll get all guilt-ridden and think maybe she has a chance for redemption. Before we can tell her no, she’ll book a flight to San Jose and she’ll be sitting here by his bedside. Do you seriously want him to deal with *that* when he wakes up?”

Aaron gave her a look over the rim of his glasses. “No, you’re right. Maybe he’ll want to think about reconnecting at some point, but now is probably not the best time for that.”

“*Probably?* You know what, fuck her. It’s taken him so long to move on after all the shit he had to endure in his childhood. She doesn’t deserve anything. If it were up to me, I would want him to stay as far away from her as possible.”

“That’s not exactly your choice to make, though.”

“Yeah, I know. But you know Shaun. It’s his basic nature to put others first, often at the expense of his own wellbeing. And if you ask me, I think reconnecting with Marcie won’t be good for him. I mean, you have to know that. You were right there. How do you not see that?”

Aaron sighed. “It was—”

“Don’t say complicated,” she interrupted him.

“But it was.”

The resentment in her chest turned to actual anger and it reflected in her voice. “His father was a violent drunk who killed his pet in a drunken fit of rage, his mother stood by and did nothing, and neither of them did a damn thing when their boys ran away from home and lived in a fucking bus. How is that complicated?”

“Yeah, well, there’s a few more things at play there.”

“Oh yeah, like what?”

“Well, for starters, this was fifteen years ago. People didn’t really understand autism the way it’s understood now. This was small-town Wyoming, there *was* no inclusivity or social support programs or psychiatric help. I know it sounds cliché, but Shaun was largely misunderstood by the people around him—not just his parents. Teachers, students… They didn’t know how to play to his strengths and let him compensate for his weaknesses.”

“Well, *you* did. You got him places, you helped shape him into the brilliant and kind man he is today. Why did no one advocate for him other than his brother? It would have only taken *one* person, the *right* person. Someone with more clout than a 12-year-old kid. Even fifteen years ago.”

“Yeah, well, we can debate what-ifs all night long…”

Lea sighed as she looked at Shaun’s lifeless features. “To be honest, let’s not. This isn’t a conversation I wanna have right now. I hope we agree on not calling his mom about this.”

“Yeah, we agree on that.”

“Okay, good.”

She stroked Shaun’s hand a bit more, hoped he hadn’t subconsciously registered this conversation.

For the rest of the night, she and Aaron sat vigil by Shaun’s side, taking turns with naps. She was sure they were only given the courtesy because he used to be hospital president. Nurses came and went, there was an emergency of some kind across the hall in the middle of the night that woke Lea from an uneasy slumber.

She must have fallen asleep again, because she woke up with a crick in her neck from an awkward sleeping position in the chair, a blanket draped over her that Aaron must have put there at some point. She looked at her watch, it was past 6 am.

Aaron wasn’t there. Shaun still lay motionless, nothing had changed.

She rubbed her tired and burning eyes, reached sluggishly for Shaun’s hand. “Morning, Shaun,” she said in a low voice. “Come back to me, okay?”

There was no reaction.

A nurse came in to adjust something on Shaun’s IV. Lea recognized her face, had seen her a few times but couldn’t recall where exactly. She addressed her. “Is there any news?”

The nurse looked at her. “No, he’s been stable. You’re Lea from IT, right?”

She nodded. “Yeah. Shaun’s wife. Sorry, what’s your name again?”

“Kelly. You helped me with a server connection issue once.” She looked at Shaun. “I’m sorry this happened, but please know that he’s in good hands. We have a great team here, and Dr. Siddiqi is excellent.”

“Yeah, I know. Thanks.”

“Dr. Murphy is still a surgical resident, right?”

“Yeah, finishing his fifth year soon. And I think he’d want you to call him Shaun. With a U.”

Kelly smiled. “I saw on the chart.”

“He has autism.” Lea didn’t even know why she’d said that. It wasn’t important to his medical care. She immediately wished she hadn’t said it.

“Yeah, I know that, too.”

Lea felt a little stupid. After Salen’s diversity ad campaign, there wouldn’t be many hospital employees who didn’t know.

Kelly explained, “We worked together on a case once. You know, before the whole Ethicure thing. There was a case review about it later, he presented it to our team because there had been some communication hiccups. He was very upfront about his ASD, and I thought that was really admirable.”

Lea felt pride swell up in her. “Yeah, that sounds like Shaun all right.”

“Did you two meet at the hospital?”

She chuckled. “No, we were neighbors in our old apartment complex. I borrowed batteries from him.”

Now it was Kelly’s turn to chuckle. “That’s definitely an interesting one.”

Lea looked at Shaun again, suppressed the urge to smooth out a lock of hair on his forehead. “Do you think he can hear us, feel us being here?”

Kelly shrugged. “Hard to say. Medically, his brain function is being reduced to a minimum with the medications he’s on. I don’t think anyone really knows how much that has an influence on perception. I’ve heard stories of patients retelling incredibly strange dreams that were built around actual conversations they were privy to. We try to be mindful of it.”

She moved to check Shaun’s head wound, applied a new bandage to the area where they had shaved off some of his hair for better access. She told Lea, “These sutures are a labor of love. Whoever did them, someone took great care to make them very neat.”

Lea had to smile. “Well, he’ll be glad to hear it.”

“I know this is scary, but I’d like to think he’ll make it through. He seems like a fighter to me.”

“You wouldn’t know the half of it.”

“You’ve been here all night, right? He’ll be heavily sedated for at least another day or two. If you wanna go home and get a bit of rest, this is as good a time as any. I’ll be here the rest of the day, I’ll make sure to check on him.”

Lea got up from the chair, stretched her muscles. “Do you know if Dr. Glassman is still here?”

“No. Sorry. Is he involved with this case?”

“No. Well, yes. Shaun is like a son to him. He’s known him since he was fourteen. He was here all night, too.”

“Oh. Okay. I haven’t seen him this morning, but my shift just started, so… And I need to go, but I’ll check on him.”

Lea gave her a grateful look. “Thanks.”

Kelly nodded at her before she left the room.

Lea got out her phone, actually saw she had a message from Aaron. It read, ‘Went home, will be back later. Please call me when you wake up.’

Lea saw someone else approaching, recognized Alex Park. His face was fraught with worry as he entered the room. “I just heard,” he said.

Lea tried to give him a brave smile, but she knew it was forced. “Yeah.”

“He was in that bus accident yesterday?”

“Yeah. Just his luck, huh?”

“How does it look?”

Lea shrugged. “You tell me. There’s brain swelling, cracked ribs, a shoulder injury. They put him in a medically induced coma. He’s been like this all night, everyone says he’s stable, but I don’t—” She felt the tears threatening, the stress of the last hours hitting her hard. “I don’t know.” She let out a sob.

Suddenly Alex was there, pulled her into a hug. “Hey,” he whispered. “It’s okay. Shaun’s a tough guy.”

She leaned into Alex. “I know.”

He put his arms around her and she let him hold her another moment before she pushed out of the embrace, wiping stupidly at her cheeks. “Sorry. I’m a mess.”

“No, don’t apologize. Have you been here all night?”

She nodded. “I look the part, don’t I?”

He grinned. “A little. Why don’t you go home, freshen up a bit. I’ll stay with Shaun.”

“Aren’t you on shift?”

“Yeah, but Andrews knows and I don’t have any surgeries scheduled until 9. It’ll be fine.”

“Glassman will probably be back at some point. He went home, too.”

“Yeah. Shaun is in good hands. Go home, sleep a little. It won’t help him if you tire yourself out. And trust me, he’s got the whole surgical department rooting for him.”

Lea gave him a smile she hoped spoke of her last remnants of bravery. She stepped closer to Shaun’s bed, took his hand once more. “Hey, Shaun? I’m leaving for a little while, okay? But I promise I’ll be back. Alex is here, he’ll stay with you for a bit. Don’t do anything stupid. I love you.”

She stepped away and Alex sat down in the chair next to Shaun’s bed. She hesitated for a moment, turned to Alex. “Can you maybe talk to him? Tell him about a cool surgery or something? Or, I don’t know… Sorry. That sounds stupid.”

He shook his head. “No, it doesn’t. And I will. I’ve got just the thing.”

She smiled. “Thank you. He really likes you, you know.”

“Yeah. He’s a complicated guy, but I like him, too.”

“He is, isn’t he?”

Alex pointed his chin towards the door. “Go. I’ve got this.”

Lea nodded, took one last look at Shaun and left the room before she took her phone and dialed Aaron's number like he'd asked.

+-+-+-+-+

Chapter 2: Once you get past the fear

Aaron tried to steel himself as he entered the ICU, not exactly succeeding. The four hour nap he'd allowed himself hadn't done much except make him more sluggish, the shower had only marginally helped keep him awake.

He'd talked to Lea on the phone, told her to get some rest, take care of herself for Shaun's sake. There wasn't much they could do except wait, and the hospital would call if there was any unexpected change.

Of course he wasn't heeding his own advice, he knew, but goddammit, he couldn't lose another person dear to his heart, and he wanted to make sure he didn't. Not that anything was in his control, but being there offered a semblance of usefulness. Or at the very least the illusion of it.

Shaun lay alone in the ICU room – no discernible change. Aaron sighed, placed the bag he had brought to the side and sat down in the vacant chair to Shaun's left. It still sent a pang of pain through his insides to see the bruising all over his face, the ugly red abrasions, the purple hematoma on his temple, the cut on his eyebrow.

Aaron's face contorted with emotion, and he gently reached for Shaun's forehead, softly brushed away a strand of hair.

"Hey Shaun," he said, his voice thick and teary. "I'm here now."

He placed his hand on Shaun's, kept talking. "Lea went home to get some sleep, but I'm sure she's thinking of you. We'll be waiting here with you, we'll be here when you make it back, okay? I'll take you out to have all the pancakes you ever wa—"

He started when there was suddenly repeated beeping, his eyes instinctively went to the monitor. Shaun's oxygen saturation was too low. Aaron quickly checked the pulse oximeter, had it dislodged or shifted?

He clipped it in the right position. It did nothing, oxygen sat was still falling, the beeping incessant and pressing in Aaron's ears. There was already commotion in the hallway, a nurse hurrying in, Dr. Siddiqi in tow. Aaron stepped back, let them do their work.

The nurse did the same thing Aaron had done, readjust the pulse ox. It still did absolutely nothing. Dr. Siddiqi had her stethoscope on Shaun's chest.

"Get an ambu bag," Siddiqi told the nurse.

As she hurried to the supply cart that stood on the other side of the room, Siddiqi said, "He's aspirating secretions, we'll have to reintubate."

Aaron just nodded, the nurse came back with the ambu bag. Siddiqi was already pulling the endotracheal tube, the nurse started bagging Shaun. His oxygen sat started climbing. Another nurse was at the door, Siddiqi told him they'd need suction.

Aaron stood and watched as they tended to Shaun, suctioned the secretions, placed a new endotrach tube and hooked it up to the ventilator. Shaun's oxygen saturation was back to normal, the beeping now absent.

Siddiqi listened to Shaun's chest again, seemed satisfied. He instructed the two nurses to monitor more closely for excess secretion. Aaron knew it didn't mean they hadn't done their job. Every patient was different, these things could happen. That's what the ICU was for – close monitoring with quick response time.

Siddiqi's eyes met Aaron's, and Aaron gave him a nod. Siddiqi wasn't a man of many words, and this certainly wasn't the time for small talk. He left while the nurse lingered a moment longer, made sure everything was in order and in the right place.

She looked at him when she was done. "He should be okay now, Dr. Glassman."

He harrumphed, felt self-conscious for not knowing her name. "Thank you. I'm sorry, what was your name again?"

"Kelly Bloomfield."

"Thank you, Kelly."

She gave him a brief smile and said, "Of course," before she left.

Aaron drew in a long breath, let it out slowly through his nose. His heart was still hammering in his chest. He pulled the chair back next to the bed, sank down in it, tried to get a grip on the adrenaline rushing through his body.

"Please don't do that again," he said to Shaun, then took his hand, squeezed it a little. "Please don't scare me again like that, okay, Shaun? We need you. Lea, me, your friends. We all need you. You're married now, you wanna have children, see them grow up, don't you?

"Just imagine, a little tiny human, you and Lea raising a baby. I know you want that, and I want that, too. I think you'd be a great father, Shaun, just like you are at everything you want to achieve. And Lea would be a great mother. You two, you make a great team. You guys, you've got this—" He had to let out a sardonic chuckle, "you have it all figured out.

"Way better than I ever did. Cause I, I apparently can't hold any marriage together. Which is why it's even more important that you make it through this. Because you're the last thing I have left in this world, okay, Shaun?"

He could feel the tears prickling, felt them spill over, had to suppress an ugly sob in his throat. He stopped talking, just sat and tried to get a grip, took off his glasses and wiped at his cheeks with both palms.

Just like that, he was painfully catapulted back to two decades ago, when he'd been called about his daughter having overdosed, rushed to her ICU bed where she'd been lying with minimal brain function that eventually ceased.

He knew he couldn't have prevented the bus accident, but he could have prevented Maddie's death if he'd just been there, if he'd been more supportive, less resentful and overbearing and angry. Was he doing this wrong with Shaun? Was he giving too little, too much? Should he be there more?

Shaun didn't have any answers for him. All he offered was the rhythmic noise of the ventilator and a steady readout of stable vital signs. At least there was that. Now all he had to do was let his brain recuperate, get that swelling down, have him find his way back to consciousness. Because he knew with a newfound clarity that losing Shaun would absolutely destroy him.

He sat there for several minutes, just watching Shaun, then went to where he'd put the bag and retrieved the book from it that he'd brought. He settled back in the chair, opened it on the first page.

"You gave this to Steve," he said out loud. "*To Kill a Mockingbird*. Thought we could revisit it together, what do you say?"

Of course there was no response from Shaun, so Aaron started reading out loud. "When he was nearly thirteen, my brother Jem got his arm badly broken at the elbow. When it healed, and Jem's fears of never being able to play football were assuaged, he was seldom self-conscious about his injury…"

+-+-+-+-+

Lea picked up the mug on the kitchen island, downed the last of the coffee. Caffeine would have to get her through the day.

She had allowed herself a few hours of sleep that didn't make her feel very rested. She texted Aaron right after she woke up, but there had been no change.

She showered, got dressed, went back to the hospital. As she entered Shaun's room, the visitor sitting with him was unexpected.

"Audrey," she greeted her. Lea knew she was still recovering from her own injuries and the aftereffects of it, still on extended medical leave.

"Hi," she greeted back. "I heard the news and wanted to check in. Hell of a phone call to get."

"Yeah," Lea said with a sigh. "I assume you checked his chart."

"I did. There hasn't been any change, but that's a good sign."

Lea nodded. Yeah. Good signs. That's all they had. People kept telling her that. "How are *you* doing?" she asked.

Audrey shrugged. "Oh, you know. Good days and bad days. Mostly okay. Thinking of coming back to work, but I'm gonna need a little more time. And you? How are you holding up?"

Lea shrugged. "I don't know. Hanging in there, I guess."

"Hey," Audrey said, then got up from the chair next to Shaun's bed, stepped into Lea's space and just gave her a hug. Lea welcomed it, let her arms come around Lim's torso.

“Thanks,” she muttered, then pushed out of the embrace. “But I’m okay. Shaun’s the one we need to worry about.”

“He just keeps getting himself into trouble, doesn’t he?”

“Yeah, the kind no one needs.”

Audrey stepped to the foot of Shaun’s bed where she held on to the foot end and gave Shaun a long look. “Just a few weeks ago, he was saving my life. Hard believe it’s him fighting for his life now. Wish I could return the favor.”

“There’s nothing we can do, right?”

Audrey shook her head. “Beyond what they’re already doing, no. Now it’s very much a waiting game. But Shaun has always been a fighter. He’ll make it through this, too.”

Everyone was telling her that. She nodded. “Yeah.”

Audrey put a comforting hand on Lea’s shoulder. “I have to go, but I wanted to stop by. If there’s anything I can do, please give me a call.”

“Thank you,” Lea told her.

Audrey nodded, and Lea watched her leave.

She stood by the foot of Shaun’s bed and let out a heavy sigh before she moved to Shaun’s left side again, gently putting her palm on his arm. “Hey Shaun, I’m back. I’ll have to go to my office for a little bit, see that everything’s in order, but I’ll be back later, okay? Work on getting better. I know you can do that.”

She gave his arm a small squeeze, gave him one last look before she left. She went to check Aaron’s office on the way to her own. He was sitting at his desk, just staring into space, and her heart went out to him. She gently rapped on the doorframe.

It pulled him from his reverie. He looked tired and worn, and Lea felt another pang in her stomach. “Just wanted to let you know I’ll be in my office for a little while.”

He nodded. “Yeah, thanks.”

“I just checked on Shaun, I don’t think there’s any change.”

“There wouldn’t be, not unless they lower the sedatives. I’ll check later how that’s going.”

“Did you get any sleep?”

“Not much. You?”

“Same, but I’ll be okay.”

“Yeah,” he sighed. “I need another coffee.”

“Okay. Let me know if there’s anything I can do.”

“Sure.”

She lingered another moment, then made her way to her office. It would be a long day.

+-+-+-+-+

It had been a long day. Maybe the longest day of Lea’s life.

Between work and spending time in Shaun’s room, there had been several colleagues dropping by to see how he was doing, sitting with Shaun while she went to the cafeteria to eat something, get a coffee, get a bit of work done here and there to offer some distraction.

Get Well Soon cards and gifts were accumulating. She’d read each of them to Shaun, told him he could look at them later. They had been asked to keep personal belongings to a minimum in the ICU, so she’d put them all in her bag to show to him later.

It occurred to Lea that she should probably tell Claire. She’d want to know. With a heavy heart, she brought up the messaging app on her phone and typed, ‘Hey, long time, no see. Not so great news, Shaun was in a bus accident, he’s in the ICU. He has brain swelling, we’re waiting for it to go down, but he’s hanging in there. Hope you’re doing okay. Call me if you wanna know more.’

The call from Claire came in almost immediately after she’d sent the message. “Hey,” Lea answered.

“Lea, oh my God, please tell me everything.”

She let out a short sigh before she gave Claire the abbreviated version, tried to answer her medical questions as best as she could, having to pass on some of them.

Lea finished with, “Glassman just came by fifteen minutes ago, they say the swelling has gone down a little but they’ll keep him sedated for another day or two. I guess that’s good news.”

“Yeah, that does sound like good news. Listen, all of this is normal with that type of injury. You have to be patient, it’ll sort itself out. And I wish I could be there. Please give Shaun my best. I’d love to talk to him when he’s better.”

“Yeah, I’ll make sure he knows that. Right now, I’d settle for him waking up. He looks really terrible, he got pretty busted up.”

Claire hesitated a moment. “Is it too creepy to ask for a photo?”

Lea let out a short chuckle. “I don’t know. I’m not sure he’d be comfortable with that. You can ask him for a video call when he’s up for it.”

“That’s fair. And you? Are you holding up?”

“Yeah. Trying to. Glassman’s here too, of course. I mean, not right now. But he’s been doing a lot, making sure Shaun gets what he needs. The surgical team has all been here to check on him. It’s not for lack of love for him.”

Lea suddenly had a thought. “Hey, I know it sounds kinda stupid, and he probably doesn’t register anything right now anyway, but I can put you on speaker so you can talk to him. Do you wanna talk to him?”

Claire was game. “Yeah, sure.”

Lea hit the speaker button, held the phone near Shaun’s head. “Okay, you’re on speaker.”

“Hey Shaun,” Claire said. “Heard you’re in the hospital. What are you doing, Mister? I’m stuck in another country, and you get yourself in trouble like this? We can’t have that. So see to it that you get better, okay? I’d come visit right now if I could, but I guess we’ll have to settle for this. Call me when you’re better, I wanna talk to you. I miss you.”

Lea was tearing up, hearing all of that. Shaun had made a few really good friends here in San Jose, it warmed her heart that he was finally finding people who loved him when his childhood had been so shitty and desolate.

Claire started talking about an interesting case she’d seen the other day, then Lea heard a bit of noise in the background. Claire said, “Sorry, I have to go, they need me. Bye, Shaun. Get better, okay?”

Lea put the phone off speaker and put it back to her ear. “No problem. I’ll keep you updated on what happens. Thanks for calling.”

“Yeah, any time. I love you both, okay? Sorry, I gotta go.”

“Okay. Bye.”

Claire signed off with a, “Bye,” and Lea ended the call.

She looked at Shaun again. “Oh, Shaunie. I hope you can feel the love from everyone. We miss you. And we need you back here with us.”

There was, of course, no response from Shaun. She didn’t think there would be. But she hoped that, somewhere in the gyri of his brain, he could hear all of this and hold on to that.

+-+-+-+-+

The next day dragged on, Shaun’s second day in the medically induced coma. Lea spent as much time with him as she could after allowing herself a full night’s sleep in her own bed at home. Aaron was in and out of his room, too. Colleagues came and went. Jordan took Lea to the cafeteria for lunch, offering much needed support and a shoulder to lean on.

Everyone was there – Andrews, Asher, Jordan, Park. The latter came by three times when he had downtime between surgeries, spent some time with Shaun. One time they video-called Morgan together, out in New York. Lea was really grateful. He gave her another hug and she allowed herself a few more tears.

Aaron caught her in the evening as she was just about to doze off in the chair next to Shaun’s bed, placing a gentle hand on her shoulder. She blinked tiredly, then gave a start. Was something wrong?

“Easy,” Aaron quickly allayed her fears.

She looked up at him. There was no alarm on his face, just exhaustion. They were all exhausted.

“Have you eaten?” he asked.

“Not since lunch. Have you?”

“No. Come on, let’s grab a bite.”

The cafeteria was quiet and empty, it was already past 8 pm. Lea opted for a tomato soup with toast, Aaron went for a pre-packaged BLT and a slice of carrot cake. He took a bite, chewed a bit, looked at her.

“So there’s some good news. The brain swelling has gone down, his labs and vitals look promising. They want to taper down the sedatives tomorrow and bring him out of the coma.” He gave her an encouraging smile.

She let out a sigh that was laced with relief. “That’s the best news I’ve heard all day.”

His expression hardened somewhat again. “Yeah, that’s really good. But you need to know that it’s a process, and it often involves certain… complications.”

“Complications?”

“Patients coming out of a coma can be unpredictable. He’ll probably be in a minimally conscious state at first. He’ll be aware of things, maybe follow instructions. When he comes out of that, he might be confused or disoriented, he may not remember things. Worst case, memory loss lasts for a while. I hope that won’t happen.

“Some people get agitated or aggressive. Seems unlikely for Shaun, right? But it could happen. You need to know that this is normal. Just remember that it’s the head injury and the drugs. These things can also be a little unpredictable. He could be okay one time and be confused again later. Like I said, it’s a process. And it can be a little scary.”

She swallowed, tried to take all of that in. “But he’ll be okay, right?”

He tilted his head to one side, gave a slight shrug. “I hope so. Brain injuries are impossible to predict. I’m trying to be optimistic.”

Her eyes were starting to tear up. She didn’t want to go there, didn’t want to imagine that he’d not come out of this himself.

“Hey,” he said gently. “I’ll be there with you. I’ve done this before.”

“You’ve been there yourself.”

He nodded. “Yeah, that too. And Shaun was there all the way. Well, sometimes a little too much so. You know how he gets.”

“Let me guess, he was trying to fix everything all the time.”

“Yeah. But he was also really sweet and supportive. We got high on my medical marihuana that one time. I have good memories of that day.”

Lea chuckled. “Yeah, he told me about that. The Mallomars lady, right?”

“Yeah, the Mallomars lady,” he said with a certain remorse in his voice. “Please don’t tell him this, but you’ve been really good for him. He’s grown so much since he came to San Jose. He’s always been amazing in his own right, but,” Aaron’s voice was thick with emotion now, “it’s like he’s a different person. A better person.”

“Aren’t we all? Better persons because of Shaun? He has that effect on people.”

Aaron nodded. “He does, doesn’t he?” He took another bite from his sandwich, Lea kept eating her soup, dipping the toast in it.

She still had questions, tried to understand what to expect. “So what’s happening tomorrow? Walk me through it.”

“They’ll gradually reduce the dosage of the sedatives over the course of the day, they’ll extubate at a certain point so he can breathe on his own. Vital signs will keep being monitored at all times. First thing that usually happens is purposeful movement, they’ll ask him to follow simple instructions, like squeezing a hand or following fingers with his eyes, ask him to talk.

“His voice may be hoarse from the endotracheal tube for a little while. And we’ll have to see what happens with the injuries he has. He’s on painkillers, so hopefully he won’t be feeling the cracked ribs and shoulder too much. The shoulder will need to go in a brace, it’ll have to be immobilized for a while, but the broken ribs complicate that. That might be a cause of frustration, because he won’t be feeling the pain too much and be confused why he can’t move his arm.

“Worst case, he’ll have to be sedated if he gets agitated, because they really wouldn’t want him to move around too much and do more damage to the rotator cuff. Finding the right pain meds dosage can be challenging, especially in unresponsive patients. We’ll have to see how that goes.

“With the ventilator gone, pneumonia can be a cause of concern if he doesn’t breathe deeply enough. There’s coughing and breathing exercises to help with that, but it’ll be hard because it’ll hurt. So brace yourself for a bit of a struggle there. At the very least it’ll be hard to watch, cause he’ll be in pain.”

Lea closed her eyes, tried to steel herself for what Aaron was saying. It all sounded horrible and tough. It would be so hard for Shaun. She knew he’d get through it, and he’d *fight* to get through it, because he would want to make it out the other end without long term effects. He was such a fierce fighter.

Aaron went on, “We usually try to get patients out of bed as soon as possible, so if he can walk, he should. Carefully at first, of course, and only with support. The nurses will help, they’re trained to handle that. If he wants to get up, call someone if I’m not there.”

“What about food?” she asked.

“We should give that a bit of time, depends on how alert he’ll be. Ice chips first, then we can start with easily digestible foods. Apple sauce is a classic, then we work our way up from there. He should drink as much as he can so we can lose the IV. I’ll spare you the details of the urinary

catheter, but hopefully that can go too, once he's more mobile. He'll be very glad to be rid of that."

Lea inwardly shuddered. She could only imagine. "So, assuming all this goes well, how long will he have to stay in the hospital?"

Aaron met her eyes over the rim of his glasses. "Difficult to predict. I'd expect roughly another week. If he does stellar, maybe a little less, knowing it's Shaun and he has good care at home. His body will be dictating that."

"Doctors make the worst patients, isn't that what they say?"

Aaron gave her a bit of a grin. "Yeah, but Shaun is not your typical doctor, is he?"

"No, but his decision making prowess isn't always top notch."

Aaron chuckled. "Maybe, but he also knows what's at stake. This could affect his ability to work as a surgeon if he doesn't put in the work and misses the milestones. I think he'll fare all right in that arena. And he has you."

Lea had another thought, and if not the seasoned brain surgeon, then who would know better? "The head injury… the location where he had the swelling, does that mess with anything?"

"That was all frontal lobe. It might affect concentration, also things like planning, judgment, emotional expression, inhibition… Hard to say, really. But yeah, he may have trouble with that for the first few days until the swelling fully resolves."

"Emotional expression?"

Aaron shrugged. "Could mean a lot of things. Could make him struggle even more with that, make him communicate less. Could mean he gets even more emotional than he already does. It's different for every patient. But he may not quite be himself for a little while. You think you can deal with that?"

She quickly nodded. "Of course."

He gave a sigh. "Well, I think that about covers it. The rest is up to Shaun. And I know you'll be there. He'll need that. He's very lucky."

She smiled. "You know he would do the same for me."

"Yes, he would."

"He'll need you too, you know?"

"Yeah. And I'll do what I can. In the meantime, go home. Get some rest. Tomorrow will be a bit of a rollercoaster."

"Yeah, I'll try. Same goes for you, you know?"

"I know."

Lea just remembered something that the stress and anxiety of the last few days had overshadowed. “It’s his birthday tomorrow. His 30th.”

Aaron looked at her. “I had forgotten about that.”

“Yeah, I almost did, too. Some birthday, huh?”

“Let’s hope we’ll have cause for celebration tomorrow either way.” Aaron took the last bite of his sandwich, started on the carrot cake. “I’ll be here first thing in the morning.”

They both would. They’d be there every step of the way, Lea was sure of that.

+-+-+-+-+

Chapter 3: Been down here for days



Aaron studied Shaun’s features. With the endotracheal tube gone and Shaun breathing on his own, he looked so much more peaceful. If he wasn’t lying in an ICU bed with all the injuries on his face, you could almost imagine he was sleeping.

Aaron tried to look for any signs of near consciousness—a flutter of his eyes, a twitch of his finger. He’d already moved his eyes earlier, seemed to have reacted to sounds, but it had been brief, and it had been shocking to see how bloodshot Shaun’s right eye was.

Knowing all too well that coming out of a medically induced coma was a slow process, Aaron tried to remind himself that he needed to be patient. Shaun’s brain was a mystery on the best of days, so it was hard to tell what this would have done to him.

Someone from Ortho had come down earlier to fit Shaun with a simple shoulder brace to immobilize his right arm. Aaron hoped it wasn't going to mess too much with the cracked ribs, but that couldn't be helped. The ribs would heal.

Lea was sitting on the left side of the bed, a frown of worry still etched into her forehead. They both perked up when there was a low hum from Shaun, his left hand grasping for something that wasn't there.

Lea took his hand. "Shaun? Hey, it's me."

He let out another hum, his eyes fluttering open. His heavily bloodshot right eye still looked terrible. Lea squeezed his hand. "Shaun, are you with us?"

"L-lea," he mumbled, his voice croaky.

"Yeah, it's me. Hey."

He let out a hum, blinked, his eyes roaming around.

"You're in the hospital," Lea clarified, "You were in an accident. Do you remember any of that?"

He hummed again, struggling to pull his hand out of her grasp. She let go of Shaun's hand, sought out Aaron's eyes.

"Hey Shaun," he said, "it's me. Can you look at me?"

Shaun's eyes settled on Aaron's face for a short moment, and Aaron told him, "There you go, that's very good."

He went around to Shaun's left side, Lea made room for him. He took Shaun's hand. "Now, can you squeeze my hand?"

Shaun needed a second or two, but he also gave a little squeeze. "That's great, Shaun, you're doing really good."

At that moment, Dr. Siddiqi came in with a nurse, and Aaron motioned for Lea to step aside and let the team do their work. They performed a few more exams, asked Shaun to follow simple commands. They watched them, Aaron knew it was all standard procedure. He saw nothing that alarmed him.

Shaun was already on the way back to a droopy slumber when the medical team left, and Aaron gave Lea an encouraging nod before she went after Siddiqi to speak about Shaun's progress.

It was maybe an hour later that Shaun stirred again, having Lea and Aaron snap to alertness when he started moving, letting out a moan. His left hand clumsily groped for the oxygen cannula at his nose.

Aaron went to his side, tried to reassure him. "Hey Shaun, easy, don't mess with that."

Shaun hummed, his eyes trying to focus, landing on Aaron's face for a moment. His voice was hoarse. "Where am I?"

“You’re in the hospital. You were in an accident.”

He let out a sound that was half confusion, half frustration.

Lea was there too, on his other side. “Shaun, I’m here too. Are you in pain?”

He slowly sought her out, hummed again, squeezing his eyes shut for a moment. “I don’t know.”

There was a small smile on Lea’s face. “Okay, I guess that’s a good sign.”

Shaun sluggishly lifted his left hand, seemingly confused by the IV line feeding into him. “Why do I have this?”

Aaron tilted his head slightly. “You were in a bus accident, you got injured. Do you remember any of that?”

“Hm. I don’t know.”

Shaun stirred again, struggled a bit against the arm brace. Aaron cautioned him, “Careful with your right arm, there’s some damage to your shoulder and you might be feeling those cracked ribs, too.”

Shaun frowned, then lifted his left arm that had a vein catheter attached to it. “What is this?”

“Saline IV,” Aaron said. He pointed to the perfusors next to the bed. “Propofol, Tramadol, Ketorolac, Mannitol.”

Shaun seemed to need a second to process this, then said, “Okay.” He licked his chapped lips, swallowed visibly. “I’m thirsty.”

“We can get you some ice chips.”

He hummed the way he always did when he didn’t like an answer, and Aaron’s mouth twitched into a small smile. “I want to go home,” Shaun intoned.

“I know. But you need to get better first, okay? You just came out of a medically induced coma.”

Shaun was moving his left hand, pulled at the oxygen cannula under his nose, repeating more urgently, “I want to go home.”

Aaron reached over and took Shaun’s hand. “Shaun, it’s okay. You’re in the hospital. You need to recover. We’ll be here with you until you can go home, okay?”

Lea gently touched his right elbow, let her hand lightly rest on his arm. “Hey, Shaun, we’re right here. It’ll be okay.”

He seemed to relax a little and Aaron breathed a small sigh of relief. Having to forcefully sedate Shaun wasn’t something he would want to have to ask for.

He reached over to readjust the oxygen, smoothing out a rampant lock on Shaun’s forehead. “Get some rest, Shaun.”

He seemed to already be halfway on the way back to a slumber, his beleaguered and drug-addled brain giving out under the sudden burst of activity. His eyes closed again, his breathing evening out.

Aaron wasn't too worried. It would get better over the next few days. He looked at Lea and gave her a slight nod.

She put on a brave smile, accompanied by a questioning but worried look. "You said this is normal, right?"

"Yeah. He'll be more alert, the more they lower the dosage of the sedatives."

She nodded. "Okay."

Aaron tried to put on his best reassuring expression. "Don't worry. These are good signs. He remembered us, he was aware of his surroundings. That's all good."

"Yeah," she sighed. "I just… I hate seeing him like this."

"You and me both."

+-+-+-+-+

Over the rest of the day, Lea was incredibly happy to see Shaun making more progress. He was waking up more, holding brief conversations, following instructions and commands, remembering the basics.

The confusion was still there, the sluggishness and general lack of focus that Aaron had talked about. She knew it was all normal. He'd graduated from ice chips to drinking a few sips of water, and there was steady improvement. She felt hopeful. He'd make it through this.

Both she and Aaron were silently sitting with Shaun now, daylight waning outside. He was resting, the drugs slowly dissipating from his system. Aaron was sitting by Shaun's side, blankly staring into the distance, and Lea wondered…

"This must be hard for you," she said to him.

He lifted his head. "Come again?"

"You never talk about her, and Shaun has only told me the bare facts, but you already lost a daughter. This must be bringing back some of those memories."

His expression darkened. "Yeah. A little."

"How old was Maddie when she died?"

He shook his head slightly. "Eighteen."

"That's so young. I'm so sorry."

"Yeah."

His voice was laden with sadness and grief, and Lea instantly regretted she had even mentioned it. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have brought it up. You probably don’t wanna talk about it.”

He briefly met her gaze. His voice was low when he said, “It’s eighteen years in November. Seems like a long time now.”

Lea looked at Shaun for a moment. “You know that he really appreciates everything you’ve done for him, don’t you? You’re more of a father to him than his biological one ever was. He’ll probably never say it quite like that, but he loves you and he thinks of you as a father.”

Something on Aaron’s face twitched. “Yeah, I know.” He let out a soft chuckle. “And he *has* told me that. Before the wedding. It was very sweet.”

She looked down at her left hand. “I don’t think I ever really thanked you, but the rings were a really touching gesture, and I want you to know it means a lot. We’ll be wearing these proudly.”

His mouth curved into the smallest of smiles but he stayed quiet. Aaron was never a man of many words.

It was then that Shaun started moving around, letting out one of his hums. It sounded somewhat distressed. Lea looked at Aaron whose eyes were all on Shaun now.

“Shaun?” he asked.

“No,” he answered as his eyes fluttered open.

“Shaun? You’re in the hospital. Do you remember?”

“No,” he repeated, starting to move more, to the point where it became somewhat concerning with all of his injuries and IVs. “No.”

“Shaun,” Aaron tried to calm him, “Shaun, you need to stop moving, you’re injured.”

He was now struggling against the arm brace. “I don’t want this, it hurts.”

“Yeah, you’ve got a shoulder and a rib injury, of course it hurts.”

Shaun was now awkwardly pulling at the IV line, and Aaron tried to hold on to his hand to stop him from pulling it out entirely, which elicited a louder, “No. Don’t touch me! Stop it! Stop!”

Aaron pulled back and flinched. “Shaun.” His voice was now stern and assertive. “Shaun, you can’t be pulling your IV. Listen to me, you’re in the hospital, you need these.”

“No,” he said again. “I don’t want this.”

Despite the brace, Shaun groped at the IV, pulled at it so that it came away and the needle site started bleeding, a red line of blood running down his arm, trickling into the stark white sheets.

Aaron was still trying to get Shaun to settle down, tentatively touching him despite Shaun clearly resisting it. “Shaun, please stop struggling, you’re hurting yourself.”

“No! You’re… you’re lying to me!” Shaun spat at Aaron while he groped for the nasal oxygen cannula with his left arm. “You always… You always lie. I can’t trust you.”

It sounded alarmingly familiar, Lea was instantly transported back to that horrible night in the pharmacy. Before she could dwell on it, Aaron’s voice pulled from her reverie. “Go get a nurse.”

Lea snapped out of her momentary helpless stupor and complied, hurried out of the room and found someone at the nurse’s station to tell her what was happening. She immediately went into action and called over who Lea assumed was a resident.

Lea hung back as the medical team entered Shaun’s room where Aaron was still trying to talk Shaun down, but the latter seemed to be too confused or delirious to listen to rational thought. His arm was still bleeding, the oxygen cannula was half pulled off of his face, and he was loudly protesting and struggling, and suddenly there were tears in her eyes.

Aaron had told her before it might happen, that Shaun might get agitated and that it wouldn’t be anyone’s fault, but it was still agonizing to watch, agonizing to be completely powerless.

The nurse and the resident took over and Aaron stepped away from the bed, standing with arms hanging limply by his side. Lea saw there were specks of Shaun’s blood on his shirt and his hands. His face looked ashen with defeat.

“It would be better if you left,” the nurse said.

Lea looked at Aaron, waited for him to make a move, which took him a few seconds to actually act on. His face stony, he wordlessly walked past Lea and she followed him outside, went after him into the hallway outside of the ICU.

“Aaron, wait,” she called.

He whirled around. “Don’t.” His voice was acerbic.

“You said this could happen.”

“Yeah. Doesn’t make it any better.”

She let out a breath. “I know. But it’s just his brain injury and the drugs, right? That’ll pass. Isn’t that what you said?”

He raised his voice. “Oh my God, don’t you dare lecture me right now!”

Lea made her voice more assertive now, too. “Aaron. I know this is hard. You love him. *We* love him. We want him to be okay. But he is, right? He’s gonna be okay. This is just temporary.”

He turned away from her, threw his arms up in the air, his voice still agitated. “Yeah, that’s what we keep telling ourselves! He’ll be okay. But what if he isn’t? Brain injuries are fickle things. It’s possible he won’t get better. It’s possible he’ll never be a surgeon again. And because of what? Because he got on the wrong damn bus at the wrong damn time!”

Lea went around so she should stand in front of him. “Hey. Aaron. Don’t do this to yourself. You know we have no control over this. It’s awful and it’s scary to think about these things, but you

know Shaun. Whatever happens, he'll fight for it. Because that's what he does—he fights for things, things that sometimes seem impossible."

Aaron drew in an audible breath through his nose, seemed to calm down somewhat. She gave him some space. After a long moment, he looked up and met her gaze, his voice much calmer. "I'm sorry. That was uncalled for."

She nodded. "It's okay. We're all stressed and exhausted."

He sighed, then sat down in one of the chairs that stood in a row against the wall. He let his head sink into his hands, rubbed them down his face. "I've seen this countless times. It's different when it's someone you love."

She sat down next to him. "Yeah. And that's only natural."

He straightened up a little, looked at her for a long moment. "You were right, though. Shaun fights for what matters. He fought for you."

She nodded. "He did, didn't he?"

Aaron's hand went to his chin and he pensively stroked his beard before he said, "That road trip is where it started for the two of you, isn't it? But that night his father died, that's when it all changed. What happened that night?"

Lea was taken aback for a moment. Yeah, that night… "What did he tell you?"

"That he was upset and you comforted him but that you didn't have sex."

She shrugged slightly. "That's what happened."

"Did he have a meltdown?"

"Yeah, I think that's what it was. He was hitting himself, hyperventilating. I wanted to pull him out of it."

"Which isn't an easy task to begin with. Once he locks into them, that can get tricky. What was it that you did?"

"I just… kinda hugged him. He started crying, got really clingy. I just held him until he calmed down. Eventually, we both fell asleep."

"You know that's a really big deal with Shaun, right?"

"Yeah, although I don't think I really knew how big a deal it was at the time. It's all about trust with him. I do know that now."

"Yeah, and somehow he's always trusted you."

"That's some of your doing too, you know."

"Me? No, that's all Shaun."

“Yeah, most of it is, but you gave him the confidence to take that leap. You know that better than me, but it sounds like he grew up in a pretty hostile environment without much love. Maybe some of it is his ASD, but I think him being the sweet and positive person that he is today, that’s in no small part thanks to you. And you definitely deserve credit for that.”

He nodded slowly. “Yeah, maybe you’re right.”

“Oh, I know I’m right.”

Aaron sighed. “Hard to imagine he’s turning 30 today. I didn’t even wish him a Happy Birthday.”

“He probably wouldn’t have registered it anyway with how out of it he still is. We’ll make good on it when he can appreciate it. In style. Well, not a huge party or anything. Just maybe a nice get-together with all his friends. You know how much he loves having his tribe around.”

“His *tribe*?”

She chuckled. “Yeah, he called it that once. Probably something someone said that he repeated. You know, that echolalia thing. It’s cute. I love it when he does that.”

“I should go check on him.” Aaron got up from his seat and Lea did the same.

“Will they let us go back in?”

“I don’t know. Let’s go and find out.”

Lea hung back as Aaron spoke with the nurse. They had given Shaun a mild sedative, Lea wasn’t able to follow most of the medical details. She hoped it wouldn’t interfere with the process of him coming out of the induced coma, but she trusted that the doctors knew what they were doing.

Aaron seemed satisfied with what he was being told, and the nurse indicated that they could briefly go back in to check on Shaun but that they should let him rest.

Lea briefly squeezed Aaron’s arm as they approached Shaun’s bed. Everything looked in order, the IV line had been replaced with a new one, the oxygen cannula was back in place where it belonged. Shaun’s eyes were closed and he looked peaceful.

They both stood by the foot of his bed. “Happy Birthday, Shaun,” Aaron said in a low voice.

Not surprisingly, there was no response from Shaun.

+-+-+-+-+

Chapter 4: Can't tell up from down

The first sensation Shaun registered when he woke up in the morning was confusion. Everything seemed unfamiliar—this bed, the clothes he was wearing, something constricting his arm, faint dull aches all over his right side.

Hospital, he was in the hospital. He vaguely remembered now. An accident, that’s what they’d said.

He sensed a presence by his bedside. He blinked. Lea was looking at him, a faint smile on her face.

“Hey,” she greeted him.

Shaun just let out a hum. Everything took a lot of effort, too much effort.

“How are you feeling?”

He hummed again. Too many questions.

“Shaun, can you talk to me? I miss hearing your voice.”

“Strange,” he gave her. His voice sounded raspy.

“You feel strange? Is it the drugs, do you think? Or should I go get someone?”

“No.”

“No, it’s not the drugs, or no, I shouldn’t get anyone?”

“You… don’t have to get anyone.”

She moved in her chair by his bedside, scooted a little closer to the edge of the seat. “Do you remember anything from yesterday?”

He closed his eyes, tried to sift through his memories. Everything was fuzzy, took more effort. He didn’t have any clear and tangible recollections to share. He stayed silent.

“Well, yesterday was your birthday. You hit the big 30. So, Happy Birthday, Shaunie.”

She was smiling at him, he wasn’t sure what to do with that. When was his birthday again? June 24th. 30th birthday. What day was it? “I don’t remember,” he mumbled.

“And that’s okay. You were pretty out of it yesterday. You seem a little more with it today, though. Is it okay if I touch you?”

That confused Shaun, too. Why was she asking his permission? She never had to before. “Why?”

Lea looked down at her folded hands in her lap. “Because you told Glassman not to touch you last night.”

He didn’t remember that. At all. “I don’t remember that.”

“Yeah, I didn’t think you would. And that’s okay. You’re still coming off those drugs, and your brain is still recovering.”

“I’m thirsty.”

“Okay, that I can help you with. Hold on.”

She held out a cup to him, one of those feeding cups with a spout. Shaun clumsily took it with his left hand and drank a sip of water. It felt good, he was so parched.

“Easy,” Lea told him, tipping the cup back a bit from his mouth. “You should go slow, Shaun. Small sips, okay?”

He complied, but instantly felt like a child. Was that how it was gonna be now? He’d need help with every little thing, even something as simple as drinking from an old person’s feeding cup?

Something inside of him constricted, and that felt unpleasant, too. He wasn’t sure what was happening. Lea’s voice was soft and soothing from next to him. “Hey. Shaun, it’s okay.”

Tears were running down his face, and he couldn’t control it, felt completely defenseless.

“Are you in pain?” Lea asked.

“No,” he said in a teary voice, because that was all that would come out.

“It’s okay, Shaun, I think it’s part of all of this. You’ll probably feel like this for a while, and that’s okay. Just let it happen, I’ll be here to help you through that.”

More tears ran down his cheeks, and he couldn’t… he didn’t know where it was coming from, how to stop it, so all he could do was resign himself to it.

Her voice was quiet. “Do you want me to talk right now?”

He drew in a shaky breath. “Yes.”

“Okay. Actually now I’m not sure what to say. But, oh. There’s all these *Get Well Soon* cards.” Lea got up and did something he couldn’t see, then she was back in the chair with a pile of greeting cards in her hands.

She held one up that had a cartoon character with a green balloon on it, then opened it. “This one’s from Asher and Jerome. ‘Shaun, hope you get well soon, we’ll stop by when we can.’ Asher was here day before yesterday, I think. He sat with you for a while. You don’t remember any of that, do you?”

The tears had stopped flowing, and Shaun felt a little more composed. “I was heavily sedated.”

“Yeah, well, we weren’t sure how much you might still be registering. But, you know, everyone was here at one time or another. Even Audrey.”

Shaun perked up at that. “How is she?”

Lea shrugged. “Doing okay physically, I think. She said she needed more time before she’d come to work. Claire talked to you a few times over the phone. She really wants to speak with you. Let me know when you’re up for it, we’ll give her a call.”

“Okay,” he easily agreed. Claire was a dear friend. He definitely wanted to talk to her.

Lea held up the next card, proceeded to read through them one by one. Most were short, wishing him well, lots of encouragement. It helped him feel better, and the tears were threatening to fall

again. He clung to Lea's voice, tried to focus on it. She gave him strength, that hadn't changed. She'd always been and would always be his rock.

Something in her voice drew him back to the moment, he tried to listen to what she was actually saying. "—go now and work for a bit. Are you okay on your own for a while? Glassy will be here later."

"Yes," he said.

"Okay. Well, hang in there, Shaunie. I love you."

He loved her, too, but the words just wouldn't come. When she left the room after she'd lingered for another moment at the foot of his bed, he realized she hadn't touched him once the whole time. What had happened the day before? He tried to peruse his memory and found no answers whatsoever.

+-+-+-+-+

"Good morning, Dr. Murphy," the nurse greeted Shaun as she entered his room. He knew her name was Kelly. He'd worked with her before, but the details around that were hazy.

"Good morning," he responded sluggishly, blinking against the faint disorientation that clouded up his mind.

Something in his brain wasn't quite working right, making everything muddled and confusing. Everyone was saying it was the brain swelling and the medications. He knew it made sense, but there was a strange disconnect somewhere.

"I see you're not on oxygen anymore, so I think the two of us are going to work a little on your mobility today," Kelly said.

He let out an uncertain hum. Getting up didn't seem like something he'd want to attempt just yet. His whole body felt off, like it would betray him if he tried anything more complex than talking and breathing.

She elaborated, "We'll need to get you ready to get out of bed, see how that goes for you."

He stayed quiet and she gave him a look. "You're gonna have to talk to me, Dr. Murphy."

He closed his eyes, tried to muster the energy. "You… can call me Shaun."

"Okay, Shaun. Let's see how far we get so that we can get you transferred to Neuro. What do you say?"

Shaun sighed. He wasn't ready. The whole thing was also somewhat embarrassing. "No," he simply said.

She put her hands on her hips. "You should know that I don't usually take no for an answer, but I'll give you a pass for now. But I can promise you that I will be back later and bug you about it."

He was glad when she didn't force the issue and proceeded to check some of his medications, hanging a new IV bag and filling up his cup with water. She pointed at it. "We'll also be monitoring your fluid intake, so you better start working on that."

She held out the cup to him, it was still the one with the spout. He swallowed down the humiliation and took a sip. To his instant dismay he'd swallowed a bit too hastily and it went down his windpipe, which immediately sent him into a burst of violent coughs.

And that—that hurt. A sharp pain shot through his ribcage, and he doubled over and rung for air, struggling against the body-wracking coughs and the pain they brought with them.

"Easy, Shaun." Kelly's firm hand was on his arm, holding him upright, gently tapping his back with the other, helping him ride it out.

It took all he had to get his breathing back under control with Kelly doing what she could to get him through it. When she helped ease him back against his pillow, she held up an oxygen mask, but Shaun fended it off with a gesture. Kelly put it back in its place but affixed the nasal oxygen cannula to Shaun's face instead.

Shaun closed his eyes and dry-swallowed. He still fought to calm his breathing, waiting for the pain in his right side to lessen. Kelly's voice cut through the noise in his head. "Do you need me to up your pain meds?"

Shaun slowly shook his head. No. This would pass. His brain was already fuzzy enough.

"Okay," she said, and silence settled for a few moments. His eyes still closed, he thought maybe she'd left, but when the pain was bearable and he opened his eyes, she was still standing there, watching him. Was she waiting for something?

"You can go," he told her.

"Thank you for the charming endorsement, but your oxygen sat was getting a bit low there for a moment."

Oh. Yes, that made sense. "What is my oxygen sat now?"

"94 and climbing."

Shaun tried to take deeper breaths, knowing it would help, but it was still painful.

"That's good, you're getting there," she encouraged him. Two more breaths, and she said, "Up to 96 now, I think we're okay. So, lesson number one, go easy on the water for now."

Yes, Shaun had certainly learned that lesson. He did *not* want a repeat of that. His ribs were still hurting.

"Lesson number two, press the call button if your oxygen sat gets low again. You've got the rib injury, and your breathing is a little too shallow. We'll need to get you started on breathing exercises soon."

Oh no. He hadn't considered that. He already hated the idea.

“Yeah, I know that face. Sorry, but it’s part of your recovery. And it’s important. I’ll leave you on the nasal oxygen for now. Maybe we can lose it again later.”

“Thank you,” he told her.

“Oh, don’t thank me yet, I will be in here a lot today with more annoying requests. Oh, and speaking of which…” she looked to the door where a young woman in a white lab coat was entering, “here’s more people with annoying requests.”

“Always with the charm, Kelly,” the young woman said. Shaun thought she looked vaguely familiar.

“I’m Dr. Malone,” she introduced herself while Kelly left the room. “Fourth year neurology resident.” She wheeled the stool on the side closer to his bed. “I hear the two of us are checking your cognitive function today.”

Shaun tried to focus on what she was saying, it was all sinking in way too slowly. “Okay,” he acknowledged.

“Okay,” she echoed. “Do you know what the MMSE is?”

He tried to remember, finding the information slowly. “The Mini-Mental State Exam.”

“Very good, I guess that’s already a point scored for long-term memory function. I’ll be asking you a set of questions and I’d like you to answer these to the best of your ability. Do you consent to this?”

“Yes,” he told her, already feeling slightly overwhelmed.

She tapped something on her tablet, probably brought up the set of questions. “What date is it today?”

That was already a question he wasn’t immediately sure how to answer. He’d been in a coma for how long? Then he remembered what Lea had said about this birthday. “June 25th. Yesterday was my birthday.”

He didn’t remember anything specific from the previous day, just vaguely that Lea and Glassman had been there, that people were asking him to do things that sounded simple but actually weren’t.

Dr. Malone nodded at him, “Happy belated birthday, in that case.”

“Thank you,” Shaun muttered.

She made a note on the tablet. “What is the season?”

Wasn’t that obvious? “Summer.”

“What day of the week is it?”

He knew the date, but he had no idea what weekday it was. “I don’t know.”

“Yeah, let me help you with that. You were admitted on Tuesday. You’ve been in a medically induced coma on Wednesday, Thursday and some of yesterday. Today is Saturday.”

Dr. Malone looked back at the tablet. “Okay, next question. What town, county and state are we in?”

“San Jose, Santa Clara, California.”

“What is the name of this place?”

“Do you… mean the hospital?”

“Yes, for instance.”

“St. Bonaventure,” he said.

“What floor of the building are we on?”

Where was he again? The ICU. He tried to picture the elevator buttons that had the wards listed next to them. The image was hazy and out of focus. “The third.”

“It’s actually the fourth.” Shit. He’d gotten that wrong.

“I’m going to name three objects. After I have said them, I want you to repeat them back to me. Remember what they are because I will ask you to name them again in a few minutes. Now, you’ll probably think I’m going to say apple, table and penny, but I’m going to switch that up a little because you’re familiar with the test.

“Banana, chair, bottle. Now repeat the three items for me.”

Shaun remembered them. “Banana, chair, bottle.”

“Now I am going to spell a word forward and I want you to spell it backwards. The word is ‘world’. Please spell it in reverse order.”

Shaun had to ponder that one, had to think hard. It was difficult, he tried to picture the letters, but fell short. He stayed silent, trying to figure it out, knowing he was taking too long. Dr. Malone prompted him, “Dr. Murphy? Can you spell ‘world’ backwards for me?”

Why was it so hard to concentrate? He was tired. He wanted to go back to sleep. He blinked, drawing in a breath, then haltingly said, “D. L. O. R. W.” He let out a hum. “No. That was wrong.”

“It was, but that’s okay. What are the three objects I asked you to remember a few moments ago?”

He had to dig in his memory, failing at recalling all of them. What had she said? A fruit of some sort. “Apple. Chair.” That was all he had.

“Almost. Can you recall the third one?”

“No.”

“It was banana, chair, bottle.”

Shit. He was failing. His brain wasn’t working. What did that mean?

She held her left arm out and pointed at her watch. “What is this called?”

“That’s your watch.”

She fished something from her coat pocket, held up another object. “And this?”

“A pencil.”

“Please repeat the following: No ifs, ands or buts.”

He repeated the phrase, thought he’d done it correctly.

“Okay, now on to something a little different.” She gave Shaun a card and asked him to read it and do what it said. The card read, ‘Please close your eyes.’ He did so.

“I think the next one is going to be a little tricky, depending on whether you’re a lefty or not. Are you left or right-handed?”

“Right.”

“Yeah, okay. Normally I’d now ask you to write something. I guess we could try to do it with the tablet.” She tapped on it, brought up a blank white canvas and held the device so that he could write on it with his finger. “Please write a complete sentence for me.”

His mind was blank. He had no idea what to write. His finger hovered inactively for a few long seconds. In the end, he wrote, “I don’t like this gown.” It was taking way too long and too much effort to use his left hand and it looked very scrawly.

Dr. Malone looked at it and smiled. “Duly noted. They’re pretty awful, aren’t they?”

“Yes,” Shaun confirmed.

“Okay, next I will show you a drawing, and I want you to copy it. Hold on, I didn’t realize that you had your dominant hand immobilized. Let me try to figure out how to do that.”

She fumbled around with the tablet for a moment, then held it back out to Shaun. He looked at the figure, tried to take in the geometric shapes, copied them as best as he could with his left finger. That, too, looked wobbly and imprecise. He hoped it was good enough.

“Okay, next one.” She held out a piece of paper to him. “Take this piece of paper in your left hand, fold it in half with your left hand, and put it in your lap.”

He took it from her, wincing at the movement, still feeling the pain in his ribcage. He tried his best to fold the paper in half, but the whole thing was pretty sloppy. He put it down in his lap like she had asked.

Dr. Malone took the paper and said, “Excellent. And with that, we’re all done.”

He breathed out in relief. He felt worn out, but he had the frame of mind to ask, “What is my score?”

She looked at her notes, calculated them up. “Twenty-two.”

“Is that good or bad?”

“It’s consistent with your injury and the stage of your recovery process. In a normal state we’d expect you to score between 26 and 28, but you’ve still got residual frontal lobe swelling and you’re on a pretty potent drug cocktail. All of that affects concentration, so all things considered, you’re doing pretty well.”

He wasn’t sure what to make of that, so he stayed quiet.

“I’ll be back later and we’ll run some more tests, but I don’t see why we need to keep you in the ICU for much longer. We’d also like you to be mobile as soon as possible. I’ll check back with Kelly to work with you on that.”

Ugh. Not this again. “She—” he started, licked his chapped lips, got frustrated at not having the words there he needed. “She already asked me to. I said no.”

She gave him a look. “It’s an important step in your recovery. We’ll want you out of bed within the next day or two, ideally today.”

It was Dr. Glassman’s voice coming from the door now. “Don’t worry, I’ll make sure he gets on his feet.”

Shaun let out another discordant hum. He didn’t want to, didn’t think he could. “Not now, please,” he mumbled.

Glassman entered the room. “Yeah, we can table that for a bit.” He turned to Dr. Malone, held out his hand. “I’m not sure we’ve met. Aaron Glassman.”

“Ashlee Malone, Neurology.”

“Fourth year, right?”

“Indeed. You have a good memory.”

“I try my best, but it’s a big hospital. How’s Shaun doing?”

“As expected. Scored 22 on the MMSE. We’ll run some more tests over the course of the day, but I’d say it’s looking good.”

Glassman smiled. “That’s encouraging to hear.”

“Well, I’ll be on my way unless you have any more questions.”

“No, thank you, Dr. Malone.”

“Sure.” With that, she left the room, and Shaun felt the exhaustion settling in. He heard Glassman sitting down next to his bed, tried to stay awake.

Glassman's voice was calming and reassuring. "That wiped you out pretty good, huh?"

"Yes," Shaun muttered.

"Before I forget. Happy belated birthday. We told you yesterday, but you were pretty out of it."

"I don't remember," Shaun said drowsily.

"Yeah, that's to be expected." Glassman shifted in his chair, then got up. "You look tired, I'll let you get a nap in. I'll be back later, and then we'll get you out of bed. No ifs, ands or buts."

Shaun thought it was ironic that the phrase had been part of the cognitive test, but he didn't have the energy left to remark on it. Instead he just formed another hum that got caught in his throat somewhere on the way to an exhausted slumber.

+-+-+-+-+

Dr. Glassman was sitting by Shaun's bed when he awoke, and Shaun was glad about that. Lying here, pretty much incapacitated and brain-fogged and helpless was humiliating, and he was very relieved to have some company he could find a small semblance of solace in.

He let out a hum and stirred, which made Dr. Glassman look up at him.

"Hey there, Sleeping Beauty."

Shaun hummed again. He didn't like these nicknames. He shifted his position, then winced from the pain in his ribcage and his shoulder.

Dr. Glassman looked somewhat alarmed, maybe worried. "Do you want me to get your pain meds adjusted?"

"No," Shaun immediately said. He knew they made his brain more sluggish than it already was. He hated feeling that way.

"Don't be a hero, there's no reason for you to be in pain."

"I don't like the painkillers."

"Oh, I think you do, because those broken ribs would be a major sticking point without them."

"I'm thirsty."

"Yeah, sure." Glassman gave him the cup that was still standing on his nightstand.

"Can I get one with a straw?"

"Of course. I'll ask for one. Or you can ask yourself."

He didn't want to call Kelly. She'd want him to get out of bed, and he still wasn't feeling up for that. It was as if Glassman had read his mind, because he said, "So how do you feel about getting up on your feet?"

Shaun turned his head away from him.

“Come on, Shaun. You know how this works. The sooner you get up, the faster you get out of here. Don’t you wanna get rid of the catheter?”

Ugh. Yes. It was very uncomfortable.

“I’ll be there, help you.”

“No,” Shaun said again. He didn’t want Dr. Glassman there. It would be humiliating and embarrassing.

He nodded. “Yeah, okay, I get that. I don’t have to be there. But I want you to try. It’s important for you to work on your recovery.”

He knew that. Of course he knew that. It just didn’t seem within the realm of possibility right now.

“Do you remember after my brain surgery? How adamant you were that I start walking?”

Yes, he remembered. “I bribed you. It didn’t work.”

“Please tell me I don’t have to start bribing you.”

He didn’t want to be bribed, let out another hum to indicate that. Hums worked for him. Words took energy.

Glassman sighed. “Is this how it’s gonna be? You’re usually a lot better at this, you usually fight for things. I need you to fight for this.”

Shaun looked ahead, said nothing. Everything felt wrong, his body was betraying him.

“Shaun, please?” Glassman pleaded.

Shaun let out a long breath, felt his ribs aching as he did so. He watched Dr. Glassman get up and leave the room, wondering where he was going. He returned a few minutes later with a plastic cup with a straw in hand, filled some water into it from the pitcher next to Shaun’s bed. He held it out to Shaun who took it and drank a few sips before he said, “Thank you.”

Glassman just nodded, then looked up at the door. Shaun’s heart sank. It was Kelly. Dr. Glassman had probably gotten her on his case. He sighed inwardly. He knew he couldn’t run from it forever, knew he had to do it – for himself as well as for Dr. Glassman and Lea.

“Shaun, will you please try?” Glassman asked.

“Okay,” he finally said defeatedly.

“Thank you,” Glassman nodded to him, then got up to leave the room. Kelly edged closer when he was out of sight.

She pulled back his blanket to expose his legs. He still hated the hospital gown.

“I’m not sure how familiar you are with mobility exercises, so I’m going to explain them all to you before we do them. Please let me know if you’re uncomfortable with anything or if anything is painful.”

He stayed silent, knowing it would be uncomfortable. Being touched by strangers always was. He tried to steel himself, felt that it was difficult. His mind wasn’t offering any defenses to speak of, and every little thing seemed bothersome, intense and overwhelming. He hoped he could push through it.

“I’ll start with your legs, I will be moving your joints to test range of movement.”

She picked up his left leg, started bending it. He tried not to flinch at the jolt of sensory input. Her fingers were cold, even through the nitrile gloves. He knew she was trying to be gentle, but it grated on him. He involuntarily let out a sound of displeasure as she lifted his leg and started moving it.

She stopped what she was doing, looked at him. “Is this painful?”

“No,” he said. It wasn’t exactly true, his ribs were giving him a dull ache, but at least now it was bearable.

“This is uncomfortable for you, isn’t it?”

He didn’t want to say yes, he was used to having to do things he wasn’t comfortable with. It came with his ASD. He was usually better at dealing with them.

“Would you like me to stop?” she asked.

“No,” he said hesitantly.

“Is there anything I can do to make this easier for you?”

He drew up his left shoulder in a half shrug. He couldn’t think of anything. “Please continue,” he gently urged her, just wishing it was over.

“Okay,” she said.

He could tell she was trying to be considerate, was trying to be careful. He clenched his jaw and endured it, tried to follow all the instructions when he asked her to move his extremities in this or that way.

Working on his left arm was more of a challenge. She asked him to lean forward, and that aggravated his injuries. He had to wince a few times. She apologized, even though they both knew nothing could be done to help it.

When she indicated his arm was also over and done with, he wanted to sigh and lie back down, but he felt her hand offering resistance. “Oh no no no no, we’re not done yet.”

His eyes widened in displeasure.

She shifted her position, applied gentle pressure to his left upper arm. “One more thing before I let you go. I want you to sit up and let your legs dangle over the side of the bed. Can you do that?”

He didn't think he could.

"Come on, give it a try. You've been doing really well so far. I promise we'll be done after this."

He closed his eyes, swallowed, gave his best to comply.

Kelly helped him sit upright, helped him sort his legs into the right position, made sure the IV lines, tubes and cables didn't get in the way. His ribs ached. "Okay, very good. Now, let's see if we can get you to stand up."

No, he definitely knew he couldn't. "Come on, Shaun," she urged him. "You've gotten this far. I think you have it in you."

He tried to tap into his energy reserves. There weren't many left. Everything was incredibly strenuous and difficult, even just scooting closer to the edge of the bed so that his socked feet touched the floor. The sensation felt strange.

"Okay, this is a little tricky with your shoulder injury, but please lean forward against me, and I'll try to pull you up. It will probably hurt a little, but try to push through it if it's not too painful. Do you think you can do that with me?"

He still thought the answer was no, but here he was, and he knew he should at least try. "Okay," he said.

It took all of his last strength to hoist himself up to his feet together with Kelly's help, and the pain was teetering near the edge of him having to let out a moan, but somehow he got to his feet, stood on wobbly legs.

Kelly straightened up but kept her hands on him to steady him. "There we go," she said.

All he wanted was to lie back down, and she must have read his signals, because she offered him help to ease him back down. He felt completely spent by the time he was lying down again with his back resting against the raised head piece.

Kelly gave him an encouraging smile. "I know that was hard, but you did great, Shaun. The nurses up in Neuro will do the rest with you later today when you get transferred. You've been a great patient, I think I'll miss you. And I don't say that to every patient." She winked at him.

He tried to return the smile, not sure if he succeeded.

Kelly wheeled the overbed table back to his bed, put the cup with the straw on it. "You've earned yourself some rest, and I'll be bringing you some apple sauce because that's also on our agenda for today."

He let out a shaky and exhausted breath, feeling it ache against his ribcage, tried to dig around in his head for whether he was ready to ingest actual food. There wasn't much of an answer there he could find.

He must have dozed off, because he woke up sluggishly to another person sitting next to his bed. Lea. She gave him a smile.

"Hey, sleepyhead."

His response was a hum again, it just was the easiest thing to do.

“As much as I like your little Shaun hums, I’d prefer if you actually talked to me.”

He blinked, tried to shake the fog from his brain, not succeeding very much. “I’m tired,” was what he managed to say, which he knew didn’t make that much sense since he’d only just woken up.

She nodded at him. “Do you want me to leave?”

“No,” he said immediately.

Her smile widened. “Don’t worry, I’m not going anywhere if you don’t want me to. Glassy told me they’ll transfer you to Neuro later, that’s great news.”

“I got out of bed this morning,” he said proudly. It sounded strange to state that as if it was a massive milestone.

“Oh wow, you’re making so much progress. That’s awesome. Speaking of progress, how do you feel about food?”

She pointed at an unopened single-serve cup of apple sauce that was standing on the overbed table with a spoon next to it.

“Okay,” he hesitantly agreed. Food sounded pretty good. He could probably do apple sauce.

She took the cup and removed the lid, put it back on the table. “I know this is kinda weird. How much do you want me to help? You’ve only got the one functional arm.”

He took the spoon, it felt clumsy in his left hand. She looked at him. “Why don’t you just slurp it?”

Slurp? Was she serious? It must have shown on his face, because she let out a laugh and said, “Seriously? You’d rather I spoon-feed you?”

“No,” he quickly said.

“Come on, there’s no one here other than us.”

“Can you hold the cup?”

“You’re such a neat-freak. But, yes, I sure can.”

The cup was emptied in good time, he was glad to be eating again. Maybe he could lose the saline IV soon.

“Do you want more?” Lea asked when he was done.

“No, thank you.” He felt strangely full, even after such a small portion.

It was just then that Kelly came in, eyeing the empty cup on the table, giving him an appreciative nod. “You’re killing it today, Shaun. That’s another hurdle down.”

It hadn't really felt like a hurdle, but he was glad she approved. "We're about to take you up to Neuro. Ready for a trip?"

Not really, but did he have a choice? It would mean a new room, new people, more tests, more fussing with meds and IVs, more hands all over him.

He felt something tapping the back of his hand. It was Lea's fingers. "Aren't you happy to get out of the ICU?"

No, he wasn't happy. None of this had anything happy attached. "I'm not happy."

He thought maybe her gaze was sympathetic. "I'm sorry," she said. "I know this sucks. I'll let them get everything ready for you, I'll come find you up in Neuro later, see your new crib."

He let the quip fall flat. He knew Lea wanted to cheer him up, wanted to be jovial about the whole thing. It was hard to acknowledge any of that, everything felt strange and uncomfortable and hard.

Kelly was already starting to disconnect some of the tubes and other equipment. Shaun sank further back into his pillow and closed his eyes, waiting for what had to be done.

+-+-+-+-+

Chapter 5: I sense you through the haze

"Oh hey, we have a newbie."

Shaun opened his eyes, having just tried for a nap in his new room. Not that it was much different up in the Neurology ward, compared to his well-known General Surgery workplace. A large window let in ample daylight, and the room felt a little more welcoming and a little less medical equipment heavy than the ICU.

Shaun knew that the young man who'd just entered his room was a nurse. He took in his long black hair that was done up in an undercut ponytail, the colorful tattoo sleeves all up both arms, the multiple ear piercings. The nurse studied a tablet he was holding, reading out, "Welcome to Neuro, Shaun Murphy."

"Dr. Shaun Murphy," Shaun corrected him tiredly.

"*Doctor* Shaun Murphy," the nurse echoed cheerfully. "Logged and noted. I'm Adam, and I'll be your server for the day."

Shaun suppressed a sigh. He wasn't in the mood for 'jaunty'.

"What's with the long face, Dr. Shaun Murphy? Aren't you glad you're out of the activity pit that is the ICU? It'll be much quieter up here. Better food, too."

Shaun wanted to hope he was right. Quiet was always welcome. Adam checked his IV, his syringe drivers, some of the other equipment. "Looks like you're all set. Is there anything I can get you?"

"Water, please," Shaun said.

“You got it.” He heard the sloshing of water from a pitcher, then Adam wheeled the overbed table closer, put the plastic cup on it. Thankfully, it was just a normal one this time – no straw or lid. Shaun clumsily took a sip.

Adam stood by his bed, pointed at the door across the room. “Bathroom’s over there, cafeteria’s on the ground and first floor, once we get you up and running enough to actually make it there. There’s a snack bar a little cl—”

“I know,” Shaun interrupted him. “I work here.”

Adam gave him a quizzical look. “Oh, right, you were on that humongous Ethicure billboard. I’m not great with faces. Resident, right?”

“Yes,” Shaun confirmed. “I am in my fifth year.”

“Gotcha, also logged and noted.” Adam gave him a long look, seemed to eye him up and down. It made Shaun uncomfortable. “Let me guess, Peds.”

“I’m a surgical resident.”

“Oh, my bad. Totally had you pegged for a Peds guy. You like it down in Surgery? Is it true that Lim is a bit of a hardass?”

Shaun hummed, not sure how to answer that, which earned him a curious look from Adam. Shaun wondered if his ASD was noted in his medical file or if Adam remembered it from the billboard.

Adam moved to the other side of the bed, typed something into the keyboard below the screen with the vital signs. Shaun wanted to know what, but didn’t want to ask.

Adam turned to face him. “Oh, and I hear the two of us are taking a trip to the bathroom at some point today. Should be fun. I hope you’re looking forward to that.”

Shaun very much wasn’t. He looked away, stayed silent.

Adam looked at him again, nodded slowly with his lips pressed together before he said, “You’re one of the quiet ones. I get it, and I’ll try not to take it personally. But if you and me,” he pointed between the two of them, “want to get along, you’re gonna have to work with me a little bit, Dr. Shaun Murphy.”

“I have autism,” Shaun said matter-of-factly.

Adam nodded again. “Yeah, I know, but I also know you can talk. And you’re obviously pretty smart. Well, right now you’re concussed, so I might give you a pass for a few things, but you should know that the silent treatment isn’t my bag. Did ICU already start you on breathing exercises?”

Shaun felt a sudden dread. “No,” he said tentatively.

“All right. One more thing I’ll put on the list.” Adam looked at Shaun’s face and frowned. “Okay. That’s clearly not a cause for enthusiasm.”

“Two of my ribs are fractured,” Shaun stated.

“Yeah, hence the breathing exercises. Don’t want you ending up with pneumonia. Cause that stuff is nasty, and endless coughing with broken ribs? *Not* a great idea. So trust me that the incentive spirometer is the lesser evil. Which I’d like to think you know, surgical resident and all.”

Yes, Shaun knew this. And Adam was a true test for his patience. He wished he would leave, Shaun longed for some peace and quiet. Adam seemed to have heard his silent request because he said, “All right then, I’ll leave you to it. You know how to call, and I’ll be back later with all the annoying stuff you’re *not* looking forward to, but please don’t blame me personally, okay?”

Shaun didn’t say anything and let a silent sigh of relief wash over him when Adam left. Maybe finally he could rest a little.

+-+-+-+-+

Passage of time became a strange concept. Shaun was somehow always tired and drifted away on and off so that it became hard to keep track. So much had already happened today, yet he realized it was only lunchtime when Adam brought him his lunch tray, cheerful as ever, and put it on his overbed table to leave Shaun to it.

To his surprise, Shaun noticed some activity by the door halfway through his rather bland meal. Asher and Jordan were standing there, lightly rapping on the doorframe. Asher asked, “This a bad time?”

“No,” he told them. He definitely welcomed the distraction.

“Sweet,” Asher said and they came in. Shaun noticed they were both holding plastic containers with food. Jordan’s seemed to be a salad of some kind, Asher had a pre-made sandwich from the cafeteria.

They pulled up the two chairs next to his bed and sat down. Jordan held up her food container. “Seemed like a good opportunity to mix up our lunch break a little.”

Shaun’s own food was less exciting. Mashed potatoes with boiled and salted carrots, broccoli, cauliflower and sweetcorn that he thought were somewhat overcooked. He didn’t like the cauliflower and was trying to eat around it.

Jordan briefly looked at him. “So, how are you doing?”

“Okay,” Shaun conceded.

“They treating you all nice and well up here in Neuro?”

“It’s okay.”

Asher cut in, “Yeah, sucks to be on the patient side of things, doesn’t it? Oh, almost forgot.” He leaned over and put a brown paper bag on Shaun’s overbed table.

Shaun eyed it. “What is this?”

“Double-choc brownie. Hope you can eat that. I know it’s kinda lame in terms of get well gifts, but we figured it was better than anything the gift shop has to offer.”

Shaun put down the spoon and fumbled with the bag with his left hand to be able to peer inside. “It is not lame,” he said. “I will ask if I’m allowed to eat this. It smells very good.”

Jordan supplied, “You’ve been out of the coma since yesterday, right? If you can eat that,” she pointed at the hospital food, “you can totally eat a brownie.”

He thought she was probably right, although the brownie was definitely not in bland, easily digestible territory.

Shaun put another spoonful of mashed potatoes in his mouth and Asher and Jordan started opening their meals as well.

Asher was the first to break the silence. “So, let it be said, as annoying as you can be sometimes, we all really miss you. Hope you can get back on your feet quickly so you can annoy us some more.”

“Nice,” Jordan cut in, “Shaun’s been out of a coma for a day, and already you’re insulting him. Well done.”

Asher shrugged. “Come on, Shaun doesn’t mind. Do you?”

He looked at Asher. “I don’t. You can be very annoying, too.”

Asher gestured towards Jordan. “See? All good here.”

“On the topic of annoying,” Jordan said, “it’s kind of a bummer that Lim is still on medical leave. Andrews never really has time for anything, and with you out of the equation too, they’ve assigned one Dr. Ricci from Cardiothoracic in a temporary supervisory position, and let me tell you, his managerial style is the *worst*. Never lets us do anything besides scut work. I kinda wonder if I’ll see the inside of an OR this week at all.”

Shaun tried to remember if he knew him. The name was vaguely familiar, but he didn’t think he’d ever worked with him before.

Asher added, “Yeah, and don’t take this the wrong way, but maybe it’s not the worst thing for you to be stuck up here for the time being, because I think the guy would eat you for breakfast.”

“Why?” Shaun inquired.

“He already chewed up and spit out Park for some minor mishap. Has zero patience, explodes at the tiniest little thing. Everyone is kinda walking on eggshells right now. Likes to take credit for everything, though. In front of patients, he’s always Mr. Congeniality, and he totally presented Park’s idea as his own and bragged about how great it was. Can’t stand the guy.”

Jordan pointed at the door. “Speak of the devil.”

Alex Park was there, holding a plastic bowl of some kind. He tentatively stepped in. “I see everyone’s had the same idea.”

Asher waved him in. “The more, the merrier.” He then looked at Shaun. “Unless you want some peace and quiet.”

“No,” Shaun asserted, chewing on the last of his carrots. “It is very boring. This is a good distraction.”

While Park rolled over the wheeled stool from the corner and sat down, Asher raised his eyebrows. “Why, glad we’re at the very least proving to be a distraction to you.”

Was Asher being sarcastic? Had Shaun said something wrong? His brain was still so hazy and he didn’t always have the right words, especially now. Was he messing this up by saying the wrong things, was he driving away his friends and colleagues?

Something was welling up inside of him, he couldn’t stop it, and before he knew it, Park was looking at him with concern. “Shaun, what’s wrong?”

He turned his head, looked away, fully aware that, stuck to this bed, he had little opportunity to hide anything. Was he crying? He didn’t want to cry. Why was this happening again?

He heard Asher speak. “Shaun, I’m sorry, I hope I didn’t say anything that offended you.”

“No,” he said, getting more upset that his voice was now teary and out of his control. “I don’t… I don’t know why. I don’t know why I’m crying.”

Alex had it all figured out, he was somehow always more in tune with Shaun than other colleagues. His voice was soft when he said, “It’s okay, Shaun. It’s the frontal lobe injury, right? That messes with regulation of emotions. Do you want us to go?”

“No,” he said quickly.

“Okay,” Park said, “We’ll stay. Just ride it out, it’ll be okay.”

Shaun still looked away. What choice did he have? He wiped at the tears rolling down his cheeks, tried to get a grip.

Thankfully, Jordan rescued the situation by addressing Park. “We were just talking about what a jerk Ricci is. He was totally out of line with you yesterday.”

Alex answered, “Yeah, but, you know… gotta roll with the change, right?”

Asher cut in, “Seriously? You’re chill with the guy?”

“No, I’m not chill with the guy. But he’s our attending for the time being. Getting my nose bloodied isn’t gonna help anyone. And this is just temporary, right?”

“Yeah, one can only hope,” Asher sighed. “Anyone know when Lim is gonna come back?”

Shaun felt a little more like himself, so he said, “She came to visit me.”

Jordan asked, “Really? When was this?”

“I don’t know, I was sedated.”

“So you didn’t speak to her?”

Wasn’t that obvious? “No. I was in a coma,” Shaun added for clarification. “Lea spoke to her. She said she needed more time before coming back to work.”

“Yeah,” Jordan said. “I mean, it’s understandable, but we could really use some good news around here.”

“I am no longer unconscious. Is that not good news?”

Jordan looked at him. “Oh yeah, that is *excellent* news. And you’re right. I shouldn’t be moping so much. I’m very glad that you’re alive and kicking, Shaun. And if I ever complain about you again in the future, please remind me of this moment.”

“I will. If I remember.”

“Oh, you will. You remember everything, right?”

“No, not… everything.”

“Isn’t that how total recall works?”

“No.”

“Okay. Then how *does* it work?”

“I can accurately recall certain images, sounds or smells that I’ve been exposed to in the past, but it doesn’t mean I can remember every single thing that has ever happened to me. It mostly works with images or text for me but can present differently in others.”

“Okay, but that’s still pretty amazing.”

“And I can only accurately recall when I concentrate. It needs to be quiet.”

“Yeah, that makes sense. But it’s still a great skill to have, especially as a surgeon.”

He could only agree. “Yes, it is.”

Shaun looked over to the door when there was more movement there, felt a pang of dread when Adam came into his room, pushing an empty wheelchair. He had a smile on his face. He always had a smile on his face, Shaun didn’t know how he did it.

“Wow,” Adam remarked, “You’ve got the whole surgical department in here, I see.”

Shaun pointed at Adam, “This is Adam. He’s my nurse.”

“*Your* nurse, huh?”

“That is what you said.”

“Well, I’m *a* nurse. Also *your* nurse today, I guess, so we’ll let that slide. And I hate to break up the little campfire gathering, but Dr. Shaun Murphy and I have an appointment with the

bathroom, and I think the three of you all know how important that part is in trauma recovery, so," he pointed at the door, "if you please."

Park was the first to get up. "All right, message received." He turned to Shaun. "I'll be back some other time. Text me if you need anything."

"Same," Jordan added as she gathered the remains of her salad.

"Feel better, Shaun," Asher said and all three left the room.

Adam parked the wheelchair a few feet away from the bed. "All right, Murpheus, this is the one where we take our first road trip."

Shaun frowned, unsure what to make of the new nickname. The first thing Adam did, however, was take Shaun's now empty food tray off the overbed table, telling him, "I'll put that where it belongs, but don't rejoice just yet, I'll be back forthwith."

With his stomach nicely filled, even though it had been a modest meal, Shaun suddenly felt tired and sluggish. The thought of getting to his feet wasn't something he felt he was equipped to do. There was that faint but perpetual dull ache hovering just at the edge of his perception, everything felt fuzzy in his head, he had no strength left.

Adam came back empty handed and said, "All righty." He stood by his bed, giving him what Shaun thought was a determined glare. Shaun didn't move, pressed his lips together.

Adam cocked his head, raised his eyebrows. "You remember what I said about the silent treatment, right?" He was already pulling the hospital blanket off of Shaun, arranging all the medical equipment he still had attached to him, and he knew Adam wouldn't take no for an answer.

When he had everything set up, he looked at Shaun again. "Ready?"

"No," Shaun said.

Adam let out a short chuckle. "Yeah, all right, I get it. But you're a smart dude. And you of all people, Dr. Surgeon, should know this is kind of important."

Shaun very much did, but he usually wasn't on the receiving end of the instructions. He wished he didn't have to be.

Adam looked around. "No slippers?"

"I don't like slippers."

"Noted, though technically against hospital policy to have patients walk on socks. Come on, sit up."

Shaun let out a sigh, yielding to his fate. Maybe this was gonna be worth the effort. If he could make it to the bathroom, he could lose the catheter. That thing was definitely a thorn in his side.

He tried to gather his strength, let Adam help him to the edge of the bed, suppressing the moan that sat at the tip of his tongue from all the jostling of his battered body.

Adam was a good three inches shorter than Shaun, but he knew all the ways to make the techniques work for him and get Shaun onto his feet with a last semblance of grace. His grip was just the right level of assuring but not too firm. Shaun was actually impressed.

Nodding his head towards the wheelchair that stood two or three steps away, Adam prompted, "Next quest objective over there. You already aced this one where we stand on our own two feet. If we're lucky, we'll find some nice loot in the bathroom. Maybe a +1 sword, or a nice strength boosting spell scroll."

Shaun had no idea what he was talking about, but he went with it. Somehow Adam made it easier than anticipated for Shaun to actually get himself over to the wheelchair, letting Adam wheel him into the bathroom.

He had to admit it felt good to get out of the bed. He knew a shower wasn't yet on the books, but he also knew that wasn't far off now. He looked forward to it. Adam helped him with some of the personal hygiene, and the trip back into bed didn't feel quite as daunting and was valiantly mastered with Adam's support, too.

When he had arranged all the medical equipment and IV back into place, Adam waved his hand in the air. "Catheter, be gone. We'll get that taken care of in a bit. That alone must have made this worth it, right?"

Shaun nodded. "Yes."

"Okey doke. Anything else you need?"

"No, thank you," Shaun said, wondering… "Why did you call me Murpheus?"

"You have a sharp memory, I should probably give you a +4 on INT. You heard of Dungeons & Dragons?"

Shaun had heard of it, knew vaguely it was some sort of fantasy game people in high school used to play. He'd never been invited. "It's a game."

"Oh, but it's way more than just a *game*. This whole thing is more fun when I think of my patients as D&D characters. You strike me as a high intelligence, low charisma wizard. You've got this massive spell book with a gazillion spells memorized, and you always know which spell to use to get you out of a pickle.

"You're usually also pretty good with dexterity when you're not injured, but on the other hand, your armor class and hit point level is a little on the low side, so you're kinda squishy, which is why you like to stay in the background and work from a distance. You're not a man of many words, so your strength lies in ranged spellcasting to protect the group and hold enemies at bay, with the occasional really brilliant trick up your sleeve.

"You, my friend, are Murpheus, the taciturn but skilled wizard. See, Betty next door, she's a stout little dwarven lady, the Barbarian kind who can fly into a rage to attack extra strong when she gets riled up. Big Mike across the hall looks like a brutish orc, but he's really more of the gentle-hearted druid type who likes taking care of orchids in his spare time and loves making everything bloom with this nice little Druidcraft cantrip he always has at his disposal."

Adam stopped there, gave Shaun an inquisitive glance. “You have no idea what I’m talking about, do you?”

He was right, Shaun had no idea whatsoever, but somehow he had to admit he was mildly intrigued. Which maybe Adam read in this expression, because he added, “Okay, it looks like that might have piqued your interest. There’s an actual rulebook for character creation, the stats blocks, all of that. Or I can do you one better, there’s actually free basic rules you can get online if you’re looking for something fun to jumpstart your battered brain back into gear. Google *5e SRD PDF*, and you’re all set.”

Shaun tried to make a mental note, hoping he’d remember it. The way his brain worked these days, or rather didn’t work, it was a bit of a long shot.

“Well,” Adam said, “I’ll let you get to it, and I’ll make sure we get you free of the catheter.”

Hooray. Shaun was very much looking forward to it.

+-+-+-+-+

Lea’s work day had gotten off to a busy start after checking in on Shaun in the morning. His first night in the Neuro ward had apparently been more restful than the ICU, and she’d wanted to spend more time with him, but an urgent work call pulled her away to get a persistent database error down in radiology fixed. A software update hadn’t gone as planned, and everyone was in damage control mode with the equipment stalling and patients piling up.

She’d spent all day putting out fires, her recent extended absences not exactly having helped the situation. She knew she could trust her team, but some things just couldn’t get solved without her sign-off or input.

She was looking forward to a bit of a breather, spending time with Shaun, keep his boredom at bay as best as she could. Because she knew he was getting there, now that he was more alert and on the way to recovery.

What awaited her when she neared his room, however, was not what she had expected. As she stepped through the door, there was a frustrated sound coming out of his mouth that she’d never heard from him before, and then the paperback novel he’d asked for the day before flew across the room, colliding with the opposite wall, falling to the floor with a light thud.

“Shaun?” She tentatively walked closer, trying to figure out what was going on. His face was contorted in an expression she could only read as frustration and anger, he was now gripping his phone, and she hurried to his bedside, just grabbing hold of his wrist before he could fling the phone across the room, too.

“Shaun!” she said forcefully.

“No!” he said assertively, trying to worm out of her grip, but she held on, hoped he would relent.

“Shaun, what is going on?”

His jaw was working, he was still trying to pull his arm free, but she could also see it was hurting him, aggravating his injuries.

“Shaun, stop, stop, stop, stop.”

“N-no. Don’t—” he said futilely.

She decided to just get the phone out of his hand and let go of his wrist. She stood, watched him for a moment, then put his phone on the bedside table out of reach for now.

He was breathing heavily, glared at her. “Leave me alone.”

“Shaun, what happened? Why are you upset?”

“No,” he spat at her, “I don’t want you here.”

Was he back to agitation mode? Was he confused again? Was this what Aaron had meant that Shaun’s behavior might be a little unpredictable? She stepped half a step back, gave him some more room.

He raised his left arm, tried to reach over to the right side of his head where it usually went, made a grimace when that hurt and he remembered that he had an injury there too. Letting out another frustrated sound, his hand came down on the overbed table where his balled fist collided with the surface with a thud. It made Lea flinch.

“Please don’t do that,” she said, maybe louder than she’d intended.

There were tears at the corners of his eyes now—she wasn’t sure if they were from frustration or pain or both. He opened and closed his left fist, maybe he’d hurt it. He turned his head away from her.

“Please go,” he reiterated.

She decided she didn’t want to do that, not while he was like this, while there was a clear and present danger he might go into a meltdown. That was the last thing he needed right now.

Pulling the chair closer, she sat down by his side and just quietly sat with him. He didn’t say anything, kept looking away, but at least he was a little calmer now.

She kept waiting, looked on warily as he grabbed a fistful of the hospital blanket and gripped it until his knuckles turned white, his expression determinedly grim.

Lea drew in a breath, thinking he might be spiraling again. “Shaun, I get it, you’re irritated, and you’re achy, and you can’t do anything. But getting angry, hurting yourself, that won’t help anyone. I know this sucks. All of it, it sucks balls, but there’s nothing we can do except take it one day at a time. We all wanna help you, but you gotta let us.”

His eyes were tearing up again, and she knew he hated that too, the lack of inhibition, the rawness and confusion and frustration all punching right through to the surface without any barriers to speak of.

“Hey,” she prompted him again. “I’m here, okay? If you need to vent, you can yell at me and snap at me if that makes you feel any better. It won’t be like this forever, you’ll get better. I know that’s easier said than done, but just be patient and don’t fight it.”

He stayed quiet, a tear rolling down his cheek. In a low voice, he finally said, “I hate this.”

“I know. I do too, but I hated it more when you were in a coma. But you got through that, and you’ll get through this, too. Just a few more days, and then hopefully you can get out of here and we can take you home.”

“Yes,” he acknowledged, sounding less aggravated, yet still defiant. “I would like to go home.”

“I know. Let’s give it another day or two, okay? Glassy said they wanna keep monitoring you, and they still have you on all these meds.”

He looked over to the perfusors, seemed to take them in for a long moment. “These are… these are all medications that are available orally. I don’t need the Mannitol anymore.”

“Okay, that’s good to know. But you’re not Dr. Murphy right now. You’re just Shaun the patient. You don’t make these decisions, your doctors do. Please listen to them. And maybe we can talk about whether they can switch you to oral versions if you think that’s easier.”

“No, it’s not easier. Intravenous formulations are metabolized differently. They are faster acting and more precisely adjustable.”

“Which is probably the reason you’re still on them.”

“Yes.”

His hand went back to the blanket, she saw him rubbing it, saw his white knuckles from clutching it more forcefully again. It told her he was somewhere in that in-between place on the way to what could become a meltdown if he worked himself up.

“Shaun, talk to me. What’s going on? What has you so upset?”

He let out a huffed breath, pressed his lips together, clutched the blanket harder. She carefully reached out and cupped her hand over his. He didn’t pull away this time, it prompted him to look at her.

“Talk to me,” she said gently.

He drew in a breath, said in a halting voice, “The… hallway is noisy. I can hear people talking all the time. I… am tired but I can’t sleep. My head hurts and my chest hurts and my shoulder hurts. My brain feels weird and I can’t concentrate on anything.

“Everyone says…” He swallowed. “Everyone says I shouldn’t worry, but will I be able to do surgery again?”

The look of absolute defeat, frustration and worry on his face made her want to gather him up in her arms, which she knew she couldn’t for all the reasons he’d listed out, and there was a knot of empathy in her stomach.

She gently rubbed her thumb over his hand, her own still resting on his. “What can I do to help?”

His voice was as crushed as the look on his face. “You can’t do anything. My injuries will need time to heal.”

“Yeah, but that’s not what I mean. I know it’s hard, and I know it’s frustrating. You’re bored and you’re irritated that you can’t concentrate on your books, that your brain is still in lag mode, which makes everything harder. So how can I make that easier for you? What do you need?”

He stayed quiet, probably looking for an answer he didn’t have. Lea had an idea. “You know what, give me half an hour. I’ll be back.” She picked up Shaun’s phone from where she’d placed it on his bedside table. “Call someone, have them keep you distracted for a bit.”

“Who would I call?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. Glassy. Claire.”

“They are working.”

“My parents…”

The look of sheer panic on Shaun’s face was hilarious, and Lea laughed. “Relax, Shaun, that was a joke. Though they have been asking about you. They’re also worried. And they’ve said to give you a hug.”

“N-no,” he immediately said.

“Oh, I know. No hugs for you for quite a while. Maybe you can text them. Or speech-to-text them.”

“The speech recognition is not very reliable.”

“I know. But my parents can read autocorrect. Or send them a voice message. You’ll manage. Seriously, I think they’d love to hear from you. They do like you, you know.”

He let out an unconvinced, “Hm.”

Lea gave him a smile and went over to pick up the novel he’d thrown earlier, put it back on his overbed table before she left to make her way up to her office to carry out her new plan – Operation Shaun Distraction.

+-+-+-+-+

Shaun played with the phone in his fingers, immediately frustrated that operating it with only one working hand was as inconvenient as everything else he tried to do. He pulled over the overbed table, wincing at the dull ache in his ribcage and the sharper pain in his shoulder at the movement.

Everything was extra effort, every little movement uncomfortable at best, painful at worst. His brain was sluggish and slow, he couldn’t concentrate or retain information the way he used to. He wasn’t sure if it was the lasting effects from the head trauma or the drugs he was still on – probably both.

On top of that, there were also the aftereffects of the frontal lobe swelling. He knew this feeling all too well, it was like those hours or days before a meltdown… where he would be trying to do things, but his brain would just not cooperate and everything felt strangely off and wrong, emotions and sensory input became hard to parse and process. He hated it every time, it was like

a harbinger of a disaster that was just ready to strike, leaving him with an unsettling, lingering unease and irritation.

With the phone lying on the table, at least he was able to use his index finger for the word-drawing function, and he spent much too long, typing out a text to Lea's mother, typing and deleting and retyping, ending up with something he hated but sent anyway. Pam didn't immediately reply, and Shaun wasn't particularly unhappy about it.

He decided to text Claire while he was at it, who actually did reply, and he was glad for the momentary distraction of a text conversation they got going. She asked for a video chat in the next day or two, and he easily agreed.

After a while, Lea came back to his room with one of the hospital tablets in her hand, and Shaun wondered what she was doing with it. Did she want to encourage him to look at patient charts? He wouldn't be very good with that either in his current state.

She stood by his side, put the tablet up on the overbed table with the foldable magnetic cover she'd fastened it to.

"Okay, Shaunie," she said, "This is your new entertainment center for the next few days. Enjoy it while it lasts."

She pushed a button and the screen came to life. It wasn't the usual St. Bonaventure layout, there were a lot more app icons on the home screen and it showed an ocean themed wallpaper rather than the neutral St. Bonaventure background.

"Don't tell anyone, but one of the perks of being the hospital's IT guru, I have all the magic passwords to unlock admin rights and make this thing actually useful. Netflix, Disney+, Amazon Prime, Apple TV, Hulu – the whole streaming world at your disposal, all on the *good* WiFi, and don't worry, the subscriptions didn't come out of the hospital's budget.

"And not just that, I've also delved deep into the world of mindless but addictive mobile gaming, so there's a whole selection to choose from, and there's more in the app store you can go crazy with. And don't even try to look at patient charts or hospital data, that's all been disabled. This is for your pure and unadulterated mindless enjoyment. What do you say?"

He didn't know what to say. Everything was overwhelming, and he was trying to sort through all the emotions that tumbled into each other. Gratefulness, satisfaction, love, self-pity, frustration, confusion, annoyance, anticipation, joy.

He felt his eyes tearing up again, everything just bubbling to the surface, him still unable to do anything about it. He looked away from her, ashamed of his stupid inability to control anything. She had seen it, of course. She always did.

"Hey," she said in her gentle voice. "It's okay, Shaun. Just let it happen."

His chin trembled, and he squeezed his eyes shut, let the tears fall. He felt her gentle touch on his hand, felt her lifting his arm to interlace her fingers with his. He returned the gesture, folded his fingers onto the back of her hand. Her thumb gently stroked his as she stood with him while he let the moment pass, waited until he could get a grip on his stupid, malfunctioning, unreliable brain.

When he thought it was safe, he looked at her, made sure he met her eyes. “Thank you,” he said in a low voice.

She gave him a big smile. “Of course. I love you.”

He did too. So much that he didn’t think just saying it back was enough. He wanted to be in her arms, kiss her, make love to her. Another thing that wasn’t going to happen for a long time.

He sighed, then said, “I… want to kiss you.”

She let out a chuckle. “Okay, come here,” she said and bent down, gave him a very gentle kiss. He wanted to return it, have more of her, lifted his head to meet her, but even that movement hurt and ruined the moment.

Her hand carefully cupped the good side of his face when she pulled back. “Sorry, did I hurt you?”

“No,” he said, “it… wasn’t you.”

“This really sucks, doesn’t it? I’m sorry, Shaun. I wish there was something I could do to make that go away.”

So did he, but they both knew only time could fix it.

She gave him a last brush of her fingers against his jaw, and he wished she didn’t pull back her hand when she did. “Well, I’ll let you knock yourself out with your new gadget. I have sooo many e-mails to catch up on. Will you be all right on your own for a while?”

“Yes,” he told her. This was good. He’d be more than all right.

“Okay. I’ll be back later. Call me or text me if you need anything.”

“Okay,” he echoed. When she was almost out the door, he called her name.

“Lea?”

She stopped, turned around. “Yes, Shaun?”

“I love you.”

+-+-+-+-+

These donuts smelled amazing, Lea could tell even with the lid of the box closed. She’d had a good chuckle when Shaun had sent her a proud voice message earlier that he’d managed to make it to the bathroom unassisted for the first time. Another hospital day come and gone, and he was crushing all the milestones.

On her way home, Krispy Kreme had the light on the sign on, which meant fresh original glazed donuts right off the fryer. Shaun loved a good, simple donut, and she knew he’d love these, now that he was off the bland food diet and allowed to have the occasional treat. He needed treats, he deserved all the treats, and so she’d made a donut stop and gone right back to the hospital.

He looked up at her from his tablet, surprised that she was back. She walked over, placed the cardboard box on his table.

“Special delivery.” She smiled at him.

He fumbled a bit with the lid with his one hand and she helped him open it. A happy little smile spread across his face, and that alone had made it worth it.

“Donuts,” he said reverently.

“Fresh off the fryer.”

He looked up at her, she could see the gratitude right there. He reached into the box, took a bite and relished it. She couldn’t help but watch, the smile still on her face just as big at how much he enjoyed the sweet, sugary goodness.

She pushed his overbed table a bit to the side, sat down on the edge of his bed, wanted to be near him. He scooted a little to the side, inviting her in as best as he could. “Do you not want one?” he asked.

“Sure.” It was still warm to the touch, and it tasted as good as it smelled.

He bit off another piece, briefly met Lea’s eyes. “Do… you remember that I got you a donut once?”

She frowned, couldn’t really remember. “Hm, no…? Help me with this one.”

“We had a fight.”

“A fight? When was this?”

“Hm. Four years ago.”

She let out a little laugh. “Shaun, that’s ages ago. I don’t have your super-brain, so I gotta say I definitely don’t remember you getting me a donut four years ago. Did I like it? Was it good?”

“I don’t know, I wasn’t there when you ate it. You might not have eaten it. You were mad at me.”

“Wait, was this when I was crashing at your old apartment after I got back from Hershey?”

He nodded. “Yes.”

“Oh man, that is *such* a long time ago.” She turned her head to face him, gave him a long look. His face was so banged up and he looked a lot more mature now, but underneath all of that she could still see the boyish innocence of that younger, more naïve Shaun.

He must have noticed, because he asked, “Why are you looking at me like that?”

Her mouth curved into a smile. “You’ve always been such a sweetheart. And you and me, we have such a sordid history, don’t we?”

“I’m not sure sordid is a good word for it.”

“It’s a figure of speech, Shaun.”

“I know. But we have always been good for each other. Even when you were mad at me and didn’t want my donut.” He paused. “You didn’t want to move in with me, either.”

“Oh yeah, I definitely remember that. I’m really glad I changed my mind. Because our apartment is awesome. And living with you has always been an adventure, both as roomies and lovers.”

“We fought a lot.”

“Did we?”

“Yes. About where to put the remote controls, about how to arrange the kitchenware and our items on the bookshelf, about not closing the toilet lid, about th—”

“Okay, stop, stop, stop. I remember now. And we worked all of that out. And you know why?”

He stopped chewing, met her eyes. “Why?”

“Because you are sweet and you are clever and you just… You’re so determined. You wanted us to work so much, and you fought tooth and nail to *make* it work. And that’s one of the things I really admire about you.”

His mouth drew into a small smile. He was so awkward with compliments. He licked the glazing off of his index finger. “I don’t think Dr. Glassman wanted me to live with you.”

“Oh, he definitely didn’t want you to live with me. But he’s also a smart man, and I think he wanted you to learn a few lessons on your own. Which I think he knows now to appreciate.”

“He said he underestimated you.”

“Yeah, I think for a long time he was convinced I was going to, I don’t know, corrupt you or something. Or hang you out to dry and he’d have to pick up the pieces. I’m glad he ultimately gave me enough credit to let me prove he was wrong.”

“You did hang me out to dry.”

“Well, yeah. Now we’re getting to the sordid part. Do we have to talk about that? I thought we had laid that to rest. Are you still hung up on that?”

“No,” he said, and she knew he meant it. “I know you love me.”

She nodded. “I do. And we have both changed a lot since then. Definitely for the better.”

“Yes, we have.”

She smiled and shoved the last bite of her donut into her mouth, relishing the sweetness. She pointed at the box. “Do you want another one?”

“No, thank you,” he said.

She closed the lid. “I can leave those here, you can have the rest later or tomorrow if you want. Ask Park to put them in the microwave for you for 20 or 30 seconds. Trust me, it’ll do wonders.”

“Okay,” he said. Yep, he loved the donuts.

He lifted his head, met her gaze. “Oh. If all goes well, I can go home tomorrow.”

She lifted her eyebrows. “Really? Wow, that would be amazing. That’s the best news ever!”

His face lit up. “Yes. I really want to go home.”

“Yeah, we all want you to go home. I miss you so much. I’d love to have you back home.”

His face looked a bit stricken and Lea frowned, wondering what was going on there. He took a moment, looked down at his shoulder brace, then said, “I will need a lot of help.”

“Aw, Shaun, why are you even worrying about this? Of course I’ll help you. Whatever you need. I’m sure Glassy will also help where he can. And you’ll heal and it’ll get better.”

“I… don’t want to be a burden.”

“Shaun, stop it. You’re not a burden. I love you, we’re married. That’s what husband and wife do, they help each other. You’d do the same thing for me if I was in your place.”

“I don’t want you to be in my place.”

“Neither do I, but that’s not the point. Please don’t worry, and please never feel like you’re a burden. You can always ask for help, okay? No matter how small or stupid it is.”

He let out a shaky breath and she cupped his jaw with her hand, and leaned in to give him a soft kiss. He returned the gesture, and she reciprocated with more vigor, enjoying his enthusiasm. His lips still had a faint sugary taste to them, and she smiled when he pulled back and she sat back on the mattress.

“We didn’t actually talk about this yet, but is there anything you’d like me to prepare at the apartment? Are there any tools you need? Anything specific that I haven’t thought of?”

He seemed to frown. “Tools?”

“Yeah, like… I don’t actually know. Sorry, that was a stupid thought.”

“No, it wasn’t stupid. But I don’t think I need anything.”

“Okay, good. I’ll see if I can work from home tomorrow. Or take a personal day, maybe. I’ll definitely pick you up, drive you home. Or maybe better use Glassy’s SUV, that might be easier to get in and out of.” She paused, looked at him. “I’m overthinking this, aren’t I?”

He had a small smile on his lips. “That is usually my part.”

“It is. You’re rubbing off on me.” She made a wiping gesture along her arm. “Ugh. Get off, I don’t want it.”

It made him smile and she cocked her head. “You already made a list, didn’t you?”

He gave a little nod. “Yes.”

“Well, you’re nothing if not predictable, Shaunie. But a list might not be the worst thing. Let me know if there’s anything on it I can help with.”

“Dr. Glassman’s SUV is on it.”

“Okay, I will definitely make sure that we have Glassy’s SUV at our disposal. Maybe he’ll even let me drive it.”

“Can you help me pack tomorrow?”

“Of course. Or just ask Adam, I’m sure he’ll help you.”

“Adam is not on hospital payroll to pack personal belongings.”

“Maybe not, but he’ll help you all the same, because he actually likes you.” As an afterthought, she added, “Murpheus.”

“He said you were a Satyr Artificer.”

“I have no idea what that is, but it sounds cool and I’d totally roll with it.”

“I think you would have high intelligence and charisma.”

She nodded approvingly. “I’m down with that. And wow, you really dug into that whole D&D thing, didn’t you? Do you ever actually wanna play?”

“Who would we play with? There needs to be a gamemaster.”

“I don’t know, I’m sure we could ask around.”

“I don’t think I would be very good at it.”

“Nonsense, you’d be awesome at it. You would spend hours trying to build the perfect character, bullet-point out a totally awesome and detailed backstory for them.”

“I am not very good at pretending.”

“Yeah, but you can learn. Might actually be a really interesting exercise, don’t you think? And you know what, I’m not sure I’d be very good at it, either. But maybe you don’t have to be. It’s a game, it’s supposed to be fun.”

Shaun didn’t respond, and Lea wondered whom she could ask to look into it. Her circle of friends weren’t really the tabletop gaming types. She made a mental note to keep it in mind for a future occasion.

She got off the bed. “Well, I gotta get home, make sure everything’s in order for you tomorrow.”

“Is the apartment very messy?”

She let out a chuckle. “No, you have definitely rubbed off on me. But, you know, these last few days have been pretty intense. Household chores haven’t exactly been top of mind, you know.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Well then.”

He called her name as she got her purse. “Lea?”

She met his gaze. “You have been spending a lot of time here, and with your work. I don’t want you to spend more time on household chores only for me.”

She gave him a sweet look. “Aw. I really appreciate that. And I promise I won’t do more than absolutely necessary. I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Sleep well, Shaunie.”

She gave him a little wave before she left. He was already diverting his attention back to the tablet she’d finagled for him. Best idea ever.

+-+-+-+-+

Chapter 6: Will you pull me up again

“All right, Shaun, are you ready?” Aaron said.

“Yes,” he said eagerly.

Lea took the duffel bag that they’d packed, Shaun was dressed and ready, his arm fitted in the black shoulder brace he was taking home. Adam was standing by with the hospital issue wheelchair that was policy.

She couldn’t not overhear Shaun’s subdued pained moan as Adam helped him into the chair. Those ribs would be bothering him for a good few weeks to come, she knew. He’d be relying on pain meds for the foreseeable future, which wouldn’t be fun, but it was just going to be temporary. She was just glad he was going home, and she was very certain he was, too.

A few people gave Shaun a little wave as they made their way to the parking garage, he was definitely a known and liked commodity at the hospital.

It took a little bit of maneuvering to get Shaun into the SUV’s passenger seat, but things only got better from there. Shaun seemed more upbeat, though she knew he wasn’t exactly comfortable. The walk from the main entrance to their apartment took some time, Shaun was still somewhat unsteady on his feet and not in top shape, which was only natural.

They took the time to let him dictate the pace, but eventually he was settled on the couch with Aaron fussing around a little. Lea went into the guest room to unpack the duffel bag and sort out the laundry. What eventually caught her attention was Shaun saying in an unmistakably unnerved tone, “I am okay, Dr. Glassman.”

“All right, point taken,” the latter said.

Aaron appeared on the doorstep to the guest room a minute later, leaning against the doorframe while Lea filled the laundry basket with dirty laundry. “Apparently I’m overdoing it a little with the fathering.”

“Don’t sweat it, you know he appreciates it.”

He nodded his chin at the laundry. “Need any help?”

She shook her head. “No, I’m good, thanks.”

“So you’re staying here for the rest of the day?”

“Yeah. I’ll do some work later from here. Thankfully it’s been pretty quiet these last few days. We pushed the big operating system update to next week.”

She put the laundry basket on the bed when she was done to take it to the laundry room later. To Aaron, she said, “You know, it’s okay if you wanna leave.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. He’ll probably be sleeping a lot anyway, right?”

Aaron nodded. “Yeah, most likely.”

“Well, there you go.”

“Please call if you need anything.”

She nodded. “I will.”

He turned around, called over to Shaun, “I’ll be leaving. Take it easy, Shaun. Let me know if you need anything or wanna talk.”

“I will, Dr. Glassman.”

To Lea he said, “I’ll see myself out. Thanks for everything.”

“Oh, please don’t thank me. I should be thanking *you*. But we’ll be fine. I’ll text you later how he’s doing.”

He nodded before he opened the apartment door. “Okay. See you.”

“See ya.”

Lea looked at her phone to check the time. “Shaun, are you hungry?”

“Hm. No.”

“Okay. Well, let me know when you wanna eat something. Or want an apple or something else, okay?”

“An apple would be nice.”

“Okay, one juicy green apple coming right up.”

She knew he liked them either peeled or cut into smaller pieces, so she took the apple, a knife, a small plate and a piece of kitchen towel with her to the couch. Shaun was sitting lengthwise with his back propped up against a few pillows, so she sat down where there was some room next to his feet.

She held up the apple. “Peeled and whole or unpeeled and sliced? Or any other combo.”

“Cut into slices, please.”

“You got it.”

She started working on the apple, discarding the pieces of core on the kitchen towel while she put the slices on the plate. She knew Shaun was watching her, but his mind was likely working on something else. Or maybe it wasn’t and his fuzz-brain was just spacing out.

She noticed him scratching the right side of his head where the head wound had been, uttering a sound that indicated irritation.

“Is it hurting?”

“Hm. No. The sutures are itching.”

“Isn’t that a good sign? Do you know when they’re going to be taken out?”

“I hope tomorrow.”

“Okay, that’s good.” She finished with the apple and put the plate in his lap. “Here you go.”

It pulled him from his reverie, and he took a slice of apple and put it into his mouth.

“Are you feeling okay like this?”

He chewed, then said, “Like what?”

“Are you in pain, are you comfortable?”

“I am not comfortable.”

“Okay. What can I do?”

“Nothing. I have injuries that are painful and will take time to heal.”

“Yeah, okay, that’s not what I meant.”

He took another bite. “I am as comfortable as I can be at the moment.”

She nodded. “Okay. Sorry. I guess Glassy and I are fussing a little too much.”

“I understand. You are worried and you want to help.”

“Yeah. But I guess I gotta trust that you have a mouth and will say when you need or want something. You *will* do that, right?”

“Yes.”

“All right. Do you have what you need?” She could see there were already several items placed on the coffee table that Aaron had moved so he could easily reach it.

Shaun nodded at the coffee table. “Yes.”

“Well, then I think I’ll go do some work, if you don’t mind. But if you want some company, please tell me. Except for a conference call at 2:30, there isn’t anything urgent on my agenda today.”

“Okay,” he confirmed.

Lea spent most of her day working at the dining table while Shaun went through a few cycles of naps, TV on demand and The Weather Channel. They had told him to periodically work the shoulder with controlled movements so it wouldn’t lock up from the prolonged immobilization, and there was also the incentive spirometer for the breathing exercises he attempted once but gave up on pretty quickly.

Lea made them a sandwich for lunch for which he joined her at the table. The rest of the afternoon was just more of the same: another round of pain meds, more of the exercises that he went into the guest room for to do them in private, and more napping on the couch.

Lea retreated to the guest room for her afternoon phone conference, got a good amount of work done afterwards while Shaun was sleeping, and for once felt actually energized after a good night’s sleep the night before.

For both their sakes, they indulged in home delivered take-out, enjoyed a nice meal of Italian pasta and insalata mista. Lea had the foresight to order an extra meal for the next day, which Shaun complimented as very smart. Yes, she had her moments.

By the end of the meal, she could tell Shaun’s pain meds were wearing off. He was shifting around on the chair, not quite hiding a subdued moan very well.

Lea put the glass down she’d just been drinking from. “Maybe you should take more of the Percocet?”

He let out a disapproving hum.

“I know you’re in pain, why aren’t you in favor?”

“I don’t like the Percocet.”

“Okay. Can I ask why?”

“They make me fatigued and constipated.”

“Didn’t they give you laxatives to help with that?”

He made a face. “I don’t like the laxatives either.”

“Yeah, who does? I mean, I get it. It sounds pretty sucky. Is the alternative any better, though? I can see you’re really achy and uncomfortable.”

He shifted around again, finally said, “I will take some ibuprofen.”

“Don’t they cause stomach ulcers if you take them over a longer period?”

“They do. Which is why I am also taking a proton pump inhibitor as a preventative measure.”

“Caught between a rock and a hard place, huh?”

She went to the kitchen to refill the water pitcher that had become a permanent fixture wherever Shaun was, filled his glass with it so he could take the meds.

As she was clearing away the dishes, she asked him, “Why don’t we get you into some more comfortable clothes and then we can maybe chill a bit on the couch, make use of those streaming subscriptions that don’t expire for another three weeks?”

He gave his approval, and she followed him to the bathroom to help with the change of attire. They started with the shoulder brace, then she helped him unfasten the buttons of his button-down—the nice blue and light blue checkered one she liked because it perfectly complemented his eyes.

They both knew the whole thing was a little awkward, but it couldn’t be helped, and he’d probably need her helping hands with some of the easy everyday tasks for a little while. She was certain they’d find their groove—they always did.

The t-shirt was less of a struggle, and when she helped him pull it off his head, it was the first time that she saw the sizable bruising all over his ribcage since that first day they had taken him to the ICU. They were starting to turn a garish purple-green now, but they were still massive and ugly.

Something inside her constricted. It looked so painful—a stark reminder of what he’d been through, how much pain he must still be feeling, and how she was utterly helpless to do anything about it.

Holding the t-shirt in her hands, she couldn’t help but stare. Her eyes filled with tears, she felt one dislodge when she blinked, her vision became blurry.

She didn’t want to fall apart in front of Shaun. It wasn’t fair to him, she knew she should be stronger than this, that he needed her to be right now. “Sorry,” she whispered tearily, then almost bolted from the bathroom, wiping her cheeks at the tears that were still flowing.

She hated that this was happening, that she couldn’t stop it. She knew it was the stress of the past week, the constant spikes of adrenaline, the lack of sleep, spending every single minute of every day either working or being there for Shaun or getting the most urgent life necessities taken care of. And then the immense relief of having him back home, it was all catching up with her, crashing down and hitting home. Seeing the illustration of his physical pain painted all over his ribcage, it had been the last straw punching through her brittle defenses.

She found herself sitting on the couch, her head in her hands, the overwhelming emotions still rising up through her chest.

She tried hard to get a grip, couldn't for several minutes, and then there was Shaun, gingerly sitting down next to her at a safe distance. She could see he had somehow put on that pajama t-shirt himself, cradling his right arm awkwardly to his chest.

She wiped at her face again, her palms coming away wet.

His voice was soft and low when he asked, "Why are you crying?"

It almost made her chuckle. And she wished she had a good answer. Why *was* she crying? He was back here with her, alive and on the mend.

Her voice was laden with tears. "I don't know, Shaun. I think it's all been a little too much."

"So you're crying because of me?"

"Yeah, maybe a little bit."

"You… were looking at my bruises. They are healing very well."

Another tear dislodged from her eye as she recalled the image. "Yeah, but they're… It's painful, you know? Seeing how much you're hurt, knowing I can't do anything about it. I wanna hold you so badly, make all of that go away. But I can't. And that… that feels terrible."

He scooted a little closer, turned to face her. "I want to help."

She let out a sad chuckle. "I know. But there's nothing either of us can do about this. So we'll just have to push through it." She wiped at her cheek again. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have crumbled like this."

"No, Lea, it was not your fault."

"No, I guess not."

He stayed quiet for a moment, then said, "Lea?"

She looked up at him through puffy eyes, his were seeking out hers and he held them there when he slowly said, "I know… about this. When something happens… inside you… and you don't know how to stop it."

Her brow creased, her eyes were watering again. He was such a pure and gentle soul. "You do, don't you?"

His voice was barely above a whisper when he said, "Do you want my toy scalpel?"

Now she actually let out a short little laugh. "Shaun, that's super sweet, but it doesn't work like that for me."

She shifted her position so that she was just opposite him, facing him. She held out her left hand for him to take it. He easily did and she squeezed it a little. "It's okay. You're here with me, and

it's amazing that you are. This past week has been really hard, and I've been stretched a little thin, but that's gonna get better now."

"I'm sorry."

"No, Shaun. Don't apologize. This isn't your fault, and you couldn't have done anything to prevent it. You've been such a trooper through all of this, and that's amazing, too. We'll be okay, because we have each other."

He looked into her eyes again—one of those magical moments of eye contact that she relished, trying to ignore how battered his face still looked. She squeezed his hand again, then sobered. "You put on your t-shirt by yourself."

He looked down at it. "Yes. Can you help me with the brace?"

"Of course. Come on."

It was the first time that Lea helped Shaun into the shoulder brace, and it took a bit of verbal instruction and repeated adjusting of the Velcro for Shaun to give his final blessing. It was less than ideal, she knew, with part of the brace wrapping around his torso, constricting his injured ribs.

She'd felt him flinch in pain a few times, though she knew he'd tried to hide it. He wasn't on the juicy IV painkillers anymore, and it showed. Shaun must be feeling it too.

When he was all good to go, she lightly grazed his elbow with her fingertips. "Hey. You should be taking some of the pain meds, don't you think?"

He made a sound that she wasn't sure whether it was endorsement or disapproval, but it must have been the former because when she went into the spare room to put his clothes in the hamper, she could hear him shaking something out of a pill bottle in the bedroom.

They ended up on the couch with Shaun suggesting a few movies he'd put on their joint interest list back in the hospital when he'd been perusing all the video streaming offerings. They settled on a movie about a linguist trying to decipher an alien language to communicate with newly landed vessels from outer space, halfway during which Shaun uncharacteristically fell asleep.

Daylight had waned by the time the movie was over, and she switched off the TV. Shaun was still sleeping next to her, his head in what looked like an awkward position. Should she wake him? She gave him another ten or fifteen minutes while she got ready for bed, now feeling the exhaustion of the last few days hitting home herself.

She eventually kneeled in front of Shaun, gently shaking his knee. It took a few attempts of also saying his name until he groggily blinked at her. He made a jerky movement, then moaned at the pain before she could say, "Easy."

He took a few moments, looked a little disoriented. She placed her hand on his knee. "How about we go to bed?"

She could see he was fighting that inner battle of wanting to be more comfortable but also not wanting to move. She squeezed his knee a little, then held out her hand to help him up if he wanted it. "Come on."

Eventually, he took it and let her gently pull him up with another low moan. Once in the bed, he was shifting around quite a lot, trying to awkwardly arrange some pillows around himself, moving and then removing them, putting them back again.

She sat up. “How can I help? Do you need more pillows?”

“No,” he said curtly, and she could hear he wasn’t happy.

“You miss that fancy adjustable bed, huh?”

He sighed. “Yes.”

“Okay. Let’s figure this out together. Just… sit up for a moment, let me help you.”

He acquiesced and she took the pillows and adjusted them in a way that he should be able to lie in a slightly elevated position. “Lean back, see how that feels.”

He gingerly did so, moved around a little more until he settled in one particular position. Lea got up and went to the living room, came back with one of the smaller pillows from the couch. She placed it near his right side. “Maybe you wanna put your arm on this?”

He seemed to like that idea and let her help him with it as well. When she was back in her side of the bed, the bedside lamp switched off, he let out a long-suffering breath. She turned to lie on her side and faced him in the dim light.

“I wish I could help you more with this.”

“I know. But there’s nothing you can do.”

“Yeah, but it still sucks. Please tell me what you want, what will help. Do you wanna be touched? Or not? Do you wanna just sleep?”

“Do *you* want to sleep?”

“Yeah, I’m pretty wiped.”

“Then let’s sleep.”

“Okay. Good night, Shaunie. Please wake me if you need anything, okay? Even if it’s the middle of the night.”

He just hummed. She hoped it was in affirmation.

She fell asleep quickly, an indication of the last week taking its toll in more ways than one.

+-+-+-+-+

Chapter 7: Draw me closer

Shaun's side of the bed was empty when Lea awoke the next morning, the mound of pillows still there. She reached over, the mattress was cold. With a sigh, she looked at her phone for the time, then peeled herself out of bed.

As expected, Shaun was on the couch, the TV switched to the Weather Channel. She went over to him, taken aback for a brief moment by his battered face that wasn't always top of mind until she saw it again. There was a slight frown etched into Shaun's forehead, he looked tired. She crouched down in front of him. "Did you sleep at all?"

"Not very much," he admitted.

Lea sighed. "The bed's not very comfortable for you right now, is it?"

"No, it is not."

"Yeah, we need to figure out what to do about that."

"What is there to figure out? We only have this bed and the one in the guest room, but it will not be any different."

"So what's the solution? You sleep on the couch? I don't think not sleeping at all is much of one."

He shrugged a little with one shoulder. "I don't know."

"Well, you're gonna be home for a while. I guess you can take naps during the day. Is it the ribs? Or the shoulder? What makes it most difficult?"

"It's the brace. It is always in the way, sometimes it hurts."

"But you can't take it off, right?"

"No. The shoulder needs to stay immobilized. Especially at night when I can't consciously control my movements."

"Yeah, that sounds tricky." She got up from her crouching position. "Do you need the bathroom?"

"Not at the moment."

"Okay."

She went through her morning routine, and was surprised to find Shaun in the kitchen when she rolled open the bathroom door. He had laid out several items on the kitchen island, he was doing something with the coffee maker.

She went over to him. "Shaunie, you didn't have to make breakfast."

"I know," he just said.

It was their usual weekday routine. He was usually out of bed and in the bathroom first, then he'd prepare breakfast for both of them while she was showering.

He pointed at the kitchen island. "I need help with this."

She smiled. Always the meticulous planner. She wondered if he'd made a list. At the very least in his head. "Okay, I'm on it."

There was a green apple with a knife and the apple corer. "We can make pancakes if you want."

His answer came quickly. "No."

She turned to him. "Wow, that's a first that Dr. Murphy refuses the opportunity for breakfast pancakes."

He also turned so he could face her. "The pancakes at the hospital were very good. The cereal and yogurt were not."

She gave a slow nod. "Okay, I get it. Much craved cereal and yogurt for Dr. Murphy it is."

He smiled, then held the can out to her where they kept their coffee grounds. "I tried to open it."

She took it out of his hands. "You really shouldn't. I can do all that, Shaun. I don't want you to hurt yourself more than you already are."

"Yes, I know. That is why I waited until you were done in the bathroom."

"Why don't you go sit at the table while I take care of the rest?"

"I want to help."

"Yeah, but look at all this. You've already done so much."

He didn't utter any further protests and sat down, carrying his cereal bowl with him in his left hand. "Hold up," Lea told him, peeling the lid off the yogurt cup, then placed it in Shaun's bowl.

"Thank you," he answered.

It took a few minutes for her to finish with all the little bits and pieces, but eventually the coffee machine sputtered to life and she sat down at the table with the apple corer and knife and went to work on Shaun's apple pieces.

During breakfast, Lea realized their routines would need quite a bit of adjustment with Shaun back home and not fully functional. They'd have to figure out what he needed help with, what he could do himself, where the boundaries lay in terms of offering help or doing things for Shaun without his explicit approval or guidance.

Communication wasn't Shaun's strong suit to begin with, and she knew he sometimes got frustrated when she wasn't doing certain tasks exactly the way he said or imagined in his head. She tried to mentally prepare herself for the occasional clashing of opinions or eruption of frustration that would undoubtedly surface until they had found their groove. But she also knew they'd get there, because they always did.

One of the next challenges was Shaun's bathroom morning routine. She asked him about it during breakfast and he explained to her how and what she could help with. It also required a good amount of trial and error to figure out how to help him shower and get dressed, how to work around the injuries that needed special treatment and care. It took some time, but they got there, with the last step along the way still to tackle.

Shaun opened the cabinet above the sink and placed the shaving cream on the rim of the sink, then took out the razor. "Can you help me with this?"

Lea looked at his face and the wounds that were still healing all over his right side. She hesitated. "Do you really think you need to shave every day?"

"Yes," he said right away.

"Don't get me wrong, I like you clean-shaven, but with all those scrapes and bruises, I'd be afraid to hurt you. Wouldn't it be better if you just let it grow out for a little while, at least until your face has healed?"

He let out an unhappy hum, she already knew he wasn't fond of the idea. Routines were important to him, and shaving was definitely one of them.

She tried to reason with him again. "Isn't a bit of stubble better than aggravating or opening up those wounds? Come on, as a doctor, that *has* to make sense to you."

"It *does* make sense. I'm not sure I like it."

"I'll do it if you really want me to, but please know that I've never shaved a man's face, and I give no guarantees that I won't hurt you or that I'll be doing it right."

"Lea," he said with an impatient undertone, "this is not rocket science."

"Yeah, I know. I just want you to know I'm not super comfortable with it while your face is still all kinds of messed up."

She saw him rubbing his thumb along the grip of the razor and waited. "Hey," she said softly. "I can give you some time to think about it. You can always ask me later if you want it shaved."

He put the razor back in its designated place in the cabinet. "No," he said. "You're right."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

She nodded. "Okay. I think you'll look cute with a five-day stubble. I think I'll dig it."

He made a face. "It will be scratchy."

"Oh, I know. But you'll look sexy and maybe a little edgy. I think it'll suit you."

"I will look unkempt."

"Nonsense. At worst, it'll make you hip and trendy."

“I don’t want to be hip and trendy.”

“Stop being a grouch, Shaunie. Because that *definitely* doesn’t suit you.”

He let out a disapproving sound and she had to smile while she watched him reaching over with his left hand into his hair on the right side, making an unhappy face.

“The sutures still itching?” she asked.

“Yes.” He made a frustrated sound, then stopped fussing with them. “Dr. Park will take them out today.”

“Are you going to the hospital later?”

“No. He will be doing it here.”

“Okay, that’s g—”

As if on cue, there was a knock on the apartment door. Shaun immediately said, “That’s Dr. Park.”

Lea went to open it and greeted him with, “Good morning. I hear you’re here for personalized medical care.”

“That I am.” Alex lifted the medical supplies bag with a smile. “And a very good morning to you, too.”

Lea motioned for him to come in. “Please take the sutures out. He’s been moping about them.”

“They are very itchy,” Shaun supplied from the bathroom.

“See?” Lea confirmed.

“Okay,” Alex said with a smile, putting the bag on the dining table. “Where do you want me to do this?”

Shaun was already coming, but he was still doing most things at a snail’s pace. “At the table, please.”

“All right, let’s take a look.”

Lea let them do their thing, busied herself with clearing away the breakfast dishes and leftovers.

It took a few minutes while Lea was still busy in the kitchen, but Alex finally said, “Okay, all done. Looks pretty good. Kind of a shame it’s all in your hair, because whoever did this, they took great care to make it look super neat. Know who fixed you up?”

“No,” Shaun said.

“Well,” Alex said, “Probably not important. Important is that you’re rid of these, and I’d say you’re cleared for hair washing, too.”

“Yesss,” Shaun said happily. Lea knew he was looking forward to that, even though she’d helped him wash around the area very carefully.

“How are you holding up otherwise?” Alex inquired.

“Okay,” Shaun supplied noncommittally.

Alex knowingly looked at Lea, and she shrugged. “Yeah, okay, I guess.”

Alex nodded. “That’s good. If you need anything, just call. I’ll be happy to help.”

Lea said, “Thanks, that’s much appreciated. Can I offer you anything? Coffee, tea?”

Alex stepped towards the door. “I’m already running late. But thanks.”

“Okay,” Lea said.

Lea saw Alex out and closed the door, giving Shaun a look where he was still sitting at the dining table. He looked happier and more upbeat than she’d seen him in a while. Having the stitches out was another step in the right direction. They were making progress, and that felt just as good to her as it did to Shaun.

+-+-+-+-+

Shaun had assured Lea that he was fine alone at home for a few hours, so she made sure he had what he needed and then went to the hospital to work there. She was still catching up with some of the things from the week before, and the hours flew by. Some people dropped by or stopped her in the hallway to ask about Shaun, and it was reassuring yet again to know he was loved and missed.

She checked in a few times with him during the day via text, and he sounded increasingly more tired and cranky. She wondered if he was trying to toughen it out because he didn’t like the pain meds, or if it *was* the pain meds that made him sluggish and irritable. She tried to prepare herself for an evening of dealing with an aggravated and short-fused husband, and wondered if there was any remedy that could actually forego that.

She sat with steepled fingers at her desk, then had a eureka moment. She packed up her things, then went to find Alex, relieved to run across him in the hallway.

He was happy to do her the favor she asked for, which was what Lea had hoped, then she went to the parking garage to make her way home, but not before making a few stops for the chores on her agenda.

She was expecting for Shaun to be resting on the couch, maybe watching some television. What she wasn’t expecting was the picture that presented itself when she opened the apartment door.

He was sitting at the table, or rather slumped there, his head lying in the crook of his left arm on the tabletop, his cheek on the table, his eyes closed. She quietly closed the door behind her and put the shopping bags on the kitchen island, then edged closer.

Shaun was definitely sleeping, which looked adorable in itself, but with the ribbed placemat his face was lying on, she thought there had to be a better way for him to get some rest. She

wondered how long he'd been sitting there like that, and it only solidified the plan she'd made earlier as being a sound one that would be beneficial for him.

She started unpacking the items from the bags, was hoping he'd wake up from the noise, which he eventually did after a minute or two. He stirred, lifted his head with a frustrated or maybe pained groan, and she couldn't help but smile at the striped imprint the placemat had left on his face.

He looked over to her, rubbed a tired hand over the side of his face, feeling for the indentations there. He let out another frustrated sound, not acknowledging her with any greeting. Yep, he was definitely cranky.

Lea took some of the items she'd bought over the table and sat down next to him, putting them in front of him. "I got these for you," she told him.

He eyed the small stack of flat objects warily, picked one of them up, his voice still tired and grouchy. "What is this?"

"Anti-slip mats. They're supposed to be for car dashboards, but I think they'll help when you only have one working arm and can't hold things properly. What do you think?"

He looked at her briefly. "Okay," he said with little enthusiasm in his voice.

"Wow. Such glowing endorsement of what I thought was a pretty brilliant idea."

He frowned. "Are you being sarcastic?"

"Yes, Shaun, I'm being sarcastic. Don't you think these will help?"

"Yes. Thank you."

Lea was already opening the packaging, put one of them in the middle of the table, then got up and put the others in strategic places—kitchen, bathroom, coffee table. In passing, she asked him, "How long were you asleep before I woke you?"

He looked at his watch. "I'm not sure. Not very long."

That prompted her to start executing her plan. She went back to the kitchen and got a glass from the overhead kitchen cabinet, then took the ice cube tray out of the freezer compartment and put four of them in the glass where they clanked against the glass wall. She gathered up the rest of the items and went over to the table where Shaun was still sitting.

"Shaunie," Lea said as she put the glass, the bottle of 7UP, three different Jolly Ranchers and the bottle of prescription strength cough syrup down on the tabletop. "The anti-slip mats were just the beginning. I think what you really need is this."

He eyed the objects with a confused and not particularly enthusiastic expression. "I don't understand."

She noticed again how sleep deprived he looked, so she could only surmise he was indeed stubbornly refusing to take the Percocet and probably had gotten stuck in worry cycles in his head a bit over the course of the day, too. Add to that a residually hazy brain that made it hard to

concentrate, and the fact that the couch wasn't all that conducive to restful sleep, and here he was in all his glory – cranky and exhausted Shaun.

"*This,* Shaunie, is Sizzurp," she explained.

"I don't know what that is."

Lea had to smile. "Oh my god, you're such a goodie-two-shoes. This, my friend, is the makings of what's known as Lean, Purp or Oil. Used to be called Sizzurp where I grew up, and it'll get you what you're sorely lacking – sleep."

"How does this help with my sleep?"

"Come on, you're the smarty-pants in this relationship, you can figure it out. What do you think it will do if we mix all these together?"

"It will create an emulsion of carbonated soda and cold syrup with added sugar and flavoring."

"Bingo. And what do you think happens when you drink it?"

"That will depend on the amount of cold syrup you add." He picked up the bottle, read the label with the ingredients. "Where did you get this?"

"Not important. Let's focus on—"

"Where did you get this?" Shaun asked again with more assertiveness.

"Shaun, we have mutual friends who are physicians."

Shaun let out an unhappy sound, but Lea shifted on her chair to directly face him. "You've not been getting much sleep, and please don't deny it because you look like a walking zombie and you *literally* just fell asleep at the dining table. I know everything is uncomfortable and painful right now because you hate the painkillers and the brace gets in the way, so I want to help you make that go away. Just for a little bit. In a way more pleasant way than the Percocet."

"More pleasant, how?"

"You probably know this better than I do, but the codeine will help with the pain, and the promethazine makes you sleepy, and if you mix it right, it gives you a feeling of euphoria, and kinda like… kinda like everything is super chill and you don't have to worry about anything. It's a really pleasant feeling. And then you usually fall asleep for a good while."

"What is the candy for?"

"You had that part right. Sugar and flavoring. Makes it taste better, basically. *And* gives it a really funky color."

"You want me to drink this?"

She looked at him, gave a little shrug. "Yeah."

He gave her a look, one that said he wasn't very much in favor, or at the very least not immediately on board.

She added for good measure, "Don't you think it would be good if you got some more sleep? And not the kind you get from increments of twenty minute naps that are rudely interrupted by your aching ribs or shoulder. Actual unadulterated sleep. Which right now you're not gonna get unless you help that along with medication. And as sleep inducing medications go, I promise you, this is as good as it gets."

He looked at her for a long moment. "Have you tried this?"

She gave him another shrug. "Yeah, once or twice."

"This can be very hazardous, you could stop breathing if the codeine dosage is too high."

"Yeah, I know. But I'm not worried, because you're a supersmart surgeon genius who will tell me exactly how much of the stuff we should mix up to get you what you need without the risk of you croaking right here in our apartment."

When he didn't react, she made another attempt. "Shaun. I'm not suggesting you do this repeatedly. Just this once. Because I think all of this is really wearing you down. That can't help with your healing process."

He drew in a long breath, winced a little, and maybe that helped with making the decision. "Okay," he finally said.

"Okay," she echoed happily. "Let's do this."

She coaxed him to move over to the couch where they sat down together. Shaun helped her figure out the right amount of cough syrup as she mixed it all together in the glass, admired how the mixture turned a vibrant purple. She handed it to him when it was ready.

He still eyed it warily, sniffed it with a certain disdain.

"Come on, down with it," she said.

He took a sip, and judging from the look on his face, it didn't taste as terrible as maybe he had imagined. "Not that bad, huh?" she asked.

"It's okay."

"You wanna go to the bed and sleep there?"

He took a moment, then said, "No."

"Okay, the couch it is. Drink it slowly, then lie down, see what it does. Talk to me if you want, otherwise just enjoy the effects of it. I hope you'll like it, but I have a feeling you will."

Shaun did as she said, sipped at it, made it through three quarters of the contents of the glass before he shifted his position and leaned back against the armrest, adjusting the pillows behind his back as best as he could.

“Here, let me help with that,” she told him as she got up, helped him put things how he wanted it.

He breathed in another long breath, closed his eyes as he breathed out.

“Tell me how it feels to you,” she gently prodded, kneeling down next to the couch near his head.

“It feels… like you said.”

“Euphoria, disassociation?”

His mouth actually curved into a small smile. “Yes.”

“Do you like it?”

Another, “Yes.” She had thought he would. His brain was probably all thoughts all the time.

“Do you wanna tell me about it?”

“I don’t… I don’t know how.”

She smiled. “It’s okay, you don’t have to. I’ll just leave you to it, unless you want me to stay.”

“I’m… getting tired.”

“Yeah, that’s normal. You probably feel really heavy, like your limbs are too heavy to move, right?”

“Yes.”

“Well, ride that high as long as you can, my friend, because your ribs will make sure you have a rude awakening at some point, but hopefully this time it’ll be later rather than sooner.”

His voice was already half asleep when he said, “Okay.”

She smiled, letting her fingers gently play with his hairline at the top of his forehead. She leaned in for a soft kiss. “Party hard, Shaunie.”

He didn’t respond, his breath having evened out. Yep, he was gone. She hoped it would do what she wanted it to do.

She cleared away the Sizzurp ingredients, busied herself in the apartment with a few chores, then sat down to catch up with her social media and answer a few messages.

A little while later, she started from the unexpected knock on the door. They weren’t expecting any visitors. She got up, tentatively opened the door. It was Aaron.

He walked right in, announced, “Thought I’d check in, Shaun—”

“Shh!” she chastised immediately.

Aaron fell silent, then looked over to the couch. You couldn't actually see anything from where they stood, but Shaun was snoring ever so slightly. It was almost endearing.

"Sorry," Aaron said in a hushed voice. He walked a little closer to the couch, peered over the edge of the backrest.

Walking back to Lea who was still hovering by the kitchen island, he said in a low voice, "He's usually a pretty light sleeper. What did you do to him?"

She couldn't help but give a little shrug and a smirk. "I just helped him along a little. The Sizzurp worked wonders."

"The stuff you make from cough syrup and soda?"

"Yeah."

Aaron raised an eyebrow. "You drugged him without his knowledge?"

"No!" she said immediately. "Of course not."

"He drank that voluntarily?"

"Yeah. After a bit of gentle prodding."

"Okay, and you encouraged him to ingest illicit drug cocktails, why exactly?"

"First of all, not exactly illicit. Second of all, have you seen the bags under his eyes? He's barely sleeping at night, and so he's tired and cranky and in pain, so trust me, he really needed this."

Aaron pulled out one of the stools at the kitchen island, and Lea followed suit, sat down next to him. Obviously this warranted a longer conversation. Aaron was worried. Of course he was worried. What she was telling him wasn't exactly reassuring.

"You're here to check on him, aren't you? So you know what I'm talking about."

Aaron sighed. "Yeah, I had a feeling there was something going on. He's been sending me all these voice messages, and he sounded kinda, I don't know, fried and sleep deprived, and… I guess that wasn't that far off."

"Yeah," she sighed. "I kinda saw this coming. Was hoping it wouldn't, but here we are."

"So what's he doing?"

"It's more like what's he not doing? He hates the Percocet, says it makes him constipated and fatigued. Which I get. It sounds pretty awful. The ibuprofen doesn't do that much, especially at night, and he doesn't have that fancy adjustable hospital bed anymore, right?

"I think with everything going on with the brace and the shoulder and the ribs, he's not very comfortable lying down. So he's over here on the couch a lot, but also not really getting enough sleep, because he's not comfortable anywhere."

"Yeah, that's what they give you painkillers for."

“The ones he doesn’t take. Which makes for cranky, achy, sleep deprived Shaun who’s not exactly easy to be around. I know he doesn’t do it on purpose, but…” She trailed off.

“Yeah,” Aaron confirmed. “Is he at least doing the exercises?”

“For the shoulder, yes. Because I think that has him worried. But that breathing thingy, he’s supposed to do that three times a day, right?”

“Yes, more would be even better.”

“Well, he doesn’t.”

“At all?”

She shrugged. “I’ve seen him do it once since he got home. I mean, I can’t blame him, I think it’s painful as hell. But him getting pneumonia, I don’t think any of us want that.”

“No, trust me, none of us wants that.”

“Can you maybe talk to him?”

“Yeah, I’ll talk to him,” Aaron nodded. “Other than that? Anything you need help with?”

She shook her head slightly. “No, I think in the grand scheme of things, it’s going pretty much as expected. He hates not being able to do anything, having to ask for help with all these everyday things. I mean, he’s being way too stubborn, as usual. But that’s also as expected. It just kinda sucks all around, but nothing we can do about it, so I’m just trying to be patient. I wish he could be, too.”

“You said he was worried about the shoulder?”

“Yeah. You know, being a surgeon is so important to him. If this screws that up, he’ll be devastated. So I know he worries about it, even though he doesn’t actually say it. But you know Shaun. He doesn’t always have to say things out loud.”

Aaron nodded. “So what’s the plan?”

She looked at him questioningly. “Plan?”

“Yeah. You know, tag team. That’s one of the things that works with him, too, right? Several people he trusts telling him the same thing.”

“For starters, just talk to him about the breathing exercises. I’ll keep an eye on the pain meds. He’s starting physio tomorrow, I’m not sure what that’s gonna be like.”

“Oh, it’ll hurt, too. You wanna make sure you have some ice packs in the freezer. The mobilization is important, but it will aggravate the shoulder. He should ice it for a bit afterwards, which they’ll probably tell him, but you can help with that. He should take extra meds on those days to make it easier.”

“From your lips to God’s ears.”

“How about the head injury?”

“Park took out the sutures this morning, which I think was a big relief. He was complaining that they’re starting to itch. I think he still has some trouble concentrating for longer periods of time, but it’s mainly the shoulder and the ribs now, and those will need a whole lot of patience.”

“Unfortunately, yes. But I’d like to think he’s in good hands.”

She gave him a smile. “Yeah, I’d like to think so, too. If only he wasn’t being Mr. Stubborn about it a lot of the time.”

“Don’t be afraid to tell him that, though.”

“Oh, don’t you worry. He may have that kicked puppy thing going for him right now, but he won’t get all the free passes.”

Aaron gave her a knowing look. She was sure he knew she could handle recalcitrant Shaun. He put his palms on his thighs, made a motion to get up. “I better get going. Call me if you need anything.”

She gave him a nod. “I will, thanks.”

They said goodbye and Lea let him out, closing the door behind him. She checked on Shaun who was still out cold. She carefully draped the Pendleton blanket over him, maybe he would even sleep into the night. She hoped it would at least give him a semblance of much needed rest.

+-+-+-+-+

Chapter 8: I hold my breath in tight

Shaun looked up from the Player’s Handbook. Had there been a knock on the door? The drug induced sleep last night had helped a lot with his ability to concentrate, and he’d finally been able to get really engrossed in a book.

Ah yes, there was another knock and Dr. Glassman’s voice. “Shaun? Are you home?”

Shaun remembered he’d texted before that he was going to come to visit for lunch. He put the book aside and pushed himself off the couch with a low groan. Those damn ribs.

When he opened the door, Dr. Glassman seemed to be looking at him a little too closely. He asked, “Did I wake you?”

“No,” Shaun said. “I was reading.”

“Okay, that’s good.” Glassman came in. Shaun closed the door behind him.

Glassman lifted a plastic bag and put it on the kitchen island. “Brought us some lunch. I hope you’re hungry.”

He wasn’t particularly so, but he’d eat if Dr. Glassman wanted to. The latter was already starting to extract what was in the bag, putting the containers out on the counter. Shaun went over to the

kitchen counter, opened the overhead cupboard to get out plates, but Glassman cut in, “Shaun, I can get those.”

“I am not an invalid.”

“Yeah, I know that, but you’ve got an injured shoulder and broken ribs, and on your dominant side, so I think you’re allowed some slack.”

Shaun ignored the comment and got the plates anyway, trying hard not to wince at the overhead motion. Ugh. He hated this. He couldn’t do anything.

Glassman was still working on the selection of food he’d brought. It looked like a lunch deal type of thing – soup, side salad, sandwiches.

“Do you want water or orange juice with your lunch?” Shaun asked him.

“Water, but please let me get that. Here,” he held out a container with what looked like a side salad to Shaun. “Take that to the table. Then sit and don’t move. Enjoy the valet service as long as it lasts.”

Shaun did as he was asked, though he still hated it. With a level of mounting discontent, he watched as Dr. Glassman filled the soup into two soup bowls and put them in the microwave, took all the foods to the table, gave Shaun the cutlery to lay out as needed. He commented, “No pickles,” as he put the sandwiches on the table.

When the microwave dinged, he gave Shaun the first of the bowls and put the other in, waited for it to finish before he, too, sat down opposite Shaun. They started eating in comfortable silence before Glassman inquired, “So what are you doing all day?”

Shaun swallowed the spoonful of chicken and noodle soup before he said, “I’m reading a lot.”

“Gets pretty boring, huh?”

“It’s okay. I am reading the Dungeons & Dragons Player’s Handbook.”

“Dungeons & Dragons? Wow, that takes me back to my college days. People still play that?”

“Yes. There are whole online streams of people playing their campaigns live on camera. It’s very entertaining.”

“Seriously? You wanna play it?”

“I don’t know. Probably not.”

“So you’re reading the rulebook just for fun?”

Shaun nodded. “Yes.”

“Okay. How’s the shoulder?”

“It’s okay.”

“You doing your exercises?”

“Yes.”

“How’s the pain?”

“Okay.”

That prompted Glassman to look up at him. “Yeah, somehow I doubt that. Please take the painkillers if it bothers you too much, okay? There’s no reason for you to sit around and be miserable. Painkillers are a wonderful invention. Make use of them while you can.”

Shaun couldn’t quite agree. “The Percocet is making me constipated. It also carries the danger of developing an opioid dependence, and it makes my brain very sluggish. I don’t like it.”

“So take it at night before you go to sleep. And I know you’re way too smart to become addicted to opioids, Shaun.”

“I don’t sleep very well at night.”

“Yeah, because you’re in pain. Case in point.”

Shaun wished it was as easy as that. “The shoulder brace is very distracting when I lie in bed, and I wake Lea up when I shift around a lot.”

“So sleep on the couch.”

“It is not very comfortable either.”

Glassman sighed. “Oh boy, what are we gonna do with you?”

“There is nothing you can do with me.”

“Yeah, I know.”

They continued eating in silence, then Glassman started talking about what was going on at the hospital. Shaun listened to the easy banter, it wasn’t as if he had anything interesting to share right now.

When they were done with their lunch, Glassman leaned back in his chair, then looked around as if he was looking for something. Shaun warily watched him get up and check out the apartment, eventually ending up in the bedroom from which he emerged with the incentive spirometer in his hand.

He put it on the table in front of Shaun before he sat back down again. “We should talk about that.”

Shaun let out a weary breath. “Why?”

“Because this is important, Shaun.”

“No, it’s not.”

Glassman's voice was assertive now, somewhat hardened. "Yes, it is."

"I am not developing pneumonia."

"Not yet, maybe. Come on, you're a smart guy. You know how this works. You're in pain because you're not taking the painkillers. That leads to shallow breathing, suppression of cough reflex and decreased mucociliary clearance. And then that leads right to pneumonia."

"Yes, I know that."

"Then why are you not doing your breathing exercises?"

Shaun pressed his lips together, stayed quiet, tried to get a grip on the unpleasant emotions that were rising up in his chest. He'd tried to do the exercises, but they caused lingering pain, and then that caused more sleep deprivation, and that caused a headache and even more difficulty to deal with the pain, and—

"Shaun?" Glassman prompted.

He pushed back his chair, got up in too hurried a motion, because it sent a stab of pain into his right side, and he sucked in a breath. That made him even more angry, and he stumbled back a step. "Because I don't want to, okay?!" he spat at Glassman.

"Yeah, but this isn't about what you want, Shaun. Sometimes we gotta do things we don't want. You know this, and quite frankly, I'm confused because you're usually pretty good with that."

Shaun walked away, retreated to where the couch was. "You don't—" he started, paced a few steps, flexed and unflexed the fingers of his left hand. "You don't know what it's like."

Dr. Glassman was getting up, edged a bit closer. "You know, actually I think I do."

"You don't have fractured ribs and a shoulder injury that could impact your career. You are not tired all the time because you can't sleep. You don't have to ask other people for help with everything."

Glassman sat down on the armrest of the couch, guardedly watched Shaun as he kept pacing in front of the television. "Not right now, but I did at one time. You remember when I was going through chemo, right? Maybe it wasn't exactly the same, but I was in pain and discomfort a lot. I had one of those spirometers."

Shaun kept pacing, avoided looking him in the eyes. "Did you use it?"

"Probably not as much as I should have, but yes, I did. I remember I hated it, and I don't want to imagine what it's like for you right now, but you gotta push through it, Shaun. Because getting pneumonia with broken ribs, boy, that's a whole other level. And you have *got* to know that."

He did, he knew all that. But that didn't make it any easier. He balled his fists, rubbed his thumb over his index finger.

Glassman went on, "And you say I don't know what it's like to have your job on the line because of a medical problem, but don't you remember, Shaun? Don't you remember what I said about the middle ground? We talked about that before I had the brain surgery.

“It’s scary as hell. And I know you’re worried. I’m not an orthopedist, but we both saw the scans. You know the chances for full recovery are a lot better when there’s no need for surgical repair. Yes, there’s a risk you might not regain full range of motion, but it’s small, and beyond doing the exercises, that’s out of your control. You’re starting physio this afternoon, so let’s stay positive, okay?”

Shaun moved the shoulder in its joint, and it still hurt, and that fear was still there, that it would not fully heal, that he couldn’t be a surgeon anymore. Morgan had been in that exact situation, he knew, and she seemed to be enjoying her new job as an internist. Could he make that same switch if he had to?

He looked up, saw Dr. Glassman’s warm brown eyes on him. There was something reassuring there, and his voice was soft when he said, “Shaun?”

He slowly stopped pacing, let his left arm sink to his side. “Okay,” Shaun said, letting out a shaky breath, trying to get the anxiety under control.

Glassman got up, went into the bedroom and came back with the bottle of ibuprofen that he must have seen standing there. He held them out to Shaun. “Why don’t you take 600 mills now, wait until they take effect, then you do the breathing exercises. That’ll make it easier. I can stay, help you, if you want.”

“No,” Shaun said immediately.

“Shaun, please.”

“I will take the ibuprofen and do the exercises, but I don’t want you to help.”

He took the ibuprofen bottle from Glassman, fumbled awkwardly to open it. Glassman wisely just looked on and didn’t say anything, which Shaun was thankful for. He got up and brought Shaun a glass of water. The three pills went down easily.

“Okay,” Glassman said. “But please don’t do it just this one time. At least three times a day, more if you can, even if it’s irritating as hell. Will you promise?”

Shaun let out an unhappy hum. He didn’t know if he could promise.

“Shaun?” Glassman urged again.

“I don’t want to promise.”

Glassman sighed. “Shaun, please underst—”

“But I will try.”

Glassman nodded, repeated, “Okay. I guess that’s good enough for me. But we do worry, Lea and I.”

“Did she talk to you about me? About this?”

“Yeah, she did. We want what’s best for you. You’ve just been through a traumatic experience. You almost died.”

Shaun didn't know what to say. What could he say? It sounded overly dramatic, unreal. He didn't feel like he'd almost died. Not that he could remember much of anything. There were bits and pieces, scraps of conversation and hazy images, strings of memories that felt surreal, some of them he was unsure if they were just figments of his imagination, concussed dreams or hallucinations or actual memories.

As if he'd read his mind, Glassman asked, "The accident, the time afterwards… do you remember any of it?"

Shaun went around the coffee table, gingerly sat down on the couch. Glassman sat down next to him at a respectful distance.

Shaun closed his eyes, unsure what was there. "I… remember the bus. There was a truck. The crash was very loud, people were screaming. I was… Dr. Glassman?"

Glassman's eyes were attentive on him. Shaun met his eyes, suddenly feeling guilty that he hadn't even asked this question before. "Did anyone die?"

Glassman let out a deflated breath through his nose. "Yes. Two people died on the scene, one in the ER. You were lucky."

Shaun didn't feel very lucky, but he knew he should be. Glassman continued, "Fourteen injured in total, including the driver. And you."

"I was unconscious."

"Yes, because of the head injury. Then we put you in the induced coma so the brain swelling could go down. Don't you remember that we told you that after you woke up?"

"I remember. But it was… it was very strange."

"Strange how?"

"I remember… fragments. I don't know what they mean."

"Fragments? Of what?"

"I don't know. They don't make sense. There are colors. People. The hospital, but it was different. I was in a boat that was rocking. Water was splashing on me, but it was red and I couldn't move, and there were voices. Different ones. They said my name, asked me questions, and I answered them all but they kept asking."

"Some of that may be based in reality. You had a lot of visitors, people were talking to you. Maybe your brain picked up on some of that, processed it in a strange way. It's not that far-fetched."

"You were there."

"Yeah, of course I was." Glassman's voice was strangely thick with emotion. "Shaun, we almost lost you. Of course I was there."

"I'm sorry."

Dr. Glassman met Shaun's eyes. "What are you apologizing for?"

"You… were worried. You said I almost died."

"Yes, but none of that was your fault. Shaun, you— you don't think that you could have changed anything, that you could have done anything, do you? Because you couldn't have. It was a freak accident."

"Yes, I know that."

"Okay, good."

Shaun's fingers found the seam of his slacks and he started running this thumb along the fabric on his thigh. "Can you… can you tell me more about what happened?"

"What do you mean? I wasn't there, I don't know exactly what happened beyond what the media said."

"No," Shaun clarified. "With me."

Glassman breathed in a long breath, Shaun wondered if he'd overstepped another boundary. "Was that an inappropriate question?"

"No," Glassman said immediately. "No, it wasn't. It's just… not a memory that's all that easy to relive."

"Would you rather not talk about it?"

Dr. Glassman sat up a little straighter, adjusted his glasses. "Did you already review your medical file?"

"I did when I was in the hospital. But I was concussed and there is a lot I don't remember."

"Okay. I'll make sure we get you access to that. But if you—" Dr. Glassman harrumphed, "if you want to know what I saw…"

Shaun waited, wondered again if he shouldn't have asked. It seemed like Dr. Glassman was struggling with the answers. Maybe he could ask more specific questions to make it easier. "Were you in the ER when I was brought in?"

"Not immediately, no. They called me, asked me to come down. You had— You were unconscious, they were reducing your shoulder, then you went into imaging for the head injury and assessment of internal bleeding.

"We saw the brain swelling, decided to induce a medical coma. They took you to the ICU, you were heavily sedated for three days. Those fragments you remember, it might be from that time, or the day we brought you out of the sedation. You were pretty confused at first."

"I… think I remember some of that. You and Lea were there."

"Yeah. We were both there quite a lot, but all your other friends and colleagues, too. I read to you from *To Kill A Mockingbird*."

“I don’t remember that.”

“No, I didn’t think you would. But I was hoping maybe you’d find it comforting. In a way.”

“Maybe I did.”

“Yeah, who knows. And then, after that, I think you probably remember the rest. Your brain was healing, you were getting better. You were starting to communicate, talk to us.”

“You wanted me to get out of bed.”

Glassman chuckled. “Yes, I did.”

“And then Kelly did get me out of bed.”

“Can you understand now why I hated that part?”

Shaun didn’t particularly like the memory. “Yes, I think so.”

“You were a little better at it than I was, though.”

Shaun looked up, sought out Dr. Glassman’s eyes. “Thank you,” he said.

Glassman frowned. “For what?”

“For helping. For being there for me.”

“Shaun, you don’t have to thank me for that. You did the same for me after my cancer diagnosis.”

“I wasn’t very good at it.”

“Nonsense,” Glassman denied, “You were plenty good.”

“You yelled at me a lot.”

There was another chuckle from Glassman. “I did, didn’t I?”

“I didn’t know how to help you. You told me to stop trying.”

“Yeah, but you came back and sat with me, once you had figured out what I needed. You did good, Shaun.”

“You… are doing good, too.”

Glassman nodded. “Well, thank you for the endorsement. I’m glad you don’t have to yell at me, because I’m not sure I’d be coming back if you did.”

“Lea would make you.”

“Yes, that she definitely would.”

“I want to thank her, too. She has been doing a lot to help me.”

“And I’m sure she’d be happy if you did.”

“How do I thank her for this?”

Glassman raised his eyebrows. “You’re her husband, you tell me. What does she like?”

“The *Uncharted* games, Sauvignon Blanc, working with computers, *RuPaul’s Drag Race*…”

“No, I mean things that are nice for her. Special. Something that she can’t get or do every day, something you can help her with or that you can do together.”

Shaun tried to think. “Driving go-karts, getting a massage, sex… I can’t do these things at the moment.”

“*You* can’t, but someone else can.”

“You want Lea to have sex with someone other than me?”

“No. Shaun.” Glassman let out a short laugh. “I was thinking gift card for a spa where she can go with her friends, or with you after your injuries have healed if you want to be there for it.”

“I… have never been to a spa.”

“Well, maybe that’s a nice little adventure to try, then. If you wanna be adventurous. Comfort zone, and all of that.”

Shaun shuddered a little. He wasn’t sure he liked the idea.

“Think about it,” Glassman added.

“Okay, I will.”

“Is Lea driving you to your physio appointment?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, good. I should get back to the hospital. Do you want me to help with the dishes?”

“No,” Shaun declined. “Thank you.”

“All right. Let me know if you need help with anything.”

Why was everyone always saying that? He wasn’t an invalid. “Yes,” he said curtly.

Glassman put on his jacket, turned around in the door. “See you around.”

Shaun was already carrying the dishes to the kitchen and didn’t reply, leaving Dr. Glassman to pull the door closed himself.

+-+-+-+-+

Chapter 9: You and I are here

Lea watched Shaun through the windscreen of the parked Striped Tomato as he exited the building with the physiotherapy studio and walked towards her. She could see he was keeping up appearances, was trying to put up a brave front, but the physiotherapy session had definitely aggravated his shoulder. He was holding his whole body very gingerly, and he couldn't suppress the hiss when he sat down in the passenger seat of her car.

She remembered what Glassman had said to her about his physical therapy, and so she let Shaun get settled on the couch when they got home, and then she got the few things that she knew would help.

The orange pill bottle rattled slightly, it was still fairly full. She put it on the coffee table with a glass of water. "Yes, these are the Percocet, and yes, I know you don't like them, but you need to take these today, Shaun. Just today, okay? Because I can see you're in pain, and that can't be good."

He drew a face, but she decided to push through it. She opened the bottle for him, held it out to him. "Shaun, please. They must have told you this in PT, too."

His face couldn't betray that she'd called him out—it never could. His tone was unhappy. "They did."

"So take them. You have to know that this is the lesser evil right now."

He grimaced again, but to her relief complied. Lea got up and went to the fridge, got out one of the ice packs that she'd made sure to put in the freezer compartment. She wrapped it in a dish towel and took it to the couch.

"You should be icing the shoulder, too, right?"

He briefly met her gaze. "How do you know this?"

"Shaun, I'm not stupid. They moved your injured shoulder around quite a bit, it's not that hard to figure out what that will do to a torn rotator cuff. And, you know, Glassy might have mentioned it, too. Come on, it'll give you some relief, help with the swelling. I'll help you with it if you tell me where it needs to go."

"Okay," he acquiesced and guided her to where the ice pack was best placed, figured out a way to keep it wedged there between his body and the backrest of the couch. She wished there was more she could do to help, it hurt her to see him in acute pain like this, but she also knew it was part of the process, and that it would get better over time.

She watched him for a minute, waited if he was going to say anything, but Shaun stayed silent, his gaze somewhere beyond the wall. She tried to make her voice sound casual when she asked, "Did they say anything about, you know… your outlook?"

Shaun turned his head to her slightly but didn't look at her. "No."

"Did you ask?"

"Yes. The therapist said there was no cause for concern and that it was too early to say but that my current range of motion was typical for this type of injury."

"That sounds encouraging, though."

Shaun just hummed, and she could see that he was still worried. He stayed quiet for a long moment, then said, "Lea? What if I can't be a surgeon?"

"Oh, Shaun. It's too early to worry about that."

"N-no." He turned his head to look at her. "It is *not* too early. What if I can't go back to surgery, what do I do then?"

"You're always so good at finding new solutions, at adapting. Don't you think you could do that then, too? Adapt, find something else in medicine that fulfills you?"

It took him a few seconds to respond. "I've always wanted to be a surgeon."

"Yeah. I know. But is that really the only thing that would make you happy, professionally? I know you hated it when you were in Pathology, but that was different. You weren't there because you wanted to, you were there because your boss didn't think you could be a capable surgeon.

"Don't you think it would be different if there was a physical reason you couldn't be a surgeon? Don't you think you could accept that and try to find the next best thing for you? Try a few different things, even. You're really good at a lot of things that aren't actual surgery."

"I won't be happy if I can't operate. I liked diagnosing people in Path, but I hated that I couldn't be in the OR, or follow the patient progression and their medical outcomes."

"No one says you have to go back to Path. There's a million other things you could do. Maybe it doesn't even necessarily have to be a job in a hospital. Shaun, your options are wide open."

"No, they're not. Not until I've finished my residency."

"Yeah, but I'm sure that St. Bon's would make that happen in some way. You know you have the whole surgical department behind you. And I still think you're painting things black a little too prematurely.

"You've been really good with your shoulder exercises. You've made sure you don't get that frozen shoulder thing. I know you'll be doing everything you can to get that shoulder mobilized again. You're an incredibly hard worker, Shaun, and you're always super focused. That will play in your favor."

He stayed quiet, and Lea didn't know what else there was to say. He was worried, and that worry wouldn't go away until his shoulder was healing more, until they had a better idea of where he stood with the recovery prognosis. All she could do was try to be there for him and support him as best as she could.

He shifted around a little, and she asked, "Do you want a new ice pack? There's another one in the freezer compartment."

“No, thank you,” he declined, reaching over with his good arm but wincing at the motion. She helped him out, took the ice pack and moved it away from his shoulder. “I’ll put this back in the freezer, let me know if you want the other one later, okay?”

A confirmatory sound was her answer, and she had a feeling that was the extent of conversation he was willing to have right now. Maybe the Percocet was kicking in, they always made him sleepy. She took the remote control from the wooden box on the table and put it in Shaun’s lap. “The Weather Channel’s ready for the taking. I’ll go do some homework for our gut sensor. Unless there’s something I can do for you.”

His eyelids were already drooping when he repeated, “No, thank you.”

Yep, he’d be gone before long.

+-+-+-+-+

Lea put the last of the cutlery from the dishwasher into the kitchen drawer and closed the dishwasher door. Another chore over and done with.

They’d spent the weekend together, tried to make the best of the situation by spending more time together, taking a short walk in the nearby park, cooking together, enjoying episodes of a British TV show they’d wanted to watch for a while. He was getting better every day, was keeping up with the daily shoulder exercises, was regaining more and more of his energy.

Lea turned around and saw Shaun still sitting at the table. He’d moved there a few minutes ago, was idly playing with the plastic tube of the incentive spirometer. She knew it was time for his breathing exercises, but also knew he hated them because they always caused pain, but at least he was doing them now with more regularity.

She sidled up to him. “Are you stalling?” she probed.

He just let out an unhappy sound, which basically said, yes, he was definitely stalling.

“You know you have to do it, though, right?”

He said nothing, pushed the spirometer away from him.

“Shaun?” she prompted.

His voice was laced with defeat and frustration. “Everything hurts all the time.”

A wave of inadvertent emotion washed over her. She knew he didn’t want the pity, but she also wished she could do something to help him. She edged closer, stood right next to him on his left, gently cupped his head with her hand and drew him to her so that he leaned into her side.

He didn’t resist and her hand came into his hair and gently played with it while he rested against her, held on to her with his left arm.

“You’re such a sad, achy little muffin. What are we gonna do with you?” she said playfully.

She was surprised when he stiffened and pushed back from her. His voice was suddenly resentful. “This is not funny, Lea.”

She took a step away, instantly regretting her remark. “I know. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to sound condescending.”

He looked at the table, eyed the spirometer again. She knew it was a thorn in his side, a hurdle he was trying to find the energy to attempt to overcome.

She went to the bedroom and shook out three of the ibuprofen that stood on his bedside table. She took the glass of water with her as well.

Back by the table, she placed the pills in front of Shaun along with the glass of water. “I know the ibuprofen only takes the edge off, but it’s better than nothing. Take them now, do the exercises, and they’ll help with the pain after you’re done. Please?”

To her relief, he actually took the painkillers, washed them down with a few sips of water. She also knew he didn’t like being watched while he went through the motions, so she gently touched his shoulder and said, “I’ll be in the bedroom while you do this. I know it sucks, but I also know you can do it. We’ll get you to relax a little afterwards.”

He let out a weary breath, but it told her he was bracing himself to do it. And what she’d just told him had given her an idea.

She closed the bedroom door behind her, started looking for what she’d need. The tub with the orange and ginger yoga balm was in her nightstand drawer, her yoga mat was rolled up in the corner. She put both on the bed, then started folding up some of the clothes she’d left on the old bus seat the night before while she waited for Shaun to finish his exercises.

Shaun gently rapped on the door a few minutes later, opening it to peek his head in. “I am done,” he said.

She nodded, took the yoga mat and the tub with the balm with her to the living room. He eyed her with mild interest. “Are you doing yoga now?”

“No. I’d like you to try something with me.”

She could see the immediate resistance from him, so she explained, “Nothing strenuous. Actually, incredibly far from strenuous. Shaun, just bear with me, okay? I think it’ll be nice, and good for you. Just…”

She let him stand there, went to the couch and pushed the coffee table a little to the side so that she had room to roll out the yoga mat there. She looked at him. He hadn’t moved.

“Please come here for a minute,” she asked.

He looked so adorably apprehensive and resistant that she had to smile. She went over to him, reached out her hand to take his, tugging at it just a tiny bit. “Shaun, you’ve been so tense, and you say you’re aching all the time. I’d really like to try to get you to relax a little. Please trust me that I’m gonna be super gentle and careful.”

He took a tentative step, followed her to the yoga mat.

“Now lie down on your back. Here, I’ll help you.”

He moaned a little as he lay down, and she fetched a pillow from the couch to put it under his right elbow and upper arm to support it in a more comfortable position. “Now try and let all your muscles relax, let go of all that tension. Let your feet fall to the sides, put that left arm next to you, palm up. You know, like I do in savasana.” She knew he’d seen her do it often enough.

He hesitantly followed her instructions, and she could see he was still way too tense, approaching it way too technically. She got herself a pillow as well, then moved to where his head was, kneeling down behind it.

“Okay, Shaun? I know this is hard for you, but I’d like you to try to relax. Don’t force anything, don’t think too hard. Just run with it, let it happen. Close your eyes, feel it, savor it. I’ll be touching you a little, let me know if that’s uncomfortable, but I’ll try to be careful.”

She looked down his body again, saw that he was still pretty wound up. His right arm was in the shoulder brace, and that naturally had his arm laying across his chest. She knew the cracked ribs were a major point of discomfort, wondered what she could do. Maybe…

“Don’t startle, I’ll unfasten your wrist strap on the brace, okay?”

She did so, very gently guided his right arm so that his hand lay across his belly rather than his ribs, taking away some of the weight. She made sure to adjust the pillow under his upper arm so that it gave enough support. “Does that feel okay?”

He gave her a confirmatory, “Yes.”

“Okay, good.” She knelt back by the top of his head again, taking the tub with the yoga balm and opened it. “I know I’ve asked you before, but does this smell okay to you?” She put a little on the tip of her index finger and rubbed it with her thumb, held it close to his nose.

He drew in a breath, seemed satisfied. “It smells nice.”

“Let me put a little on your forehead, I wanna make sure that doesn’t feel weird for you.”

He confirmed with an “Okay,” and she had to smile, hoping it wasn’t just to appease her. “I want this to be nice for you. Please don’t say yes just for me.”

“It’s okay,” he told her.

“All right, here we go.”

She took a little more of the balm and tentatively spread a small amount above the bridge of his nose between his eyebrows, waiting for his reaction. He wasn’t moving, wasn’t grimacing or flinching. She took that as a good sign.

“I’ll rub my palms together now, don’t startle. It’s just to warm up my hands. She did it until she could feel the friction warm up the skin of her palms. Then she spread some of the balm in her palms and told him, “Keep your eyes closed, just relax, breathe in.”

She let the hands hover over his face so that the gentle orange and ginger scent would reach his nose and the warmth of her palms shield his face. She wasn’t sure it was gonna do much for him. She held her palms there for a moment, then moved to his forehead.

The bruising on the right side of his face had graduated to a very faint green now, it was almost gone. The scrapes on his cheek were healing too, some already well on the way there. The by now well pronounced stubble was growing into the beginnings of a beard.

She drew both her thumbs in straight motions from the bridge of his nose two inches up his forehead, applying gentle pressure. He was still so tense, she could feel it.

She guided her hands to the base of his skull, found the spot where his spine connected to his skull and softly massaged around it. “Loosen your jaw, let your tongue relax. Slacken your facial muscles, your forehead, the muscles around your eyes. Just let it go, Shaun.”

After a minute or two, she moved her hands to the side of his head, her index and middle finger finding his temples. She pressed very carefully into them, rubbing there in small circles, then moved her fingers up just a little, keeping to apply gentle pressure.

Finally, he was easing up a little, starting to let the tension go. Her fingers moved to his hairline, and she traced her fingertips along it, let her fingers come into his hair, moving from massage to soft caress, carefully avoiding the area where he’d had the scalp laceration.

That seemed to do the trick, she could almost feel him melting underneath her hands, and her mouth drew into a smile. Yes, that was it. That was what he needed, what she had hoped they could do together. Maybe the painkillers were also kicking in now. He really needed the release, the reprieve.

She kept giving him all the tender loving care she could for a few minutes, felt him fully relax eventually. His breath evened out, his eyes still closed, his facial features calm and serene.

Lea kept it up for a few minutes longer, enjoying his total release of tension and relaxation just as much as him.

He didn’t react at all when she stopped with her ministrations, and she wondered…

“Shaun?” she whispered.

He didn’t respond. He had fallen asleep. Ultimate goal achieved.

She quietly got up and smiled as she got the Pendleton blanket and draped it over him, trying not to wake him. He looked very innocent and peaceful, and she wished he could have more moments like this.

She knew it would get better, he would heal. But it would take time, and it would keep being filled with frustration and impatience and aches and pains. She vowed to be there for him as much as she could.

+-+-+-+-+

Shaun was restless. He knew it wasn’t good for him, and his body told him the same thing.

With Lea at work, he was by himself again during the day with little to do that felt in any way useful or satisfactory. He’d tried pacing around the patio, around the apartment, but now his ribs were aching and he felt trapped and uncomfortable in the shoulder brace. He knew he wouldn’t have to wear it for that much longer, maybe another week or two. The physical therapy was

helping, he was slowly getting more and more range of motion back, and the pain was getting better, too.

Everything was annoying him today. He hadn't been able to concentrate on his novel, on the medical research he'd looked at. Daytime television was unwatchable, and nothing felt right. Lea and he had texted a bit back and forth in the morning, he was getting better at it, but her message from later in the afternoon had been short. 'Sorry, busy now. Will see you later.'

It was getting towards the end of the day, Lea should be home soon, they usually had dinner together. His mind went back to his conversation with Dr. Glassman, he wanted to be more useful, wanted to do something nice for the both of them. Making dinner seemed like a good start, and these days it was all Lea because Shaun was just so incompetent with his one working arm.

He looked through the fridge, through what they had in storage in the cabinets. There was some fresh chicken and broccoli, he vaguely remembered her saying something about Asian stir fry. None of them were gifted cooks, but they got by on simple things. And he could do stir fry, he'd done it before, he still had the recipe saved on his phone.

He got the chicken out of the fridge, started unwrapping it and stopped when he realized it was wrapped in cellophane instead of the usual parchment. God, he despised cellophane, the bane of his cooking existence.

He positively hated how it felt, how it was loud and grating in his ears when it crinkled, how it was rigid and never stayed folded the way you wanted it to. It tended to sprinkle juice or liquid everywhere when you tried to handle it. He just… he didn't want to touch it.

He took a step back, eyed the wrapped ready-cut chicken with disdain, unsure what to do. It wouldn't unwrap itself. He'd have to either clench his jaw and get through it or wait for Lea to deal with it. He drew in a breath, let it out slowly against the dull ache in his ribcage. He could do this. It was just plastic foil.

It was just as irritating as he remembered it, but Shaun managed to get the chicken out of the cellophane, threw it in the trash with a deep loathing, hating it more when it didn't fold neatly into the trash can, tried to scrub the sound and feel under his fingers from this memory. How did neurotypical people not hate this?

He set the chicken aside and tried to figure out what to do about the broccoli. It was a whole head all in one piece. Almost impossible to chop up just with his left hand. He'd have to figure something out.

And then there were the chickpeas. The can was one of those with a pull tab—another challenge if you only had one fully working arm. But he was fairly sure he could do this. If he held it with his right hand, it should work.

It didn't take long for Shaun to realize that it didn't actually work. He had to grip the can with enough force to pull, and that hurt his shoulder, and the prolonged immobilization wasn't helping with his muscle strength. Just as he was about to pull the lid off with his left hand, the can slipped from his fingers, and before he could do anything, the half open can tumbled to the floor, spilling liquid and chickpeas everywhere.

He vaguely registered movement from the apartment door just as he was letting out a frustrated sound that was somewhere between a growl and an 'ugh', followed by a, "Ffff…"

"Shaun?"

It was Lea, and there were chickpeas and liquid all across the floor, the now half empty can right in the middle of it, and Shaun looked at it helplessly, angry that he'd messed this simple thing up, too.

"Jesus, Shaunie, what are you doing?" Lea dropped her bag by the door, went up to the kitchen island.

"No," he told her, stumbling backwards towards the window. It sounded angry, even to him.

"Shaun, hey."

"No," he said again, lifting his left hand.

She stopped, stayed at a distance, even though he knew she wanted to help, her eyes wide, something in them that seemed familiar but that he didn't— Fuck. He was useless, he couldn't do anything right these days.

He felt his back colliding with the old industrial style stool that stood there by the window and he stopped moving, watched how Lea was turning her attention to the chickpeas all over the floor, crouching down with the roll of kitchen towel to clean up the mess.

He felt his eyes tearing up, and that made him angry, too. This day had been one frustration after the next, and this was just perfect. He'd wanted to do something nice for her, for them, and now she was cleaning up after him. Again.

"Don't," he snapped at her, but she didn't. He took a step closer. "Stop."

She wiped up a bit more of the liquid, then turned so she could look up at him. "Shaun, it's okay."

"No," he shot back, "it's not okay!"

She straightened up, put the soggy towel and the half open can on the kitchen island, stood to face him, her voice soft. "Hey. Shaun. It's fine, it's just some spilled chickpeas. It happens. I'll clean it up, it's not a big deal."

"It is! It *is* a big deal!"

She gave him her full attention now. "Shaun, what is going on? Why are you angry?"

"I… I can't. I can't do anything."

She sighed. "You've got a shoulder injury. No one is expecting you to open cans and…" she looked at the kitchen island, "cook dinner, by the looks of it."

He let out a frustrated breath through his nose, took a step back again. "I wanted… I wanted to do something nice. For you."

She cocked her head to the side. “Aw, Shaunie. While that’s much appreciated, I wish you’d just waited for me to be home. We could have done it together. That would have been nice, too.”

He blinked, feeling a tear dislodge, wiped at it irritably, trying to sort out all the emotions that were rising in his chest that he didn’t like, that felt too confusing, too overwhelming. And there was Lea, in front of him, tentatively holding out a hand, waiting to see if he’d take it.

He looked at it for a long moment, then reached for it, trying to draw comfort from her touch. She stepped closer, let her other hand touch his right arm, running her fingers along it ever so gently.

“It’s okay,” she said gently. “I get it. You’re frustrated, and it sucks. But we’ll figure it out. Together. Just don’t be upset. I’m here to help. I’ll let you clean up if you wanna do it yourself, but might be easier if we do it together. And then I’ll help you cook. How’s that sound?”

“This was our last can of chickpeas.”

She let go of his hand and turned towards the kitchen island. “There’s about half of it left. And maybe we can substitute it with something else. Don’t we still have some baby carrots?”

Shaun let out a hum. The recipe said—

“I know the recipe says differently,” Lea took the words out of his mouth. “But remember what we talked about, about being flexible sometimes?”

Flexibility. He didn’t like it. Often it was messy and unregulated, there was a reason there were rules. Lea tried again when she read his reluctance. “Or you can go and do something else while I do the cooking.”

“No,” he said. “I want to help.”

“Okay then. Let’s clean up the rest of the floor and then we’ll see what we can cook up. Quite literally.”

They cleaned up the floor together, Shaun helped as best as he could, trying to find all of the stray chickpeas that had rolled around, careful not to step into any of them. It was taken care of quickly.

When Lea looked at the chicken, she raised her eyebrows. “Wasn’t this wrapped in cellophane?”

Shaun involuntarily shuddered. “Yes.”

“Should I be asking what you did with it?”

Why was she asking him this, wasn’t it obvious? “I threw it away.”

“Did you wear gloves and headphones?”

He frowned. “No.”

Lea nodded in approval. “Wow. That’s new. So proud of you, Shaunie.”

Was she praising him for handling a sheet of plastic? Were those the accomplishments he was expected to achieve these days? He put down the bottle of oil he was holding with an audible clank, not able to hold back the frustrated sound that came out of his mouth.

He stepped away, stepped down into the living space, rubbing his thumb up and down the tablespoon he was still holding, acutely aware Lea was following him. Why was everything so irritating today, every little thing setting him off?

She stepped into his field of vision. “I’m sorry, Shaun. What did I say that offended you?”

“You…” he started, not even sure how to explain it. He paced away a few steps, still rubbing the metal spoon.

“I what? Please talk to me.”

He went behind the couch, putting some distance between them. “I feel useless,” he finally said.

She didn’t follow, but she turned to him. “Shaun, you’re on medical leave. You’re allowed to be useless. You’re still healing. You don’t have to save the world.”

“I don’t want to save the world. I can’t even cook dinner.”

“Yeah, so what? You will be able to do it again, once you’re out of that brace. Until then we adapt, we help each other. But you gotta let me help you.”

He kept pacing, he didn’t want that. He wanted to be able to do things.

Lea continued, “Is that what you’ve been thinking about all day? Being useless, being frustrated? Is that why you tried to prove that you weren’t, by making us dinner?”

He hated when she was able to read him so easily, find and poke those sore spots with one practiced grasp.

“Don’t you think you should cut yourself a little slack? Shaun, you’re a doctor, you know how this works. These injuries take time to heal, and until then, there’s very little you can do. You’ll have to accept that you’ll be a little useless for a while. It’s part of the process.

“I really appreciate that you tried to do a nice thing for me today, but you don’t have to be a hero trying to do it. I just want you to get better, that’s all I need. We can do all those normal things when your injuries have healed. Right now, I just want to spend time with you, okay? Help you however I can, help you feel more comfortable, because I know you’d do the same thing for me. Will you let me do that?”

He stopped pacing, stopped the spoon rubbing and turned to look at her. “I don’t want to watch you do everything. That makes me feel more useless.”

“Yeah, okay, I get that. So why don’t you do some of the little things? Set the table, for instance. Pick the things that aren’t so hard right now, that you don’t need two arms for.”

He let out a sigh. “Okay.”

She gave him a smile. “Can you tell me what I said that made you upset?”

“You… said you were proud of me for throwing away the cellophane.”

He could see that she was frowning. “Because I know you hate it with a passion, but you still did it.”

“I do things I hate all the time that are a lot harder.”

She nodded. “Okay, so you’re saying that came across as patronizing?”

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry, it wasn’t supposed to sound that way. I was genuinely proud that you stepped out of your comfort zone. I know these things aren’t always easy for you. It was meant to be encouraging.”

He drew in a breath and let it out. It helped calm him. “I know.”

She walked around the couch, stood in front of him. “I want to kiss you.”

He allowed himself a small smile. “I want to kiss you, too.”

“I don’t want it to hurt you.”

He reached out and drew her closer, and their lips met. He immediately felt more at ease, felt some of the apprehension melt away. He was so lucky to have her, this would be so much harder without her.

When she pulled back, she let her left hand slide down his left arm until their hands met, and she gently pulled the spoon out of it. “Come on, let’s get that dinner made. I’m really hungry.”

She could help but smile, and he wasn’t sure where the thought was coming from, but he asked, “Lea?”

She looked at him. “Yes, Chickpea?”

He frowned. “Why did you just call me Chickpea?”

She smiled, shrugged a little. “Because you’re a total chickpea when you’re cute and adorable. I won’t use it again if you hate it.”

“I… don’t hate it.”

“Okay, Chickpea. What did you want to ask me?”

He hesitated a moment, then said, “What you did yesterday, can we do that again? Later?”

“What did I do yesterday?”

“On the yoga mat?”

“The relaxation exercise?”

“Yes.”

Her smile widened. “You really liked that, huh?”

“Yes,” he confirmed.

“We absolutely *can* do that again. I’d love to.”

“Thank you.”

“Of course.”

+-+-+-+-+

Chapter 10: Just like a memory

Lea looked at her watch, nervously tapped her fingertips against each other. Shaun was taking a long time in the bathroom this morning and she had to put make-up on before she left for work.

She knocked on the bathroom door. “Shaun? Can I come in for a moment?”

“Yes,” came the muffled response.

She rolled the door open. He was standing at the sink in his day clothes, looking at himself in the mirror, his hand rubbing along his scruffy chin. She sidled up to him.

“I want to shave it off,” he said. There was a frustrated undertone to it.

“Really? I like it on you. Makes you look really handsome.”

He made a displeased face. “I don’t like the way it feels.”

“Yeah, okay, I can see that.”

“Can you help me?”

“With shaving?”

“Yes.”

“Didn’t we have this conversation before? I’d actually be more comfortable if you asked Glassy for any man-shaving. And I’m running late, I have a meeting I need to be in the office for, so it’d have to wait until tonight anyway.” She reached for the cabinet above the sink. “May I?”

Shaun stepped away and let her open the cabinet so she could get to her make-up. “I need to run something else by Glassy anyway. I’ll ask him if he can help you with your scruff, okay?”

She wasn’t sure how much he liked the idea of her handling his own matters. He just gave her a non-committal, “Hm.”

She looked for the eyeshadow in the cabinet, then found it and put it down on the sink. “Are you done here? I need to do my make-up.”

“I couldn’t get the brace on right.”

“Oh.” She looked at it, realized that it was the first time he hadn’t asked her to assist him with it. Perhaps that was what had taken so long. “Why didn’t you wait for me to help you?”

He let out a disapproving sound. She waited for more, but nothing was forthcoming.

“Shaun, you know there’s no shame in asking me for help.”

“Yes,” he just said snippily, then left the room.

She went after him, followed him into the bedroom. “Wait. Shaun. Please don’t be like this. Let me at least fix that Velcro around your chest.” There was a strap he couldn’t reach well himself that was hanging loose.

He stood by the wardrobe, his face in an unhappy pout but let her adjust and fasten the Velcro.

“How’s that?”

“Okay,” he told her huffily.

“Hey,” she said in a gentle voice, “what’s going on? Why are you frustrated?”

He turned away from her. “You know why.”

“Because you’re stuck at home with lingering pain and nothing to do and it’s getting more boring every day while you still can’t use your right arm and do any of the things you want to do, and you think you’re being a burden, which you’re actually not.”

He gave her a cursory look that said it all. He didn’t respond verbally.

She nodded. “Yeah, I get it. And it’s sucky. I know I sound like a broken record, but there’s very little we can do about it, Shaun.”

“Yes, I know.” His tone was still laced with frustration.

“So is there an actual solution to that?”

He let out a despaired breath. “I don’t know.”

She lifted her arms, let them sink to her sides again. “Yeah, me neither. Maybe we need to find you a one-armed temporary hobby. Do you maybe wanna think about that? Text me if you have ideas, because I really have to go now.”

He didn’t say anything else, and she hoped he wasn’t going to be stewing on that the whole day. She made a mental note to check in with him after her work meeting. And to talk to Glassman about it, like she’d planned to anyway.

+-+-+-+-+

“Glassy.” Aaron lifted his head from the report he’d been engrossed in to acknowledge Lea entering his office. “I need your help.”

He smirked, gave her a look over the rim of his glasses.

Without preamble, she stated, “Shaun is going stir-crazy cooped up at home, and I swear one of these days, I’m gonna go stir-crazy with him. We need to get him out of the house.”

He chuckled. “You’ve got a car, don’t you? Why don’t you take him somewhere?”

She lifted her arms. “I don’t know. He’s still got those cracked ribs, I know they’re bothering him a lot. He doesn’t always say it, and he’s a stubborn idiot who doesn’t take as many painkillers as he should. With that busted shoulder, needs help with almost everything, and that frustrates the hell out of him. He dropped a can of chickpeas yesterday he was trying to open, they went everywhere, he got really upset about it.

“I think I’m at the end of the road with what *I* can do to help, because apparently he thinks that he’s being a huge burden or something. Which he’s not, but you know how he gets these ideas in his head. And then when he’s home all day on his own, that doesn’t really help…”

Aaron put away the folder with the report. “You know what, I think I’ve got just the thing in mind. One of my old buddies has a horse sanctuary outside of the city. Could be a nice day trip.”

“Horses?” she asked.

“Yeah.” He squinted at her. “Bad idea?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know, you tell me. Has Shaun ever been around horses?”

“Probably not, beyond the odd petting zoo visit as a kid.”

She looked at him for another long moment. “You know, I could very well see him actually liking it. And even if he’s not into the horses, it could still be a welcome distraction.”

He nodded. “I’ll make a phone call, see what I can arrange. I’ll check with Shaun, too.”

She smiled a grateful smile. “Thank you. You’re a lifesaver.”

“Sometimes very literally so,” he quipped.

“Oh, something else. Shaun wants to shave off his one-week facial scruff because it’s starting to annoy him. Can you help him with that?”

“Can’t you?”

“I probably could, but it’s just… I don’t know, it just feels like a dude thing, you know? I’ve never shaved a man’s face before.”

He couldn’t help but smile a little. “I think this is the first time I’ve ever heard Shaun being referred to as a ‘dude’, but, yes, I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thank you,” she said, pointing a finger at him before she left his office, and he watched her go. The horse farm was not a half bad idea, he mused. He hadn’t seen his friend Ira in a long while, it would be a great opportunity to catch up.

And if he was being quite honest, he was now curious to see how Shaun would be with horses, so he picked up his phone, scrolled through his address book until he found what he was looking for. The call was answered after a few rings.

“Hey, Ira, it’s Aaron Glassman. How are you doing?”

“Aaron, that’s a pleasant surprise. Long time, no see.”

“Yeah, I know. Life’s been kinda busy.”

“You still diggin’ around in people’s brains?”

“Not as much anymore these days, but yeah. Listen, I actually wanted to ask you for a favor.”

“Sure, what do you need?”

“You still have the horse farm, right?”

“Yes. Well, my daughter’s running it now, but it’s still going strong.”

Aaron harrumphed. “It’s a bit of a long story, but you remember Shaun, right?”

“The autistic kid you raised?”

He chuckled. “Not so much a kid anymore, he just turned 30. He was in an accident and he’s been housebound for a while with an injured shoulder. He’s going a little stir-crazy and I was wondering if we could come out to the farm for a day. You know, change of scenery. I think it’ll be good for him.”

“Oh yeah, for sure! Tammy and I would love to have you, how does this weekend sound?”

“I’ll check with Shaun and his wife, but maybe we can come out Saturday or Sunday. I’ll text you. Thanks a lot.”

“I’d love to see you again, old pal.”

“Yeah, me too. Looking forward to it.”

They hung up after their goodbyes, and Aaron pulled up Shaun’s number in his phone and dialed it. It took a little while for him to answer.

“Hello, Dr. Glassman.” He sounded tired.

“Hey Shaun, how you doing?”

“I’m doing okay.”

“Are you? You sound tired.”

“I *am* tired.”

“Still not getting enough sleep, huh? I hope you’re taking plenty of day naps.”

“I… do. You woke me up.”

“I’m sorry. Do you want me to call later, go back to sleep?”

“No. I’m awake now.”

“Okay. Listen, how do you feel about taking a trip this weekend? Get out of the house a little. Might be nice.”

“A trip to where?”

“I’ve got a friend who has a horse sanctuary outside of the city. We can visit for a bit, take a look around, catch up.”

Shaun hummed one of uncertainty hums, and Aaron had to smile. Maybe he needed a little gentle encouragement. “Check with Lea, see what she thinks. But it’s very laid back, quiet. I think you’ll like it.”

Shaun gave him a tentative, “Okay,” and Aaron hoped Lea would do the rest to get him to agree. After all, she was the one who had suggested it.

“One more thing, Shaun. I can come by tonight, help you with that beard shaving.”

“It is not a beard.”

“I don’t think it matters what it’s called, Lea mentioned you wanted it gone.”

“Yes. I don’t like it.”

“Does tonight work for you?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. I’ll see you later, then.”

“Okay, Dr. Glassman.”

Shaun had hung up before Glassman could utter a farewell—classic Shaun. It still amused Aaron, and he put away the phone with a smile.

+-+-+-+-+

Standing in Shaun’s bathroom, Aaron held the shaving cream can so that the nozzle fed into Shaun’s hand and pushed on it. A heap of white foam oozed out that Shaun started applying to his face.

Aaron remarked, “Feels like old times, doesn’t it?”

Shaun stopped with the cream and briefly looked in Aaron's direction. "You never shaved me before."

"No, I guess not, but I taught you how to do it."

"It wasn't very hard."

"Are you trying to convince me that this isn't a good memory?"

Shaun's eyes widened a little. "No. It *is* a good memory."

"Okay, glad to know we agree on that. You sure you don't wanna keep going and grow an actual beard?"

Shaun's answer was very quick. "Yes."

"It will stop being annoying and scratchy, once you get past the second week."

"I don't want a beard. This is only because of my skin abrasions, and those have healed now."

Aaron shrugged. "I just think this looks good on you, but you're the boss."

"Lea said that as well."

"See, Lea has good taste."

Shaun held out his hand and Aaron squirted more foam into it as Shaun inquired, "Are you wearing a beard because you think it makes you more attractive?"

That was actually a good question. He'd worn a beard for so long that he couldn't quite remember what had prompted the decision. "I don't know. It's just easier. You don't have to shave every day."

"It still has to be trimmed."

"Yeah, but not as often."

"I have never seen you without a beard."

"No, I don't think you have. I can dig up some old photos if you like."

Shaun was now done with applying the shaving cream, and Aaron took the razor in his hand. "Ready?"

"Please try not to cut me."

Aaron gave him a look that he hoped was saying, 'Really, Shaun?' which Shaun seemed to be mostly ignoring. Aaron wasn't certain if that was out of ignorance or on purpose.

He worked quietly for a few minutes, the scraping of the razor the only sound that broke the silence, and he could see that Shaun was getting less apprehensive by the minute. Their silence

was comfortable. Although Shaun was all grown up and independent now, the familiarity was still there and words weren't needed.

When he was done with the right side, having taken extra care where the skin injuries had been, he met Shaun's gaze through the mirror. "How is that?"

Shaun inspected himself in the mirror. "It's good."

"Okay," Aaron confirmed and went to work on the left side of Shaun's face, then moved to the neck and the trickier areas on the chin and around the lips. It took a good while until Shaun was shaven clean and Shaun was happy with it, but he looked content and satisfied with the result after he'd wiped off the last of the shaving cream.

"Have you thought any more about the horse farm?" Aaron asked.

Shaun put away the towel, hung it neatly over the rim of the bathtub. "Yes. I would like to go there with you and Lea."

"Okay, that's great. I'll let Ira know we're coming. Is Saturday okay, do you think?"

"Yes," Shaun confirmed.

"All right, I'll pick you up around 10, maybe? Does that work for you?"

"Yes," Shaun confirmed again as he left the bathroom. Aaron followed him into the living room.

"You've never been around horses, have you?"

"My parents wanted us to try pony riding at a fair in Douglas once. I didn't like it very much, but I think Steve did. Do you want anything to drink?"

Aaron stopped by the dining table. "No thanks. And this won't be like that. It's a horse sanctuary, I think they have a few donkeys, too. No one will be forcing you onto any horses or anything like that."

"Oh, I know."

Shaun got himself a glass of orange juice from the fridge, then sat down at the table where Aaron joined him. "I just wanna make sure you're comfortable with the idea. We'll just look around, Ira will probably give us a tour, we can stick around a little if we want. You know, play it by ear, see how it goes and how you feel."

Shaun looked at him quizzically. "You are worried about me."

Aaron felt a tiny pang of emotion hit in the vicinity of his stomach. "Yeah, Shaun, you got out of the hospital a week ago and you're still healing from all those injuries. Of course I'm worried."

Shaun straightened up a bit more, his expression determined. "I am fine."

"Are you?"

“Yes. The injuries are healing at the expected rate, I am taking my medications, I now have ongoing physiotherapy, I am also doing the breathing exercises, even though they are painful and uncomfortable and there are no signs of pneumonia or other complications. You don’t have to worry about me.”

Aaron let out a little chuckle. “Yeah, well, it doesn’t quite work like that. But thank you for telling me, maybe I’ll worry a little bit less.”

“I don’t want you to worry about me.”

“Oh, I know. But that’s not something you can just switch off, you know. How many PT sessions have you had so far?”

“One, there’s another one scheduled for tomorrow. I have an appointment with Dr. Luca on Friday to discuss my progress.”

“Okay, that’s good. Keep me updated on that, will you?”

“Yes, I will. Do I need to prepare anything for Saturday?”

Aaron shrugged. “No, I don’t think so. Maybe don’t wear your best clothes?”

“Are you expecting for us to get dirty?”

“It’s a horse farm, there’s bound to be some muck and some dust. Will that be a problem for you?”

Shaun looked a little unsure. “I don’t know. Probably not.”

“Yeah, you’re not a little kid anymore.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

Had he said the wrong thing? “I don’t know, just… You’re a grown man now, you’ve got 30 years of experience under your belt. You’ve learned and grown. Like we all do.”

Shaun nodded. “Yes, I have.”

“Yeah, which is why I think you’ll be fine. And you know what? I’m really looking forward to it. I think it’ll be a really nice time.”

Shaun had one of his little wistful smiles on his lips now. “Yes, I hope so, too.”

It was then that there was a noise from the door, Aaron saw it opening and Lea entering. She looked at the both of them. “My two favorite men in the world, and one of them is clean-shaven.”

Aaron gave her a mischievous look. “If that was an attempt at schmoozing up to your sort of father-in-law, I’m not sure it worked very well.”

She hung her purse on the coat rack and toed off her shoes. “You, Aaron Glassman, need to learn how to take a compliment.”

She went over to Shaun and let her fingertips glide over his clean shaven cheek. “Back to normal, huh? Are you happy?”

Shaun smiled. “Yes. Very happy.”

She pulled up a chair next to him. “What did I interrupt?”

Aaron supplied, “Just some discussion about the horse farm visit. We were thinking of going on Saturday.”

“Oh yeah, that sounds great. I’m in. Shaunie, are you down?”

He looked pleased. “Yes, I think it will be a really nice time.”

“Okay, awesome. I’m hungry, have you eaten?”

Aaron got up from the table. “I should be going.”

“Are you sure? We could order in, or even go and eat out. Da Lucci maybe?”

He hesitated, looked at Shaun who seemed undecided. Lea also looked at Shaun. “We don’t have to go out if you don’t want to.”

Shaun seemed to have made his mind up in the meantime, though. “Let’s go to Da Lucci.”

Lea nodded appreciatively. “Okay, great. Pizza Parmigiana, here I come.”

+-+-+-+-+

“Shaun?” a vaguely familiar female voice said that he couldn’t quite place.

He looked up from Lea’s eReader that he’d taken with him to his physio appointment to make the wait time pass more quickly. He recognized the woman right away. “Vera.”

She sat down in the chair next to him, her gait having the characteristic limp of someone with a lower limb prosthetic. “Didn’t think I’d see you here,” she said. She pointed at his right arm. “Occupational hazard?”

“It was a bus crash.”

“How did you end up getting mixed up with a bus crash, you crazy bastard? And don’t tell me you crawled in there to help after the fact.”

“N-no. I was *in* the bus.”

“Wait, was this the mass casualty thing that was all over the news?”

“I would assume so, yes.”

“I’m sorry, Shaun, it looked pretty awful on TV. Hope you’re healing okay.”

“Yes, I’m healing okay. The physiotherapy helps.”

“If you don’t mind my asking, how’s your love life going? Did you move on? Did you fall in love again?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“No? Oh, that’s disappointing.”

“No, I didn’t have to move on. Lea is my wife now.”

“Wait, you’re married?” He saw Vera look to his left ring finger. “That’s great. How come?”

“You helped.”

“Me? How did I help?”

“Lea was listening when I was talking over the radio, when I told you she made me more. It made her realize that I also make *her* more. She kissed me after you were taken to the hospital.” The memory instantly made him smile. “It was very beautiful.”

“That’s fantastic, Shaun. And I’ll tell you right now, I’m actually also getting married. I met someone after the accident, and he proposed to me last week. I know it’s fast, but this,” she pointed to her right leg, “made me realize you shouldn’t be wasting any time.”

“Are you here for your leg?”

“Yeah. I’m getting a new prosthetic fitted and we’re still getting it adjusted. It’s a bit of a process. But it’s all good. This is better than dying in a flooded brewery basement. I don’t know if I ever truly said thank you. Thank you for saving my life, Shaun.”

He smiled again. That’s what he had become a surgeon for—saving lives. “You’re welcome. I’m very glad I saved your life.”

She nodded. “So am I. Look at us. Survivor buddies. And marriage buddies. We’re killing it.”

A young woman came into the waiting area, announcing, “Vera Bernard?”

She gave Shaun a look as she got up. “Well, that’s me. Hope you heal fast. Maybe I’ll see you around.”

“Okay,” he said, watching her walk away.

That had been an unexpected encounter, but a nice one. He didn’t often get to see patients again after he had treated them, and usually he didn’t really care. But Vera was different. Vera had been special, and he was glad to know him saving her life had meant something, and that she had found love—just like he had.

As terrible as that night had been, something good had come from it, too. And that was encouraging to know.

+-+-+-+-+

Chapter 11: The fear of the uncertainty stinging clear

The first thing Shaun noticed when he opened the car door was the smell. It wasn't that farming and livestock smells were wholly unfamiliar to him—Casper, Wyoming wasn't exactly a metropolis—but living in San Jose for these last few years, he'd forgotten what it smelled like out in the country.

It was nice out here. Lots of green, meadows lining the narrow roads when they left the outskirts of San Jose, trees up in the hills to their right. The weather was on their side as well, blue skies and sunshine. All in all a pretty perfect day for a trip outside the city.

Dr. Glassman's friend had seen them drive up, he was walking towards them as Shaun peeled himself out of the passenger seat, trying not to groan. The cracked ribs were still a pain point—quite literally. He couldn't wait for the day when he could move again without being sorely reminded that his ribcage existed.

"Aaron," the tall, wiry man with greying hair who looked to be Glassman's age greeted him. Shaun watched them go for a brief manly hug. He hesitantly ambled closer and stood next to Lea. Glassman introduced them.

"Ira, this is Shaun and his wife Lea. Shaun, Lea, this is Ira."

Ira turned to them, held out his hand to Lea who stood closest. When he looked at Shaun, taking in the shoulder brace, he must have realized a handshake probably wasn't quite so convenient, so he held up his hand in a greeting. Shaun was glad for the opportunely avoided skin contact and just said, "Hello."

"Nice to meet you both," Ira said.

Lea nodded to him. "Thanks for the invite."

"Oh, sure. How could I refuse a request from my old friend? Here, let me show you around."

They all walked towards where a large barn was located across the spacious farmyard. To their right was a sandy area with a metal barred horse pen covered by a beige tarp where a woman was lunging a dark brown horse.

Ira pointed at her. "That's my daughter Jennifer, horse is called Henry. One of our pensioners, we have a bunch of them. You'd like to think humanity has evolved, but there's still plenty of people who consider animals worthless, once they can't work anymore or need extra care."

"So you buy up horses in need?" Lea asked.

Ira nodded as they kept walking. "Yeah, sometimes. We get calls every now and then about, you know, perfectly fine horses being short-listed for the slaughterhouse or neglected animals, some of them in really terrible states. It's always so sad to see it, but the best feeling in the world when we can nurse them back to health and give them a good life out here."

As they got closer to the stables, the smell was getting a lot stronger. It was very distinctive—not just manure but also… Shaun wasn't sure he could even describe it. Probably just what horses smelled like. He stopped when they reached the stable door.

Lea noticed it and asked, “Shaun? What is it?”

“Hm.” He hesitated. “The smell is quite strong.”

The others stopped now, too. Lea took a step closer to him. “Would you rather stay outside?”

He thought for a moment, felt a little self-conscious. He knew Glassman had said that it was kinda like a family trip, but he wasn’t stupid. They were here just as much for Shaun to get a change of scenery as they were for Glassman to see his old friend again.

He tried to gather some resolve. “No, it’s okay, I will get used to it.”

“Are you sure?” Lea asked.

Ira now volunteered, “You can go to the house if you like. My wife Tammy is there, she’ll let you in. She knows you’re coming.”

“It’s okay,” Shaun asserted. It already smelled a little less pungent.

Shaun briefly glimpsed at Glassman, but the latter wasn’t paying him any heed. That was good. Shaun really didn’t want the extra attention, fairly confident that Glassman had already primed Ira on the fact that he had ASD. Which wasn’t necessarily a bad thing, it just… It was still uncomfortable and awkward sometimes, although Ira seemed the type who wasn’t going to make a big deal of it. Something that suited Shaun just fine.

The stables were just like Shaun had imagined them. Stalls lined both sides of the middle aisle, with chest-high doors and wooden dividing walls with steel bars at the top that separated the stalls. Most stalls were empty, which Ira explained as well.

“Most of the buggers are out in the pastures and paddocks right now.” He walked down the aisle until they came to the next stall that had a beige horse in it. “This is Blossom, one of our problem children. She’s got a sun allergy, so we try to limit her time outside.”

Lea gaped. “Horses can get sun allergies?”

“Yeah. It’s fairly rare, but it can happen. We have a special UV protection sheet for her that helps.”

“Wow,” Lea commented.

Ira went two stalls down, pointed at the stall there. “Mister Buns. He’s a bit of a rascal. Managed to drive a nail into his hoof yesterday, so we’re keeping him inside for a few days.”

Shaun peered over the door. Inside was a grey donkey with a white muzzle and belly and a dark cross running down his back and shoulders. Shaun asked, “Why is he called Mister Buns?”

Ira shrugged. “Beats me. That was his name when we got him, and we try not to rename unless the name is really terrible. We had a mule called Chirpy once. I kept thinking of a parakeet so we renamed him to Bigby.”

The next few stalls were all empty, one of the last ones had a dapple grey horse in it that shied away when they approached. Ira gestured at it. “And last but not least, this is—”

“Grandpa!” a child’s voice interrupted. Shaun watched a sandy-haired boy running in from the open door on the other side of the stable they were now approaching. Shaun estimated he was maybe five or six years old.

“Theo,” Ira greeted him. “Have you met our guests?”

“No,” Theo said, “Are they important people? Like those who came here last weekend?”

Ira chuckled. “No, they’re friends. This is Aaron, this is Lea, and this is Shaun. Say hello to them.”

Theo looked up at them, then said, “Hello.”

Shaun felt unsure what to do. Children weren’t his forte. They were unpredictable and hard to read, sometimes hard to communicate with, especially at this age. Theo seemed to be studying Shaun a little more intently. “Are you hurt?”

“Yes,” Shaun just said.

“Why?”

“I was in an accident.”

“Like, a car crash?”

Ira went up to the child and placed his hand on the boy’s shoulder. “Why don’t we keep all those questions for later, Theo? Did you want something from me?”

“Oh. Yes. Parker was filling up the water tank, but he said I should get grandpa because the… the… I forgot what it’s called, but it’s not working. The thing that the horses push and then the water comes out.”

“The push paddle?”

“Yes, the push paddle.” Theo was now grabbing on to Ira’s hand and pulled him towards the door. “Can you come, grandpa?”

Ira looked at them and shrugged. “I guess duty calls, but feel free to come with. Hopefully this won’t take long.”

They all followed him to a barn across the farmyard where a boy around young teenage age was holding a water hose into the opening of a cylindrical water tank on wheels. Ira went straight for the round dispenser with the push paddle and inspected it. A practiced turn of the hand, and water was coming out of the tank with a hissing sound.

“There you go,” Ira said. “That thing gets stuck sometimes.”

“It’s almost full,” the boy with the hose said. Shaun thought he bore a certain resemblance to Theo, sharing hair and eye color—not unlikely they might be brothers.

“That’s good, can you drive it out to the pony paddock when you’re done?”

“Sure,” the kid said. Theo had climbed up onto the tank and was sitting on top of it, tapping it with his knuckles so that it made a hollow sound.

Ira pointed to the older boy. “That’s Parker, my other grandson. Parker, these are friends of mine. Aaron, Lea and Shaun.”

Parker just gave them a brief look and a sound that was more like a grunt than a hello. Ira turned to the three of them. “Puberty,” he said under his breath with a shrug.

Ira turned around and pointed towards the area behind the buildings. “The paddocks and pastures are out there, not sure you wanna look at those. And of course our newest attraction,” he pointed to another building a bit further back, “the pigsty.”

“You’ve got pigs now too?” Glassman asked.

“Yeah, pot-bellies. Always wanted them. Let’s take a look.” They started walking, but Ira stopped and turned to Shaun. “It’ll smell worse than the horse stables, and it happens to be feeding time. Which usually means lots of squealing.”

Shaun shuddered. “I don’t think I will like that.”

“Well,” Ira said, “stay here, look around. Invitation to the house still stands.” He pointed at the farmstead to the side of the property that was nestled into a group of trees.

“Okay,” Shaun easily agreed.

Lea looked at him, and he was pretty sure she was asking if he wanted her to stay with him without actually saying it. He told her, “You can go see the pigs.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

She nodded. “Okay. I’ll take some pictures for you.”

Shaun wasn’t entirely sure he needed to see photos of pot-bellied pigs, but he wasn’t about to object. “We’ll come find you,” she told Shaun.

“Okay,” he confirmed, and watched them go, trying to decide what to do. His feet took him back to the pen where Jennifer was still working with the brown horse Shaun recalled was called Henry.

Shaun watched the two of them for a few minutes, appreciating the graceful rhythmic strides of the horse in motion, how his muscles moved under the short and shiny fur. He wondered what it would be like to ride a horse.

The only time he’d sat on a horse’s back was at one of those pony rides at a local fair as a kid, his father having grabbed him against his will and planted him in the worn western saddle. He hadn’t liked it then, but the memory was old, and he questioned if perhaps he would feel differently if he actually had a choice in the matter. Of course with his injuries right now, any such activity was out of the question.

His attention was captured by Jennifer uttering some verbal commands to the horse, giving it a hand sign, and it slowed down and eventually stood still. She folded up the lunge line and led the horse to the pen gate, near where Shaun stood.

Unfastening and opening it, she met Shaun's gaze. "You must be Stan," she said.

"Shaun," he corrected her. "With a U."

"Shaun, got it. Sorry, I have a terrible memory for names. I'm Jen, Ira's daughter. Did dad show you around?"

"Yes. They went to see the pigs. I didn't want to go."

She gave him a smile. "Can't blame you. I have no idea why he bought those pigs, but that's dad for ya."

She led Henry out of the pen and closed the gate again. Shaun kept a respectful distance, which Jen noticed and told him, "You can come closer if you want. Henry's one of our pensioners, living out his retirement with us. He's really gentle."

Shaun carefully edged closer. "Is that why he has a limp?"

Jennifer gave him a look that Shaun could only interpret as impressed. "Wow, you've got a keen eye. He has arthritis." She patted the horse's neck. "Don't ya, old bugger? He's been doing quite well with some gentle exercise, it helps with mobility and stiffness."

"Yes. Regular activity replenishes lubrication to the cartilage of the joint and helps maintain joint movement, increases muscle flexibility and sustains bone and cartilage tissue function."

"You're a doctor, right?" Jen said as she started walking towards the stables.

Shaun followed alongside her. "Yes, I'm a surgeon." For good measure, he added, "For humans."

Jen chuckled. "Yeah, I gathered. Neurosurgery, like Aaron?"

"I'm still a resident. We only specialize after the fifth year of residency."

"Any idea yet what specialty you'll pick?"

That was a good question, one that had been on Shaun's mind a lot recently. "I haven't decided yet. I like trauma surgery."

"That sounds pretty gruesome. Should I ask what the arm brace is all about?"

Shaun frowned. What was she asking him? "I don't know if you should ask that. *Are* you asking that?"

She let out a short laugh. "Yes, I guess I *am* asking that."

"I was in a bus accident."

"That big thing that was in the news?"

He wasn't sure how much the accident had been covered in the news, but the answer was probably yes. "It will be three weeks ago on Tuesday."

"Yeah. Wow, that looked absolutely horrible. I'm glad you're okay. Well, kind of okay. I hope it's healing well."

"It… is healing."

"Yeah, it must suck."

Shaun could only agree. "It does."

They were getting to the stables now, Jen led Henry in through the door and fastened his halter to two ropes on either side so that Henry stood in the middle of the aisle. She started to tend to him, removed the protective boots from his legs, cleaned the hooves, went over his body with a rubber curry.

Shaun kept watching her, and when she straightened up from currying Henry's belly, Jen asked, "Normally I'd ask if you wanna help, but I'm guessing that's not really a great activity for you right now…"

"No, it is not."

"Have you been around horses much?"

"I have not."

She stopped with her ministrations on Henry and went to Henry's head, patted his neck gently, smoothing out a strand of his black mane. "Henry's a really good boy. You can come closer if you want, give him a little pat."

Shaun hesitated at first, but what could really happen? Henry was fastened to the wall on either side, and he seemed very docile. As far as Shaun could tell, he looked content. Shaun walked to Henry's head. His ears moved slightly, he pricked up an ear.

"They like it when you pat their neck or gently scratch them behind or between the ears. I mean, every horse is a bit different, but Henry is happy with any attention. And you seem like the gentle type. Give it a go if you like."

Shaun carefully reached up with his left arm and felt the fur. It was soft and smooth, a little greasy on his fingertips as he stroked the neck. He gave Henry a little scratch behind his ear, and Henry lowered his head.

"See," Jen said, "he loves it."

She went back to finish cleaning Henry up while Shaun kept skritching him behind the ears. Henry was now drooping his eyelids and looked very relaxed. Jen went into a storage area that Shaun thought might be the tack room, then came back with a carrot in her hand. She held it out towards Shaun. "I think he's earned that. Let him bite off a piece, offer smaller pieces on your flat palm." As an afterthought, she added, "If you want." He wondered if maybe he'd made a face.

Shaun's first reaction was to say no, but he remembered all those conversations about comfort zones. He took the carrot and warily held it near Henry's mouth whose attention had now definitely been piqued. His lips felt out the carrot and he bit off a piece while Shaun held on to the other end. He happily crunched on the carrot, then gently nudged Shaun's arm with his muzzle.

Shaun made his palm flat like Jen had said and offered the rest of the carrot up to Henry, whose soft lips sought it out and then ate it off Shaun's hand. It wasn't an unpleasant experience as such, but Shaun instantly hated the horse slobber it left in his palm.

He looked around helplessly, and Jen must have seen it. "You wanna wash that off?"

"Yes, please."

She pointed to the room where she'd gotten the carrot from. "Check in there, it has a sink."

"Okay, thank you."

Shaun was surprised how neat and clean the tack room was. It almost resembled a spacious kitchen, with a workbench in the middle that included a sink, a few western saddles in different designs and sizes and other equine equipment all hung neatly on racks, there were a number of cupboards, shelves and storage spaces lining the walls, some of them lower with padded seats.

He went to the sink and was glad to get the horse residue off his hand, then rejoined Jen who was now unfastening the ropes from Henry's halter. "I'm gonna take him out to the paddock. You can join me if you want, but you can also stay here, wait for your friends."

He could definitely feel the ache in his ribs now, the exhaustion starting to hit. As much as he hated to admit it, his body was still in recuperation mode. "I… will stay here, thank you."

"Sure. I'll see you later, then."

The sound of the hooves on the concrete floor was strangely pleasant, and Shaun watched them leave, then ambled down the stable aisle. He noticed movement out of the corner of his eye, and there was a grey tabby cat with its tail arched high that strutted up to him, twining around his legs. He wanted to pet it but decided against it not to jostle his already sore ribs. He should probably be taking some ibuprofen if he wanted to enjoy the rest of the day.

He ended up back at the stall with the dapple grey horse that Ira hadn't told them the name of. Shaun could see it was a mare and highly pregnant, she was standing back in the corner of her stall, her ears flicking back and forth nervously. Shaun wondered why she wasn't outside.

He stood and studied the horse, tried to see if she was injured. She was favoring three of her legs, one of the back legs resting with the hoof tipped up on the toe. He'd seen other horses stand like this, so he didn't think that was necessarily unusual. Her belly was well rounded from her pregnancy, so maybe she was trying to deal with the extra weight, but upon closer inspection, Shaun thought the hoof of that resting foot might be a little misshapen.

It took maybe a minute or two before the horse came closer, reached over with her nose to sniff Shaun out. His first instinct was to shy away, but he remained where he was because he couldn't see any sign of aggression. She seemed curious. Maybe she was bored and liked the distraction of the new human who was here.

Shaun quietly and motionlessly let her feel him out, waited what would happen next. She eventually lifted her head over the stall door and looked at him. He waited another minute, then slowly reached out to see if he could pet her. While she jerked away slightly from him at first, she let him make contact, and he scratched her behind the jaw first, then slowly worked his way up to her ears.

They stood like that for a little while, and Shaun found himself enjoying the horse companionship a lot more than he'd initially thought he would.

+-+-+-+-+

Lea listened to Ira and Aaron's chattering as they walked back towards the main farmyard. Ira was very excited about the latest addition of the pot-bellied pigs. He had a lot of interesting stories, and Lea was glad they'd taken this trip. It had been a good decision for Shaun not to come see the pigs, it had definitely been loud, to the point where even she was close to wanting to plug her ears.

Shaun was nowhere to be seen, but she followed Ira and Aaron who seemed to be headed for the stables. When they neared the open entrance, Ira suddenly stopped short, apparently surprised by what he was seeing.

He was looking at Shaun caressing one of the horses—the grey one they hadn't been formally introduced to yet. Both Shaun and the horse looked pretty comfortable. Lea was tempted to fish for her cell phone to take a photo.

"Something wrong?" Aaron asked Ira who had his eyebrows raised.

"No, just… a little surprised."

"Because…?"

"Pickles is one of our recent additions. We picked her up a week ago, we've been keeping her inside to get acquainted and she's also heavily in foal. She's been pretty skittish. That," he pointed to Shaun still petting her as if it was the most natural thing in the world, "isn't something I would have expected to see."

They went into the stable, Shaun and the horse now noticing them too. Pickles immediately jerked away, her ears back to the nervous flicking, then she retreated back into the stall.

Shaun's gaze followed the horse, then he came to join them. Lea couldn't help but grin, this was just too good not to tell him. "Did you know you just made friends with a horse named Pickles?"

Shaun's face seemed to fall a little, and it was adorable. "Oh no," he said under his breath, and Lea's grin widened.

Ira gave the both of them a look. "What am I missing?"

Shaun looked in Ira's general direction. "I hate pickles."

Lea reinforced it with a, "With a passion."

"Heh," Ira said, "that *is* funny."

“Why is she inside?” Shaun asked.

“We picked her up a last week after someone gave us a call. Not sure what exactly her history is, we were given some bogus story, like people always do when they have maltreated horses. She’s definitely a little malnourished and one of her back hooves was all grown out and malformed. We had the farrier look at it, hopefully it’ll be fine with time, but she’s still a little lame on that foot. The extra weight doesn’t help.

“She was going up for auction, but despite the pregnancy, I’m almost sure she’d have ended up in the slaughterhouse. People just don’t want unfit horses they have to invest in. It’s a real tragedy. But to answer your question, we’re trying to get her acquainted with the new environment. Takes a little longer with some than others. She’s not very companionable with other horses so far, which doesn’t help. She seems to like you, though.”

“I… didn’t do anything,” Shaun said.

“Yeah, and maybe that was what did the trick. Horses are often good judges of character. I think you may have made a new friend.”

Lea offered, “Shaun and Pickles—most ironic horse friendship ever.”

Aaron chuckled, and Shaun was smiling now too, but Lea could see there was some exhaustion there. It wasn’t surprising. This was probably the longest he’d been on his feet since they had released him from the hospital.

“How about we go to the house?” she suggested.

Ira looked at his watch. “Perfect timing, lunch should be about ready. Just let me get this one last thing, then I’ll be right with you.”

He went into the tack room, came back with a tool of some sort. “I’ve been meaning to get this fixed. Come on, let’s go grab some lunch.”

Ira’s wife Tammy was just as warm and welcoming as Ira himself. As lanky as her husband, grey hair pulled back in a ponytail, she immediately invited everyone in. There were quick introductions, and it didn’t take long for the whole group to be settled around the dining table.

There was a lot of easy banter, Ira and Aaron catching up, sharing stories, some questions for Shaun and Lea. She watched Shaun for a little bit, but he seemed comfortable enough, if maybe a little tired. He answered questions, smiled, he seemed content. She was glad, this was such a nice change of pace and scenery.

Twenty minutes later, Tammy and Ira served lunch—tacos with all the classic ingredients, different offerings of dips and sauces and both crunchy and soft tortillas. Shaun looked relieved too, he was a picky eater, and she knew he preferred the soft tortillas over the hard ones.

With everyone seated, Tammy declared, “Dig in, hope this works for all of you.”

“It’s perfect,” Lea confirmed.

Tammy looked at Ira. “Did you tell the kids?”

He nodded. “Yeah, I sent Parker and Jen a text. Jen said she’d need another fifteen minutes, Parker just sent one of those symbol things that I don’t really know what it means. So yeah, they should be coming.”

Tammy just shrugged to the others. “Horse farm life. It’s a circus, but I love it.”

As if on cue, Parker joined them, giving the table a disdainful look. “White people taco lunch again?”

“Parker,” Tammy chastised him, but he was already taking his seat and started to pile food onto his plate without giving the rest of the group much heed.

Shaun had two soft tortillas on his plate, Lea was carefully trying to gauge if or how much help he needed. She knew he didn’t want to appear helpless, but he probably didn’t want to make a mess of things in front of everyone either. She inconspicuously reached her arm over to lightly tap his thigh. It prompted him to look at her.

“Do you want help?” she asked in a low voice.

He just let out a short hum, but his expression said it all, so she took the two tortillas off of him and asked him what we wanted and built him two to start out with.

She was glad no one paid it much attention, although Tammy seemed to have noticed it and looked at Shaun, commenting, “Ira once got on the wrong side of a riled up horse. It kicked him in the arm, broke his ulna clean through. Makes you remember just how much you take two working hands for granted, doesn’t it?”

“Please don’t remind me,” Ira said. “I’m rooting for ya, Shaun. Hope you can lose that thing soon.”

“It *is* difficult, especially for Lea. She has to do a lot of extra work to help me.”

“Nonsense,” Lea said. “You’d do it for me, too, and it’s not that much.”

“You have to help me shower and get dressed every morning.”

She shrugged. “Yeah, so what? And it’s not like that doesn’t come without its own perks.”

“You mean seeing me naked?”

Lea chuckled. “Yeah, but I’m not sure that’s an appropriate topic in polite company, Shaun. Plus, there’s minors at the table.”

That earned Lea a disdainful look from Parker which she chose to ignore. Shaun raised his head and asked, “Is Parker not old enough to know the basic anatomy of the male human body?”

Lea looked around and could only see amusement in people’s expressions, except Parker whose face now definitely looked flushed. She looked back at Shaun, saw his usual innocent confusion as to why he had apparently just said something inappropriate. “He is, but I don’t think he wants to imagine you naked. Or anyone else here, for that matter.”

Shaun shrugged his left shoulder. “Okay. Is this the right time to change the subject?”

This time, Aaron cut in. “Yes, it very much is, and I’ve got just the thing. Have I mentioned we’re now second place in the local softball hospital league? We’re called the St. Bon’s Vital Signs, and I wish,” he gave Lea a poignant look, “we had a more reliable cleanup hitter on the team.”

The conversation quickly turned to baseball, and Lea wordlessly put two more tacos on Shaun’s plate before she got started on her own. He gave her a grateful look and she returned it with a loving smile. They were such a good team.

Jen and Theo joined them a little while later, Shaun was on the fourth taco, and Lea saw him stiffening a little when Theo picked the vacant chair next to Shaun. She had to hide a smirk, because Shaun and kids was like oil water where Shaun was concerned, when the feeling often wasn’t mutual.

They would hopefully start their own family in the not too far future, so any opportunity for Shaun to learn would be an opportunity well utilized. It wasn’t long before Theo started peppering Shaun with questions.

The first one was easy. “What’s your name?”

“I’m Dr. Shaun Murphy.”

“Are you grampa’s doctor?”

“No. I’m a surgeon at San Jose St. Bonaventure Hospital.”

“What’s a sir-jom?”

“Surgeon,” Shaun corrected. “I operate on people.”

“Like, cut them open and fix their insides?”

“Yes.”

“Grandma had an operation last year. They took out her neck.”

Lea saw Shaun curiously study Tammy’s neck, and Tammy explained, “They removed a thyroid nodule.”

“Ah, yes,” Shaun contributed. “That’s a very routine operation.”

Ira looked at Theo and pointed at Aaron. “Theo, my friend Aaron is also a surgeon. He operates on people’s brains.”

That seemed to impress Theo. “Wow, that’s so cool. Do you cut open their heads?”

Aaron smiled. “Sometimes.”

Theo looked back at Shaun. “Do you also cut open heads?”

“I cut open different things, sometimes it is skulls.”

Parker said under his breath, “Gross,” but no one paid the comment any attention.

Theo pointed at Shaun's arm. "Did they cut you open, too?"

"No, my injury didn't require surgery."

"Does it hurt a lot?"

"Not… a lot."

Theo took a bite from the taco that Jen had put on his plate, but not before he'd asked, "Do you have to wear this when you sleep?"

"Yes."

"Do you always have to wear it?"

"Yes."

"Forever?"

Shaun let out a sigh, clearly not all that happy with the Twenty Questions. "No, not forever. It is only for a few weeks."

"Why do you talk funny?"

"Theo." Jen gave him a reprimanding look.

"It's okay," Shaun reassured her, turning his head in Theo's direction. "I have autism."

Theo took a sip from his glass of water. "One of my friends in school has autism, but he doesn't talk funny. He gets to go on breaks without permission and he can draw dinosaurs really good."

Lea could see that Shaun was both pleasantly surprised and touched that these days, ASD wasn't such a big deal anymore, even to young children like Theo. She knew Shaun's childhood experience out in Wyoming had been very different.

Theo took another bite of his taco and then turned his attention back to Shaun. "Can you draw dinosaurs really good, too?"

Lea was amused, now invested in hearing that answer as well. Shaun said, "It has been a very long time since I've drawn a dinosaur."

"Can you draw a dinosaur with me?"

Jen cut in again, "Theo, maybe later, okay? We're still eating."

Shaun sheepishly supplied, "I don't draw very well with my left hand."

"Hm," Theo said disappointedly, then added, "But it's okay. I can teach you. I'm very good with the brachiosaurus."

Shaun just let out a hum, and Lea had to smile again. She knew exactly how keen Shaun was to draw dinosaurs with Theo, but she thought it would be very cute if he actually tried.

Stuffing the last piece of taco into his mouth, Theo mumbled, “I’m done,” and slid off his chair. Jen watched it with a bit of reproach, but Lea figured that this was probably what their family life was like, here on the farm. It was such a cool thing for children to spend time outside the city with nature and animals all around. She would wish that kind of thing for her own children one day.

They spent the rest of the meal with some easy banter. Ira, Tammy and Jen were great to get along with, the food tasted good, and she felt very welcome here. She stole a glance at Shaun, and he also looked content and relaxed.

At least he did until Theo came back to the table, squeezing in between her and Shaun, placing a sheet of paper on the table. “I made this for you,” he said, looking up at Shaun.

It was a rather crude drawing of what Lea assumed was a dinosaur, with messy block letters above it in red and blue that spelled FOR DOKTER SHON. She could already see that Shaun was about to correct the spelling mistakes, so before he could, she quickly interjected, “Wow, Theo, that looks really great. Is that a brachiosaurus?”

He nodded eagerly. “Yes, this is the tail,” he pointed at one end, “and this is the head. They only eat plants, so they don’t have very sharp teeth.”

“You know a lot about dinosaurs, don’t you?”

“Yes, I know everything about dinosaurs.”

He touched Shaun’s left arm, and Lea could see Shaun involuntarily flinch, which Theo didn’t seem to notice, or at least didn’t comment on. “Can you come, I want to show you my room?”

Shaun looked helplessly at Lea with that deer-in-the-headlights look that was kind of adorable. She gave a little shrug and a nod with her head to indicate Shaun should go with Theo. She knew it was very much outside his comfort zone, but sometimes it wasn’t the worst thing for him to go and venture there.

“Go on,” Lea tried to encourage him. “Your left-handed drawing skills could use some practice, don’t you think?”

“Please, Dr. Shaun?” Theo pleaded.

Shaun let out a sigh. “Okay,” he finally relented. Lea very much wanted to be a fly on the wall for all of it, but she settled for trying to quiz Shaun about it later.

Parker had settled on the couch in the next room, Lea could see through the open door that he’d connected his Nintendo Switch to the TV and was playing *Zelda: Breath of the Wild*. Jen had made sure to remind him that he had limited game time and should ration it well, but he’d just dismissed it with a grunt with Jen giving Lea a little eyeroll when she met her gaze.

There was a muffled, “Goddammit!” from Parker from the next room, followed by a, “You stupid piece of shit!”

“Parker, language,” Jennifer called over to him.

Lea decided to go and investigate. “Got stuck somewhere?” she asked, standing behind the couch to see what he was doing.

“No,” he said, hitting the controls repeatedly with his thumb. “It’s the stupid Joy-Con. The left stick just randomly stops working and it’s super frickin’ annoying because it keeps happening.”

“Oh yeah,” Lea said, “That’s a known hardware bug, it can happen in some of the older models.”

That earned her a turned head from Parker and a surprised almost-gape. “You’ve got a Switch?”

“Yeah, and a PS4. I work in IT. And I believe Nintendo will fix that for you for free if you contact their customer support. Something about a piece of foam they add into the Joy-Con, if I remember correctly.”

Parker nodded. “Okay, cool, maybe I’ll do that.”

“I think they’ll be adding a multiplayer for Zelda later this year, that could be fun if they do it right.”

Parker looked up at her again. “You offering to play with me?”

She shrugged. “Sure, if you want. Shaun is many things, but he’s not exactly the video game enthusiast. He likes watching me play sometimes. RDR2 was fun.”

“Mom won’t let me play that. She says it’s too violent, but that’s total BS.”

“Well, it does have an 18 rating.” She went around the couch and sat down next to Parker. “So, where are we at right now?” She pointed at the screen.

“I was gonna do the three maze shrines.”

“Oh yeah, they were fun, I remember those. Make sure you check out all the houses in Hateno.”

“Why, what’s with those?”

She shrugged. “It’s more fun if you find out for yourself.”

He was already back to the gameplay and said, “Okay, I’ll put it on the list.”

She watched Parker for a while. Shaun came to join her eventually, and she tried to get him to talk about his time with Theo, but Shaun being Shaun, he didn’t have many words for the drawing endeavors he’d engaged in with Theo. Apparently there had also been a presentation of Hot Wheels cars in a toy garage.

A little while later, Aaron and Ira asked them if they wanted to come watch the farrier who had just arrived. Ira explained that one of their horses had ligament issues and needed special therapeutic horseshoes the farrier was going to fit today.

They went ahead and watched the farrier’s work with interest, Ira explaining what was going on while the horse whose name was Traveler stood with the patience of a saint as his feet were being tended to. Shaun was quickly inquiring about the details of the leg injury, and the farrier explained what he could.

As he was finishing up with his work, Lea stole a glance at Shaun, and she could see that his energy was now waning. He was definitely not back to full form, and the pain meds were doing their bidding in terms of added fatigue, so she went over to Aaron and took him aside for a moment, giving him a subtle hint that maybe it was time to suggest to go home.

Aaron understood, and Shaun didn't protest, probably glad at the prospect of being able to relax and rest. They said their goodbyes and thank yous to Ira and his family, and he and Tammy made it a point to invite them back whenever they wanted. Lea was confident it wasn't just a polite gesture, she had the feeling she and Shaun had made a positive impression, and Ira and Aaron were old friends who were very comfortable with each other.

Soon they were sitting in Aaron's SUV, driving back into the city with the car radio playing some oldies station at low volume. Aaron made a valiant attempt at some small talk, but it fell flat quickly and Lea found that she'd gotten a text message from her parents that she started to answer with some back and forth discussion following.

Before she knew it, Aaron stopped the car in front of their building, and Lea grabbed her purse from the seat next to her. She heard Aaron say, "Shaun?"

She stole a look, and Shaun was sitting motionless, his head leaned against the passenger side window. She had to smile. Aaron gently touched Shaun on his upper arm, repeated his name. He sluggishly stirred, let out a tired and confused hum.

Aaron told him, "You're home."

Lea got out of the car, went around to the passenger side door, seeing if she could help. She opened it, held out her hand to see if he wanted the assist. He looked tired as hell, and he probably was. She guessed he was feeling it, too, as he gladly took her hand and let her help him out of the car, mumbling a low, "Thank you."

Lea leaned her head into the car to look at Aaron. "Thanks a million. That was a great trip. Just what we needed."

"Sure," he nodded.

"And thanks for the chauffeuring service."

"No problem."

They said brief goodbyes and Lea followed Shaun who was already well on the way to their front door. As they got in and walked along the corridor, she inquired, "Did you like the trip?"

"Yes," he just said.

"That's all you have to say about an epic day out, just yes?"

He remained silent, and Lea got the keys from her purse as they neared their apartment door.

"I liked it very much," Shaun volunteered.

"And you made new friends, animal and human alike. We should definitely count that as a win."

“Theo was very… difficult to be around.”

“Yeah, I know kids are hard for you to connect with. But for what it’s worth,” she opened the door for them, “he really liked you, though.”

Shaun sat down on the step to the dining area and undid his shoelaces. “Why?”

Lea let out a chuckle. “Why did he like you? Maybe because you didn’t treat him like a kid. Because you’re kinda quiet and reserved, you only talk when you have something meaningful to contribute, and you explain things to kids without dumbing them down too much. I think most kids prefer that over the boisterous, eager grandma type who is all over them and wants to constantly cuddle.”

She saw Shaun shudder, wondered if he’d had any boisterous grandma encounters in the past, which he undoubtedly would have hated a million times more than your regular neurotypical kid.

Lea toed off her own shoes and put them on the shoe rack. “Why is it that you didn’t like him?”

“I didn’t say I didn’t like him.”

“Okay, you said he was difficult to be around.”

“Children are often loud and unpredictable. I never know if I’m saying the right or the wrong thing.”

“And you know what, Shaun? That’s the beauty of kids. There is no right or wrong thing to say. They’ll take you at face value, and I daresay Theo liked just about *everything* you said. He was practically hanging on your lips. He called you Dr. Shaun, which I think is really cute, and he drew you a pretty awesome dinosaur. Doesn’t that feel nice?”

Shaun pushed himself up with a grunt to put away his shoes. “He misspelled my name.”

“Shaun, he’s five.”

His only response was one of his hums, so Lea added, “Look, I know you’re not all that comfortable around small kids, but don’t you think that maybe when you get a little more used to it, you might actually start to like it?”

“Why do you think we will meet him again?”

“Oh. I don’t know. I really liked it there, and Ira and Tammy invited us back whenever we want to. Don’t you wanna go back?”

“I… think I would.”

She watched him go into the bedroom and trailed him. “Then let’s make plans to go back. It could really help you with your healing, too. I think it’s a great idea. Maybe next weekend?”

Shaun was taking fresh clothes out of the wardrobe. “I want to shower.”

She frowned. “Now?”

“Yes. The horse smell is in my hair. I don’t like it.”

Ah, that’s what it was. His sensitive nose. “Then I guess I should be showering, too.”

“Yes, please.”

“All right, I definitely will, but first let’s get you cleaned up. Come on.”

They’d done the assisted showering often enough that Lea and Shaun were a well-oiled team by now and it was becoming easier and more efficient every time. She’d helped Shaun towel off afterwards, now helping him into his clothes so that he could put the shoulder brace back on.

As she stood and held out his underpants to him, she eyed the clothes he’d chosen to wear. “Why did you put these out, Shaun? Why not change into your pajamas? It’s not like we’re planning to go or meet anyone else today.”

“It’s only 5 pm,” he said by way of explanation.

“Yeah, but again, we’re home now with nowhere to go. No reason you can’t be comfy. I’m sure you’re pretty tired, you’ve been on your feet a lot today. Don’t you wanna take a nap?”

He let out a hum.

“I can go and get them for you real quick…”

Another hum from him. She knew she shouldn’t be pressing the issue, but he was so damn stubborn sometimes, with his routine and patterns that could get in the way of comfort or convenience.

She let it go and picked up the pair of dark grey slacks to hold them out to him, but he hesitated, then said, “I think you’re right.”

She nodded. “Okay. Do you want long-sleeved or t-shirt?”

“T-shirt, please.”

“You got it.”

She went into the bedroom and got his pajamas, helped where she could, made sure to assist him with the t-shirt without jostling his arm too much.

“Okay, hair next,” she said, pointing to the toilet for him to sit down on the closed lid. They’d done this a number of times, and Shaun sat down while Lea got a fresh towel and started gently rubbing his hair dry, being extra careful on his right side with the scar.

“Did you like the horses?” Lea casually asked him.

“They are very graceful animals.”

“Yeah, and it seems like you made fast friends with Pickles.”

He stayed quiet and she added, “Did you hear that Ira said she’s usually pretty skittish? She must have liked that gentleness you have just as much as Theo.”

Lea started a little when Shaun jerked his head beneath her hands, wondering if she’d done something to hurt him, but when she looked at his face, his eyelids were very much drooping. He was already about to nod off.

She stopped with the toweling and gently cupped his chin with one hand to draw his head up. “Shaunie. We need to get you in a horizontal position. You’re already falling asleep.”

His eyes trailed her face lazily and he just let out an undefined, “Hm,” to prove her point.

“Come on, sleepyhead,” she urged him.

“My hair is wet,” he mumbled, not moving.

“Yeah, and it can dry while you sleep.”

“No. I don’t like it.”

She sighed. “Okay, I’ll get the blow-dryer. But don’t fall asleep on me.”

“I won’t. The hair dryer is loud.”

“This is already the super expensive, super quiet model, how can that be too loud?”

He made a grimace. “I don’t know. It just is.”

“Well, unfortunately that can’t be helped.”

“Yes, I know.”

Lea went to go get the hair dryer from the cabinet, plugged it in. “All right, Shaunie. Brace yourself and be thankful your hair isn’t as thick as mine.”

She went about it carefully, used a low temperature setting and tried to blow as little air on his face and ears as she could, knowing it was one of the things he didn’t like either. He looked adorably tousled and boyish when she was finished and she couldn’t help but lean down and plant a kiss into his soft and nice smelling hair.

“All done, I think you’re in for a well-earned nap now. You think you wanna take a stab at the bed? It’s been a while that you’ve given that a try.”

Shaun was all hums and no more words now, and Lea knew she needed to stop with the helpful suggestions and just let him do his thing. She took the wet towels to hang them on the towel holder next to the shower before she left Shaun to his own devices.

He emerged from the bathroom a few minutes later, making a beeline for the bedroom, closing the door behind him. She had to resist the urge to give a few more prompts about extra pillows and pain meds. With him out of sorts, the balance between mothering and support wasn’t always easy to strike.

She caught a glimpse of Shaun ten minutes later when she quietly snuck into the bedroom to get her Bluetooth headset from her nightstand. Shaun was fast asleep on a mount of their pillows he'd arranged somehow to feel comfortable. She quietly got out her cell phone and snapped a quick photo.

Back in the living room, she sent it to Glassy with the words, 'You did good,' as she sat down on the couch.

He took a few moments to reply, and what he sent was, '👍 I enjoyed it too. We should do it again.'

'I'd love that & I think Shaun might too. I'll ask him. Still laughing about 🐂🥒🥒'

She got a laughing emoji back. Glassy's emoji vocabulary wasn't that vast, and he wasn't the texting type. She replied, 'Let's talk tomorrow.'

His reply was another thumbs up. She put the phone down on the coffee table and then booted up the PlayStation. She might as well make use of the alone time that she didn't get as often as she wanted.

+-+-+-+-+



Chapter 12: A vague, haunting mass appeal

Budget planning was one of the few things that Aaron hated with a passion. He was glad that he didn't have to deal with most of it any longer, with the hospital presidency having gone back to Andrews, but he still had to review the final budget grids for the clinic, now that Reznick was no longer here and some of the administrative responsibility had fallen back to him.

He looked up from his desk as he detected movement by the door, recognizing the person coming into his office immediately. "Shaun."

“Hello, Dr. Glassman.”

Aaron had to look again to confirm the detail he’d only registered subconsciously. “You’re out of the shoulder brace.”

Shaun let out a little relieved breath as he slightly moved his right shoulder. “Yes. Dr. Luca was very satisfied with my progress.”

“I bet you’re very happy to be rid of that thing.”

“Oh yes,” Shaun confirmed with a clearly very gratified expression.

“How about we go out and celebrate that tonight?”

“I should not be mixing painkillers and alcohol.” He looked at his watch. “I wanted to tell you about the shoulder since you asked to be kept updated on my medical status, but I have to go now. The bus will arrive in seven minutes, although it is often late at this time of day.”

Shaun was already leaving, but Glassman called after him, “Shaun. Shaun! Wait up a moment.”

Shaun stopped just outside the door. Aaron got up and took his suit jacket from the coat rack next to the shelf. “Let me drive you home.”

“Are you not working?”

He shrugged. “It’s kind of a slow day, and the clinic is covered.”

Shaun seemed to be happy with that. “Okay.”

He sidled up to Shaun as they walked towards the elevators. “So that’s a no about going out tonight?”

“I am still taking ibuprofen as needed.”

“Yeah, but they do those mocktails that aren’t half bad. You might like those. We can ask Lea too if she wants to come.”

“Lea is meeting with Dr. Allen tonight to talk about the ingestible sensor. Lea has been making adjustments to the monitoring software, and she has been complaining about the lack of availability of the necessary chipsets from China.” Shaun made a face. “A *lot*.”

“Going on your nerves a bit, huh?”

“Yes. But I’m happy she has found something to work on in her spare time that she enjoys.”

“Then all the more reason for us to let the two ladies get their work done without you distracting them while they’re at it. We can also meet at my house if you’d rather not be out in public.”

Shaun turned his head to look at him. “I think I would like that better.”

“Okay, then let’s do that.”

“I will look up recipes for mocktails I will like. I will text you the ingredients.”

Aaron couldn’t help but smile. “You do that, and I’ll make sure we’re all set for Happy Hour.”

On the way they ran into a few colleagues, and Shaun had a number of people saying hello, indicating that they were happy to see him recovering. Shaun met them all with a smile and a semblance of brief small talk—at least the kind you could call that where Shaun was concerned.

It filled Aaron with an immense sense of pride. Shaun had always been so awkward in social situations. It was amazing that he had grown more in the last five years here in San Jose than he had in the first ten that Aaron had known him.

He had made leaps ever since coming to the city, and that beautiful moment they’d shared when he gave him his family heirloom rings, it had made it all worth it. It still hurt beyond belief that Aaron had lost his daughter, but he’d won a son and he would forever be grateful for that.

When they rode down in the elevator, Aaron turned to Shaun. “Shaun, remember when you asked if we can go fishing again? I know a place that’s not too far from here. We could go out there this weekend.”

Shaun hummed noncommittally, and Aaron looked at his face to try and read what kind of hum that was. He waited a moment to see if Shaun would add something.

He eventually did. “Can we go back to the horse farm?”

Aaron allowed himself a small smile. “You liked it there, huh?”

“Yes.”

He nodded. “Okay, I guess horse farm it is. I’ll give Ira a call.”

The elevator arrived and they got off. Shaun was smiling. “Okay. I will ask Lea if she wants to come, too.”

“Very good. Maybe we should get you up on a horse some time.”

That made Shaun look a little more panicked than enthusiastic. Aaron added, “Relax, it was just a suggestion. Don’t you wanna try it, though?”

“I have an injured shoulder and broken ribs. I don’t think horse riding is a suitable activity.”

“Well, not *now*, obviously.” Aaron unlocked the car with the remote and the indicators flashed briefly. “I’m just saying that I’m sure Ira or Jen would be happy to help you have a go if you ever wanted it. Could be something new to try. And you had that grey mare that seemed very fond of you.”

Shaun’s smile widened. “Pickles. I think she liked me.”

“Yeah, and you liked her too, right?”

Shaun opened the passenger side door. “I did. She will be giving birth soon.”

“Yeah, and that’s kind of exciting too, isn’t it?” he said as he went around to the driver’s side of the car.

“I don’t know. I’ve never seen a horse give birth and it is very unlikely that I will be there to witness it when it’s time.”

“Well, yeah, but I bet a young foal will be delightful to watch. They’re very cute on their wobbly little legs.”

Shaun gave him an inquisitive look. “Have you watched many young foals?”

“One or two. Ira’s always had an interest in horses, and I’ve known him for a long time. That gelding, Henry, he’s had him since he was a little squirt. Had to be bottle-fed because the mother died in labor.”

“He has arthritis.”

“Who, Ira?” Aaron asked as he started the car and started driving out of the parking garage.

“No. Henry.”

“See, you already know more about these horses than I do.”

“Jennifer was lunging him in the horse pen on our first visit to help with the stiffness. I noticed he was limping.”

“Yeah, you would, wouldn’t you?”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because you always notice things. You’re really good at that.”

Shaun made an approving sound and Aaron suggested, “Do you want me to pick you up later? Maybe around 7?”

“No, thank you. I will walk, it’s not very far.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. My legs work just fine.”

Aaron let out a little chuckle. “Yeah, you’re right. So 7 sound good to you?”

“Yes, 7 sounds good to me.”

“Excellent, then it’s a date.”

Shaun didn’t say anything else and they rode the rest of the way in comfortable silence.

+-+-+-+-+

Hm. Where was it? Shaun roamed through the wooden box in the storage room adjacent to the kitchen where they kept their sparse inventory of gardening tools. Had Lea moved their tools around again? He hated it when she didn't keep things where they were supposed to be.

He called over his shoulder, "Lea, where are the pruning shears?"

She promptly appeared in the doorway, blocking off some of the light. "What do you want with the pruning shears?"

"The ivy on the patio has become very unwieldy. I know it is best pruned in the spring, but I don't think we did it this year."

"Shaunie, you shouldn't be trimming ivy."

"I want to. And it needs to be done."

"Yeah, maybe, but your ribs and your shoulder are still healing, you shouldn't be doing these chores. I'm happy to do it, at least until you're back to form."

Shaun straightened up and turned around, looked at her. "Lea."

He knew it got her attention because she was looking at his face now. He briefly met her eyes. "I have been doing nothing for three weeks. I have been watching you take care of everything in our apartment, had to let you help me with everything. I know you say you don't mind, but I do. I want to do this. I want to stop feeling useless."

"Oh, Shaun. I get that. But it shouldn't be at the expense of your health."

"It isn't. My shoulder is healing, and I know which motions to avoid that interfere with the healing process. My ribs are getting better and they don't hurt as much anymore. I… can do this. Please let me do this."

She closed the gap between them, took his hands and gave him a kiss. "Okay, I'll let you do this. But please know that you can ask me for help with anything you need, especially with overhead motions. I know those are still difficult for your shoulder. You can leave those for me, okay?"

He nodded. "Okay."

"Oh, and the pruning shears should be in the toolbox on the floor," she told him.

"Why? They belong in this wooden box." He pointed at the box for good measure, then bent down to retrieve the shears.

"Yeah, sorry, I guess I forgot."

He gave her a look to underline his point about keeping things where they belonged as he went past her back into the kitchen.

"Shaun," she said and he stopped near the kitchen island. "I'm sorry. I don't always remember where things are supposed to go, especially if it's something I only use once or twice a year. I don't have your super memory, remember?"

He frowned at her tone of voice. Had he offended her? “Did I say something wrong?”

She sighed. “No. Just… Sorry, I should have run that through the Shaun filter.”

“The… Shaun filter?”

“Yeah. You know, when you’re inadvertently rude or accusatory even though you don’t mean to.”

“Was I being rude or accusatory?”

“No. Well, yes, maybe a little. But I know you didn’t mean to. I just read this thing about gun control online and it made me really furious. I shouldn’t be taking that out on you.”

“I didn’t want to sound rude or accusatory.”

Her voice was a lot calmer and gentler now. “Yes, I know. And I know you hate when things aren’t in their designated place. I’ll try to remember that the shears go in the box for next time. But now you know to maybe look in the toolbox if you can’t find them in the wooden one.”

He gave a little shrug. “Okay,” he said and went to work on the ivy on the patio.

The sun was shining and it was fairly hot outside, but the gentle breeze that played with his hair made it more bearable as he leisurely cut off the unruly strands of ivy and plucked away brown leaves.

He had been at it for a while when he saw Lea amble closer out of the corner of his eye. She was holding the foldable stool they kept in the storage space that she leaned against the wall. “Let me know when you want me to have a go at the stuff up top.”

He let a handful of brown leaves fall onto the pile in the garbage bag next to him. He turned to her, took in how the sun was hitting her face just right, making her hair shine in a warm, glowing brown.

She lifted her arms. “What?”

He smiled. “You look very beautiful.”

She seemed surprised. “I am dressed in my most slouchy home outfit, my hair is a mess and I don’t have any make-up on.”

“You are still very beautiful.”

She was smiling now, her eyes crinkling. This was definitely a happy smile. “Okay, I’ll take your word for it.”

He audibly inhaled. “Lea? Can we have sex tonight?”

She gave him a look that seemed quizzical. “Are you sure you’re up for it?”

They hadn’t had sex since before the accident, not the mutual kind he was thinking of. And he’d only been fully out of the brace for a day, but he sure as hell knew he wanted it.

He let out a breath. “I don’t know. But I want to try. I miss having sex with you.”

The smile on her face widened. “So do I. And yes, let’s try, test the waters, see where it goes.”

He was so relieved and elated to hear it, which elicited a breathy, “Oh.”

He enjoyed the moment, realized that finally things seemed to be falling into place. He was going back to work later this week as well, and it was time that they both got a little bit of happiness after all these weeks of hardship and pain. Yes, he was definitely up for it.

+-+-+-+-+

“Hey, welcome back,” Jen greeted them as Shaun, Glassman and Lea got out of the car. “We sure like returning customers around here.”

Shaun watched with curiosity as Dr. Glassman pulled Jen into a brief embrace. He followed Lea as she joined Jen and Glassman, saw Jen pointing at his arm. “No more shoulder brace, I see.”

Shaun nodded. “Yes.”

“That must be a relief.”

“Yes, it is.”

“Well, that’s great news all around, I guess. Let me go and find Dad. He must be around somewhere.”

It didn’t take long for Jen to come back with Ira, and he warmly welcomed them back as well. Ira and Aaron were quickly engrossed in a conversation about baseball, and Shaun and Lea hung back.

He saw her looking at him, and she asked, “You wanna go say hi to the horses?”

“Yes,” he said.

“Okay, let’s see who we can find.”

They went to the stables first, but all the stalls were empty, even the one for Blossom—the one with the sun allergy. Lea remarked, “They must all be outside, let’s take a look.”

They went to where they knew the paddock was and stopped at the fence. Most of the horses were further back, their heads down, grazing lazily. A darker brown donkey was standing closer, he came to the fence and stuck his nose through in anticipation of a treat or two.

“Hey buddy,” Lea greeted him, petting the fur. “Sorry, but we came empty-handed.”

The donkey lost interest fairly quickly when he realized there was nothing to be gained and trotted away.

Lea pointed to a grey horse in the distance. “I think that’s your horse friend over there.”

Shaun took a look and tended to agree by the size of her belly, but he didn't know if the farm had more than one grey horse.

There was a familiar children's voice from behind them. "Dr. Shaun!" Theo sure sounded excited, even Shaun could hear that.

He came running, and Shaun took an involuntary step to the side. Small kids tended to be a little too boisterous sometimes, and a little too exuberant with their eagerness for physical contact. Lea must have seen it, because she put herself in the way and crouched down, welcoming the child with an enthusiastic, "Theo!"

He stopped in front of Lea, then went around her to get closer to Shaun. "You're back!"

"Yes, we are," Shaun said.

"Grandpa got a new tractor, do you wanna see it? It's really cool!"

Shaun let out a hum. He wasn't much interested in agricultural vehicles, but Theo didn't seem to care. "It's green, and it has a loader in the front. Mom and grandpa say I'm not allowed to sit in it, but I really want to."

Lea turned to Theo and asked, "Theo, do you know if that's Pickles over there?" She pointed at the grey horse they had mentioned before.

"Yeah, and that's Cinnamon, that's Opie, Snowball, Traveler, Little Joe and Rio." He pointed at the different horses as he listed off the names. "The donkey over there is called Barney, he's always hungry. I don't like him, he kicked me once."

"Oh no, that's not very nice of him."

"I think he was scared. Mom says I shouldn't go to the horses and donkeys from the back, they don't like that and sometimes they get scared."

Theo was looking up at Shaun, studied him for a long moment. "Is your arm all healed up?"

Shaun realized Theo had noticed the absence of the brace as well. "Oh. No. It is not fully healed. But I don't need the brace anymore."

"Okay," Theo said. "Can we go see the tractor?"

Lea looked at Shaun, lightly touched his arm. "Come on. Could be fun."

Shaun made a grimace. "It will be loud."

"If it's brand new, it might not be that loud."

Shaun reluctantly followed, Theo trotting next to him, excitedly sharing more of his recent adventures. "Yesterday, grandpa and I drove the hay bales from behind the barn to the stable. One of them fell off and the twine broke and then there was hay everywhere. Grandpa swore quite a lot."

"Oh?" Lea supplied. "That sounds like it made a big mess."

“Yes, it took a lot of time to clean up. Parker said we should just get Barney to eat it, and then mom and grandpa got some of the horses and donkeys, and then they ate all the rest up really quick.”

“That was a great idea.”

Theo made an affirmative noise, and then they rounded the corner where they could already see the shiny new tractor, and Dr. Glassman right in the driver’s seat. Shaun kept standing a little to the side, he didn’t particularly like the noise of the engine.

Something touched Shaun’s right hand and before he could do anything, Theo was pulling at it. Shaun flinched hard as he let out a pained moan—he hadn’t expected it and it hurt the tendons in his shoulder.

Theo immediately let go and stood still, looking up at Shaun, his eyes wide. Tears were pooling in them, and then Theo turned and ran towards Ira who was standing with Dr. Glassman by the tractor.

Shaun stood helplessly, trying to understand what just happened. He looked at Lea, and she immediately reassured him, “Hey, Shaun, it’s okay.”

“I didn’t do anything,” he feebly said.

“I know, this wasn’t your fault.”

“No, it was Theo’s fault. He pulled on my injured arm.” The one he was now cradling in his left.

“Yeah, but he’s a kid. He doesn’t understand what ‘slowly healing injury’ means. He probably even forgot you had it in the excitement of the moment.”

“Why is he crying?”

“He was probably a little scared and overwhelmed because he hurt you when he didn’t want to.”

He looked over to where Theo was hugging Ira who had crouched down and was comforting and talking to the child. Shaun let out a deflated breath. “What do I do now?”

Lea chuckled a little. “Let him quiet down, then talk to him. Try to explain to him why you reacted that way. He needs to know that you’re not mad at him. He really likes you, and he’ll be afraid that he did something wrong and you’re upset with him.”

“But he did do something wrong.”

Lea sighed. “Yes, but not on purpose. You’re not upset with him, are you?”

“He shouldn’t be pulling on my right arm. He shouldn’t be pulling on any of my arms.”

“Shaun, he’s a five-year-old, I don’t think he fully understands the concept of your ASD and what that means. Maybe you should sit down with him and try to explain that these things are really important to you. You know, in child-friendly, simple terms.”

Shaun hesitated. “I don’t know how to do that.”

She gave him a smile. “You don’t give yourself enough credit, because I think you do. Come on, let’s go talk to them.”

Shaun let out a hum, didn’t move.

“Hey,” Lea said. “Come on. Look.” She nodded her head in Ira and Theo’s direction, and Ira had straightened up and was now walking towards them with Theo holding his hand.

Shaun was suddenly apprehensive. He wasn’t good with these things. He knew Lea had confidence in him, but he might be saying the wrong thing, and he didn’t want Theo to cry or be scared again.

He felt Lea’s hand gently brush his left arm. “You’ve got this, Shaunie.” She walked away towards where Dr. Glassman was still sitting in the tractor, the engine now off, leaving Shaun standing even more helplessly.

He sighed, waited for Ira and Theo to approach. Ira opened the conversation with, “I’m sorry about that.”

Shaun looked at him briefly, then looked at Theo. “I am not mad at you,” he told him.

Theo just pressed a few inches closer to Ira’s leg and Shaun felt even more insecure.

Ira crouched down again to talk to Theo. “Did you hear that, Theo? Shaun is not mad at you.”

“I know you didn’t mean to hurt me,” Shaun tried to elaborate. “My shoulder is still injured and it will hurt if I move my arm sometimes.”

Theo shyly peeked up at Shaun and said in a small voice, “I wanted to show you the tractor.”

“Yes, I know.” Shaun looked over to it, trying to find something appreciative to say. “It is a very nice tractor.”

Theo just nodded and Shaun stood still, unsure what else to say next. Lea had said he should talk to Theo about his ASD. Was this the right time? He wouldn’t know if he didn’t try, right? “I want to talk to you about my autism,” he offered.

It seemed to make Theo perk up a little. Ira’s look at Shaun seemed surprised, too. Ira turned back to Theo. “Do you want to talk to Shaun about that?”

Theo nodded again.

“Okay,” Ira said as he straightened up and let go of Theo’s hand. He pointed to a bench made from halves of wooden logs that was standing in front of the barn to the side. “Why don’t you go over there with Shaun and you two have a little talk?”

Theo just said, “Okay,” and was already walking over to it. Ira looked at Shaun. “Thank you,” he said.

Shaun turned his head, then went to go over to the bench that Theo was already scrambling up on. Shaun sat down at a respectful distance, but Theo was already scooting closer. Shaun inhaled to steel himself.

“I don’t like being touched,” he told Theo.

The child was looking up at him. “Why?”

“It makes me uncomfortable.”

“So you don’t want me to touch you?”

“Yes. It doesn’t mean I don’t like you or that I’m mad at you. It’s because I have autism.”

“I touch Connor sometimes. I don’t think he doesn’t like it.”

“Who is Connor?”

“My friend in school.”

“Oh. Connor may be different. We are not all the same.”

“Okay,” Theo agreed. “Why does Lea touch you?”

“She is my wife. It is different with her. I have known her for a long time.”

“Does Dr. Aaron touch you?”

Shaun shrugged. “Sometimes.”

“Have you known him for a long time?”

“Yes, a very long time.”

“Can I touch you when we know each other for a long time?”

That was a good question, and not one Shaun had a definite answer for. “I don’t know. This is only the second time we’ve met.”

“What if I touch you by accident?”

Shaun wanted to roll his eyes. Why was the kid so enamored with touching him? “I think that will be okay. That happens sometimes.”

“What if a horse touches you?”

“That is also different. I am not around horses a lot.”

“When mom takes me to the doctor, he touches me sometimes. Do you not have to touch people when you are a doctor?”

Was Theo now going to go through all the different permutations of touch? “I have to touch patients, that is part of my job. I don’t always like it, but it is also not the same.”

“You are very complicated.”

Shaun didn't think so, but he stayed silent because he wasn't sure what to say to that. Theo added, "Parker says you're weird, but I don't think you're weird."

That was probably a compliment, but Shaun wasn't sure what to do with that either. Theo seemed to be studying him, then remarked, "Do you always do this because you have autism, too?"

He folded his hands in front of his chest just the way Shaun was doing right at that moment. Shaun looked down at his hands, suddenly conscious of the automatic gesture. "Yes," he simply said.

"Why?"

That was a more complex question to answer, and not one he felt he wanted to discuss with a small child. He hummed, thought about it for a long moment. Theo was looking at him the whole time. Finally, Shaun said, "It is easier to hold my hands still that way."

"Why do you want to hold your hands still?"

Because it had been ingrained into him as a child, had been drilled into him by his insensitive and ignorant parents and peers. Because it kept people from bullying him when he felt the need to seek comfort and equilibrium from stimming. Because it was just… easier.

"You… said Parker said I was weird. Not holding my hands still makes people think I'm weird. Most people don't like it."

Theo lifted up his folded hands. "So this makes you not as much weird?"

"Yes," Shaun confirmed.

"Is it bad to be weird? When Parker said you were weird, Mom said he shouldn't be saying that. She said it was rude and… inpropi— I don't know the word."

"Inappropriate."

"Yes. What does that mean?"

"It means it's not the right thing to do or to say."

"Why?"

Shaun sighed. "I don't know how to answer that."

"So when I touched you, it was inpropiate?"

"Inappropriate," Shaun corrected once more. "Yes. But you didn't know that, so I'm not mad at you," he reiterated.

"It's okay. I won't touch you again because you said you don't like it."

"Thank you," Shaun said with relief. At least that message seemed to have been received now.

“Can we go see the tractor now?”

Shaun looked over to it. Aaron, Lea and Ira were standing near it, Ira was explaining something, by the looks of it. “Okay,” Shaun reluctantly agreed.

“Yay!” Theo exclaimed and was already hopping off the bench and running back to the others. Shaun followed.

Lea raised her eyebrows when Shaun met them. Dr. Glassman’s face may have spelled approval, perhaps even pride, Shaun wasn’t quite sure. Ira, he couldn’t quite read. Lea prompted, “That looked like it went well.”

Shaun nodded. “Yes, I think so.” He sought Theo out with his eyes. “Theo wanted to show me the tractor.”

Ira chuckled. “Of course he did. I think he’s prouder of the thing than I am.”

And there was Theo, keeping a respectful distance, nagging, “Dr. Shaun. Can you come?”

Shaun sighed. “I will go look at the tractor.”

He indulged Theo for a good fifteen minutes, listened to the excited recounting to details that were completely inconsequential to Shaun but that he logged away in his brain anyway.

Theo made sure not to get too close to Shaun, for which he was thankful, and there was just something satisfying about seeing the five-year-old be happy just by having Shaun present and what he hoped seemed attentive enough. There may have been a bit of medical reviewing of recently studied journal articles going on while Theo was babbling away about vehicular details that Shaun didn’t find interesting in the least.

It was Jen who rescued them, calling Theo over for something after which he trotted away with Parker. Shaun breathed a sigh of relief as he rejoined the others who were still standing to the side, discussing something.

Jen went over to Shaun just as he joined Lea’s side. “Shaun, can I ask you something?”

He turned to her. “Yes.”

“This may be a bit awkward, but Parker has this school assignment to write an essay about neurodiversity, and we were wondering if you’d agree to speak to him.”

“About… what?”

“It might help if he got some actual insights from someone on the spectrum. I was hoping that would be okay, but you really don’t have to if you’re not comfortable with it.”

Shaun considered it for a long moment. “I don’t know what I would be able to contribute.”

Jen nodded. “It’s not a problem, Shaun.”

There was a loud noise from over by the stables of something knocking hollowly on wood, and Jen looked over to it, then quickly excused herself to need to go and check. Shaun felt Lea's hand slide into his and looked at her. "How about we take a little stroll, stretch our legs?"

The temperatures were teetering on the edge of just being a little too hot to want to spend extended periods of time out in the sun, but Shaun nodded. "Okay."

Ira had heard it, so he pointed to the left. "There's a path over there, and when you get to the end of it, you can just walk along the edge of the barley field until you get to the dirt road that will lead back down here. It's a really nice little walk."

"That sounds perfect," Lea said. Shaun had to agree.

They made their way to where Ira had indicated, which led them along one of the horse paddocks. They stopped when they got closer to where some of the horses were, watched them for a little while before they continued on their walk.

It wasn't long before Lea asked him, "Are you sure you don't wanna talk to Parker?"

Shaun had to ponder that for a moment. No, he wasn't sure. He just didn't know if he wanted to willingly put himself in that position, knowing that Parker didn't feel comfortable around him to begin with.

"Shaun?"

"Parker doesn't like me."

"You know, I wouldn't even say that. He just doesn't know what to do with you. I think this could be good for both of you."

"How would this be good for me?"

Lea shrugged. "I don't know. You sometimes have trouble connecting with kids, right? Could be a learning experience. And it would be an opportunity for you two to get to know each other a little better. Parker probably hasn't been directly confronted with autism. He may be biased, have certain preconceptions. It would probably benefit you as well if he saw that behind the awkward weirdo is actually a super smart, sweet and funny person."

"And what if he doesn't?"

"Then that's his loss. At the very least he'd have learned something about autism. That can't be a bad thing."

Shaun let out a hum.

Lea stopped, so Shaun stopped as well, turning to face her. She gave him one of those intensely scrutinizing looks. "Remember when we were doing the reality TV show?"

Shaun sighed. That hadn't exactly gone according to plan. Sophie was still working on the final cut, they knew it would air eventually. "Yes," he said in a disheartened tone.

“This could be like that. You know, autism awareness, just on a smaller scale. Don’t you want people to do away with some of those prejudices and misconceptions, want them to learn about what it really means? I know this is awkward for you too sometimes, but you’re usually pretty open about it.

“I mean, I don’t wanna pressure you into it. If you don’t wanna talk to Parker, that’s totally fine. It’s completely up to you.”

“So you think I should do it?”

“No, Shaun, I don’t want you to do it just because I think it’s a good idea. I just wanna make sure you know what you’re saying no to.”

“Can I think about it?”

She stepped closer, took his hand again. “Of course you can.”

“Lea?”

“Yes, Shaun?”

“Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For asking me these things.”

“I’m really glad you’re telling me this. Because I never want you to think I’m questioning your judgement or I’m second-guessing decisions you’re making. And I know that’s a fine line to walk. I overstepped it when I messed with your scores. I want you to tell me when you think I’m overstepping anything, okay?”

“Okay,” he easily agreed. “I will ring the cowbell.”

She let out a little laugh. “Yes, please ring the cowbell.”

They walked for a while in silence and it didn’t take long until they came to the barley field that Ira had mentioned. The sun was peeking out from behind some of the clouds, and Lea tugged at his left arm just a tiny bit.

“This is a really nice view,” she pointed at the gently rolling hills and the valley in front of them, “how about we sit here for a little bit?”

Shaun looked around and found a patch of grass in the shade of a few shrubs that lined one side of the barley field. “Over there?” He pointed at it.

“Perfect.”

Shaun sat down first, Lea sitting just behind him on his left side, slinging her arm loosely around his waist so that his back leaned into her chest. “Is this okay?” she asked.

He smiled. “Yes.”

He turned his face up towards the sky to let the sun warm his face, hoping the sunscreen they'd put on earlier would hold long enough. He blinked against the sun, held up one hand to his brow to shield his eyes.

"These cumulonimbus clouds look very interesting."

"Cumulonimbus, is that what it is?"

"Yes. They form when water vapor condenses in the lower troposphere. They can vary greatly in size, sometimes their base can be several miles across."

"Those aren't rainclouds, are they? Wasn't it supposed to rain later?"

He looked at the sky more closely but didn't see any clouds that threatened immediate rain. "Cumulonimbus can be a source of rainfall, but I think you're wrong about the forecast. They only predicted a 2% chance of precipitation in this area today."

"Yeah, maybe I remembered that wrong."

She reached her chin over his left shoulder and tucked it there and he relished the physical contact, thinking about his conversation earlier with Theo. With Lea, everything was different. He felt at home with her, felt safe.

She said to him, "Did you know there's a Cloud Appreciation Society?"

"No."

"You should look it up, they have a website."

"You looked up clouds on the internet?"

She shifted a little against him. "I overheard someone mentioning it once. I mean, this was a few years ago, your cumulonimbus talk just made me remember it."

"It sounds interesting."

They stayed quiet for a long moment, then Lea asked, "How was your talk with Theo earlier?"

"It was fine."

"What did you tell him?"

"That I didn't want to be touched."

"And what did he say?"

"He had a lot of questions."

He felt her chuckle against his back. "Oh yeah? About what?"

"About touching."

“And did you explain it to him?”

“I tried.”

“I’m sure you did great. He certainly seemed happy.”

He thought again about what Lea had said earlier, about Jen’s request. Was he being too complacent, a little too comfortable in his comfort zone? Should he be taking that stand with Parker and make the effort?

When Sophie had asked them about the reality show, he’d told her he would have wanted to see autism representation on TV when he was younger. This was another chance to raise awareness, to play a small part in something that could become a lot bigger if enough people joined the cause.

His hand sought out hers and he intertwined his fingers with hers. “I want to do it.”

“Do what?” she asked.

“Talk to Parker.”

He could only imagine she might be smiling. Her thumb stroked across the ball of his. “What made you change your mind?”

“You were right. Raising awareness is important.”

“Yeah, I think it is. Sometimes I wonder if I should get more involved. You know, volunteer somewhere.”

“That could take a lot of time. You are already busy with work and your digestive tract sensor.”

“Yeah, I know. And maybe right now isn’t the right time, but we can hold that thought for later. And, you know, if you ever wanna go that route yourself, I’d totally support it.”

He was unsure what to think of that idea. For now, a conversation with Parker seemed like the right thing to do. He wasn’t sure he wanted to take any bigger steps than that, but he knew he also felt proud that Lea was so supportive.

Lea moved behind him, gently released him from the easy embrace they’d been in. He shifted his own weight, could feel a definite sting from his shoulder and dull ache from his ribs now. He’d foregone the painkillers in the morning, hoped he wouldn’t need them.

He rolled his right shoulder a little bit, which of course Lea was noticing. “Is your shoulder sore?”

“It’s okay,” he evaded.

She came around so she could see him. “Did you bring your painkillers?”

“They are in the backpack in the car.”

“We can go back if you wanna take any.”

He hated this. He didn't want the pain meds, but he also knew he didn't want the day to be ruined by his aching body reminding him of the unfinished healing process at every turn.

"Let's finish our walk," he said.

"Okay," Lea agreed, then got up and held out a hand to help him up. "Come on, Dr. Shaun."

He let her pull him up, his ribs now definitely protesting. He had to suppress a moan, but pushed through it until the pain lessened enough to try and ignore it as they continued on their stroll.

Back at the farm, Shaun asked Dr. Glassman for the car keys and took his pain meds right by the car with a swig of water from the water bottle in his backpack. It was lukewarm from the sun-heated car that was standing in the half shade of a tree.

Once he'd locked the car again, noises and commotion in the stables filtered through to his ears, so Shaun decided to investigate.

He found Jennifer and Parker with Pickles there, and a middle-aged man who Shaun assumed was a vet since he was holding a syringe that he was beginning to inject into Pickles' neck. She clearly seemed nervous and fidgety and she actually bucked with a horse squeak when the vet injected the needle.

Shaun stopped a safe distance away, watching the trio trying to calm Pickles down in reassuring voices, Jennifer holding her by the halter. It took a while for the vet to actually manage to administer the contents of the syringe, but not without a struggle.

They lightly patted Pickles' neck when the vet was done. Jennifer noticed Shaun eventually, and she automatically explained, "We're vaccinating her for tetanus and strangles."

Shaun edged a little closer. "What is strangles?"

"It's a bacterial infection that causes pretty nasty abscesses, usually in the head and neck."

"Okay," Shaun confirmed. He'd look it up later, perhaps a pathogen specific to horses, which he didn't know much about. "When is she due?"

The vet answered this one. "We don't know for sure, but I'd say maybe another couple of weeks to a month." He looked at Jennifer. "Do you think you'll need me for the birth?"

Jennifer shook her head. "If it goes smoothly, I wouldn't think so. Let's hope she's a natural." She stroked the mare's neck. "We do, don't we, Pickles?"

Pickles let out a nervous snort and shook her head as much as the confines of the halter would allow it. The vet felt a few places on Pickles' belly and underside, then gave her a pat on the croup. "All done, girl," he said. "Everything looks good from here."

"How is her back foot?" Shaun inquired, looking at it.

The hoof still looked slightly different in shape than the others, the farrier the week before had explained that some malformations had to be adjusted gradually not to put too much strain on tendons and ligaments.

The vet let his gaze wander to Pickles' back hoof. "Some minor residual lameness, but I hear it's already improved. I don't see any cause for concern right now, chances are good it'll eventually clear up."

Shaun let out a relieved breath. He really hoped Pickles would fully recover, and he felt something unpleasant bubbling up inside of him at how people could neglect animals to the point where they were starting to physically suffer. It was completely beyond his capability to understand.

Jennifer took the vet aside and they discussed a few more details as she accompanied him out of the stables. Parker hung back to stay with Pickles, and Shaun stood, unsure what to do. He stepped a little closer, maybe he should be talking to Parker about that homework assignment.

"Your mother said you wanted to talk to me about a school project."

Parker looked at him with what Shaun thought might be surprise in his expression. "Didn't you say no?"

"I did, but I changed my mind. We can talk about your school project."

Parker nodded as he adjusted one of the ropes attached to Pickles' halter. "Okay." He pointed to a small tool that hung on one of the nails on the wooden wall near Shaun. "Can you get me the hoof pick?"

Shaun eyed the wall, took what he thought was likely the hoof pick and handed it to Parker. Pickles eyed him curiously as Shaun came closer. She looked calmer and more relaxed now, so Shaun opted for giving her a careful pat on the neck and watched as Parker picked one of her front legs off the ground, wedged it onto his knee and started cleaning the dirt out of the hoof.

Pickles' nose came to nuzzle the crook of Shaun's neck, and he tried not to flinch. The mare was surprisingly gentle, and he stood still for a moment, trying to decide if he was enjoying or disapproving of the equine gesture. He concluded that he didn't actually hate it, so perhaps that answered Theo's question of whether he minded being touched by horses.

What he did mind, however, was when Pickles started licking his hand, so he pulled it back. Pickles drew back her head, shook it a little and let out a snort. Parker was now doing the back hoof that hadn't been malformed, letting out a little, "Oof," as Pickles leaned her weight right into him.

"Stop that," he said to the horse and shifted his body weight a little to deal with the extra weight. Pickles didn't seem to care. Shaun was fascinated that she had been so nervous with the vet before, but now seemed to be the picture of calm.

Before long, he found himself scratching Pickles behind one ear, which she seemed to enjoy, hanging her head lazily, letting out a long horse breath through her nose, twitching slightly when Parker moved to the last leg to clean it.

When Parker was done, he straightened up and remarked, "She really seems to like you."

Shaun wondered why everyone was telling him that. Was there something to it, that Pickles had taken a special liking to him? He had little experience with horses and their behavior.

“Why do you say that?” he asked Parker.

“Just look at her. She’s super relaxed. She doesn’t always let people get close, she’s pretty skittish with Mom or Zoe. I dunno, maybe it’s a gender thing.”

“A… gender thing?”

“Yeah, some animals generally don’t like men or women. Could be bad experience, you know. A lot of the horses here were mistreated before they got here.”

“Or it could be pheromones,” Shaun remarked.

Parker was now unclipping the halter from the ropes to the left and right. “That’s like… body odor, right?”

“No. Pheromones are chemicals secreted by animals to generate a response in other animals of the same species.”

“Isn’t that the same thing?” He took Pickles’ halter and Shaun stepped back and out of the way. “Come on, girl,” Parker said as he led Pickles to where her stall was.

Shaun tentatively followed, listening to Pickles’ hooves clacking rhythmically on the concrete floor, noticing the slight limp she had on her hind leg. “Why are you not taking her back outside?”

“It’s getting pretty hot outside. With her being this pregnant, she’ll be better off inside today. Grandpa had this special ventilation system built in when he had the stables renovated a couple of years ago. Works pretty well, and there’s also the misting system when temps get more extreme. Most of the horses love it.”

Shaun had indeed noticed that the temperature in the stable was noticeably cooler than outside, and he looked up to where Parker was pointing. He could see some kind of water pipe system up in the ceiling.

While Parker closed the latches on Pickles’ stall door, Shaun asked, “When do you want to interview me?”

Parker shrugged. “I guess we could do it now.”

Shaun agreed with, “Okay.”

Parker turned sideways and indicated the stable exit. “My notes and stuff are at the house.”

When Shaun didn’t say anything, Parker started walking to the house and Shaun followed.

They ended up sitting at the dining table with Shaun in a chair across from Parker. The latter was leafing through a college block with handwritten scribbles, eventually stopping and tapping his pen on the paper.

Shaun waited and silence ensued. Eventually, he asked, “Why did you ask me to talk to you when you’re not talking?”

Parker shrugged. “I guess I don’t really know where to start…?”

“You said you had to write an essay.”

“Yeah, about neurodiversity and stuff. We’re doing that in Social Studies now.”

“What is the subject of the essay?”

Parker shrugged. “I dunno. Just neurodiversity. Autism, I guess.”

“I am not an expert on autism.”

“No, but you have it.”

“Yes.”

“You’ve always had it, right?”

“Yes. It’s a congenital condition.”

“And, like… What’s it like?”

Shaun frowned, then shrugged. “I don’t know how to answer that.”

“Well, you’re kinda… different.”

“Yes.”

“Isn’t that, I dunno, difficult?”

“Sometimes.”

“You don’t talk much either, do you?”

“I am autistic.” Shaun sighed, realized maybe he should be making more of an effort. “It is part of my ASD.”

“ASD?”

“Autism Spectrum Disorder. Was that not explained in your class? It’s a common abbreviation.”

“Sorry, maybe I forgot. Is it difficult for you to talk to people?”

“Sometimes it is. People don’t always like me. I think you don’t like me.”

When Parker didn’t say anything, Shaun looked at him. He wasn’t exactly sure, but maybe he had said something inappropriate. Case in point, maybe.

He added, “People often think I’m weird because I don’t talk or behave the way it is socially expected. I think… I just said something that made you uncomfortable.”

“Yeah, you were kinda blunt. So, like, you can’t be polite?”

“I don’t always know what’s polite, so I don’t do it on purpose. I am also not very good at reading non-verbal cues.”

“Non-verbal cues, what’s that exactly?”

“Facial expressions and body language.”

“So you don’t know what this is?” Parker held up a hand with his middle finger up.

“Oh, I know what that is.” Shaun couldn’t help but smile, particularly since he thought Parker’s cheeks looked just a little more flushed than before.

Parker shifted in his chair. “Sorry, I didn’t wanna insult you.”

“You didn’t. What I meant is that I can’t always tell how people are feeling. Things like smiles and laughs are easy, but there are nuances in facial expressions and gestures that other people can read that I can’t.”

“Okay. We watched some videos in school and it said a lot of autistic people don’t want to be touched.”

“Yes, that is another frequent trait of ASD.”

“So do you also not like people touching you?”

“Yes.”

“But your wife was touching you.”

“Yes, but that is different. I love Lea.”

“What about Aaron?”

“I love Dr. Glassman, too.”

“So, like, it’s only strangers?”

“No. It was very difficult when I was dating Carly. It took a long time for me to be able to have sex with her.”

That seemed to be piquing Parker’s interest. “Wait, you dated before?”

“Yes. Why does that surprise you?”

Parker shrugged. “I dunno. You said lots of people thought you were weird. Does being weird make you, like, maybe kinda hot?”

That stumped Shaun. He’d never even entertained the idea that he was being seen as particularly attractive or desirable. “I don’t think I am,” he imitated Parker’s tone of voice, “maybe kinda hot.”

“Well, you're married, and you have a dating history.”

“People on the autism spectrum can date. I’m not sure why that is considered unusual.”

“So how do you do it? Do women like it when you're, like, super blunt?”

“Why are you asking me that?”

“Well, you're married to a super-hot woman.”

“You think Lea is super-hot?”

Shaun heard it, even though Parker said it under this breath. “Duh.”

“Lea has said she values my honesty. I don’t know if that is generally considered attractive in men.”

Parker took some notes in his rather unruly college block that had a number of dog ears that Shaun could see. He looked up at Shaun after a few moments of scribbling. Shaun noted that he was left-handed.

He could tell that Parker had more questions. “So you were in that bus accident that was in the news a few weeks ago?”

“Yes, but I don’t know what that has to do with my autism.”

“I guess it doesn’t, but I was just curious. Can you, like, remember any of it?”

Shaun could see from the corner of his eye that Lea was now standing in the doorway, leaning casually against the doorframe with her shoulder. “Not very much. I lost consciousness almost immediately.”

“So it just busted up your shoulder?”

“I have a tear in my rotator cuff, two fractured ribs and there was brain swelling in my frontal lobe as a result of blunt force trauma.”

“Wow, really? Did you have to have brain surgery?”

“No. The swelling was treated with a diuretic agent and went down without surgical intervention.”

“I mean, that all sounds kinda scary.”

Shaun tried not to think back to it. “It was. I would prefer not to talk about it.”

Parker nodded. “Yeah, sure. Sorry.”

“Did you have more questions about autism?”

Parker consulted his notes again. “You’re a surgeon, right?”

“Yes, I’m a fifth year surgical resident.”

“Does your autism interfere with your work?”

“Sometimes, but it also helps. I can visualize things very well.”

Lea walked closer. “He gets these visions.” She pulled out a chair next to Shaun and sat down. “It’s kinda cool to watch.”

“Visions?” Parker asked.

Lea looked at Shaun. “Can you explain them?”

He shrugged lightly. “I just… see things. In my head.”

“Try to describe it. Is it images? Texts? Are they three-dimensional? What happens when you see them?”

“It is all of that. It can be something I’ve read or seen before, sometimes I imagine what something will look like and then I can visualize it—where organs, blood vessels, tendons or nerves are positioned in the body, where an injury or a medical problem may be located. It is different every time, but it can help finding a surgical solution.”

Parker’s eyes had become a bit wider. “That’s kinda cool. So that vision thing, is that also your autism?”

“No,” Shaun said, “The technical term is savant syndrome, but it is not unusual to occur in tandem with ASD. Roughly 50% of individuals with savant syndrome are on the autism spectrum.”

Parker was immediately taking notes. Shaun added, “If you want more statistics, it occurs approximately four times more often in males than it does in females.”

Parker briefly looked up, “So you’re, like, super-smart?”

Shaun was about to say no, but Lea was faster and said, “Yes, he’s super-smart.”

Shaun protested, “I am not super-smart.”

“Yes, you are. And your vision thingy has saved a lot of lives. Ask anyone at the hospital, and they will tell you the same thing. Do you wanna talk about your struggles with communication? That might be useful for an essay on ASD.”

Shaun shrugged again. “Lea is right. I cannot always communicate very well. It can be difficult when I have to speak to patients. You… said I was blunt. That makes a lot of people very uncomfortable.”

“Has anyone ever asked for another doctor because they didn’t want you?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

“It has happened several times. Some requests were granted, others were not. When I was being offered my first lead surgery, the Chief of Surgery told the patient she would have to go to another hospital if she wanted to be operated on by a surgeon other than me.”

“And did the patient go to another hospital?”

“No.”

“Why wouldn’t anyone want you as their doctor if you’re super smart, though? I think I’d totally want you.”

Shaun’s mouth curved into a small smile. Parker was leafing through his college block notes again. “I wrote down that some people with autism need special help. Do you have anything like that?”

“No. My type of autism would be graded level 1 today. Dr. Glassman helped me when I was growing up and in med school. He got me a position as resident at the hospital. Now I have Lea, too.”

“Yeah, why do you call him Dr. Glassman?”

“What else would I be calling him?”

“I don’t know, he’s practically your stepfather, aside from the fact that he’s not married to your mother.”

Shaun hummed. “He… is not my stepfather.”

Lea cut in, “Call it foster father, then. He’s definitely that. More than that, I think.”

“Are your real parents dead?”

Shaun drew in a sharper breath. “My father died. My mother is still alive.”

Lea gave Parker a look and contributed, “Yeah, that’s not the best topic to talk about. I think we should leave it at that where family questions are concerned.”

Parker easily agreed. “Okay.” He turned another page to look at his notes. “I think I’ve got it pretty much covered.”

“Okay,” Shaun echoed.

Parker harrumphed awkwardly. “I, uh… Thank you.”

Shaun briefly met his eyes. “You’re welcome. I hope it was helpful.”

“Yeah, I think it was.”

Lea turned to Parker. “I know it’s kinda awkward, but I’d love to read your essay when it’s done. Think you wanna share it with us? I mean, it’s cool if you don’t want to.”

“I gotta write it first,” Parker said evasively.

“Yeah,” she said. “It’s up to you. Here, let me give you my e-mail address if you wanna mail it later.”

“Yeah, sure,” Parker told her.

Just at that moment, Tammy poked her head in the door, a straw hat in her hand. “I’m gonna be out in the garden for a while, but you’re free to stay in the house.”

Lea asked, “Anything I can help with?”

“Well, I was gonna pick some strawberries. We’re getting to the last of the crop, and they really need to go.”

“Fresh strawberries?” Lea perked up. “I’m totally in.”

Tammy laughed and Lea looked at Shaun. “Wanna come?”

“Hm. No.” He wasn’t very keen on being out in the open early afternoon sun.

“Okay,” Lea said, and then she was gone with Tammy.

Parker looked at his phone and made a grimace. “Grandpa texted me, I have to go and help him with the manure spreader.”

Shaun certainly didn’t like the sound of that, so he stayed sitting at the table for a few minutes, letting his mind wander, then decided to go and see if he could find something more interesting to observe, but not before he had gotten the sunscreen from his backpack.

He struggled a little getting it applied to his left arm with his right shoulder still protesting at certain movements, but the ibuprofen he’d taken earlier was helping, and in the end the only lingering unpleasantness was the sticky feeling the lotion left on his skin, but Shaun knew it was a necessary evil and it was just one of those things he’d have to deal with.

He quickly settled for taking a seat on one of large wood logs that were conveniently lying in the shade of a gnarly tree near the horse pen. Jennifer was riding one of the horses there, it was the first time Shaun had seen them riding any of the horses. He watched with interest as Jennifer gave the pinto certain cues and the horse yielded to them. He wondered what it would be like to ride a horse like this,. It seemed somewhat daunting but perhaps also rewarding. He still wasn’t sure he wanted to actually try it.

What he was definitely grateful for, however, was that Dr. Glassman had suggested that first trip to the farm a week ago. This was so much better than sitting at home, trying to find new ways to combat the boredom.

+-+-+-+-+

Aaron let gaze wander across the brownish green pastures that stretched out before him, dotted with the occasional group of horses that were lazily grazing out in the heat, some of them standing under trees, randomly whipping their tails at bothersome insects.

With Ira turning his attention to manure spreading, Aaron had politely excused himself. He didn't mind helping out, but manure was where his helpfulness met its boundaries, and Ira had given him a grin and nodded.

His eyes fell on a familiar figure sitting under a tree in the shade in the distance near the horse pen, so Aaron made his way to join Shaun. He was fairly sure Shaun was pretty happy here, otherwise he wouldn't have suggested a second trip, but it couldn't hurt to check in.

"Hey," Aaron greeted Shaun as he walked up to the wood log he was sitting on.

"Hello, Dr. Glassman."

Aaron sat down next to Shaun. "Everything all right?"

"Yes. It is very all right."

Aaron let his eyes glide over the landscape, relished the scenery once more. "It's nice out here, huh?"

"Yes, I like it a lot."

"You said you needed your pain meds earlier. Is it the shoulder or the ribs?"

Shaun made a face. "Both."

"Not a cause for concern, I hope?"

"No," Shaun said immediately. "The pain wasn't very strong. I took the ibuprofen so that I could enjoy my time here more. I don't always need the painkillers when I'm at home, but I move around more when I'm here."

"Yeah, makes sense. And I'm glad you made that call to take the painkillers earlier."

"I have another appointment with Dr. Luca tomorrow. I hope he will clear me to go back to work."

That prompted Aaron to look at Shaun. "Oh wow, so soon?"

"It is not soon. The accident was 26 days ago."

Almost a month. It felt shorter than that to Aaron. He gave Shaun a quizzical look. "Are you sure you're ready?"

"Yes, Lea and I had sex yesterday. Twice. It went very well."

Aaron chuckled. "Yeah, okay, not what I wanted to know. Would you like me to speak to Andrews?"

That elicited a surprised look from Shaun. "Why?"

Aaron suddenly didn't know how to answer that question. "You know what, you're right. Forget I asked that."

Shaun stayed silent for a moment, then said, “In your TV interview, Sophie asked you if you saw yourself as my protector.”

“You saw that?”

“I reviewed some of the footage to find my diagnostic mistake. Sophie asked you if you saw yourself as my protector and you said you don’t anymore, but I think you just wanted to protect me.”

Aaron shrugged. “Old habits, I guess. I should stop doing that, shouldn’t I?”

“Yes. You also said that you were relieved I was going to make it.”

Aaron harrumphed, feeling a little self-conscious suddenly. “Did I?”

“Yes. Although you also said you were proud of me.”

Damn Shaun’s eidetic memory, but Aaron still stood by what he’d said. “I *am* proud of you.”

“Why did you think that I wasn't going to make it?”

Aaron shrugged. “I don’t know. I guess… I guess for a while I wasn’t sure what your future would look like. You know, when you were younger.”

“Why?”

“Come on, Shaun, you know why.”

“Because of my autism.”

“Yeah.”

“Did you think I couldn’t graduate med school or work as a surgeon? Or live on my own?”

Aaron felt even more uncomfortable now. Shaun had a way of drilling into the hard topics with fierce tenacity, but maybe these were legitimate questions he deserved an answer to. “Yeah, there may have been a time when I wasn’t sure you could do all those things. But you did, because you’re determined and hard-working and, you know, you’re also super smart, so there’s that.”

“When did you think I couldn’t do all those things?”

Aaron sighed. “I don’t know. When you were growing up, I guess. You do remember we had some rough times, right? All those situations with the foster families that didn’t work out. That first year in med school didn’t go all that well. You almost got kicked out of a course.”

“The professor was teaching outdated techniques.”

“Perhaps so, but professors have a bit of an ego sometimes, and it’s also a matter of respect. You can’t just challenge them in front of the whole class. Didn’t we talk about this back then?”

“We did.”

“Yeah, and you learned something and then made sure not to repeat your mistake, right?”

Shaun just let out a hum, and Aaron wasn’t sure he wanted to dig deeper. Some things were better left unsaid with Shaun.

Shaun was still examining the arguments. “I lived on my own before I moved to San Jose.”

“Yes, you did, but you also had a lot of help out in Casper. You knew a lot of people, and people knew you. I knew San Jose would be a whole other caliber, and there would be a whole lot of stepping out of your comfort zone.”

Shaun stayed quiet for a moment, then said, “Dr. Melendez told me once that you have your most profound learning experiences when you step out of your comfort zone.”

“And he was probably right about that, but Shaun, your learning zone is a bit narrower than other people’s.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Step too far out of the comfort zone, and learning goes out the window because you start panicking, because you’re overwhelmed or, I don’t know, going into survival mode.”

“Does ‘you’ relate to me, or was that a generalized statement?”

“The latter—that holds true for pretty much everyone.”

“So… you mean I panic more easily than neurotypical people?”

“Yeah. Maybe. I think that’s just another aspect of your ASD. Don’t you think that’s true?”

“When did you change your mind?”

“Change my mind? About what?”

“You said you were relieved I was going to make it. That implies you changed your mind about being apprehensive about whether I was going to make it.”

“No, Shaun, *you* changed my mind.”

“What do you mean by that?”

Aaron shrugged. “You fought hard for what you wanted, and that paid off. I mean, look at you now. You’re a great surgeon on your way to becoming an attending, and you found love and friends and married a wonderful woman.”

“All of that did not go very smoothly, either.”

Aaron gave him a curious look, a hint of amusement playing at his lips. “No, but it definitely made life a whole lot more interesting.”

“It is not the kind of interesting that I wish to have in my life.”

Aaron looked at Shaun's face, trying to gauge whether that had been a joke or just an inadvertently amusing Shaun statement. Shaun had his deadpan face on, so probably the latter, but Aaron relished the moment anyway. With a smile, he said, "No, I guess not. But still, you can't argue with the outcome, right?"

Shaun looked on. "No, I suppose not."

"So, going back to work, huh? Are you excited?"

"Yes," Shaun said enthusiastically. "Very. It is very boring at home when Lea is not there."

"I don't think you'll be doing any surgeries for a while, though. You know that, right?"

"Oh yes, I know. But I can do other things until my shoulder has fully healed."

"Yeah, of course you can."

"I could help you in the clinic."

"Yeah, sure. But you know what, talk to Andrews, I'm sure he's got some suggestions."

"Yes, I will."

The conversation stalled, and together they watched Jen ride the horse in silence. Aaron stole another glance at Shaun, felt relief all over again that he seemed to be doing well. It had been a little touch and go there in the ICU those first few days, and Aaron reminded himself to be grateful more often that Shaun was alive and on the road to what they all hoped would be a full recovery.

+-+-+-+-+

Chapter 13: Let the fear take the wheel and steer

Lea couldn't tell exactly why or how, but when she woke up, she knew that Shaun wasn't there. Her gaze over to his side of the bed confirmed it. It was still dark out, so it had to be the middle of the night.

She listened for a moment, didn't hear anything, but the bedroom door was closed. Maybe he'd gone back to sleeping on the couch, although she thought since he'd gotten rid of the arm brace, he'd been fine to go back to sleeping in bed with her.

She lay for another moment staring at the ceiling, vaguely recalling something from earlier that night. Had she woken up before? Had he woken her? Or was she imagining that?

She quietly got out of bed and opened the door to the living room. Shaun was sitting on the couch, his back straight, definitely awake.

When she went around the couch to gauge what his state of mind was, her worry meter shot up a notch. He seemed calm, but there was a hardened edge to his face, his hair tousled in a way that suggested he might have had a meltdown, or maybe a precursor of it. The toy scalpel was lying

on the coffee table, the one he usually kept stowed away in a box now and hardly ever got out anymore.

She sat down next to him, trying to keep some distance. In a gentle voice, she said, “Hey.”

He let out one of his hums, so at least he was acknowledging her.

“Are you okay?” she probed, but he didn’t answer. So, no, probably he wasn’t. What had happened? Had he had a bad dream or gotten stuck in some negative feedback loop in his head?

“Shaun, please talk to me. Did you have a meltdown?” She really hated the thought of him getting all worked up with her sleeping in the next room.

His answer was a low, “No.”

“But you were upset. Did you have a nightmare?”

He tensed at that, so she knew she’d hit a nerve. “How long have you been sitting out here?”

He shrugged a little without specifying. She saw he wasn’t wearing his watch, but she guessed it had been a while.

She let out a heavy breath. “You could have woken me. I could have helped.”

“You were sleeping,” he said dejectedly.

“Yeah, but you can always wake me when something like this happens.”

She wanted to hold him, comfort him, but wasn’t sure just how open he was to physical contact right now, so she opted for moving a little closer to him, putting her hand out next to him, palm facing up. He briefly looked at it, then let his own hand slide into hers, intertwining his fingers with hers.

His grip was fast and strong, almost hungry for the touch, the connection. He might not have had a meltdown, but now she knew he’d been in bad headspace in one way or another.

She pulled a little at his hand, seeing if he wanted more, and he gave into it and leaned into her as Lea adjusted her position and let him gently rest against her chest, his head in the crook of her neck.

She placed her arm around him, gently gliding her fingers along shoulder and upper arm, very careful not to aggravate anything, but he didn’t seem to mind.

They sat in silence like that for a while. She didn’t think he was crying. She wasn’t quite sure what was going on in his head. Maybe just some more processing, trying to sort out what was happening or how to find his way back to an equilibrium.

After a few minutes, he pulled away and ended up lying on his back with his head on her thigh. She allowed herself a smile as she let her fingers play with his hair by his temple. Her fingers traced the skin there where the ugly bruises had been. The scabs from the open wounds had all healed by now, but he still had the rosy freshly healed skin on his cheek.

“Your face is healing very nicely.”

He lazily closed his eyes, drew in a breath that was more relaxed and even. She wasn’t sure he wanted to talk about it, but at least she wanted to offer the opportunity. “Did you dream about the accident?”

He took a moment to respond, but said in a low voice, “Yes.”

“I’m sorry, that must have been scary.”

His exhale was a bit shakier. She waited but he didn’t say anything else, so she probed, “Do you wanna talk about it?”

He took another moment to answer. “There is… not much I remember.”

“Of the dream or the accident?”

“Either.”

“Shaun, I don’t wanna ask you more questions if you’d rather not talk about it, but you never told me what you do remember. I’ll listen if you wanna talk.”

He let out a hum, but it wasn’t the immediately rejecting one, it was one of those that indicated he was trying to decide, trying to find the right words.

“I… I only remember people gasping and screaming. The truck came from the right and the impact was very sudden and very loud. I was standing near the rear door, and I think it threw me to one side. I don’t remember anything else after that.”

Lea had a lump in her throat, not able to stop imagining what that must have been like. She swallowed heavily. “Yeah, Aaron said you were unconscious when you were brought in. You must have hit your head hard on something, probably lost consciousness right away.”

“Do you know what happened afterwards?”

She shook her head. “No. I’m guessing an ambulance took you to the ER. They called Aaron, and he called me when you were already in the CT. I first saw you when you got to the ICU. I’m sure we could ask around and check who brought you in, they might be able to tell you what it was like on the scene. But are you sure you want to know? All of that sounds really gruesome.”

He took a moment to say, “I don’t know.”

“Well, think about it. If you think it’ll help you to know, I’m sure you can find out.”

“Maybe you’re right. Maybe it’s better when I don’t know.”

“Did you relive all of that in your dream? Is that what you woke up from?”

He shrugged ever so slightly. “I think I remembered the sound of the crash.”

“Can you tell me what happened earlier tonight, after you woke up? Were you upset? Overwhelmed? You said you didn’t have a meltdown, but you were on the way to one, weren’t you?”

He let out an audible breath through his nose. “Yes.”

She stopped caressing him for a moment, let her hand rest gently on his head. “I wish you would have woken me up. I want to help you through these things.”

He hummed, then fell silent. It made her think of something else, something that happened a while ago. “Do you remember that night in the pharmacy last year, after Alma’s baby died?”

She could see his face darkening, and she was immediately sorry she had brought it up.

“Yes,” he said hesitantly.

“I’m sorry, please forget I said that. I shouldn’t—”

“What about that night?”

“Shaun, are you sure you wanna talk about it? I know that stuff is hard for you.”

His answer was to push himself up and out of her lap. He sat up, made a grimace at his aching ribs, but sat with his legs crossed next to her. He turned his head towards her. “What do you want to know?”

“I just… Things were so bad back then and we never really talked about it. I kinda want to. But only if you’re comfortable with it.”

He drew in a breath, stayed quiet for a long moment before he said, “I’m not comfortable with it.”

“Okay, then w—”

“But you’re right. We should. It’s important.”

“You had nightmares then, too. I know you didn’t want me to know, and we weren’t in a very good place then, but I was really worried. Seeing you like that, it was… It was terrible. And I know you have very little control over it, I’m not saying you could have prevented it, or that, I don’t know, you could have done anything differently, but I wanted to help you so badly. It really hurt that I couldn’t.”

“It is very difficult to do anything about it when it happens. Sometimes impossible.”

“Yeah, I know. And I’d like to know if there’s anything I can do to help if that happens again. I hope it doesn’t, but I also know it might. What helps you during a bad meltdown like that? Do you know?”

“I’m… not sure there is much that helps.”

“Glassman was there. I don’t know how much you remember of it, but you were crying, and he just kinda held you until you calmed down. Would you like me to do that? I don’t wanna get in your space when I shouldn’t.”

“I didn’t want you to because I was upset that you had lied to me.”

“Yeah, I know. And that made it kinda complicated and messy, right?”

His voice was low and full of regret when he said, “Yes.”

He was now fidgeting with his wedding ring and she waited. He eventually said, “I think it will help if you are there now. You always know how to calm me down. You have done it before.”

She smiled a sad smile. “Wyoming, is that what you mean?”

“You held me until I stopped crying.”

“Yeah, I know. But I think that was different. Was that a meltdown, or was that just you being overwhelmed, not sure what to do with the grief and those ugly things that your douchebag of a father said to you?”

His jaw was working before he said, “Is there a difference?”

“I don’t know, you tell me.”

“I don’t know, Lea. It just… happens.”

“Yeah,” she sighed. “And please know that I don’t ever want you to think you’re not strong enough or you’re not good enough when those things happen. I know it comes with the territory, and I genuinely want to help you through them. So if you ever think there’s something I can do, can you let me know?”

“Yes,” he told her.

Her hand went to his knee where she let it rest. “I’m so proud of you. You’re amazing, and I love you so much.”

He looked at her, made sure to seek out her eyes. “I love you, too.”

She relished the moment, was glad she’d pulled him away from the event horizon of that black hole he had been circling, but was there perhaps more to it? “Shaun, have you been having these nightmares before?”

He let out a short hum, followed by a, “No.”

“But have you considered that they might happen again? You know, it could be your brain still processing the trauma of the accident, even now. You’ve been through this hellish experience, you’ve been in physical pain for all these weeks.” She had another thought. “Parker asked you about the accident the other day, do you think that might have triggered it?”

Shaun just sat there silently while she gently stroked her fingers over his kneecap. He didn’t have any more answers than she did.

“Speaking of which,” she said to change the subject, “I think you and Parker talking was really good. He didn’t really make an effort to get to know you before, and he knows a lot more about you now. He may just have a newfound respect for you because of it.

“And remember when we were talking about having children? Kids today, they learn about all of this in school now. There’s a whole lesson plan on neurodiversity. Just the other week I read online that a man with autism became the first nonverbal graduate of UCLA. I really don’t think we have anything to fear for our children, no matter what they turn out to be.”

“I wish we could have had that when I was young.”

“Yeah, me too. Your childhood might have been a lot happier.”

He briefly met her eyes. “Was your childhood happy?”

She made a grimace. “Yeah, I guess. I mean, Donnie wasn’t exactly the loving kind of brother. We fought a lot. But my parents were always there, we always had what we needed, we were loved. Knowing you has made me appreciate that a lot more. I don’t know, maybe that’s a good thing, although I wish it wasn’t at the expense of your terrible childhood.”

“I… fail to see the correlation between my terrible childhood and your happy one.”

“Yeah, I know, I just… I wish things could have been different for you. Makes me so sad and angry every time I think about how you were treated like shit and bullied all the time. You’re the last person to deserve that.”

“Steve was always there to help me.”

“Yeah, and thank God for him. I wish I could have gotten to know him.”

Shaun drew in a heavy breath. “Me too.”

“Do you ever imagine what he’d be doing right now, the kind of person he’d be if he was still alive?”

“No. What would be the point of that? He would still be dead.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. I’m glad you at least have photos of him. And that Glassman found you.”

“He didn’t find us. We found him.”

“Yeah, I only know a very abbreviated version of that story. Do you wanna tell me? Actually, no, wait. Don’t go there. Tell me a few good memories you have from your past. Med school, maybe? Something that’s a pleasant memory that you wanna hold on to.”

Shaun’s mouth curved into a small smile. “Dr. Glassman and I went fishing by a river once.”

“Oh? Did you like it?”

“No. I was wet and cold and it was very boring. We didn’t catch any fish.”

She chuckled. “Are you sure that’s a good memory?”

“Yes.” Shaun nodded lightly. “Lea?”

She met his eyes. “Yes, Shaun?”

“Is it strange that I think of Dr. Glassman when people talk about fathers?”

She frowned. “No, not at all. Didn’t you and Glassy actually talk about that before the wedding?”

“How do you know that?”

“He told me. When you were in the hospital. Well, not in so many words, because you know Glassy, but he mentioned something. Please give me the tea on this. Did you hug? Were there manly tears?” she asked half-jokingly.

“No.”

She shook her head. “Why am I not surprised. The two of you are such dudes.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means you probably should have totally hugged.”

Shaun looked slightly stricken now. “Do you think Dr. Glassman wanted a hug when I told him?”

She let out a short laugh. “No, don’t worry. I’m sure you did absolutely fine. You do you, Shaun. I wasn’t even there. But I’m glad you talked about that. It was about time. Did Glassy say anything?”

“He said he loved me. He called me Dr. Murphy.”

“What?”

“I said, ‘I love you, Dr. Glassman,’ and he said, ‘I love you too, Dr. Murphy.’”

Now Lea actually laughed out loud, which made Shaun look at her with a bit of alarm. “Why are you laughing?”

“Because it’s kinda funny. And it’s very Glassy to turn a declaration of love into a wisecrack.”

“Are you saying he didn’t mean it?”

“No, Shaun,” she assured him immediately. “It sounds like it was very sweet. And I know I shouldn’t be making fun. Glassy loves you as much as you love him. And he is totally the father you deserve with all of your heart.”

That seemed to assuage him, and she saw him trying to stifle a yawn. She tapped his leg with her fingers. “How about we go back to bed, try to catch some more sleep?”

He slowly nodded. “Okay.”

She got up from the couch and held out a hand to help him up, which he gladly took. When they got back into bed, she watched him fuss around a little with the pillow. She had to suppress the urge to suggest he take the pain meds, but she had to trust him to know what he needed.

He finally settled down in a half-sideways position on his left side, and she let herself relax. A few more hours of sleep would be nice. She hoped it would be restful and uninterrupted for both of them.

+-+-+-+-+

Despite the setback a couple of nights ago with the nightmare he'd woken up from, Shaun felt that things were finally falling into place. His appointment with Dr. Luca on Monday had gone well. With the shoulder brace come and gone, the orthopedist was very satisfied with Shaun's progress, and although those ortho appointments, just like the physiotherapy sessions, always brought lingering pain from testing motion boundaries, Shaun had been elated to be cleared to go back to work tomorrow.

He and Lea had celebrated that evening he got the news, got slightly drunk on Tequila and joy, ending the night on a high note of sweet and satisfying sexual activities.

With just a few days of free time left, Shaun had decided to make the most of it, so he'd reached out to Jen to ask if he could come back to the farm today. Of course Jennifer had replied that he'd always be welcome there but that he should check with Ira because Jennifer would be at work during the day. Shaun vaguely recalled she worked as a paralegal, he wasn't sure if it was part-time.

Ira had insisted on picking Shaun up at the light rail station, even though Shaun had already mapped out the trip by bus. Perhaps it wasn't such a bad idea, the nearest bus station was almost a mile away from the farm.

The car drive was slightly awkward, Shaun wasn't exactly well versed in many of the topics that held Ira's interest, be it golf or baseball or just small talk in general. In the end, Ira ended up in a monologue about the history of the horse sanctuary and his love for horses. Shaun paid close attention, particularly about the part of thunderstorms expecting to come in later. Shaun was well aware but it hadn't been top of mind for him until now.

As usual, Ira let Shaun wander on his own for a bit after they arrived, Shaun was surprised to find a young woman working in the stables that he'd never seen before. He greeted her with a, "Hello."

She looked up from the stall mucking. "Oh, hello. Are you looking for someone?"

"No," Shaun answered her.

"Okay." Shaun noticed she was looking at him rather intently. "Sorry, who are you?"

"I'm Dr. Shaun Murphy."

"I wasn't aware the vet was coming in today. Are you new? I don't think I've ever seen you before."

"Oh. No. I'm not a veterinarian. I'm a surgeon at St. Bonaventure Hospital."

“O…kay. Then if you don’t mind my asking, what are you doing here? We don’t usually let strangers wander around the property.”

“I’m not a stranger. I am friends with the Greenbergs. I’ve been here before.”

“Please don’t take this the wrong way, but is there any way you could corroborate that?”

Shaun tried to think how he could answer the question satisfactorily. He pointed at the empty stall that belonged to Pickles. “That stall is occupied by a dapple grey mare called Pickles who is highly pregnant.” He pointed to another stall diagonally across from it. “That stall belongs to Barney the donkey who is always hungry. I don’t know the names of all the other horses, but I do know there is one called Rio, Cinnamon, Opie, Snowball, Henry, Traveler and Little Joe. And another donkey called Mister Buns. Is that enough information to corroborate my earlier statement?”

She let out a little laugh. “Yeah, that’s more than enough. I’m sorry, but I just wanted to make sure you weren’t some random dude with no business walking around here.”

Shaun gave her a nod. “I understand. What is your name?”

“Oh. I’m Zoe. I help out sometimes. You know, make a little extra money, especially now during semester break. Plus, I really love being around horses, so win-win, right?”

“Yes,” Shaun confirmed. “I like th—”

“Dr. Shaun!” came Theo’s excited voice from the door, his little feet tapping on the concrete floor as he came running in. “You’re here!”

Shaun was already bracing himself, thinking Theo might hug him, but he stopped at a respectful distance and just looked up at him. Shaun stole a glance at Zoe who seemed to be viewing the scene with keen interest.

“Hey Theo,” she said.

“Hi Zoe,” the child greeted back. “Dr. Shaun is here.”

“Yes, I’ve already met him.”

“He has autism and he doesn’t want to be touched,” Theo explained.

Shaun immediately felt apprehensive, gave Zoe another look to see her reaction. “Okay,” she said to Theo, “It wasn’t like I was planning on touching him, but thanks for letting me know.”

Theo was impatiently bobbing on his feet. “Can we go to the pigs? I wanna show you something.”

Shaun wasn’t sure he liked the idea and drew up his shoulders somewhat. Lea had said the pigs were very loud. “What do you want to show me?”

“It’s a surprise.”

Shaun let out a short hum. “I don’t like surprises.”

“Why? Surprises are super cool! I love surprises.”

“I don’t like the pigs,” Shaun tried to explain further. “They are very loud.”

“Only when they get feeded. They are not loud now. Please come, Dr. Shaun.”

Shaun cast another glance at Zoe, and she told him, “He’s right. The pigs only get real loud during feeding time. I think you might be okay.”

Shaun hesitantly agreed and followed Theo outside and to the pigsty, although Theo didn’t actually go there but to the pasture behind it. He pointed at a blue object that stood in the middle of it. “Look.”

Shaun looked, unsure what he was looking at. It seemed to be a large blue plastic barrel with a metal bit coming out on one side towards the bottom. “What is it?”

“It’s a pig water barrel,” Theo proclaimed proudly.

“Okay. I assume this is for providing the pigs with drinking water?”

“Yes. Parker and I helped grandpa make it. We had to drill a hole in the barrel and then grandpa put me in the barrel so I could help with the bulkhead because grandpa couldn’t reach it from the outside and I’m small. That was fun!”

Shaun had to admit the idea was somewhat amusing. Theo continued, “And then he put in the pig nipples and used some of the silly rubber.”

Shaun frowned, not sure what silly rubber was, but maybe it wasn’t important.

“And now there’s a lot of water in it and the pigs can drink it whenever they want. It’s really cool and now grandpa doesn’t always have to fill up the water buckets.”

Shaun couldn’t help but admire the ingenuity behind it. “It seems very convenient.”

Theo looked up at him. “What is con-veen-nent?”

“Useful.”

“You use really weird words sometimes,” Theo said in a tone that Shaun thought was perhaps a bit reproachful.

There was a low rumbling from somewhere in the distance, and Shaun looked up in the direction it was coming from. The sky towards the north-east was a menacing dark grey, storm clouds carrying certain rain. The wind was now picking up too, tousling Shaun’s hair and letting the leaves of the small trees near them rustle. This was the thunderstorm Ira had mentioned earlier.

Theo was looking up at him. “Grandma said I should come in the house when the storm comes. I think we should go in the house.”

Shaun could only agree, so he told Theo, “Okay,” and followed him. They ran into Tammy in the small foyer who greeted them with, “Oh, hey Shaun. Ira mentioned you were here. Sounds like the thunderstorm’s rolling in.”

“Yes,” he confirmed, following her and Theo to the kitchen. “They issued a severe thunderstorm watch this morning for the area.” Shaun pulled up his cell phone and brought up the weather app. “Oh. It is now a severe thunderstorm warning.”

“Yeah, I’m still hoping it won’t hit right here, but looks like it might.”

“Is it not dangerous for the animals?”

“Oh, they’ll be fine. They all have shelters they can use, we don’t usually get them inside in the summer.”

Theo was squeezing against Tammy’s leg. “Can I have some cookies?”

“Not now, Theo. We’ll be having lunch pretty soon, all right?”

“Please…?” he pleaded, but Tammy stayed steadfast.

“You can have some after lunch if you still want them then, okay?”

Theo pouted but said, “Okay.”

“Do you wanna go up to your room, show Shaun some of that new Lego?”

Theo was immediately excited. “Yes, I have a new tractor. It’s like grampa’s, except it’s red, and there’s crates and carrots and a pumpkin and an apple. I want to show you!”

Shaun thought perhaps it wasn’t the worst idea to have some distraction. He hadn’t really taken the thunderstorm warning into account in the morning before he left, hadn’t brought any earplugs or headphones.

Theo was immediately focused on his new Lego set and proudly showed Shaun all the things that the tractor could do. Shaun noticed with growing apprehension that daylight became noticeably dimmer, the rolling thunder changing from a low rumble to a more pronounced sound. Big raindrops were starting to pelt the roof above them, and Shaun inwardly cringed.

Thunderstorms were a nuisance at best for his SPD, sometimes a bigger issue if the thunder became loud and frequent and he had no way of shielding himself from the sensory assault.

A stroke of lightning flashed outside the window, bathing the room in a brief flash of light, and Shaun tensed, waiting for the thunder to hit. He inwardly counted. Five seconds. It was definitely coming closer. Despite knowing it would hit, he still twitched when the thunder sounded, now definitely louder and more forceful.

Theo’s voice pulled him from his reverie for a moment. “Dr. Shaun?”

He stole a glance at the boy who seemed fairly relaxed. “Are you scared?” Theo asked.

“No,” Shaun said. He wasn’t exactly scared. He knew all about the science of thunderstorms and how they happened. The thunderstorm itself wasn’t scary.

“But you look like you’re scared.”

Shaun wasn't sure what to say to that.

Theo picked up one of the Lego pieces and stuck it to another one. "I'm not scared of thunderstorms, either. Sometimes the horses are, I don't think they like the loud sound."

Shaun could definitely relate, and he drew in a breath as lightning flashed again. It only took two seconds for the thunder to clap, this time loud and overwhelming. Shaun couldn't help but flinch, drawing his hands up halfway to his ears.

Theo was looking at him again. "Why are you doing that if you're not scared?"

Shaun let out a shaky breath. "The thunder is very loud."

"Yeah, it is. But it's over real quick, so that's not so bad."

Another flash of light, now followed by thunder almost immediately. This one was sharp like a gunshot, and Shaun involuntarily clapped his hands to his ears, closing his eyes. His shoulder and ribs ached from the sudden movement, and he wasn't sure what was worse, the thunder or the actual pain.

He flinched again when there was a touch on his thigh, and he opened his eyes.

Theo was sitting right next to him, holding out a soft toy rabbit he had gently bumped against Shaun's leg. Shaun didn't know what to do with that, but there was a certain amount of comfort and reassurance in the gesture. He drew in a breath, took his hands away from his ears.

Theo was looking up at him, and maybe there was curiosity there, maybe also a bit of worry, Shaun couldn't be sure. "Dr. Shaun?" Theo asked again. "Are you hurt?"

Shaun hummed, his muscles still tense, waiting for the next onslaught.

He vaguely registered that Theo put the rabbit in Shaun's lap when Shaun didn't actively take it and then got up and left. Bright light lit up the room and Shaun pressed his hands to his ears again, squeezing his eyes shut. With the sound more muffled, it was at least bearable, although he could physically feel the sound waves now.

He wasn't sure what to do, suddenly felt very self-conscious. This was one of those situations he hated, where he wished he didn't have all these sensory sensitivities, where he could just function like a normal human being, where he didn't have to be comforted by a small child over something as trivial as a thunderstorm.

There was more lightning, more thunder, still too loud. He somehow sensed movement around him, opened his eyes again.

"Shaun?" It was Tammy's voice, and Shaun moved his hands away from his ears.

She was holding out her hand, and there was a small cardboard item in it. A pair of foam earplugs. He looked up at her but wasn't sure what he read in her face. It was still hard to tell non-verbal cues from people he didn't know that well. Theo was standing by her side, holding her other hand.

"Will these help?" she asked him.

He took them gratefully. “Yes, thank you.”

She nodded and Shaun took them out of the package, but didn’t manage to put them in soon enough before the next wave of lightning and thunder. Just his luck it now seemed to be circling just above them rather than move away. He stuck the earplugs in his ears, immediately feeling a little more relaxed. He let out a breath.

Tammy’s head turned towards the door and she pointed there with her hand, maybe someone had called her. She moved her mouth, Shaun couldn’t make out what she was saying, then she left.

Theo moved next to Shaun again and sat on the floor, a little too close for comfort, but Shaun didn’t mind quite as much. He felt for the toy rabbit in his lap. The fur was very soft and pleasant—his apprehensiveness lessened a tiny fraction.

There were muffled words from Theo that Shaun could hardly make out, so he pulled the earplugs out just a tiny fraction to understand him better. “—*is* very loud, but the lightning is more scarier. It once hit a tree in the horse paddock and then the tree was bursted apart. Grandpa showed it to me.”

Shaun thought back to that documentary he’d watched with Alex Park and all the information he’d absorbed through his Weather Channel interests. “Lightning is very powerful and very hot. It can do serious damage.”

“Yes, the tree fell over. It was a really big tree.”

Shaun saw movement from the corner of his eye. Tammy was standing in the doorway again. “Everything all right up here?”

Shaun looked up at her. “Yes.”

She nodded with an, “Okay. I’ll be downstairs if you need me.”

Shaun didn’t say anything and she left again.

There was another flash of lightning, then a few seconds of silence, then more thunder that the earplugs shielded him from well enough for Shaun not to flinch. Shaun wondered… “Do you want to know how lightning happens?” Because *this*, he definitely knew.

“Yes, how does lightning happen?” Theo asked eagerly.

Shaun thought about weather science for a moment. How could he explain this in a way that a five-year-old would understand?

He gave it his best shot. “When the sun is shining, it warms up the ground, and the air around it also gets warmed up. It rises up towards the sky and then the moisture in the air makes clouds form in the sky where it is a lot colder.

“When the clouds rise up even more to where it’s very cold, small particles of ice form and they hit each other. The small pieces of ice hitting each other cause a discharge of electricity, and when this electricity is strong enough, it makes a bolt of lightning.”

“Yes, the lightning always comes out of the clouds,” Theo confirmed.

“The electric discharge also makes a sound, but because light travels much faster than sound, we don’t always hear the thunder together with the lightning, even though they technically happen at the same time.”

He looked at Theo, not sure he was getting anywhere with his explanation, but Theo seemed to still be paying attention. “Is the lightning super-fast?” he asked.

“Yes, almost 190,000 miles per second.”

“Wow, that sounds like a lot.”

“It is,” Shaun confirmed. “Nothing in the universe can travel faster than light.”

“That’s so cool. I want to run at lightning speed.”

“No one can run at the speed of light.”

“Not even Usain Bolt?”

“I don’t know who that is.”

“He runs really fast. Grandpa says he’s the fastest man on earth.”

Ah, sports. “Usain Bolt can’t run at the speed of light, either.”

“But he can run really fast.”

Shaun stayed quiet. This wasn’t a conversation that he could contribute anything meaningful to. Theo tapped his leg with a longer piece of Lego he was holding. “Dr. Shaun, the thunder isn’t real loud anymore.”

Shaun looked up towards the window, noticing that daylight was brighter now. He pulled out the earplugs a little more, happy to notice that the rain was lessening and the sound of the next thunderclap was indeed a lot fainter.

“Thank you,” he told Theo.

“Are you better now?”

“Yes,” Shaun smiled. “I’m better now.”

He held the toy rabbit back out to Theo. “Thank you for this.”

“That’s Milly-Moo.”

Shaun looked at her again. “She is very cute.”

“Grandpa gave her to me. Not Ira, my other grandpa. I don’t see him very often.”

Shaun had little experience with grandparents, but of course Theo had to ask. “Do you see your grandparents a lot?”

“My grandparents are dead.”

Theo made an affirmative sound. “My other grandma is also dead. She died before I was born. Are your parents also doctors?”

Shaun wasn’t sure how to answer that, so perhaps he could just not answer it at all? Would Theo move on if he didn’t? He didn’t want to start talking about his biological parents. In truth he very much preferred not thinking about them at all. Dr. Glassman was the only parent that mattered to him. Perhaps this was his answer. “My father is a doctor.”

“And your Mom?”

Shaun stayed quiet, then decided to end the conversation the best way he could figure out in the spur of the moment. He got up from the floor and walked away.

“Where are you going?” Theo inquired.

Shaun stopped in the doorway. “I have to go to the bathroom.” He didn’t wait for an answer and made his way downstairs to where he knew the guest bathroom was. It hadn’t even been a lie, he truly needed the bathroom.

He ambled into the kitchen afterwards where Tammy was emptying the dishwasher. She turned around to face him when he walked in. “Hey Shaun.” Her gaze lingered on him for a long moment. “Everything all right?”

“Yes,” he confirmed. He got the earplugs out of his pants pocket and held them out to her in his palm. “Do you want these back?”

“Oh no, we have a large supply. Ira uses them for some of the louder machinery.” She straightened up, asked him, “Can I offer you anything? Water, soda, orange juice?”

“Can I have a glass of milk?”

She nodded. “Yes, of course.”

Tammy got him a glass of milk, then carried it to the small table that stood to the side, motioning for Shaun to sit down. He did as suggested, took a sip of the milk, watched Tammy sit down at the seat diagonally across from him.

Her hands had reached for a coaster that was lying there, she started fumbling with it. She clearly had something on her mind. Was she going to tell him she didn’t want him around Theo on his own when he was being overwhelmed by sensory input and couldn’t pay attention or protect the boy? Should he have tried to fight it more, control it, should he have—

“So I know this is slightly awkward,” Tammy started, and Shaun inwardly prepared for the onslaught, “but I want you to know that you can feel safe here. What happened earlier, I think Theo was concerned. He came to get me, wasn’t quite sure what to make of it, how to help you. It was the sound of the thunder, wasn’t it?”

Okay, that was not what Shaun had expected. That was much *better* than what he'd expected. Still, he wasn't sure what Tammy's intention was, so he just said, "Yes."

"I will admit that I don't really know much about autism, so I'm hoping you can help me."

She stopped there, and he waited. When she didn't elaborate, he asked, "Help you how?"

"Understand it better, maybe try to avoid something like that next time, if at all possible."

"Thunder is always loud. That can't be avoided."

"No, but you said the earplugs helped. I'm guessing that's what you would usually also do when a thunderstorm is rolling in?"

"When I'm at home, I use noise-canceling headphones. Earplugs work, although they are not as effective."

"Is it any loud noises? Or is there something special about thunder?"

That was a good question. "I don't like loud noises in general. With thunder, it can be worse because it's unpredictable."

"Yeah, that makes sense. What else is there you don't like or where you get apprehensive like that?"

'Apprehensive' was putting it mildly, Shaun thought, but he didn't correct Tammy. "I don't like pickles."

That made Tammy laugh softly. "Noted. You don't like garlic either."

"No, and anchovies, olives, mushrooms, walnuts and mayonnaise-heavy dishes."

"If that's your whole list, then I'm considering myself lucky, because Parker's is much, much longer. And while that's good to know, I was thinking more in the direction of situations we should try to avoid or try to keep you away from. I mean, I don't want to make you uncomfortable. This probably isn't something you're overly keen on talking about."

No, he wasn't overly keen on talking about this with a relative stranger, but there was just something about the way Tammy was approaching it, about how there didn't seem to be any judgement to her questions that made him feel comfortable enough to discuss it with her.

"I… don't always know when something like this will happen. It… it has to do with processing sensory input. The condition is called sensory processing disorder, although it is currently not recognized as a medical diagnosis. I can become overly sensitive to stimuli in my environment."

"So it's not just sound?"

"No, it can also be touch, sometimes visual input. Although there are techniques to try and cope with it, I can't always control it."

"Yes, I can only imagine. Is there anything that helps when it happens?"

“Yes. Removing the source of the stimuli. Of course that’s not always possible.”

“No, as was the case with the thunderstorm. I think it was great that you talked to Theo before about not touching you. I have a feeling that would have been detrimental in that situation.”

“Most likely, yes.” Shaun thought back to how Theo was trying to hand him the toy rabbit. He knew it had been an attempt at comforting him. “Did I scare Theo?”

Tammy shook her head. “No, I don’t think so. He was concerned for you, but once he saw you calm down with the help of the earplugs, that definitely reassured him.”

Shaun looked at Tammy’s face, tried to read her, but he didn’t know her that well yet and wasn’t sure what her expression was saying. There was still the question, the worry at the back of his mind that he’d brought down the stairs and into the room. “Do… you want me to not be alone with Theo anymore?”

Now there was definitely a frown on Tammy’s face. “No. Why would you ask that, Shaun?”

“I… got overwhelmed. What if… what if something would have happened?”

“Happened? What do you mean? Do you…” He could see she was struggling to find the right words, “Do you tend to get physical when something like this happens? Do you lash out?”

“No,” he said immediately, not sure how to really explain it. “No, I… get overwhelmed. And then I can’t do anything.”

“Weren’t you just playing with Theo? What do you think you should have done?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. I don’t know if I could have done anything if there had been an emergency.”

“Well, for starters there wasn’t any emergency, and I don’t think Theo had any issues with the situation.”

“But he did. He came to get you.”

“Yes, because he wanted to help you. And he did, didn’t he?”

He had. He’d been at the mercy of a five-year-old child to help him through a situation that any neurotypical person would just shrug off. Shaun could feel his eyes tearing up, wished he didn’t have to be this way.

He wished he didn’t have to have these doubts about whether he could do what was necessary in an emergency. He wished he didn’t have to have conversations with comparative strangers about what made him dysfunctional and—

He hastily got up from the chair, felt his ribs protesting as he did, and he hated that, too. He fled from the room, crossed the foyer in quick steps, opened the front door and stopped short on the roofed porch, realizing it was still raining steadily.

He started pacing, his right arm reaching up to go into his hair, stopping mid-motion when his shoulder told him no. He let out a frustrated sound, clasped his hands and pressed them together until the pressure became uncomfortable.

He heard the door open behind him a few moments later, Tammy hovering on the doorstep. Her voice was gentle, she said his name, and for some strange reason he didn't immediately want to reject her.

"If I said something to offend you, I'm very sorry."

"N-no." He kept pacing, trying to sort out what was happening. He stopped for a short moment. "You didn't offend me."

"Can I ask what's wrong? What has you upset?"

"I don't—" He let his left hand go into his hair and tousled it, drew a small amount of comfort from the familiar gesture. What was he going to say? That he didn't know? That would be a lie.

And he was proving his own point again, right here. He was losing his grip, would start spiraling out of control if he missed the mark and overshot the point of no return. "Please leave," he told Tammy.

She stayed for another long moment, then retreated, and for a split second he wished she hadn't. He started pacing again, his breaths more erratic, his ribs objecting to the extra intake of air. He tried to calm his nerves, tried to rein in his agitation, tried to concentrate on the soft patter of the rain on the roof above.

He was starting to sweat, the extra moisture in the air making everything muggy and oppressive, the air still warm from the anticyclone that had brought the initial heat of the day.

His mind was still reeling. Had he blown it? Had he alienated this really warm and welcoming family that had invited them in, no questions asked? Was his autism ruining this one good—

"Shaun?"

It was Ira, walking towards the house, stopping just beyond the top stair, a few feet away from Shaun. "Is everything all right?"

He wasn't sure how to answer that, because no, not really.

Ira prodded further. "Did something happen?"

"Yes," he said. He'd screwed up again.

"Is everything okay with Tammy and the kids?"

"Yes," he answered truthfully.

"Okay. But you're obviously upset. Do you want to tell me what happened?"

He let out a negating hum.

Ira lingered another moment, then said, “Okay, I’m gonna go inside. Maybe it would be good if you came with me, so we can talk about it?”

Shaun let out another hum. “I don’t want to go inside,” he said curtly.

“Okay,” Ira confirmed again. “Is there anything I can do?”

“No,” he just said, then breezed past Ira and down the three wooden steps to escape towards the stables. He just needed to be away from this, away from people. He didn’t want to talk.

His feet took him to the stables. He stood in the entranceway for a moment, listened to determine if anyone was here. To his relief, all he could hear were muted animal sounds, so he tentatively went inside, ended up in the tack room, sitting down on one of the padded benches, his hair and shoulders slightly damp from the rain.

The smell of leather vaguely mixing with horse scent had something soothing to it, and he tried to get a grip on the thoughts still spinning in his mind. His eyes registered movement, and there was the grey tabby cat he’d made the brief acquaintance of during their first visit. She strutted up to him, rubbed against his legs, then hopped onto the bench and gently headbutted his arm.

He instinctively reached out to pet her, and it didn’t take long for her to start purring, eventually curling up in his lap, relishing the caresses. Shaun felt himself slowly finding back to a semblance of an equilibrium. The jumble of thoughts evened out, he regained some focus and perspective, the purring furball in his lap acting like a grounding force.

He sat there for a long while, not sure how long exactly. Eventually, there was a soft rap of knuckles on wood from the open door. Tammy was standing there in a pair of black rubber boots. “Is it okay if I talk to you? I’ll go if you’d rather be alone.”

He drew in a breath. “It’s okay. We can talk.”

Tammy came in, leaned against the workbench in the center of the room a few feet across from him. “I want to apologize, I may have given you the wrong impression or maybe made some wrong assumptions. Shaun, I didn’t want to assume that you would be… I don’t know… in any way unsafe for any of us. And if that made you upset, I’m very sorry.”

He stayed quiet for a moment, then said, “It wasn’t that.”

Her brow knitted briefly. “Would you like to tell me what it was?”

Would he? Maybe she deserved to know. He wasn’t sure how exactly to tell her. He stroked the cat’s head, and she responded with an extra strong purr. “It’s my ASD.”

“Can you elaborate what you mean by that?”

“I don’t… I don’t like it when I get overwhelmed. It’s difficult.”

Her voice was gentle, and there it was again, that feeling that he wanted to trust her not to reject him. “Yes, I can only imagine. I said it before, Shaun, you can feel safe here. No one will judge you. We know it’s not something you can control. And you did nothing wrong earlier. Nothing. I want you to know that. No one is upset with you.”

That was reassuring to hear, but Shaun couldn't trust that she was telling the truth. He never could truly tell whether people were honest or not.

When he stayed quiet, Tammy added, "I think maybe you were concerned earlier that you upset Theo or me, or that we don't trust you with Theo. But I can also assure you that's not the case. You know, I think we all have things to learn about you and your autism. And that's okay. That's why I wanted us to talk about it. Because we can't learn if we don't. It's okay if you don't want to, but I'd like you to know that I'm here if you do."

Shaun looked down at the cat in his lap, didn't dare meet Tammy's eyes. She was being much too kind, it wasn't something he had expected. "Thank you," he said in a low voice.

"You're very welcome, Shaun." She moved, pushed herself away from the workbench. "You can stay here if you need some more time, but we'll be having lunch soon. We would love if you'd join us."

As an afterthought, pointing at the cat, she added, "Oh, and don't let Maeve hold you hostage. She does that. Just nudge her out of your lap, she won't hold it against you. Maeve loves everyone."

He watched Tammy leave the tack room wordlessly, allowed himself to let out a long and relieved breath. Maeve was still purring in his lap, now kneading her front paws against his slacks. He wished he could be this relaxed and carefree.

He stroked her soft fur for another few minutes, then decided that he would take Tammy up on her offer. He still wasn't sure he could fully trust that she hadn't just tried to appease him, that she was only being nice to him to honor their friendship with Dr. Glassman. Oddly and confusingly, something inside him also *wanted* to trust her.

He felt slightly guilty for pushing Maeve out of his lap, but he remembered what Tammy said. Maeve made a tiny noise that was halfway between a purr and a meow and then hopped to the floor. He knew Tammy was right about loving everyone when she immediately rubbed against Shaun's legs as he stood up.

He made sure to wash his hands at the sink in the tack room, and back at the house he hesitantly opened the door and entered. Ira, Tammy, Parker and Theo were already sitting at the table, eating what looked like a casserole. Heads turned to look at him when he came into the room, and he immediately felt uneasy.

Tammy pointed to the vacant chair next to Parker. "Come join us. I hope you like beef casserole."

He wordlessly sat down, there was an empty plate with cutlery in front of him. Ira handed him the large spoon to get a scoop out of the casserole dish. Shaun wasn't sure he was going to like it, but he knew he had to at least try it. He remembered Lea's napkin trick, but he knew that wouldn't work here.

He put a small portion on his plate, unsure he could eat it all if he found it repulsive. Surprisingly, he very much didn't hate it. It was moderately spiced, not too grease-heavy, the beef tender and delicious.

He wordlessly listened to the animated chatter at the table, Theo in lively discussion with Ira about plans that involved something with the new tractor. Parker seemed to be mostly averting

his gaze from Shaun, so Shaun did the same. Tammy smiled at him a few times but didn't initiate any conversation, which Shaun was ultimately grateful for.

He was pulled from his reverie when Theo asked, "Dr. Shaun, will you also come with me and grandpa?"

Ira cut in, "Shaun won't be here tomorrow, Theo."

He drew his face into what Shaun thought was maybe a pout. "Why?"

This one, Shaun could easily answer. "I am going back to work tomorrow."

That made Tammy perk up. "Really? That's great news. I bet you're looking forward to it."

"Yes," Shaun said eagerly. "Very much."

"Yeah, I'll bet. I hope you'll still come visit when you have time. We really love having you and Lea here. Aaron too, of course. And Pickles' foal should be born soon, that will be a sight to see."

Ira looked up at Shaun. "Actually, I've been meaning to ask, do you want to be here for that, provided it's not the middle of the night? But I should warn you, often births happen during the night."

Shaun knew to contribute to that as well. "It is the same for humans. Human births are most likely to occur at night or in the early hours of the morning. It has been theorized that it is evolutionary heritage to offer the mother and newborn baby better protection from predators."

Ira nodded. "Yeah, that makes perfect sense. You never answered my question, though. Would you like us to let you know when Pickles goes into labor?"

Shaun didn't have to think long and hard about this one. "Yes, please. My phone will be on at night when I'm on-call, although I'm not sure I will be on-call much while I can't do surgeries yet."

"Yeah, well, I'm not sure you'd wanna drive out here at ungodly hours just to see a little baby horse born."

"Yes, I would."

Ira let out a short chuckle. "All right, that's certainly commitment. We'll make sure to send you a message, then."

"Thank you."

The rest of the lunch was pleasant and laid back, and Shaun allowed himself to relax a little more. Maybe Tammy had been genuine. He hoped she was. Ira and Parker were the first to leave to go and repair a fence. Theo wanted to come but they had to convince him to stay at the house.

Shaun warily hung back, ended up helping Tammy clear the dishes from the table to take them to the kitchen. At some point, Tammy turned to him. "Shaun, are we okay?"

He gave her a questioning look. "What do you mean by that?"

“Things got a little… weird earlier. I just want to make sure that we cleared up any misunderstandings. That you know we really like having you here and we don’t have any reservations about you, or about you spending time with Theo or Parker.”

“Why do you keep repeating that?”

“Because I’m… Because maybe I sense some reluctance from you. Am I wrong about that?”

He was clearly puzzled how she could sense anything of the sort when he had never said anything. He looked at her for a long moment, briefly sought out her eyes. They were an interesting shade of grey-green. “You were… not wrong. I cannot easily tell when people are lying. I wasn’t sure you were lying just to make me feel better.”

Something in Tammy’s expression changed, he wasn’t sure what, when she said, “Yeah, and that makes this really difficult. I don’t know what else to tell you other than that I’m not lying. We truly like you, and we like having you here. You can talk to Aaron about it if you want. You trust him, don’t you?”

“Yes, I trust him.”

“And I encourage you to do that if you still have doubts.”

“No,” Shaun said, “I don’t anymore.”

Tammy’s mouth drew into a visible smile that he could see was reaching her eyes. It made Shaun more content in the moment, too. As an afterthought, he added, “You apologized to me earlier. Your apology is accepted, although it was not necessary.”

“Okay, I’m really glad to hear it.”

Shaun could feel her gaze still focused on him, waited to see if she would say something else. Maybe her face twitched with something, what was he missing? “Is something wrong?”

She looked away, then let her eyes linger on him again. “I would really like to give you a hug, but I know you don’t want that, so let’s leave it at that.”

Shaun wasn’t sure what to do with that. He barely knew Tammy, was somewhat bewildered that physical contact with him was something she desired. He tried to imagine what it would be like, but the idea, while not exactly loathsome, wasn’t immediately welcoming either.

When Shaun didn’t do anything, she turned her attention to the dishwasher, opened the door and pulled out the lower rack. He thought maybe he saw her wiping her nose with the back of her hand. She wasn’t crying, was she?

Shaun stood helplessly for another moment, then went back to the dining table to get the last of the dirty dishes. When he got back to the kitchen, Tammy looked perfectly normal, and Shaun decided not to question it.

Human relationships were complex and complicated, and he wasn’t sure he’d ever truly master them. But he’d made it this far, hadn’t he? And with all these good people in his life, he’d make it farther, yet.

+-+-+-+-+

“Hey,” Lea greeted Shaun as she got home from work. Her workday had been somewhat frustrating, she hoped Shaun’s day had been better than hers.

He was sitting on the couch, typing something into his laptop, by the looks of it. Music was playing at a low volume from their Bluetooth speaker, and Lea stopped short as she took off her shoes and hung her purse.

“Is that Toxicity?” she asked.

Shaun briefly turned his head in her direction, then looked back at the laptop screen. “Yes,” he said. “You like that song, but it has a lot of aggressive yelling. I like this version.”

She listened for another moment as she walked towards the couch. “That sounds like… I don’t even know what that is. Is that a recorder?”

Shaun shrugged slightly. “It is called bardcore.”

Lea let out a short laugh. “Bardcore? Seriously? So this is, like, a medieval cover version?”

“Yes,” Shaun confirmed. “The artist is called Algal the Bard.”

She went around the couch and sat down next to Shaun. “Shaunie, you are such a weirdo.”

“You don’t like it?”

“No, I do, but you gotta admit it’s a little, I don’t know, unorthodox.”

Shaun shrugged again, and Lea gave him a look, noticed something in his hair. “I can see you hung out with Pickles today.”

He turned his head and looked at her. “How do you know that?”

She pointed at the back of his head. “You’ve got horse nuzzle remains all up in your hair.”

His hand immediately went there, a few pieces of the chewed up and dried grass falling onto the backrest of the couch as he touched it.

“Didn’t you go and shower after?”

He shrugged. “I will shower later.”

Lea smiled again. This was trademark Shaun, too. Sometimes it took him a while to get used to things, it seemed like the horse farm smell wasn’t bothering him as much anymore now.

She looked at his face. “So tell me about your day out. Was it good?”

Something in his expression hardened, and she immediately grew concerned but waited if he would answer. He didn’t.

“Shaun, did something happen?”

“Yes,” he said curtly.

“Okay. What happened?” She had a thought, probed to see if her hunch was right. “Was it that thunderstorm that rolled through earlier?”

“Yes,” he simply said.

“You didn’t have any earplugs, did you? Was it very bad?”

“It was… bad.”

“Bad how? Did you have a meltdown?”

“No. Not… during the thunderstorm.”

“But you had one later?”

“No.”

“Okay. Shaun, please talk to me. If you didn’t have a meltdown, then what?”

“I got upset. And I left.”

“You left the farm?”

“No.”

Lea sighed, could see Shaun getting worked up again, his hands now running up and down his thighs. She didn’t want to keep pressuring him into retelling an unpleasant memory, but she also knew that sometimes these things festered and grew if he didn’t talk them out and got some positive validation.

She scooted closer, put a gentle hand on his that made him stop his rhythmic movements. “Hey. I know it’s hard for you to talk about it, but don’t you think it’ll feel better afterwards? You know you can tell me, don’t you?”

He let out a long breath before he spoke. “The thunder was very loud and I got overwhelmed.”

“Okay. But I guess you somehow dealt with it, or just… I don’t know, rode it out?”

“I was with Theo and he thought I was scared.”

“Yeah, I can see how he might have thought that.”

“What if I can’t be a good father?”

Whoa, where was this coming from? That was quite a leap. She frowned. “What does that have to do with the thunderstorm?”

He took a long moment to answer and finally said, “I couldn’t do anything when I was with Theo, what if that happens with my own child?”

“Couldn’t do anything? What do you mean? Were you outside when it happened?”

“No, we were in Theo’s room.”

“Okay, and you said he thought you were scared?”

“Yes, he went to get Tammy to help me.”

“Help you?”

“She gave me earplugs.”

“Oh. But that’s smart. Didn’t they help?”

“They did. But what if that happens when I’m with my own child, and they are in danger or scared and I can’t help them or comfort them?”

“Was Theo in danger? Did he need comforting?”

“No. He was playing with his toys. He said he wasn’t scared.”

“Shaun, you’re really good under pressure, and I think there are situations when our instinct kicks in, which is true just as much for you as it is for neurotypical people. As much as you like Theo, I think it would be a little different if it was your own child. If our child was in danger, I have no doubt whatsoever that you would 100% protect it with your life, even during the biggest thunderstorm on earth. Which I think you would also do for Theo if the situation called for it.

“And this showed that you were comfortable enough around him to let your guard down, which I don’t think is bad at all. Theo is a smart kid, and he likes you. If he went to get Tammy to help you with this, that says he cares. I think that’s what you should take away from it, and not how you, I don’t know, froze up in front of him.”

“Tammy wanted to talk to me about it afterwards.” His expression darkened again. “I got upset.”

“Upset how?”

He gave a dejected shrug. In a small voice, he said, “You know how.”

“But you said it wasn’t a meltdown.”

“It… wasn’t. But it was— I was upset. I ran away.”

“To where?”

“The front porch. Then the stable.”

Lea let out a sigh, squeezed Shaun’s hand a little. “But that’s okay, sometimes that’s what you need. Was Tammy upset with you over it?”

He clenched his jaw for a second, then said. “No. She came to find me and she said she wanted me to feel safe.”

Lea could feel her eyes tear up. That family was such a godsend—for all of them, most of all Shaun. “Then what’s the problem?”

“That… that *is* the problem. I do feel safe, but maybe… maybe I shouldn’t.”

“You shouldn’t feel safe there? That doesn’t make any sense.”

“You… said I let my guard down. I don’t think I should be doing that. It makes me…” he struggled with the word, “weak.”

Lea was taken aback. “Shaun, that is such nonsense. You’re not weak. I know your asshole of a father said that to you, but you need to stop listening to that voice in your head. He was wrong. And you deserve to have places where you feel safe, where you *can* let your guard down. I think it’s amazing the farm has become that for you. You should be welcoming that, not fighting it.”

He pulled his hand out from under hers, started fiddling with his wedding ring. “I still don’t know that I’ll be a good father. What if I never get there? What if I try and it won’t work?”

“Haven’t we had this conversation before? Haven’t we talked about how much of a great father you’ll be, haven’t Claire and Glassy told you the same thing?”

He was still playing with the wedding band, turning it around on his finger. “The second time we went to the farm, I scared Theo when he hurt my shoulder. I scared him today when I froze up during the thunderstorm.” He paused for a moment. “I am not good at this.”

“And I think you know that part of that is your ASD, but, Shaun, part of it is also because you have all those unfounded doubts in your head. The beauty of it is that kids tend to accept things without questioning. Theo may not fully understand your autism, and he probably thinks you’re a bit odd, but you’re Dr. Shaun. And he loves Dr. Shaun just the way he is.

“Parker, on the other hand, he still thinks you’re weird and awkward. But that’s teenagers for you. And you know that not everyone you meet in life has to become your best friend. You take the wins as they come, right?”

She gave Shaun a long look. “Shaun, is this something we should talk about?”

He turned his head to look at her. “Talk about what?”

“Kids.”

“You mean if we want to have a child?”

“Yeah. I mean, I think we both know we want kids someday. But is that someday now? Is this the right time?”

She knew she had his attention now by the way his eyes sought out hers. “Do *you* think this is the right time?”

She shrugged. “I… don’t know. I hadn’t really given it much thought. I do want to try again, but I’m not sure if it isn’t too soon, you know? Your job situation will be a lot more secure if you get an attending position in a few months, but with our first baby… We didn’t exactly plan for it to happen, and if we do try again, I wanna feel like I’m ready, you know?”

“How do you know when you’re ready?”

That was a good question, and she wished she had a good answer. “Maybe when we’re asking these exact questions.”

“So we are ready now?”

“I don’t know, Shaun. Do *you* want to have a child? Do you want us to try again now?”

He was chewing on that question, she could see it, so she gave him a few moments to formulate his answer. It eventually came. “I do want a child, but it is important that you are ready. I will love our child when we have it, but it does not have to be right now.”

She gave a little nod, wondering if that was his evasive answer, the one that said, ‘I actually want one now, but I don’t think you’re quite there yet.’ It was hard to tell with Shaun sometimes.

“Lea? I want you to tell me when you think you’re ready.”

She let out a little chuckle. “Of course I will tell you, dummy. I want us to have all the little squirts crawling around this space, driving you crazy because they’ll be putting the whole apartment in disarray. I want to see you asleep with a sweet little Shaunie baby on your chest, drooling all over you. I want grumpy Grampa Glassy to get all gooey and happy when he’s feeding your kid pureed carrot.”

“It will be *our* kid.”

“Of course it will. And Glassy will make an awesome grandfather, don’t you think?”

“Yes,” Shaun confirmed, “he will.”

“He did all right with you.”

There was another question that seemed to be on Shaun’s mind. “What if our child has autism?”

Lea shrugged. “Then it has autism. We won’t love it any less. And if anyone is equipped to deal with that, don’t you think that’s us?

“You saw how Theo reacted when you mentioned it to him. Things have changed a lot since you were a kid, and this is 21st century California. There’s all these support systems in place, and there’s a huge inclusivity culture these days. I’m not even worried about that.”

That seemed to relax Shaun somewhat. She lightly touched his arm. “I know you’re really worried that you’ll pass it on, but I want you to know that I’m okay with whatever happens. We won’t be able to control any of that, and I don’t think it should be a reason for us not to have kids.

“Because look at us. Look at all the things we’ve been through. And here we are, happily married and as strong as ever. We’re great together, and our kids will be great, whatever genetic makeup they will have.”

“Do you want more than one child?”

“Yeah. Maybe. I don’t know. Do you?”

“I don’t know either. Having *one* child sounds very daunting, and I think it will not always be easy for me.”

“Well, okay then. Let’s start with one and see where that goes. I mean, someday. Not right now.”

“Unless we have twins.”

“Unless we have twins. Which I think will be super stressful, so I’m kinda hoping not. Let’s aim for one first, okay?”

“I don’t think there is anything I can do to intentionally influence that.”

She let out a little laugh. “I didn’t mean it quite that literally. Oh, and to go back to your initial question from half a conversation ago, I think you will be a *great* father, Shaun. The best I could wish for, because I know you care, and I know you’ll love our children with all of your heart. And that’s the most important thing. Everything else will fall into place.”

He seemed to be happy with that, but he couldn’t help but add, “And you will be a great mother, because you also care, and you will love our children with all of *your* heart.”

“Our children will be smothered with all the Murphy family love we can give and grow up to be amazing, sweet, loving and incredibly smart geniuses like you, because that’s what I want to believe and that’s also why I love you.”

She smiled and got up from the couch, softly touching his good shoulder as she did so. “And please go shower, you smell like horse stables.”

Shaun just responded with his trademark noncommittal hum.

+-+-+-+-+

Chapter 14: I should be the one behind the wheel

“Ah, Shaun,” Andrews greeted him as Shaun walked into his office. “You probably know that I’m filling in for Dr. Lim while she is still on medical leave.” Andrews pointed to one of the round tables in front of the massive bookshelf that lined the wall of his office. “Take a seat.”

Shaun sat down, waited for Andrews to do the same.

“How are you?” Andrews asked.

Shaun wasn’t sure what kind of answer was appropriate. Was this the small talk version that you were expected to answer casually with, “Fine,” or, “Okay,” or was this an actual inquiry about his physical and medical status?

Shaun opted for the safe option. “I am doing okay.”

Andrews promptly followed it up with a more precise question that Shaun was thankful for. “How’s the shoulder and the ribs?”

“They are healing,” he volunteered. “Did you not check my medical records?”

“Actually, no, I’m not your treating physician.”

“The recovery process is going well. I have been cleared to go back to work.”

“Yes, of course, and I’m glad to have you back, as I’m sure is everyone else here.”

Shaun nodded. “I am glad to be back as well.”

Andrews pressed his palms together. “And that brings me to the topic at hand, because I think you are aware that we cannot allow you actively back in surgery until you have your full range of motion in your shoulder back.”

“Yes, I am aware.”

“Okay, good. There are some options for you for as long as active surgery is off the table. Chart review, consulting and research tasks, just to name a few, but there’s something else I’d like to propose that’s a little different and might be an interesting challenge.”

Shaun wasn’t sure whether to be filled with anticipation or dread, it could go either way.

Andrews continued, “We have a new clinical trial coming up that we think we can recruit enough patients for, and we’re one sub-investigator short. The study initiation visit is on Tuesday, so we have a few days to get you up to speed, provided you don’t have any objections.

“As I’ve mentioned, the alternative is chart review and surgical consultation without any active surgical work, and research, of course. We have two papers that are looking for co-authors, and I know that’s up your alley, too. So the choice is yours.”

“What kind of clinical trial?” Shaun asked. It could be interesting.

“It’s a drug trial to prevent post-surgery wound infection. The protocol is fairly involved, and since the patient pool will cover both elective as well as acute surgery patients, it will require someone who is on top of things and actively monitors for suitable patients from multiple sources that fit the in- and exclusion criteria. And who better suited for the job right now than you?”

“Can I read the study protocol?”

“Sure. Although if you want to do more than that, we need to get you officially trained and added to the study staff. I assume you’ve heard of GCP?”

“Yes. Good Clinical Practice.”

“Indeed. You’d have to complete GCP training and it probably can’t hurt to refresh the basics of clinical research.”

Shaun thought about it for a moment, then said, “I took an ICH-GCP training as a med student. I was helping my supervisor with an investigator initiated study. It was interesting, although I think they assigned me so that there was less opportunity for me to be in active surgeries.”

“Okay, that’s good that you’re already familiar, but I’d still suggest you refresh your knowledge. The sponsor may require you to have an updated training certificate. I will e-mail you all the links to the relevant trainings.”

“Okay,” Shaun said.

Andrews added, “And please know that this is not like that. This is definitely not an attempt to sideline you.”

“Oh, yes, I know.”

“Okay, good. Because as soon as you’re cleared for surgery, we want you back in the OR, Shaun.”

“Will I have to work with Dr. Ricci?”

Andrews seemed to frown at him, then said, “Not right away, no, seeing how you’re not on active surgical rotation. I have made him aware you’re coming back, of course. But with the clinical trial, you’ll be under my jurisdiction for the time being. I will be the principal investigator, though I expect most of the operational work will be handled by you. Will that be a problem?”

“No,” Shaun said easily.

Andrews gave a curt nod. “Very well. Did you have a concern with Dr. Ricci?”

“I did not, but Dr. Allen did.”

“Did she now?”

“Yes. She said—”

“Let me stop you right there, Shaun,” Andrews interrupted. “I trust that Dr. Allen will come to me if she has any issues she needs to be addressed. I want to trust in my staff discussing interpersonal concerns with me directly, and what you may have heard from your peers may not have been for my ears.”

“Okay,” he told Andrews. He was probably right. Jordan’s venting may not be appropriate to be retold to the hospital president. He should have realized that earlier.

“All right,” Andrews said, pressing his hands together in front of his chest. “I will make sure you have all the information you need about the trial in your inbox. It might be good to check in with the rest of the study team, it will be important that you work hand-in-hand with the study coordinator and study nurses. I will send you their names as well. Oh, and you should clear your schedule for 10 am this morning and maybe stay away from the break room until then.”

“Why?”

“Let’s just say we would like to welcome you back as a team.”

Shaun frowned. A welcome back party of sorts? He hoped it wasn’t going to be a loud, raucous affair, but hopefully his friends and colleagues would know better than that.

Andrews looked up at him. “Do you have any more questions?”

“No, thank you.”

“Well, then I guess we’re all set.” He motioned vaguely towards the door, which Shaun knew was his cue to go. He got up and left to find a quiet place where he could sit down with his laptop to read up the e-mails that had accumulated and get acquainted with the study that Andrews had mentioned.

Shaun stopped by Lea’s office on the way to the surgeon’s lounge. She looked up from her computer as he entered.

“Hey,” she gave him a casual greeting. “It’s nice to see you back in your dapper white lab coat.”

He looked down his body and could only agree. “Yes.”

Her gaze lingered on him. “Did you just want to come and say hi?”

“Oh. No. I wanted to let you know that I’m going to be in the surgeon’s lounge and I will be avoiding the break room until 10 am.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Okay, that sounds like someone spilled the beans.”

“I can try to act surprised, but I don’t know if it will be very convincing.”

That prompted Lea to laugh. “No, Shaun, you don’t have to act surprised. How much do you know?”

“Just that there will be a gathering in the break room at 10 am to welcome me back. Dr. Andrews told me.”

“Yeah, I guess everyone knows how much you hate surprises. I think it’ll be nice. The food has all been Shaun-approved. Well, what I *think* is Shaun-approved, so I can’t make any promises.”

“Did you plan this?”

“No, I think Asher and Jordan did. They just ran some stuff by me to make sure it would be appropriate.”

Shaun nodded. “Okay.”

“Okay,” Lea echoed. “Well, then I guess you can come to the break room at 10. Are you seeing any patients today?”

“No. I will be doing some research and training. I can’t be in active surgery.”

“Yeah, I know. You knew that, too.”

“Yes, I did. And I’m okay with it.”

“So it sounds like everything is going well…?”

“Yes. Okay, I will go now.”

He turned around and was about to leave her office when she called him back. “Shaun?”

“I’ve been meaning to talk to you about this, do you have a minute? Or… maybe more than a minute.”

“I don’t have any patients to see, so yes. Unless it is an unpleasant topic, in which case I would rather we do it at home after work.”

“No, it’s not unpleasant as such. It’s just… when you leave very abruptly like you just did, that’s kinda… rude?”

“Rude? What do you mean?”

“Well, often you say, ‘I have to go,’ and then you just go.”

“Yes. What should I be doing instead?”

“Well, you…” He could see she was trying to find the right words. “It would be more polite if you waited for a response from the other person. Maybe they have something more to add to the conversation, maybe they want to acknowledge that it’s okay for you to leave. Maybe they want to say a brief farewell. That sort of thing.”

He opened his mouth, closed it again, then said, “So I need to wait for permission from the other person to leave, otherwise it is considered rude?”

“Well, permission is maybe too strong a word.”

“But when I say I have to leave, I always have a reason to leave.”

“Yes, and that’s fine.” He heard her sigh. “Look, I’m sorry, I don’t wanna add to your list of annoying and confusing social norms to bend to.”

“No,” he told her, “I want you to tell me these things. I don’t want to be rude. I just… don’t understand.”

“Yeah, I know. And I’m not sure I can really explain it. Just… imagine that… imagine you had a patient who needed a certain treatment that you wanted to administer. And Park came to you with another treatment that he thinks is best. He tells you what he has planned, then he turns around and says, ‘I have to go,’ and leaves before you can discuss your idea. Wouldn’t you think that’s rude?”

Shaun let out a short hum. “He would probably have had a reason to go.”

“Yes, maybe, but wouldn’t you at least have wanted to discuss your own idea with him before he left?”

“If I think my idea is better, then yes.”

“So wouldn’t you be annoyed that he didn’t give you a chance to discuss it?”

“Are you saying people are annoyed at me when I leave at the end of a conversation?”

“No. I mean, maybe sometimes. There might have been situations where people were a little annoyed by it.”

“Why didn’t they tell me?”

“Maybe because they know it’s just… one of your things?”

“You mean it’s my autism.”

“Yeah.”

He was taken aback. It had never occurred to him that any of this might be considered rude or inappropriate. It had always made perfect sense to him.

He looked up at her. “How do I change it?”

“Well… you could just maybe wait a beat after you tell the other person that you want to leave, see if they maybe want to respond to it…”

“Is that usually conveyed through non-verbal cues?”

“It can be…”

“Then I don’t think I will be any good at recognizing it.”

“Well, it can be verbal, too.”

“So what would they be saying?”

“I don’t know, maybe a, ‘Okay, bye,’ or, ‘All right, I’ll see you later.’ Those are indicators that the other person understands the conversation is over and in a way gives you implied approval to leave.”

“Should I be saying those phrases, too?”

“Shaun, I don’t want to tell you what to say. You don’t have to start using forced language that doesn’t come naturally to you. I just wanted you to be a little more self-aware of how to end a conversation.”

He looked at her for a long moment before he said, “This was useful information. I will try to apply it in the future.”

She gave him a smile. “And that’s exactly what I was hoping.”

He got up from his chair. “Okay, now I want to go.” He stood and waited for her answer, met her eyes for good measure.

She chuckled. “Okay, Shaunie. I will see you at 10 in the break room.”

He stood a moment longer, just to make sure. Lea added, “That was my verbal cue to tell you I’m happy with your wish to leave.”

He let out a relieved sigh. “Okay.” On the doorstep, he turned around, recalling what she had said earlier, “All right, I will see you later.” He wasn’t sure he had delivered it well.

She had a smile on her face. “That one needs some practice, but it’s a start. Now go.”

He gave an affirmative hum and went on his way to the surgeon’s lounge.

The next two hours flew by with Shaun taking care of all the administrative catch-up that came with an extended leave of absence. A lot of e-mails had accumulated, many of which were just routine lab alerts that would have already been tended to by other doctors, or medical journal update notifications that he filed away pretty much unread, same as the conference invites. Business development recruiters were getting more obtrusive and crafty every year, now they were sending requests that they had already booked appointments at a specific time in their calendars to speak with Shaun and asked him to confirm availability. He ignored all of them.

Park had wandered in at some point, his face beaming with a smile upon the sight of Shaun. Shaun thought for a moment that he was going to hug him, which Shaun tried to quickly decide whether he was going to evade it or let him do it, but Park ended up holding out his fist instead, which Shaun recognized as an invite for a fistbump.

He’d never fistbumped anyone in his life before, but he decided to go for it, at which Park laughed, so Shaun wondered if he’d done it wrong. Before he could ask, the conversation switched to a rushed inquiry how Shaun was doing, that they were glad he was back, and then Park hurriedly went to grab a phone charger from one of the shelves with a quick apology that he had to run.

Shaun was about to employ the lesson just learned about replying with what he thought might be an appropriate farewell acknowledgement, but Park had left before he could do so. It left Shaun somewhat puzzled, maybe he’d have to go over this with Lea again.

His phone beeped at 9:55, reminding him of the 10 am meeting in the break room. He activated the screen lock on the laptop and closed the lid, put it away until later and then made his way along the familiar hallways.

It was good to be back, good to return to the familiar environment. He knew he had missed it, but only now realized how much so. Even if he couldn’t be in surgeries yet, he already felt so much more useful, like there was purpose restored to his life.

The swinging doors to the break room were closed, so Shaun looked at his watch. 10:01. He tentatively opened one of the wings and peeked in. Someone must have seen the movement, because Jordan’s voice sounded, “Shaun, the man of the hour, do come in!”

He opened the door fully, stepped into the room. All his closest colleagues were there. Not just Lea, Dr. Glassman and his fellow surgeons, he also saw Jerome, Adam and a few other nurses he had worked closely with, both in a professional and recovering patient capacity.

Faces turned in his direction, voices with happy welcomes immediately piped up, suddenly everyone was clapping. Shaun didn’t know what to do or say. The clapping subsided and Jordan spoke up again, “Welcome back to the fold, Dr. Murphy.”

He briefly let his eyes wander around the room. Various food items, mostly sweets, baked goods and fruit, were placed on the table near the counter. On the counter stood what looked like a chocolate fountain as well as soft drinks, orange juice and plastic cups.

There was a brief lull in the noise, he realized again all eyes were on him. Jordan sidled up to him, handed him a cup with orange juice, leaned in and whispered, “Do you wanna give a short speech?”

“Oh,” Shaun let out a nervous breath. “I am not good at that.”

“It’s okay. Just say thank you and, you know, that you’re happy to be back—assuming that’s actually the case.”

“Okay,” Shaun uneasily whispered back to her.

He gripped the plastic cup with both hands in front of his chest, scanned the crowd, rested his eyes on Lea and raised his voice. “I am not very good at speeches, so Dr. Allen said I should say thank you and that I’m happy to be back at work. She assumed it would be the case, and it is.

“I am *very* happy to be back at work, and I am also happy to be here with all of you again, even though I won’t be doing any surgeries for the time being.” He looked around, then added, “I will be even happier when I go back to the OR.”

Some people were raising their cups in a toasting gesture. Asher said, “And so will we. In the meantime, enjoy bossing us around outside the OR, and I guess,” he made a sweeping gesture to where the food was standing, “the buffet is now officially open.”

People nodded, and the small crowd started dispersing, picking up paper plates and loading some of the treats onto them.

Lea came up to Shaun, told him in a low voice, “I told you before I don’t wanna tell you what to say, but don’t you think this could be a good opportunity to thank people for all the Get Well Soon cards and good wishes and, you know, for coming by when you were here as a patient?”

Shaun let out a deflated breath. He should have thought of that sooner. “You’re right,” he told Lea, looked around a little helplessly since now people were paying more attention to the food than him. He went to the drawer at the counter he knew held the metal cutlery, having to squeeze past the small cluster of people that were crowding around the chocolate fountain. He took two spoons out of the drawer, turned back around and clanked them together three times.

It had the desired effect. Immediately all eyes were back on him. He let out a short hum, then said, “I forgot to say this earlier. Thank you for all the good wishes and for visiting me when I was a patient. It helped a lot, knowing that people were thinking of me and wanted me to get better.”

There, he’d said it, hoping he’d done well enough. He saw that a lot of faces were now more pensive, some he thought maybe even touched, although he couldn’t be sure. When people were still looking at him, he added, “You can continue eating now.”

That elicited a few chuckles, but people indeed went back to eating. Lea gave him a stage whisper with the words, “Well done, Shaunie.” He beamed at her proudly.

Dr. Glassman joined the two of them, and Lea pointed to the crowd at the counter with the words, “Looks like the chocolate fountain is a winner.”

Glassman gave a nod. “Always is.” He turned to Shaun. “Don’t wanna try it?”

Shaun hadn’t even had the chance to figure out what food he wanted. Lea put a paper plate in his hands and gently nudged him towards the food table. Before he could rejoin Lea and Dr. Glassman, he was intercepted by Adam as he was putting a selection of fruit on his plate next to the lemon cake muffin. “Lab coat suits you,” he said. “Sure trumps the hospital gown.”

Shaun could only agree. “Oh yes.”

“You know, it’s a rare treat to see our acute care patients again after they’re discharged, so this is a nice change. Really glad you made the cut.”

Shaun thought back to his recent encounter with Vera. “Two weeks ago I met a patient again whose life I saved three years ago. I amputated her leg after it got impaled on a steel rebar. Meeting her again did feel very nice. I’m glad she… made the cut, too.”

Adam gave him an appreciative nod, then asked, “So I hope they didn’t put you on scut work.”

“No. I will be sub-investigator on a clinical trial until I can go back to actual surgery.”

Adam nodded again. “I hope you like paperwork. Cause trials are all that. Lots and lots of paperwork, and CRAs telling you about *all* the things you’re doing wrong, and leaving you pointless data queries that you never know how to answer in that electronic system that’s super counterintuitive. But, hey, enjoy it while it lasts. And who knows, maybe you like that sort of thing, cause I sure don’t, but you know… the boss woman likes the trials, and so every now and then I get stuck with one when I don’t run away fast enough.”

Shaun made a mental note that Adam could be someone to consult if he had any questions regarding general study conduct and filed that away in his head. Adam put a slice of brownie on his plate, then looked up at Shaun. “Piece of advice. Tell the CRA that you’ll be extra meticulous and fast with the data entry if they bring you your favorite snacks. Works every time.”

Shaun filed that away in the ‘useful advice’ section, too. He saw Adam stealing a glance at his smartwatch, which was followed by, “Shoot, I gotta scoot. Anyway, thanks for this, much appreciated, and I hope I don’t see you again.” He added, “As a patient.”

This, Shaun thought. This was another opportunity for his Lea lesson. He looked at Adam. “Okay. Goodbye.”

Shaun tried to determine from Adam’s facial expression if that had been appropriate. Judging by the slightly knitted eyebrows maybe not, but he couldn’t be sure. After an awkward second of silence, Adam lifted his plate slightly and said, “So long, Dr. Shaun Murphy, and thanks for all the fish.”

Now it was Shaun’s turn to knit his brow because he didn’t get the reference. It had to have been a reference to something. Adam had already left, so he couldn’t ask, thus he chose the next best person, which was Jerome who was also refilling his plate at the table. Shaun inquired, “What does, ‘thanks for all the fish’ mean when there is no fish being offered here today?”

Jerome's mouth formed into a smile. "Never read *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*?"

Shaun was vaguely aware of the books, knew there were several iterations of movies. "I have not."

"Yeah, one of the books in the series is called that. *So Long, and Thanks for All the Fish*. It's a message the dolphins leave when they leave earth for an alternate dimension. It's…" Jerome looked at Shaun, then added, "Yeah, it probably makes more sense when you've actually read it."

"Okay," Shaun said, making another mental note to look into it. He wasn't sure it was going to be his thing. Sci-fi was not a genre he normally gravitated towards. He chose to engage Jerome in conversation about the clinical trial instead, knowing he had been assigned to it as well, and that seemed much more useful and interesting to Shaun.

Many more people came up to him over the next hour with expressions of gratitude that he was back until the crowd eventually thinned and people excused themselves. Lea and Dr. Glassman were the last to remain, both now clearing the remaining food from the table after Asher and Jordan had been paged to a consult.

Shaun put the bottles of soda in the fridge, already feeling the added strain on his shoulder and ribs from all the extra activity. He hadn't taken any painkillers in the morning, wanting to see how it would go and not wanting to risk the extra fatigue side effects today if he could help it.

Lea stood next to him when he straightened up. "This was nice, right?"

"Yes," he agreed. "This was very nice. And I liked all the food except the dragon fruit and the lychees."

"Yep, I thought they were wildcards, but I figured there was enough to choose from."

"Yes, there was. Have you read *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*?"

She looked at him. "Ah geez. Yeah, a million years ago. It's really wacky. Why?"

"Do you think I would like it?"

She looked at him quizzically. It was Dr. Glassman who answered it. "I don't think you will."

He turned to Glassman. "Why?"

"Because," he pointed at Lea, "it's wacky. No offense, Shaun, but you're not the wacky type."

He could only agree to that. "I think you're right. I am not the wacky type."

"You know what," Lea said, "Don't listen to Glassy the Grouch. I think I have a copy at home. I'll look for it, you should give it a try. Because I know you can be wacky."

"Okay," Shaun easily agreed. "I tried what you said about implied conversation ending approval with Adam. I'm not sure it worked."

"Why, what did he say?"

“Nothing. He just looked at me and then said, ‘So long, Dr. Shaun Murphy, and thanks for all the fish.’”

“Ah, hence the *Hitchhiker’s Guide*.”

“Yes. Nurse Martel explained the reference to me.”

“Well, I’m glad we have a few sci-fi nerds around, at least.”

Glassman chimed in, “I’ve read it too, you know.”

“How long ago?” Lea asked.

“Oh, let me see… maybe thirty years ago? Forty?”

Lea shrugged. “I’m not sure that counts. And I know for a fact you’re not a sci-fi nerd.”

“I like *Star Trek*.”

“Yeah, the old one with Captain ‘Suck Your Belly In’ Kirk because you grew up with it as a kid. That doesn’t count either.”

“Hey,” he protested, “I like Picard, too.”

“Have you seen *Discovery*? *Strange New Worlds*?”

“Say what now?”

Lea pointed a finger at him. “You’re proving my point.”

Shaun listened to their easy banter while they finished the tidying and cleaning up, not able to contribute much to the *Star Trek* conversation, but instead just enjoyed their company. It was indeed great to be back at work. This was part of his home now. This and the people around him. He considered himself very lucky.

+-+-+-+-+

Lea could see that Shaun’s first day back at work had been tiring. There was no bounce to his step, his expression clearly spelled exhaustion and a bit of stoic but contented pride, and she thought she had heard him groan a little when he got out of the car.

She watched him go right to the couch after he’d taken off his shoes and jacket and decided to give him some time. He once told her he needed their apartment to unwind, to have a safe space where he didn’t have to follow social rules and guidelines, where he could just be himself without any peer pressure.

She’d never thought about it that way, they’d always just naturally found their way to settle in at home, at least after an initial acclimatization period when they first moved in together. Perhaps it hadn’t been the worst thing that they first shared an apartment as roommates rather than a couple, because it had taught them how to navigate around the other person without all the emotional strings of a romantic relationship attached.

It occurred to Lea that Shaun had been spending so much time on his own during the recovery, hadn't really had that many social interactions with the exception of the horse farm. It must have been extra taxing to go through a whole day of social interactions and varying degrees of masking and bending to societal expectations.

It didn't take long for him to switch on the Weather Channel, and that brought a small smile to Lea's face. He was nothing if not predictable sometimes, but also one of the things that she loved about him. She had never wanted that kind of relationship where the two partners were always all over each other. She wanted to be allowed to be herself, and wanted to do the same for her partner. They were both pretty good at that, they always had been.

She went over to the fridge to open it, see what was still there in terms of dinner options. She closed it again, then went over to the couch. Shaun's eyes were on the TV but she could see he wasn't actively paying attention.

She sat down next to him and very gently touched his thigh with a soft, "Shaun?"

He let out a quiet hum, she knew what that meant.

"I know you don't wanna talk right now, but we should think about dinner. How would you feel if we ordered in tonight? I know you're tired, and I don't really feel like making dinner, either. Would you be okay if I ordered from Khao Soi and got you the mild chicken pad thai you like?"

She let her thumb stroke over his thigh, waited for a response that didn't come. "Shaun, just a yes or no, please."

"Yes," he said quietly.

"Okay. Let me know if you wanna talk later. I'd love to hear about your first day back, but take your time."

He didn't say anything else, his gaze still on the television, so she took her phone and went into the bedroom to order the take-out, then busied herself with a few chores until the doorbell rang with the food delivery.

She took the food, put the bags on the kitchen island and sorted it all out. She wasn't sure Shaun wanted the chopsticks, he was still a bit less apt and dexterous with his right hand, so she wanted him to have a choice of regular cutlery that she put out.

When she carried the tray with the food cartons over to the couch, she stopped short. Of course he'd fallen asleep. She stood for a moment, smiling, trying to decide whether to wake him, then decided he needed the sleep more than the food right now.

She carried the food back to the kitchen. They could easily warm it up in the microwave later, though she allowed herself to eat three of the wontons just to quell the biggest of her hunger.

It was after another hour that she decided to wake Shaun up. She wanted him to try and sleep during the night, get back to a more normal circadian rhythm. She crouched down in front of him, gently touched his hand. "Shaun?"

It took a second attempt for him to actually stir and let out a disoriented hum.

“Hey,” she said, “Sorry, but I think you shouldn’t be sleeping through the whole evening. Dinner’s here, too.”

He hummed again, tiredly asked, “How long was I asleep?”

“I don’t know. Maybe an hour or so. Do you feel better?”

He heaved himself up with a groan. “Yes.”

“You need to get used to being on your feet again all day. It might take a while. Are you hungry? I’ll warm up the food for us.”

“Did you not eat?”

“No, I wanted to wait for you. Are you hungry at all?”

“Yes, I am. Did you get the pad thai for me?”

So he had paid attention. “Yeah. There’s also wontons, and I got the Phanaeng curry with chicken and veggies, but I don’t think you like that, right?”

“No, I don’t like that.”

“I’ll heat up the pad thai for you. Do you also want the wontons? They’re probably cold by now, and I don’t think they do well in the microwave.”

“Just the pad thai, please.”

She nodded. “Okay, you got it.”

Shaun peeled himself off the couch and joined Lea in the kitchen as she transferred the food onto plates with the first one already in the microwave. She had to grin when she saw that some of his hair was sticking out at odd angles.

Amazingly, he actually noticed. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

She pointed at his head. “Your hair is all over the place.”

He immediately went for it with his right arm, letting out an unpleasant sound when his shoulder reminded him it was still healing. But it was probably a good sign that he was now starting to forget about it.

She walked over to him. “Here, let me help you.”

She smoothed out his unruly wisps of hair, then heard the microwave ding. Shaun went to tend to it while she got the next plate ready.

When they were sitting at the table, Shaun actually giving the chopsticks a go, he briefly looked at her. “Dr. Andrews made me a sub-investigator on a drug trial today.”

“Oh?” she said. “That sounds exciting. Or, I don’t know, is it exciting?”

“I wouldn’t call it exciting, but it is interesting.”

“So you’re gonna be doing that for as long as you’re not able to do surgery?”

“Yes, I think so. He also offered that I could co-author two papers and do research and chart review, none of which is as interesting.”

“That’s good, though, right? At least you have options. I know it’s not the same as surgery, but it sounds like a good thing to do in the interim. And like it’ll keep you busy.”

“Yes, there are a lot of trainings I have to complete, and someone from the CRO will be there on Tuesday for a study initiation visit.”

“Okay. What does that mean?”

“They will explain the study and what we have to do. It will be with the whole study team.”

“Study team sounds cool. Anyone on it I’d know?”

“Nurse Martel has been assigned as the study nurse. I’m not sure you know the others.”

“You should really call him Jerome, Shaun. He was at our wedding. Well, both our weddings.”

“He *is* a nurse.”

“Yeah, but he’s also a friend and Asher’s boyfriend. You didn’t call Claire Dr. Browne, did you?”

“Claire is different.”

“Yeah? How so?”

“Claire is a very good friend.”

“Speaking of which, have you talked to her recently?”

Shaun chewed on another mouthful of noodles. “We have a video call scheduled for tomorrow. Can you wake me if I fall asleep?”

She smiled. “Yeah, of course. What time?”

“We agreed on 8 pm.”

“Okay, sure. Did you set a phone alarm, just in case?”

“Yes, of course.”

Yeah, why was she even asking? “I’ll put one in my phone, too. Say hi from me, okay?”

“You can join us if you want.”

“Yeah, maybe for a bit. It was really nice seeing Claire again when she was here. We should go and visit her some time.”

Shaun looked up at her. “You want to go back to Guatemala?”

She frowned. “Yeah, could be a nice trip, don’t you think?”

“You don’t speak the language, and I didn’t think you liked it there very much.”

Lea put down her own chopsticks. “I never said I didn’t like it there. It was just a pretty tough time, you know? I was still dealing with the loss of our baby, and having that little girl there…”

“Isabela,” Shaun contributed.

“Yeah, Isabela. That just made it harder, you know? But also maybe easier in the end. It was a good trip. In hindsight, I’m really glad I went along. I think it was just what I needed at the time, and I know you had a great time.”

“You… said that it made you feel worse that I was happy there.”

“Yeah, but that was then. I think it would be different if we went there now. We’re both in a good place. Well, aside from the fact that you’re still healing, but you’re getting better, and we wouldn’t be going right *now*. Would you want to go back and visit?”

He briefly met her eyes. “Yes, I think so. But maybe not as a doctor.”

Lea smiled. “Come on, you’d hate being there and not being able to help.”

“But I don’t want you to be on your own the whole day if it’s a vacation.”

“I’m sure we’ll make it work. We could plan a few nice day trips in the area. You being fluent in Spanish will help a lot, and Claire probably knows what’s worth seeing down there by now. Let’s look at flights for later in the year. We could take a week off, maybe. What do you think?”

Shaun put another piece of chicken in his mouth. “I would like that.”

“Okay, then let’s talk to Claire about it tomorrow.”

He shrugged with an upbeat, “Okay.”

“Okay,” she echoed, happy that they had a plan.

After they finished with dinner and took care of the dishes together, Shaun got up and went to the guest room. Lea’s attention was piqued when he went straight into the bedroom from there, closed the door, and then got all coy and bashful when he came out. She knew he had something up his sleeve, but she decided to give him the satisfaction of the surprise element and finished up wiping the kitchen counter.

He came to meet her and said, “Lea?”

She turned to him. “Yes, Shaun?”

“Please come to the bedroom.”

Yep, there it was. “Okay,” she said and followed him.

He sat down on the bed near the bedside table and took what was there in his hands. She sat down beside him and took a closer look at what he held out to her.

Both objects were something crafted and folded out of paper, one an intricate luscious pink flower that reminded her of a lotus, the other a square pale purple envelope with ornaments. She took them from him. “What is this?”

“I want to thank you,” he simply said.

“For what?”

“For helping me.”

“Helping you? What do you mean?”

“Please open it.”

She turned over the envelope and carefully peeled it open. It was crafted in a way that it folded open like a little box and there was a printed card in a matching color lying inside with text in a cursive font. It said, ‘Gift Voucher for a Spa Day for Two. Time, location and second person will be your choice. Please refer to the list.’

She looked under the voucher and there was a folded up list with names and addresses that looked like spa locations in the area, a star rating system next to each. She looked up at him.

“A spa day? Where is this coming from?”

“I have gotten a lot better at massages, but I want you to have a very relaxing day. The last month has been very stressful for you.”

He was such a sweetheart, she really didn’t know what to say, gave him a long, loving look. “Shaunie, this is super sweet, but you don’t have to do these things.”

“I know. But I want to because you helped me. You were always there.”

“Aw, Shaun, you don’t need to thank me for that. In sickness and in health, isn’t that what the vows say?”

He didn’t answer and went for something he produced from under the bed which he also handed to her. It was a cotton drawstring bag about half the size of a gym sack. “You said you were terrified of foot fungus. This will help.”

It made her smile. “I said that?”

“Yes. You were driving home from the gym and said you couldn’t shower there because you were terrified of foot fungus. You smelled very badly of sweat.”

She drew open the strings and fished for what was inside while she said, “Wasn’t that a million years ago? When we first met?”

“Yes. Although that was not a million years ago, it was roughly five and a half.”

Lea pulled a pair of bath slippers from the bag—not the boring, old-fashioned type but something actually tasteful that she immediately liked. “Shaun, you’re always so thoughtful. These are really pretty. And they will definitely help with the foot fungus.”

Shaun now pointed to the list he’d made. “I added a rating system for customer satisfaction and I excluded those where customers mentioned hygiene concerns.”

“That’s very helpful, thank you. This says spa day for two. Do you want the two of us to go together?”

He let out a little hum. “Dr. Glassman said it could be something new for me to try, but you can also go with Jordan or someone else of your choice.”

“Is this something you *want* to try? Because truth be told, I don’t know if you’ll like it very much.”

“I don’t think I will, either.”

“Yeah, it’s all gonna be massaging and saunas and strangers with very little clothes on.”

She saw Shaun shudder slightly next to her and couldn’t help but let out a light chuckle. She put the slippers away and scooted closer so that she sat right next to him. She reached out to take his hand. “Thank you, this is super sweet. I’ll ask Jordan and we’ll pick a nice weekend to have a super relaxing day. And while I really, *really* appreciate it, I want you to know that it wasn’t necessary.

“I know you had a super hard time with that arm brace, and I know it was a huge source of frustration for you, but helping you was never a burden. You would bend over backwards to help me if roles were reversed. I know that without a shadow of a doubt.”

He smiled and confirmed, “Yes. I would.”

“You know what? I shouldn’t be the only person being rewarded that we made it through this rough patch together. I love the spa idea, but I think it would be so much better if we could do something really nice and relaxing together.

“We just talked about a Guatemala trip. Let’s definitely make that happen, and then figure out something super nice for us to do there together. Because you also deserve some relaxation and happiness. Or figure out what to do with that weekend trip to Napa that we got from Andrews. We never redeemed that. What do you think?”

He was smiling one of his little serene smiles that indicated he was satisfied and happy. “I like that very much.”

“Okay. It shall be done. Now come here and let me kiss you.”

He easily acquiesced.

+-+-+-+-+

Chapter 15: With open arms and open eyes

Remember to put in warning for foal birthing scene and chapter end note!

Shaun didn't believe in karma or the concept of 'not meant to be', although he was ready to change his mind after how this day had gone.

The apartment door slipped from his fingers as he was about to close it, and it fell into the lock much too forcefully. He jumped at the loud noise, which also made Lea turn her head at him from where she was sitting on the couch.

"I'm sorry," he told her as he sat down on the step to untie his shoelaces.

Her voice was chipper. "No biggie, it happens. How was your day?"

He sighed. "Not very good."

"Oh no. What happened?"

He joined her on the couch when he had taken off his shoes. He didn't feel the need to vent very often, but he'd prepared everything for the study initiation visit of the drug trial, he thought he was as well prepared as he could be, but he'd gotten off on the wrong foot from the first moment on with the Clinical Research Associate that they'd sent to give them the presentation.

It had already started with the guy not having the right version of the slide deck, which he only noticed after Shaun had pointed out that the information on the slides didn't match the study protocol, so ten minutes into the presentation, he had to spend an inordinate amount of time looking for the correct file in his e-mails.

Shaun had interjected with questions from the list he had put together before the meeting, and after the third time, he was in no uncertain terms asked not to interrupt and save the questions until the end. When he went to address them afterwards, he was told that there was no more time because the CRA had a flight to catch and Shaun should e-mail or call him.

The presentations and trainings they were given were half-baked at best, the CRA seemed all over the place, Shaun had more questions than before after the three hours, not to mention that his head was spinning. He'd also tried to sign up to the electronic study portal that they were supposed to be given access to, which wouldn't accept his credentials and he had to spend twenty minutes on the phone with someone from the helpline to get it fixed and be given the right level of access. Thankfully, the person had been courteous and friendly, eventually sorting it out.

He folded his legs under him, drew in a breath. "The study initiation visit was a disaster."

"That's too bad. You were kinda looking forward to that, weren't you?"

"I had a lot of questions, but the CRA was not well prepared. He wasted a lot of time which he would not have had to do if he'd been better prepared, and he didn't answer any of my questions. I tried calling him but his phone always went to voicemail. I had to write everything down by e-mail. It was a long list."

“Yeah, that sounds super frustrating. But, you know, maybe he just had a bad day? It can happen.”

“The initiation visit was intended to train our whole team on how to execute the study. It’s very important that everyone knows what to do to generate valid data.”

“Maybe try calling him again tomorrow? He might just have been busy.”

“He said he had a flight to catch.”

“See? He was probably traveling.”

“Afterwards I tried to make necessary preparations for the study, but no one had time for me, the electronic portal didn’t work, and I am not sure how to identify the right patients for the study. It will not be very efficient if I have to manually monitor patient charts to find the patients that we need to enroll.”

Lea now put away the tablet she’d been holding in her lap, which told him she had his undivided attention now. “Okay. I assume there are certain kinds of criteria that need to be met in order for a patient to be suitable for the study, right?”

“Yes. There are several inclusion and exclusion criteria. Some of them depend on lab results, so we won’t know them right away.”

“Okay, but some are based on diagnoses and symptoms, I’m guessing?”

“Yes.”

“Well, maybe we can help with that. I can speak to Larbi, he’s a whiz with the EMR system. I’m sure he could program you some automatic alerts based on keywords or diagnostic codes. Would that help?”

Shaun thought that was an excellent idea. “Yes,” he said enthusiastically.

She gave him a nod. “Okay, I’ll talk to him tomorrow and I’ll hook the two of you up to work that out. Are these patients that would be seen by departments other than General Surgery?”

“Yes,” Shaun confirmed.

“At the risk of stating the obvious, but you could go around the hospital and talk to the other departments, ask them to contact you if they see a patient that might be suitable. Might not be the worst idea anyway, some department heads might not take kindly to you running around their wards, trying to recruit their patients into a drug trial.”

“Yes, I had considered that. It *is* a good idea.”

“Okay, I’m glad I can offer up actual solutions here. And I hope you can sort things out with your CR person.”

“CRA,” Shaun corrected. “It means Clinical Research Associate, although the business card says Site Manager. I am not sure why he was hired for the position, because his management skills didn’t seem very good. How was *your* day?”

Lea proceeded to tell him about her day but kept it short since there wasn't that much to report that held any interest for Shaun. By the time she had done some of her own venting, he realized he felt better. Having someone to share his frustrations with was a blessing, and today she had actually helped him with ideas for solutions.

And maybe she was right, maybe the CRA had just had a bad day and they'd just gotten a bad start. Shaun decided he'd try to give him the benefit of the doubt.

+-+-+-+-+

The next day, Shaun was ready to rescind that notion. While the CRA had responded with an e-mail, he'd only answered half the questions, completely ignored some, given unhelpful responses to others. His phone still went straight to voicemail.

Shaun had ended up looking up the contact list for the trial and called someone else from the same company, eventually getting a lady on the phone who was helpful and could assist him in getting answers to all his inquiries.

Newly invigorated to get this off the ground and do good work that Andrews could be proud of, he heeded Lea's advice and started making the rounds around the hospital to speak to all the departments he thought could have potential patients for the trial.

When he got to the ICU, he saw a familiar person standing by the nurses' station. Kelly casually looked up when he approached, a smile spreading across her face when she recognized him. "Oh my God, Shaun, is that you?"

He frowned. Who else would he be? "Yes."

Kelly looked like she wanted to hug him, and he involuntarily took a small step back.

Kelly stopped short, realizing her misstep. "I'm sorry, I'm just so happy to see you. Doesn't happen very often that we see our patients again, and it's always a joy to see them up and about. How are you? I see you're back at work. How's the shoulder and the ribs?"

"They are healing well," he told her.

"Yeah, I'd imagine you've still got a few weeks until everything is back to true form. How long has it been now?"

Shaun quickly calculated in his head. "Thirty-seven days."

"Oh wow, over a month, time really flies. Do you have a patient here in the ICU, or why are you here? I know it's not just to see me."

"Dr. Murphy," Shaun heard a vaguely familiar voice from behind him. He turned around. It was Dr. Siddiqi. "Very glad to see you back on your feet."

Shaun nodded. "Yes."

"I hope you're doing well?"

“I am doing well, thank you,” Shaun told him, not willing to go into more detail at this point. It was time to speak about the reason of his visit. “Dr. Andrews made me sub-I for a post-surgical wound infection drug trial. Who do I speak to about potential patients with elective or acute surgeries being treated in the ICU?”

“I think that will be me,” Siddiqi said.

Shaun nodded. “Excellent. I would like to talk to you about potential elective or acute surgery patients treated in the ICU.”

Siddiqi pointed to where his office was at the end of the hallway. “Then let’s talk.”

+-+-+-+-+

WARNING: The next scene contains fairly graphic descriptions of a horse birth. If you have issues with this, I recommend you skip right to the next chapter. If you'd still like to know what happens in the scene without reading it, there's a summary in the chapter end note.

Chapter End Note:
For those who wanted to skip the foal birthing scene, here is a quick summary of what happened.

One night, Shaun is being notified by Jennifer that Pickles went into labor, he decides to drive out to the farm by himself since Lea is set to meet with Jordan that night. Shaun is with Ira, Jennifer and Parker throughout the labor process for a while, but at some point there are complications and Pickles shows signs of distress. The vet is held up with another urgent case and can’t come right away, so Shaun tries to do what he can, but since he’s not a vet or an OB-GYN, his options are limited.

While Shaun frets over not being able to help Pickles and flees to the tack room for a little while to find some peace and quiet to think of solutions, Jen comes to get him a few minutes later. The situation resolved itself and Pickles gives birth to a healthy rose-grey male foal. Ira wants Shaun to name the foal, but he doesn’t have any spontaneous ideas. When Ira asks Shaun what his favorite food is, they decide to name the foal Pancake.

During the wait, Jennifer mentions to Shaun that Parker got an A on his school essay on neurodiversity, and Parker reluctantly agrees to share the essay with Shaun and Lea.

“Oh.”

Shaun let out one of this breathy ‘ohs’ as he brought up the text message from Jennifer. He turned around from where he was sitting on the couch to address Lea who was at the dining table with her laptop. “Pickles is in labor.”

What he got from her was a barely audible, “Hm.” Her attention was still focused on her computer screen as she kept typing.

Shaun got up from the couch. “Lea?”

“Yes,” she said off-handedly. He wasn’t sure if she was actually paying attention now.

“Lea?” he repeated as he stepped closer.

“Yes, Shaun.” Now he knew she sounded irritated. He wondered if he should be retreating, but this was kind of important.

He opted for sitting down across from her. She eventually lifted her gaze to look at him over the rim of her laptop screen. “Did you need something?”

“Pickles is in labor.”

Now the message had definitely gotten through, because she actually made an effort to focus on him. “Oh wow. That’s exciting. Do you wanna go?”

“Yes,” he said immediately. “Do you want to come?”

“Normally yes, but Jordan’s on the way, and we worked really hard to get things ready for a milestone we had set for tomorrow. I know you don’t get to see a horse birth every day, but this is also kinda important because we have that investor meeting coming up. Would you be mad if I stayed?”

“No,” he told her. “I will check the train schedules.”

“Why don’t you take the car?”

That was a good question. He had avoided driving for as long as his shoulder was still impaired, but it was steadily getting better. She looked at him. “I mean, do you think you’re not ready? I think you are.”

He could probably give it a try. “I… think I’m ready.”

She nodded at him. “Then go for it.”

They’d taken the trip out of the city often enough now that Shaun knew how to drive there. He had the route mapped out in his head anyway. Outside of rush hour, there was only moderate traffic and the drive went smoothly.

He went straight to the stables and was welcomed by Jennifer and Ira who were standing outside Pickles’ stall, watching her. Shaun walked closer, was greeted first by Ira. “Hey Shaun.”

He joined the pair, peered inside the stall. Pickles seemed restless, was circling the stall, turned her head to look at her belly, her hind legs wider apart than usual.

Ira quickly assured him, “This is pretty normal, it’s the early stages. She probably has some mild contractions going.”

“Did you call the vet?” Shaun asked.

“No, we wouldn’t really do that unless there’s signs of trouble. We’ve been through some of these before.”

“How long has she been like this?”

“An hour or two. It can take quite a while. Have you delivered babies before?”

Shaun nodded. “Yes. Twice. Once during a quarantine lockdown in the ER. I was alone with Nurse Petringa, the mother and baby almost died. It was very stressful, but both survived.”

“Oh wow,” Jennifer said, “That sounds intense and scary.”

“It was. The second delivery went a lot more smoothly.”

“Well, let’s hope this one does, too.”

They stood for a long while, just watching Pickles. She lay down a few times, rolled around, then got up again, circled her stall more, urinated twice. Shaun got more nervous too but tried not to let it get to him. Pain during labor came with the territory, there was no reason to worry.

Parker came by at some point, watched the ongoing labor with them for a while. Shaun noticed with curiosity when Jen stood next to him and put her arm around his shoulders and Parker leaned into her, slinging his own arm around her waist.

Shaun had never had that with his parents, but also knew he never wanted to have that with his parents. For a brief moment he wondered what it would have been like if their relationship had been more loving, but pushed that thought away quickly. There was no point in all dwelling on what-ifs, the past couldn’t be changed. He now had loving people in his life whom he knew to draw comfort from, whom he could lean on for support. That was more than enough for him.

Still standing with Parker, Jennifer turned to Shaun, “Oh, hey, Shaun? Did Parker mention he got an A on that neurodiversity essay?”

“No, he did not.”

“Yeah, the teacher was really impressed with how he included the practical examples that you gave him. Didn’t she, Honey?”

“Yeah,” Parker added. “She wanted me to read from it in front of the class.”

“Did you e-mail it to Lea?” Shaun asked.

“Uh. No. I don’t know if I want you to read it.”

Jennifer turned to Parker. “Why? Is there anything in it you think is inappropriate?”

“No,” he said hesitantly. “I dunno. It’s just… weird.”

“Shaun contributed greatly to it, don’t you think he should get the chance to read it? You’d like to read it, right, Shaun?”

“Yes,” he told them.

Jen pulled on Parker’s shoulder a little. “Come on, Honey, go and send it to them. You should be proud of it, you know?”

“What if Shaun doesn’t like it?”

Jen looked at Shaun. He wasn't sure what the appropriate answer would be to that. "I… can give you constructive feedback what I don't like, if that is the case."

Jen told Parker, "See, that doesn't sound so bad."

"All right," Parker grudgingly agreed, then pulled the smartphone from his pants pocket, spent a minute or two tapping the screen before he said, "There, it's sent."

"Thank you," Shaun told him. Jen was smiling. Shaun made a mental note to look at it later.

It was about an hour later that everyone's attention was piqued when Pickles let out a pained whinny. She was now stomping her back hooves more nervously, kicking one leg up against her belly every now and then. The frequency of her breathing was increased too and there were visible patches of sweat on her neck and flanks.

Shaun saw that Ira's expression was now definitely laced with worry. Shaun asked, "This is no longer normal, is it?"

"No," Ira said as he opened the stall door. "It's not. I think she's in distress."

He stepped closer to Pickles, took a hold of her halter. His voice was low and soothing. "Hey girl, what's wrong?"

Pickles let out another pained sound that sounded disturbingly close to a shriek, kicking a back leg against her belly again. It pierced right through Shaun's defenses and he flinched at the sound. He went into the stall too, wondered if he could do something.

He tried to feel his hands along Pickles' sides while Ira held her head, which she clearly didn't like and recoiled at the touch.

Jen's voice came from the door, "I'll call the vet."

Ira looked at Shaun. "Anything?"

He could only shrug. "I don't know. I would have to feel inside her birth canal, but I'm not an expert on horse anatomy or gynecology."

"Well, it's better than what we have right now."

Jennifer came back, told them, "Vet is held up with another emergency. Says he'll come as quickly as he can, but it might be another hour."

Shaun's worry meter shot up, he heard Ira saying, "Can you get the livestock gloves?"

Parker said, "I'll get it," and hurried away.

Shaun stood helplessly by Pickles' side, watching her physical distress without knowing what to do while Ira unsuccessfully tried to calm her. They gave her some room again, and she trampled around, lay down when Parker came with the arm length plastic gloves, then hastily got up again. Shaun's own breathing was now shaky, he could almost feel Pickles' pain. He wanted so badly to help her.

“Can you please hold her still?” he instructed Ira, Jennifer and Parker. The three of them tried to pin Pickles more towards the side of the stall as Shaun tried to decide which arm to use. He’d have better control and finesse with his right arm, but eventually decided on his left. There was too high a risk that Pickles would make jerky movements and he’d end up screwing up his right shoulder again.

He slipped one of the gloves on, trying to ignore the crinkle of the material. These were too close to cellophane, and he hated cellophane so much, but there were more important things to focus on right now.

Jennifer stood by Pickles’ hind leg, tried to ensure she wouldn’t break away. Shaun pulled her tail to the side, felt for her vulva, then started to push his hand inside. Pickles stiffened and recoiled, but he gently edged his hand further inside.

He couldn’t be sure, he’d never felt inside a horse, but he thought she was already considerably dilated. He felt around with his fingers, hit upon what he was fairly certain was one of the tiny foal hooves. This was good. He knew the hooves would come out first, then the head.

When he pushed further, he felt the foal move, also felt the tiny muzzle. Pickles let out another pained shriek, and trampled her hooves, jostling Shaun a few steps to his left. He had to groan himself at the pain it caused in his ribs with his arm stuck inside the horse.

“You okay?” Jen immediately inquired.

“Yes,” he assured her, ignoring the dull pain in his ribcage.

He felt for another two seconds, couldn’t really discern anything. He carefully pulled his arm out, shaking it out as he pulled the plastic cover off it.

“I can’t tell what’s wrong. It feels like what I think it should be. I could feel the legs and head. I think it’s alive, it moved.”

Ira said, “Well, at least that’s something. Come on, let’s give her room, I wanna let her move around.”

Everyone came to the side of the stall, watched as Pickles walked more nervous circles around the stall, then stood still, breathing heavily. A few drops of milk were dripping from her udder. There was another pained sound from Pickles, more hoof stomping. It hit Shaun right in the vicinity of this stomach. What could they do?

He tried to think, tried to come up with something—anything. What had he read about horse births? None of what he had looked at had described anything like this.

He drew in a shaky breath, folded his hands in front of his chest, rubbed his thumbs together nervously. His right hand came up into his hair, he ignored the momentary pain in his shoulder from the sudden movement.

Was there anything he remembered from human gynecological literature that could help? Had he read anything that might give him a clue?

Ira and Jennifer were talking again, he hadn't listened to what they were saying while he was trying to scan for information in his brain. There was an article he had looked at once, he tried to—

"—call the vet again, see how—"

"Quiet!" Shaun snapped loudly.

It stunned Ira and Jennifer into silence. Even Pickles flinched and Shaun immediately realized he'd been out of line. It made him even more apprehensive, and he hurried out of the stall, paced a few steps in the aisle. His hand went into his hair again, his breath now a choppy staccato rhythm.

Think. He needed to think.

"Shaun?" It was Ira's voice.

"No!"

Quiet. He needed quiet. There were too many distractions here.

He needed a game plan, needed something else they could try if the vet wasn't coming. He turned on his heel, hurried towards the exit, found the door to the tack room wide open and sought refuge there. He closed the door behind him to shut out as much ambient sound as he could.

He paced along the narrow space between the saddles and the workbench, folded his hands, unfolded them again, moved his lower arms up and down. This wasn't working. He needed to get a grip. He stopped pacing, remembered the techniques. Breathe in, breathe out. Blow out the candles. He pursed his lips, exhaled slowly. His ribs protested slightly.

Feeling a little more in control, he sat down on one of the padded storage chests along the wall after he had pushed a horse rope to the side. He went back into brain scanning mode, tried hard to find any useful information.

Pickles wasn't bleeding, at least not that he could discern. The foal seemed to be in the right position. Contractions were happening. What was going on? Was the umbilical cord getting twisted? Would that cause distress in the mare? Was there a bowel torsion? It was all possible. What could they do about it? How could they tell?

What else was there? Could he—

The door to the tack room opened. Jennifer was standing there. "Shaun?"

No. He didn't want more distractions.

"Shaun, I think we're okay. Pickles lay down, she's pushing, the foal is coming."

He let out a relieved sigh, jumped up from the seat, hurried towards the door. Jennifer stepped aside, led the way back to Pickles' stall.

She was lying in the straw, the amniotic sac now visibly hanging out of the vulva. She was raising her head with her lips curled up, then lay her head down and rolled to her side. The contractions were in full swing, heaving her body up and down. She groaned a little when the next one came.

She pushed once more and the hooves were starting to emerge. Her body heaved again with a contraction. It was a slow process and Shaun could see that Pickles was having a hard time, but at least things were moving now and she didn't seem to be in more distress than what was expected for the birthing process.

She pushed and pushed, took breaks in between, just breathing heavily. Little by little, a light colored foal emerged. At some point Pickles stood up again with the foal's legs and part of the head protruding from her rear, made another circle in her stall, then lay back down and rolled on her side. More heavy contractions followed until finally the little, tiny baby horse slid out of her and lay in the straw behind her. Shaun could feel a heavy weight lifting from his shoulders.

Ira edged closer and cleared some of the amniotic sac away from the foal's head so it could breathe. They watched the little thing with bated breath. It was breathing, shivering a little. It was a greyish brown color, by the looks of it. Shaun let himself feel the pang of joy that rose up in him. Both the mother and foal seemed okay. The danger was over!

Pickles was now lying calmly, recovering from the heavy effort. She turned her head, watched her offspring with interest. Minutes passed and the foal started moving more and more, made first attempts at getting its long legs assembled under it.

Ira turned to Shaun and Jennifer. "I think it's a little colt."

Pickles let out a low horse sound and moved her front legs, then heaved herself up. Her head sought out her son, started licking his fur, welcoming him to this world with low motherly sounds. The foal became more and more active, scrabbling his long legs around, making first attempts to get to its feet.

Shaun had to suppress the urge to help it, knew this was part of the process. It took an inordinate amount of time for the little one to stand on his own four feet, wobbling awkwardly with spread front legs, falling down again at some point.

Pickles nudged him with her muzzle until finally he stood more steadily, reached his mouth towards Pickles' belly. She kept licking his croup, until finally, after many failed attempts, he found the milk source and started suckling.

Shaun could see Parker was leaning against Jen's side with her arm slung around him the way they had before, and Jen was gently touching her father's arm as they watched silently. They were all smiling, as was Shaun. Everything seemed to have ended well.

The vet arrived just when Pickles was rolling around once more and the placenta fell away from her as she got up. She let out what sounded like a contented or maybe relieved snort. The vet, the same one who had given her the vaccinations, took a look into the stall and dryly commented, "Well, seems like I wasn't needed after all."

Jen lifted her arms apologetically. "All's well that ends well, I guess."

He went into the stall and examined both Pickles and the foal, seemed to be happy with what he was seeing. "I'd say you have two beautiful, healthy members of a new horse family right here."

Shaun turned to him. “What was wrong with her before?”

The vet shrugged. “A little hard to tell now. Could have been any number of things.”

“What are they?”

“Oh, you want a list?”

“Yes, I’m a surgeon.”

The vet nodded at him. “Okay.” He gave Shaun a number of different medical terms, ran through them and answered Shaun’s medical questions until Shaun was satisfied that Pickles would most likely be okay.

The vet said his farewells soon thereafter, and Shaun, Parker, Jennifer and Ira lingered by Pickles’ stall door, watching the little rose-grey colt as it lay in the straw, Pickles nuzzling it lovingly.

Jennifer remarked, “Has a bit of Arabian in him, don’t you think, Dad?”

Ira nodded. “Yeah, definitely. Pretty little thing, I bet he’s gonna be a real rascal. Wish we could keep him.”

Shaun was taken aback. “You… will sell him?”

“Well, not right now, but eventually, yeah.”

“Oh no,” Shaun sighed.

“Don’t worry,” Ira tried to mollify him, “not for another few months. And you know what? He’ll need a name, and I think you should do the honors.”

Shaun raised his eyebrows. “Me?”

“Yeah. You had a hand in it. Very, very literally.”

That was true, but Shaun’s mind was suddenly blank. He didn’t have any idea what good horse names were that would do a half Arabian colt justice.

They stood in silence until Ira probed, “No suggestions?”

Shaun wasn’t good with conjuring things up from his imagination. He liked research. He’d usually make a list and consider options. He didn’t have a list of horse names. “I don’t know about horse names.”

“What’s your favorite food?” Ira asked.

“Why?”

“Well, you hate pickles. We should make up for that.”

“I like chocolate chip pancakes.”

Ira lifted his hands in approval. “There you go. Pancake it is.”

Shaun looked at him, tried to gauge his expression. He wasn’t sure what he was reading there. “Are… you joking?”

Ira met his gaze. “No, I’m not joking. I think Pancake is perfect. I’m happy to go with that. Jen?”

She gave a little nod. “Yeah. A little unusual, but fine with me. Pancake works.”

Ira gave the upper edge of the stall door a gentle tap. “What do you say I quickly clean up here, and then we have a drink in the house to celebrate the newest family addition?”

Shaun immediately mentioned, “I have to drive.”

“Oh right. Well, you can toast with something non-alcoholic. Or stay here for the night. Do you have to work tomorrow?”

“No, I am not on shift this weekend.”

“Guest room is yours if you want it.”

Shaun wasn’t sure he liked the idea. He hadn’t prepared or brought anything for an overnight stay, didn’t like unplanned, spontaneous changes like this. It seemed like a pretty big break with his routine just so that he could have an alcoholic beverage. “No, thank you,” he told Ira.

“Suit yourself,” the latter commented, and Shaun wondered if he’d offended him. Did Ira look offended? He didn’t think so.

As if on cue, Shaun felt his phone vibrate in his pocket. He fished it out, saw that he had three messages from Lea, all asking how things were going. He turned to Ira. “Can I take a photo?”

“Of us?”

“No, of Pickles and Pancake.”

“Oh,” Ira laughed. “Sure, knock yourself out.”

Shaun took two quick smartphone photos and typed up a brief response to Lea along with one of the photos. He sent one to Dr. Glassman, too.

Lea answered immediately. It said, ‘It’s so cuuuute!’ with a heart emoji behind it.

Everyone ended up back at the house, Tammy had stayed behind with Theo who was sleeping, Jen reminded Parker that it was also way past *his* bedtime. Shaun looked at his watch. It was nearing midnight. Parker protested but eventually trotted upstairs, stifling a yawn.

While Ira and Jen reported to Tammy of the birth, they toasted to a healthy little Pancake with different beverages, Shaun opting for the non-alcoholic orange juice option. There was mention of the interim complications, and Jen turned to Shaun.

“Shaun, you got a little tense in there. Did we… I don’t know, it wasn’t us who upset you, was it?”

It seemed to get Tammy's attention too. She'd seen him get flaky before. "No," he quickly said, "It's my ASD. Sometimes it happens."

"Should we have done something differently? Could we have helped you with it in some way?"

Shaun could feel his eyes tearing up. This family was so incredibly kind and welcoming. He'd never had anyone who tried to accommodate him without question as much as they had.

Jen's voice cut through the emotions that were rising up in his chest. "Shaun, I'm sorry, what did I say?"

"No," he said, "I don't— People usually don't ask me these questions."

"We don't have to talk about it if it makes you uncomfortable."

"It's okay. But I don't know how you can help. When it happens, it's… different every time. Sometimes talking helps. Sometimes it doesn't. Touch or other stimuli can make it worse, but you didn't touch me. That was very good."

"Yeah, you communicated that early on. That definitely helped."

It was Tammy's soft voice that contributed, "Quiet helps, right?"

"Yes," Shaun said in a low voice.

Jen looked at her mother, probably conveyed surprise. Tammy elaborated. "We had this talk before."

"Sorry, I didn't know."

Tammy shrugged. "It's okay. I didn't think Shaun wanted it to be common knowledge."

He suddenly felt very self-conscious and uneasy, even though he knew everyone here meant well. He wondered how he could bring that line of questioning to a conclusion. He tried with, "I am okay now. This was a good day."

Ira raised his whiskey glass again. "Hear, hear."

There was a bit of more easy banter after that, and Shaun mentioned he wanted to leave a little while later. Ira and Jen thanked him again for the help, Shaun thanked them for letting him be a part of it.

At home, Shaun knew he had to shower before going to bed. He tried being quiet, but Lea stirred when he got into bed, greeted him with a low, "Hey," when he slid under the covers.

"I'm sorry I woke you," he told her.

"Oh no, I wanna hear everything. How did it go?"

"It went well at first, then it didn't, and then Pickles was okay and she gave birth to a healthy male foal that I named Pancake."

That had Lea laugh. “Pancake? Seriously?”

“Yes. Ira asked what kind of food I like, and I said chocolate chip pancakes.”

Lea laughed again. “Are you pulling my leg right now?”

“N-no. The horse is really named Pancake.”

“That’s super-cute, though. I love it. And thanks for the photo, he looks so sweet.”

“Ira said they will sell him in a few months.”

“What? Seriously? That would be a shame.”

“Yes. He said they can’t keep him but it wouldn’t be for another few months.”

“Oh well, at least you get to see him grow up until then. Little Pancake. I wanna go see him. Now I’m actually kinda sad I didn’t go with you, but Jordan and I got a lot done tonight, so at least there’s that.”

“We could go back on Sunday.”

“Yeah, sure.” She made a short high-pitched sound that sounded happy. “A cutesie little mini Pickles. I can’t wait.” After a short pause, she added, “Oh, and Parker sent that homework essay to me.”

“I know.”

“I read it, it’s pretty good. You should, too. I forwarded it to you.”

“He got an A for it. He said his teacher wanted him to read from it in front of the class.”

“Yeah, I can see that. That’s pretty awesome, though. Aren’t you glad you helped him with that?”

“I am.” Shaun felt a yawn working up his throat and let it out. “I will read it tomorrow.”

The yawn didn’t slip by Lea. “You’re tired. I’ll let you catch some sleep, but I’m glad everything went okay and that you got to be there for the birth.”

Shaun was already dozing off. “Me too,” he mumbled.

The bed shook slightly as Lea shifted around on her side. Shaun was fast asleep within minutes.

+-+-+-+-+

Chapter 16: Hold the wheel and drive



Shaun was sure seeing a lot of the Greenbergs these days, but visiting a two-day-old Pancake was too good an opportunity to pass up, so he and Lea drove out to the horses again on Sunday.

Their welcome at the farmstead wasn't as warm as expected this time around—they heard loud voices arguing as they opened the front door, and Shaun looked at Lea when they entered. Lea just shrugged and they entered anyway.

They found Tammy in the den off to their right, watering the flowers there on the window sill while Jennifer's loud and agitated voice rang through the house. "Come on, Dad, we've needed a better manure system for years! And what did you do? You bought those stupid pot-bellied pigs! Who produce more of that shit. Very, very literally."

Ira countered with, "We're a horse sanctuary, not a massive horse breeding farm. What would we need a manure suctioning system for?!"

Shaun and Lea looked at Tammy, who just shrugged.

Jen's voice came closer, she was now entering the kitchen, still arguing, "Yeah, okay, maybe the suction system is overkill, but at the very least we need to expand the dry stack and get a belt conveyor. We can't keep doing this with wheelbarrows forever!"

"And why not? That's how we've always done it. It's worked fine so far!"

Ira came into view, walked past Shaun and Lea while Jen called after him, “Wow, Dad, seriously?! The old ‘that’s how we’ve always done it’ argument?”

Ira opened the front door without another word and pulled it closed with vehemence. Shaun jumped when it loudly slammed into its lock.

Tammy turned to Shaun and Lea with an apologetic look on her face. “They do this every few weeks. But, you know, Jen is right. We need a better manure management system. Ira’s just too stubborn for his own good sometimes.”

She walked up to them, gestured towards the kitchen. “Sorry you had to witness that.”

Lea said, “Don’t sweat it. Parent-children disputes. I get it. It happens.”

Jen was standing in the kitchen. She was upset, even Shaun could see that. When Tammy entered with Lea and Shaun, she turned to Tammy, “What do I do, Mom? He needs to know that he’s still clinging to the Dark Ages!”

Tammy nodded at her daughter. “Just keep chipping away at it, Honey. He’ll see it eventually. I’ll work on him a little tonight.”

“Yeah, *eventually*,” Jen repeated. “When? In ten years, when we’ve all fucked up our backs from his outdated methods that no one anywhere uses anymore?”

“Jen,” Tammy tried to assuage her daughter, “You know how he gets.”

“Yeah, fucking stubborn, that’s how he gets.”

“Honey, mind your language, we have guests.”

Jen looked at Shaun and Lea. “I’m sure they’ve heard the f-word before.”

Shaun saw that Lea was smirking. “I totally fucking have,” she dead-panned.

Jen pointed at her. “See.” Her tone softened and she said, “I’m sorry, that wasn’t the best welcome today.” She sighed. “We don’t fight a lot, but when we do, it gets pretty heated. Dad’s a stubborn old grouch.”

Shaun supplied, “Dr. Glassman is also very stubborn. I hope he never buys pot-bellied pigs.”

That elicited a chuckle from everyone in the room and Tammy said, “Yeah, Aaron and Ira have always been a pair matched in Heaven. God knows how they get along.”

Jen let out an audible exhale, then said, “Well, now that we got this out of the system, I was just gonna go get Pickles and Pancake and take them outside. First time out in the paddock, let them both stretch their legs. Wanna come with?”

She didn’t have to ask twice, Shaun and Lea followed her right away.

Pickles and Pancake were still in her stall, and Jen got the halter and put it on Pickles that she begrudgingly let Jen fasten to her head. Shaun recalled what Parker had said about gender preference and pheromones and he wondered if Pickles still didn’t like Jennifer.

“Come on, girl,” Jen said as she led Pickles out of the stall, “Time to show your little ‘un the whole wide world.”

Shaun and Lea hung back and followed, glad that they could witness Pancake’s first venture out into the open. He stayed right by Pickles’ side for the first few yards, then became a little bolder and looked around, stopping a few times to survey the scene.

Once in the paddock, Jen let go of Pickles’ halter and let her roam free. Ira was now joining them, slowly approaching the fence where they all stood. He sidled up to his daughter and Shaun heard him say, “I guess we had another fight.”

“Yeah, we did. But come on, you know I’m right,” Jen told him.

He pointed at the mother and her foal in the paddock who were now prancing around excitedly. “Let’s talk about it later.”

Shaun himself turned his attention to Pickles and Pancake. Pickles seemed happy to stretch her legs, trotting around in energetic strides, Pancake following her with his tail held high, now much steadier on his feet than the first night Shaun had seen him.

Shaun tried to look for signs of lameness on Pickles, but there were none. The farrier and the vet had been right. The discomfort in her hind leg had sorted itself out after her hoof malposition had been adjusted. Shaun was relieved that she wasn’t going to be left with permanent pain.

The two horses running around so carefree was a joy to watch, even when Pickles started diverting her attention more lazily to the scant remains of grass on the ground, Pancake never too far away from her, suckling at her udder at one time, his tail busily indicating excitement.

Pickles came to the fence once, collected a few ear skritch cuddles from Shaun. Lea crouched down to say hi to Pancake, who nudged her hand, then scooted away a few feet. Lea straightened up again. “He’s so cute.”

He was now jumping with all fours into the air, and Ira let out a little chuckle. “Yep, there’s definitely some Arabian in him. Might even have a purebred as a father.”

“You don’t know?” Lea asked.

“Nope. The owner wasn’t real talkative about her history. Let’s just say the transaction wasn’t entirely rooted in mutual goodwill.”

“Shaun said you’re going to sell Pancake eventually?”

Ira shrugged. “Yeah, you know, we can’t keep ‘em all, as much as we want to. We’d have hundreds of horses otherwise.”

Shaun’s shoulders slumped. He was already attached to the little guy. He hoped they’d find a good home for him, at least, but he had a feeling that Ira and Jen were picky with where their horses went.

Shaun asked, “Will you sell Pickles, too?”

Ira looked at him. “Not sure yet. Jen wants to see how she performs under the saddle. If she’s a good riding horse, she might enjoy going to a place where people work more with her. But she’s got a grace period either way with the little one by her side and we’re still watching the leg, too. Vet says she’s no older than ten, so she should have at least a good decade or two ahead of her.”

Ira must have seen Shaun’s stricken face because he winked at him. “Hey, buddy, don’t worry. I’ll put in a good word that she can stay.”

That made Shaun feel a little more at ease, and he mused for a moment that it had been a very long time since anyone had called him ‘buddy’. He wasn’t sure if that was a compliment or not, but decided not to dwell on it.

Ira turned his attention to Lea, asked her, “I wanted to ask you a favor, actually. Aaron mentioned you had expertise in fixing vintage cars.”

She turned her head to look at him. “Yeah. I ran a garage with my brother for a while.” She gave Shaun a poignant look that he knew by now meant he should not be interrupting. “Helped Aaron with his beauty of a Roadster, too.”

“That old green thing of his?”

“Yep. It’s all nice and shiny now. He took it out to Montana last year.”

Shaun let out a displeased sound at the memory. That had *not* been a good time. Ira misinterpreted it and said to Shaun, “Not a vintage car fan?”

“I don’t care about cars. I need them to drive. I don’t care what they look like.”

Lea was giving Ira a look that Shaun could only interpret as, ‘He’s such a dilettante.’ Verbally, she said, “So anyway, yes, I guess you can say I have a certain level of expertise in fixing old cars.”

“She… repaired an iron lung once with a vintage gearbox.”

“Yeah, that too.”

Ira pointed a finger at her, “Sounds like you’re my gal.”

“Uh oh, that sounds ominous.”

“Yeah. Probably not exactly your field, but I have this antique tractor out in the barn that I’ve been meaning to fix up forever, and I finally have some time to devote to it. I was wondering if you could take a look.”

Lea’s face lit up. “Yeah, sure. Can’t make any promises, though. Never been near any antique tractors.”

“Oh yeah, I know.”

“Well, lead the way,” she told him, then lightly touched Shaun’s arm. “I’ll see you later.”

Shaun just gave her a small nod and watched the two of them walk off. He hung out by the paddock for a little while longer, then walked around a bit to see what was going on that might be interesting to watch. Even though it was the weekend, there was always something or other that would capture Shaun's interest.

He ran into Jennifer in the stable who was carrying a saddle towards the tack room. "Wanna help us with some saddle care?" she asked.

Sure, why not, Shaun figured. He followed her and saw someone else in the room whom he recognized as Zoe. She looked up at him. "Hey again. Shaun, right?"

"Yes," he confirmed. Obviously Zoe had a better memory for names than Jennifer.

Jen put the saddle on one of the rounded trestles in the middle of the room and motioned for Shaun to sit down on a stool that stood there. She started explaining to him how to clean and oil those parts that needed maintenance.

He found that he quite enjoyed it, there was a certain tranquility to it, and Jen and Zoe seemed to be happy to let him work in comfortable silence while the two of them continued their easy conversation.

At some point, Jen got a phone call and excused herself, motioning to Shaun that he could keep working without her.

He kept tending to the leather and metal the way Jen had shown him, let his mind wander while his hands did the work. It felt good to be doing something tactile and dexterous again, even if it wasn't surgery.

He started when Zoe's voice broke the silence. "So, what do you do?"

"Do you mean what profession I work in?" Sometimes these small talk questions weren't quite so clear to Shaun.

"Yeah. Wait, you already told me that when we first met. Didn't you say you were a doctor?"

"Yes, I'm a surgeon."

"Oh wow, that's kinda cool. What specialty?"

"I am still a resident, I haven't chosen a specialty yet."

"Okay. So you basically operate on anything?"

"Yes. Most cases are routine elective surgeries. The very specialized surgeries are often performed by the specialty departments."

"Do you like it?"

"Yes, I like it very much."

"So how'd you end up here?"

“Ira is an old friend of Dr. Glassman’s.”

“Okay. And who is Dr. Glassman?”

“He’s…” What was Shaun gonna say to that? A friend? My father? Wasn’t he both of those things? “He’s a good friend. And my father, although he’s not really my father.”

“You call your father who’s not really your father Dr. Glassman?”

“Yes,” Shaun told her. Why did people think that this was strange? Parker had asked him that same question.

“So what makes him your father but not really your father?”

Shaun was trying to come up with an answer that wasn’t going to be long and complicated, but before he could get to it, he heard the footsteps of someone jogging closer. It was Parker. “Shaun,” he said, a little out of breath. “Can you come?”

It sounded like maybe there was a certain urgency to it. “Is something wrong?”

“Theo fell and cut open his chin. He’s bleeding pretty hard.”

Shaun immediately put down the oily cloth he’d been holding and followed Parker. Together they hurried to the house where Theo was sitting on the kitchen counter and Jen was holding a blood-stained towel to Theo’s chin who was loudly crying, interspersed with pained sounds in between the sobs.

“Shaun,” Jen said with relief. “Can you take a look?”

Shaun went right into ER triage mode. “What happened?”

“He fell off a fence and hit his chin.”

Shaun washed his hands and then went over to the two of them. “I need to see the wound.”

Jen pulled the towel away and Shaun bent Theo’s head slightly to be able to see better. Theo’s crying increased in volume and he flinched, but Shaun did his best to ignore it.

The wound was on the edge of the chin slightly to the side, a messy gash a little over an inch wide. There was blood on Theo’s t-shirt and on his hands, too.

“Is it only this?”

“Yes,” Jen said, “I think so.”

“Okay. It will need sutures.”

She sighed. “Yeah, I thought so. I don’t suppose you could do that here?”

“Did he lose consciousness?”

“I wasn’t there when he fell, but I don’t think so.”

“Did he vomit or say he was dizzy or have blurred vision?”

“No. Theo, do you feel dizzy or strange? Can you see okay?”

Theo was still crying, but he shook his head.

Jen turned back to Shaun. “Do you think it’s a concussion?”

“Most likely it’s not, but please let me know if he develops any of those symptoms.” There was still blood seeping out of the wound, so Shaun added, “Please put the towel back on it.”

Theo let out something akin to a wail when Jen did, and Shaun could hear Parker muttering in the background, “Don’t be such a baby.”

Shaun turned around to face Parker. “Your brother is much younger than you. Children his age have more sensitive pain sensors and process pain differently. It is not his fault that he is crying.”

That startled Parker into silence, Shaun thought maybe his face was flushing in a little, too. He didn’t fail to notice that Theo had also become a lot calmer, his cries now subsiding, his breath hitching with audible sobs. Maybe his explanation had helped Theo, too.

Shaun thought for a brief moment. “I have a first aid kit in my backpack that has the necessary equipment. I can do it here, but an emergency room or a clinic would be better for professional wound care and pain management. I don’t have injectable local anesthetic.”

Jen sighed. “Yeah. The nearest one is a bit of a drive, but I guess we’ll go there.”

“No,” Theo protested, starting to cry again.

“Theo,” Jen said, “You heard what Shaun said.”

“I want Dr. Shaun,” Theo said tearfully.

“Sweetheart, we don’t have the right medicine here to—”

“I want Dr. Shaun,” Theo repeated, this time more defiantly.

Jen turned to Shaun and lifted her arms in a shrugging gesture. “I guess Dr. Shaun it is. That okay with you?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. What do you need?”

Shaun rattled off a few things he knew he didn’t have on him that would help, then went to retrieve the first aid kit from his backpack. He had made sure to add simple sutures, surgical needles and a needle driver to it after the dislocated ankle fiasco last year.

He asked Jen if they had something to numb the pain, and she fetched a numbing cream that they had on hand, which for lack of injectable lidocaine Shaun knew wasn’t ideal but would help with the pain.

Cleaning and disinfecting the wound and applying the cream was a bit of a struggle with a frightened and pain-addled child. Shaun knew that rationality wasn't something that worked for small children, so he was glad that Jen did most of the work and the attempts at comforting.

Shaun was trying to figure out where he could work best, and suggested they put Theo on the dining table with a pillow under his head so they could tilt his head for Shaun to have better access.

Theo had calmed down somewhat in the meantime, now it would be a waiting game for the numbing cream to take effect. With Theo sitting in Jen's lap on a chair by the dining table, Shaun pulled up his own chair and sat down himself. Silence ensued and Shaun started running through the steps in his head while he adjusted the position of the instruments he had already laid out on the table.

Theo was starting to quietly cry again, Shaun wasn't sure if it was from seeing the needle or if he was still in pain. He knew he couldn't help with either of those things. When he was done setting up what he needed, Shaun folded his hands and waited. It would be another few minutes before he could start.

Only Theo's low sobs broke the few moments of silence until Jen said, "Shaun, can you explain to Theo what you'll be doing?"

Oh. He should have done that from the start, shouldn't he? "Yes," he said.

He looked at the child. "Theo? Do you want to know what I will do?"

Theo nodded as he looked at Shaun, another sob escaping his throat. "Okay. We put cream on the wound that will make it less painful, but you could still feel some pain when I put in the sutures. It is important that you hold still because I need to be able to close the wound as precisely as possible so that it heals well."

Theo stayed quiet but was still attentive to what Shaun was saying, so he continued, "You can cry if you want, but it will help if you don't move your head very much. I will ask your mother to hold your head still."

"Okay," Theo said meekly.

"When I start, I will use a needle and medical thread to stitch your wound edges together. The stitches will have to stay in for several days before a doctor can remove them when your wound has sufficiently healed. They will probably start itching after a few days. Mine did and it was very annoying."

"You have stitches too?" Theo asked. "Can I see them?"

"They have been removed already."

"Can I see?" he asked again.

"The scar is covered by my hair."

"I wanna see your stitches," Theo kept nagging.

Shaun sighed, then felt for his scar. The skin there was still sensitive and he could feel the scar tissue under his fingertips. He tried to part his hair where he thought it would be visible, turned his head so that Theo could see.

“Whoa,” he said, “that’s really big. Did you bleed a lot?”

“I don’t know, I was unconscious.”

“What’s unconscious?”

“It’s like sleeping and you can’t wake up.”

“Hm,” Theo said. “Did it hurt?”

“Yes, but I also had other injuries that hurt more.”

“Like your arm?”

“Yes. And my ribs.”

“Did Dr. Aaron make your stitches?”

“No.” At least Shaun didn’t think so.

“Does Dr. Aaron make really good stitches?”

Shaun nodded. “Yes, I think he does. He has a lot of experience. When I am done with the sutures, we will put a band-aid over it so that the wound stays clean. You need to keep that on until the sutures can be removed and you should not touch the wound or the sutures.”

“How can I touch it when there’s a band-aid on it?”

“You should not remove the band-aid and touch the wound or the sutures or touch the band-aid. Your mother can help you change it when necessary. After about a week, it should have healed enough and a doctor will take the sutures out. You should see a doctor for this.”

“But I want *you* to do it.”

“I don’t think I will be here when it is time.”

Theo looked at his mother. “Mom, can we go to Dr. Shaun to pull the stitchures out when I’m all healed up?”

She gave the evasive answer. “We’ll see.” Shaun thought maybe they were going to have that discussion again at a later time.

Shaun turned around to face Jen. “I work at St. Bonaventure Hospital in San Jose. The hospital has a clinic that you can go to if you want. If you tell the staff to page me and I’m not busy with anything urgent, I will come and see you, but any doctor will be able to remove the sutures. It is a very routine procedure.”

He turned his attention back to Theo. “If the wound starts hurting significantly or it becomes warm or red or swollen, please tell your mother. It could be signs of an infection, and then it will need immediate attention.”

“That’s a lot of things to remember.”

“Yes, but your mother will help you.”

Shaun thought they might be ready to start now, and they got Theo all set up on the table with Jen sitting behind him, her hands lightly on each side of Theo’s head. He was no longer crying, and Shaun was acutely aware that he should probably be saying something to reassure Theo. He remembered Isla and how he offered she could squeeze his hand, but Shaun would need both his hands for suturing.

He let out a hum, which prompted Theo to turn his head and look at him. Shaun felt for a crease of fabric of his t-shirt at his chest and pulled it out so that it was more accessible. “Please take this and pull on it if what I’m doing hurts too much.”

Theo’s little hand came to grab hold of the t-shirt and Shaun thought they were ready. “Okay, I will start now. Please try not to move.”

Shaun worked in focused silence for a few minutes. Theo flinched slightly twice but didn’t pull on Shaun’s shirt and Shaun could tell he was trying to hold very still. Five stitches and the wound was neatly closed—Shaun was happy with the result.

The last step in the process was applying the band-aid that Jen had given him. Shaun noted that there were cartoon characters on it. He tried to be as gentle as he could with the adhesive ends, then said to Theo, “Okay, I am finished.”

Theo’s hand let go of Shaun’s shirt and carefully came up to feel the edge of the band-aid, but as per Shaun’s instructions he didn’t do much more than gentle touching. Shaun was about to clear away the used equipment, but then remembered something. He turned back to look at Theo. “You were very brave.”

Theo beamed at him proudly. “I have stitchures from Dr. Shaun.”

“Yes. It will hurt more when the numbing cream stops working. That will be very normal. Please don’t touch it.”

Theo nodded. “Okay. Can I go now?”

Shaun gave him a nod. “Yes.”

Jen helped Theo down from the table, and he was quickly off and out of the room. Jen looked at Shaun. “You know that he’ll be telling everyone about his ‘stitchures’ from Dr. Shaun now, right? Thank you, Shaun.”

He gave her a brief smile. “You’re welcome. Do you want to know anything else about wound care?”

Jen shook her head. “No, I’m good, not our first time. Comes with the territory of kids on a horse farm. This saved us a trip to the clinic, plus added bonus that you were the one to do it.”

“Okay,” Shaun acknowledged as he packed away the leftover supplies. It occurred to him that his own shoulder hadn’t bothered him during the short procedure, which he took as a good sign. Maybe they could think about him joining short surgeries again soon.

It made him realize once more how much he missed surgery. He remembered his conversation with Lea about finding something else in medicine that would fulfill him, but surgery was really where he felt at home. He had a sudden longing to be back in an OR—the faint familiar smell of disinfectant, the blue and green color tones, a life under their hands they could save or prolong or help make easier.

Jen’s voice pulled him from his reverie. “Everything okay?”

Shaun looked up. “Oh. Yes.”

“All right. Looks like disaster has been averted and Theo’s a happy camper. I better check if Zoe’s done with those saddles. She may have left, I think she mentioned she had to leave early today. You’re happy to come back with me if you want, see if we can finish them up.”

“Okay,” he confirmed. Some more peace and quiet after this interlude of unexpected excitement would be welcome.

Jen gestured towards the door. “Well then, lead the way, Dr. Shaun.”

+-+-+-+-+

Chapter 17: Waiver my chance to be one of the hive

“Dr. Murphy.”

Shaun turned around, saw Jerome who was entering the locker room just as Shaun closed his locker door.

Shaun greeted him back with a, “Hello.”

Jerome stood there for a moment, looking at Shaun before he said, “Please excuse my curiosity, but is that… a Player’s Handbook you’re holding?”

Shaun looked at it for a moment, then said, “Oh. Yes. Adam lent it to me, I was going to give it back to him.”

“You play D&D?”

“N-no.”

“Okay, so you’ve read the PHB but you don’t actually play?”

“Yes. I was interested in the basic rules and how to build a character. It was a good distraction while I was at home on medical leave.”

“And you’re not interested in actually playing?”

“No.”

“No, you’re not interested?”

“No, I’m not ‘not interested’.”

“So you *are* interested?”

“I don’t know anyone we could play with. There needs to be a game master.”

“Yes, right. And maybe I could hook you up if you *are* interested. Just let me know, I’ll ask around. I know a few people.”

“Can Lea play, too?”

“Sure, the more, the merrier.”

+-+-+-+-+

Jerome carried his tray with lunch to the small cafeteria table where Asher was already sitting. The latter immediately moped when Jerome sat down.

“The fries are always so thick here. They’re kinda soggy, why can’t they make them nice and thin and crispy?”

Jerome slid into the chair opposite his boyfriend. “You could also just stop getting them, expecting a different result and then being disappointed every single time.”

Asher sighed as he picked up another French fry and wobbled it up and down between his fingers. “Yeah, I guess I could. I just like fries, you know?”

“Yeah. Let me take you out to where you can get the best fries in town.”

Asher’s face lit up. “Yes, please.”

Jerome gave him a grin. “I’ll put it on the agenda.” He put a forkful of pasta in his mouth, chewed before he said, “So I ran into Dr. Murphy earlier, did you know he had an interest in RPGs?”

“Can you please not call him Dr. Murphy? That sounds weird.”

“What else do you want me to call him?”

“Shaun…?”

“Well, he calls me Nurse Martel.”

“Yeah, but that’s Shaun. He calls me Dr. Wolke most of the time, too. I don’t know, maybe it’s a professional hierarchy thing. But, no, I didn’t know he had an interest in RPGs.”

“How would you feel if we invited him to that *Tales from the Loop* session I’ve been wanting to run forever?”

“You know he has autism, right?”

Jerome shot Asher what he hoped was a *‘are you serious?’* look. “You mean in case I missed that humongous billboard and the gazillion Ethicure posters all over the hospital? Or I somehow missed it at the wedding we both attended? Wedd*ings*, plural.”

Asher looked down. “Yeah, sorry, that was a stupid question.”

“Of course I know he has autism, but you obviously know him better than me. Hence my asking.”

“Have you worked with him?”

“Yeah, he’s actually the investigator on that drug trial. He’s a bit of an odd duck for sure, but we get along okay. Could be interesting to run a game with him.”

Asher listlessly dipped another French fry in the single-serve ketchup pot. “Did he say he wanted to play with us?”

“Not in so many words, but he’s looked into D&D, and he mentioned he and Lea would love to try it. 5th Edition is a bit of a handful if you’ve never played, which is why I think *Tales* will be great. The rules are pretty simple, and it’s not as complex as 5e. You can dive right in without needing to know a whole complicated ruleset, and there’s a few short adventures that you can run in one or two sessions. It would be great as a first introduction. For you, too.”

“I… don’t know. Are you sure you wanna play with Shaun?”

Jerome gave him a long, scrutinizing look and Asher looked back at him. “What?”

“I’m trying to decide if you’re being judgmental right now or not.”

“What do you mean, judgmental?”

“*‘I don’t wanna play with the autistic guy because I think it could be weird and awkward.’* Isn’t that what you’re thinking?”

“No.” Asher scoffed. “*Seriously*?”

“Then why even ask that question?”

Asher shrugged. “I don’t know, just… I’m not sure how good he’d be at the whole ‘pretending to be another person’ thing. I mean, Shaun is brilliant and his brain is a magical information repository we all wish we had half the capacity of, but he also has this thing where everything is always right or wrong. He might get all insistent about the rules or the underlying math, or whatever else it is that the game is based on. Interruptions like that wouldn’t help with immersion and group cohesion, right?”

“Yeah, sure, but now you’re making assumptions.”

“Assumptions based on prior experience.”

“Come on. I know Shaun isn’t totally clueless. And I know he listens to advice and guidance. He’s a smart guy, and I’m pretty sure he has the capacity to adapt if you tell him that he’s being

disruptive. I mean, you work with him, you've even been out with him to karaoke night. Why is this different?"

Asher shrugged. "I don't know. I just wanna… manage expectations, I guess."

"Yeah, okay. I mean, I could chat with him before the game, make sure he knows what to expect. Or is this you not wanting to play with him?"

"No. I'm cool to give it a try." Asher chewed on another French fry.

"All right, I guess that's settled. I'll check back with Shaun, see if we can find a day where all of us are off. That might be the true challenge."

Asher sighed. "Yeah, working hours in patient care suck. Remind me, why did I choose to become a doctor again?"

Jerome shrugged. "Beats me."

+-+-+-+-+

Shaun sat in the surgeon's lounge, nervously tapping his thumb against his white ballpoint pen. It was going on 40 minutes past the agreed time for the first monitoring visit of the clinical trial.

Thanks to Shaun's diligent follow-up and Larbi's medical records alert notifications, they had enrolled three patients in the past week, and the CRA had wanted to schedule a personal visit to ensure everything was in order with the data before they recruited more study participants.

It took another eight minutes for the CRA to arrive, knocking his large wheeled pilot case unheedingly against the furniture, which annoyed Shaun even more. "You are late."

The balding man in what Shaun imagined was perhaps his late 40's sat down at the table. "Yeah. Sorry. Got stuck in traffic."

"You could have called to tell me. I have wasted 48 minutes of my time waiting for you."

"Sorry," he said again without further explanation. Shaun's annoyance level rose yet again.

The man extracted his laptop from his case, Shaun opened his own. He'd made sure that everything was in order, that the CRA had read-only access to the study participant's medical records, that all the case report forms had been completed accordingly. He also put the folder with the actual physical paperwork that was required next to where the CRA sat.

"I have completed everything you asked for. The hospital has e-mailed you the access data for the medical records system. Please change your password after your first login."

The guy was busy typing something into his computer and didn't respond.

Shaun pressed his lips together, folded his hands and waited. Nothing happened other than more typing. Shaun waited some more, finally said, "Do you have any questions?"

The man looked up from his screen. "Sorry, what?"

“Do you have any questions?”

“Yeah. I need access to your medical records system.”

Shaun sighed. “I… just told you that the hospital has e-mailed you the appropriate access data. Please change your password after your first login.”

“Okay.” He looked at his computer again, clicked around a bit. Shaun was surmising he was opening his e-mail software. “This is San Jose Good Samaritan, right?”

“No, this is St. Bonaventure Hospital.”

“Ah yeah, right. Here it is.”

Shaun pushed his laptop over. “You can use this computer to log in. Your access will be limited to read-only. I have entered all the relevant data in the patient file. I created a specific tag with the study number, you can filter for it although you can also review the complete medical history. One of the patients had an adverse event, I have documented that as well.”

The man nodded at him. “Sounds good. Did you respond to all the DQs?”

“What is a DQ?”

“Data query. You know, in the CRF.”

Oh, that. “Of course. Did you not review them?”

“No, our in-house folks do that. I pulled a report last night, I haven’t looked at it yet.”

Shaun looked at his watch. “I have made an appointment with the pharmacy at 10:30. You indicated that you needed to review the used study medication.”

The CRA also looked at his watch. “Yeah, but I need to prioritize the SDV. Can we move that to 12, maybe?”

“Hm. No.” Shaun’s annoyance level rose another notch. “The pharmacist indicated she is very busy. It was already difficult to get her to commit to the 10:30 time slot.”

“Yeah, all right, I guess I’ll make that work somehow.”

The more Shaun talked to the man whose name he knew was Michael Winter, the more he felt growing antipathy towards him. Lea had said maybe he’d had a bad day at the study initiation visit, but it seemed he was just incredibly disorganized and not particularly detail-oriented. It baffled Shaun how he’d chosen a job that was almost 100% data-driven and largely relied on paying attention to detail.

By the time Shaun had sorted everything out with him so that he could work on his own to do the source data verification, Shaun wanted to scream. He considered himself a usually fairly patient person—it sometimes came with the territory of his autism to have to have patience with people—but Winter was seriously testing Shaun’s boundaries.

Shaun didn't think he could work long-term with this person. Not sure what to do with his pent-up frustration, he found himself on the way to Dr. Glassman's office. He walked in without preamble. "The CRA is impossible to work with," he told Glassman.

Glassman was looking at Shaun over the rim of his glasses. "CRA?"

"The monitor for the clinical study."

"Okay…"

"He is incredibly disorganized," Shaun moved his hands in front of his chest to illustrate his points, "he is very unprepared, he doesn't answer my phone calls or messages, he was almost 50 minutes late *and* he wanted me to move the visit to the pharmacy which was already difficult to schedule when I made the appointment two days ago."

"Yeah, that sounds tricky."

"Yes. I can't keep working with him. What do I do?"

Glassman looked up at Shaun. "Have you tried explaining to him that these are frustrations for you?"

"No…"

"Well, don't you think you could try that? But… maybe try to say it nicely. Lots of 'I' messages and less of the blunt 'you' approach."

Shaun was confused. "What does that mean?"

"You know, try to avoid 'you are wrong' and go more with 'I would rather' or 'it would help if you did…' That sort of thing."

"Why does it matter how it is phrased? The facts are still the same."

"I don't know, Shaun. It's… I guess phrasing can soften the blow, especially if it's criticism. Make you more receptive to it…?"

"That's very confusing."

"I don't know, is it?"

"Yes. I want a different CRA. One that is less frustrating."

Glassman gave him a long look. "You could ask the company to assign someone else if it mattered that much to you. I'm not sure they'd do it just because you're frustrated, but it's another option."

"Would that not be rude?"

Glassman nodded. "Probably a little, yeah. But what's more important to you—a good working relationship with your study monitor, or being perceived as rude?"

“What if they say no? Then the CRA will resent me and it will be even more difficult.”

“Well, yeah, there’s that. But this is life, Shaun. Sometimes you have to work with people who are frustrating. You clench your teeth and get through it. You’ve done that often enough.”

“Yes, but I don’t like it.”

“No one likes it.”

“That is not very helpful advice.”

“Yeah, I know. But that’s all I got.”

Shaun let out a discontented breath. He didn’t like it when he wasn’t getting good advice. It was easier knowing how to solve a problem when you had a clear idea how to do it. This one seemed like it was going to be tricky to resolve. Or maybe one that he couldn’t resolve at all. He didn’t like the idea of having to work with Winter for an extended period of time. He already knew it would test his patience, that it was likely to come to an unfavorable situation if he didn’t work hard on not getting himself too worked up.

“So,” Dr. Glassman said, “you helped with the foaling, I hear. What was that like?”

“Exciting. And stressful.”

“Stressful?”

“Yes. There were complications.”

“With the birth?”

“Yes, Pickles was in distress but we don’t know why. It resolved on its own and the rest of the birthing process went as planned. Lea and I visited on Sunday. Both Pickles and Pancake are doing well.”

“Pancake? Is that the name of the foal?”

“Yes.”

“Did you have anything to do with that?”

“Yes. Ira wanted me to name him.”

“And you named him Pancake.”

“No. Ira did.”

“But you suggested it.”

“No.”

“You gotta give me more than that, Shaun.”

He sighed. “I didn’t know what name to suggest, so Ira asked what food I like. I said chocolate chip pancakes.”

“Of course you did.”

“That is how he was named Pancake.”

“That’s actually kind of funny. And I’m glad you could be there for it. That’s not something you see every day.”

“Yes,” Shaun agreed with a small smile at the memory. Despite the hiccup with Pickles’ temporary complications, it had been an amazing and gratifying experience.

It was then that Shaun’s phone dinged, and he picked it up to look at it. “Oh. Another study candidate. I have to go.”

He heard Glassman say, “All right,” as he was already getting up from the chair and out of his office.

After Shaun had reviewed the patient data from the alert notification he had gone up to the orthopedic ward to talk to the patient about study participation. The informed consent discussion didn’t go very well, and the patient ultimately declined joining the study.

The treating physician took Shaun aside afterwards, told him, “A suggestion, Dr. Murphy?”

Shaun knew there was criticism to come, tried to prepare himself for it. “Yes?”

“Maybe a little less scientific reasoning and a little more gentle reassurance next time? I don’t really want my patients to feel like they’re doing something wrong when they say no to a clinical trial.”

Uh oh. That had not been his intention. “I did say several times that participation was voluntary.”

“Yes, but you also tried to persuade the patient that this was important to advance medical research and help bring new drugs to the market.”

“It is.”

He saw the orthopedic attending sigh. “Look, I know you’re autistic, and that probably factors into this, but is there maybe someone else you could send next time to talk to the patients about the study?”

Shaun was taken aback, but it wasn’t the first time that he was rubbing someone the wrong way and was being told they’d rather deal with someone else. Maybe he could elicit some help with it. To the attending, he said, “I will try to be more… reassuring next time.”

The attending didn’t seem to be happy with that response, but Shaun wasn’t sure what else to tell him. He was the only sub-investigator on the study, and the informed consent process had to be undertaken by a physician.

With his job done up here, Shaun made his way back to the surgery ward, checking whether Jerome was on shift. He found him in a patient room and waited outside until Jerome was done with his work there.

“Nurse Martel, I would like to speak with you.”

Jerome nodded at him. “Okay, sure.”

Shaun followed him to the small cubicle off to the side of the nurse’s station that held a few computer stations. It was unoccupied and Jerome and Shaun took two of the wheeled desk chairs.

Shaun got straight to the point. “I need your help with the clinical study.”

“All right. What can I do for you?”

“Today I tried to consent a patient and he declined. I was told by Dr. Yates that I came across as coercive. I need you to help me with that.”

“Okay,” Jerome said hesitantly. “Though I’m not sure how you’d like me to do that.”

“I would like you to come with me to the next informed consent discussion and tell me when I’m being coercive.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

Yes, of course he was sure. This seemed like a good solution. Was it not? “Do you not think this is a good idea?”

Jerome shrugged slightly. “It might be perceived as unprofessional if a nurse interrupts the physician.”

Hm. Yes, that might be true. “What would you suggest I do instead?”

“Honestly… I’m not exactly sure. It’s hard to say, seeing how I wasn’t there.”

“Perhaps you could come with me the next time and listen, then tell me afterwards how I can improve.”

“Yeah, sure, if I’m available. I could also do some of the talking if you think that would help. I mean, I don’t want to undermine your authority, of course you’re the physician.”

Shaun thought that was an excellent suggestion. “I like that idea very much.”

Jerome nodded. “Okay, cool. We should go over the ICF and see how we could divide and conquer.”

“Yes,” Shaun agreed. “I will make a list.”

He saw Jerome frown a little, but he didn’t immediately say anything. Shaun got up from the chair, but Jerome called him back. “Shaun?”

Shaun stopped and turned to face him while Jerome added, “I can call you Shaun, right?”

“Yes. Perhaps… not in front of patients.”

“No, of course. There was something I wanted to run by you. We talked about D&D before, right? I’ve been meaning to run a one-game session for a while. Not D&D, it’s another roleplaying system, but it’s pretty simple and fun. I’m still looking for players, I thought maybe you and Lea might want to join to try it out?”

“Who else is going to be there?”

“So far just Asher, but it would be good to have at least four players. With the two of you, we’d need one more person, provided you’re interested. The system is called *Tales from the Loop*, it’s kind of a 1980’s mashup with sci-fi elements. You’ll be playing teenagers out for a bit of summer break adventure.”

Shaun let that sink in, unsure what to make of the invitation. He’d studied the D&D rules, thought he had a basic idea of how it would work. A whole other system would require more research. He also didn’t have good memories of his teenage years, was unsure how that was going to factor into it.

“Can I have more information first?”

Jerome nodded. “Yeah, sure. I can e-mail you some links. But if you’re interested, we should talk about getting it on the books. With three of us on different shift schedules, couldn’t hurt to plan early.”

Shaun could see the merit in that. Jerome added, “Check with Lea too if you want. You’re both welcome to join, we could play at my place, but anywhere that has a larger table would work.”

“We have one,” Shaun supplied.

“Okay, cool, that’s another option then. We can talk about that later if you’d rather play in your own home.”

“Okay,” Shaun said, “I will think about it.”

“Excellent.” Jerome got up from the chair. “I’ll see you later.”

Shaun was about to dismiss the farewell, but recalled what he and Lea had talked about. “I… will see you later,” he said.

Jerome didn’t react and walked away, so Shaun thought maybe he was getting better at not making it sound strange. Or at least he hoped so.

+-+-+-+-+

Lea wasn’t sure what had made her look up from her computer, but she saw Shaun approaching her office through the open door. There was a spring to his step and he made a few happy skips along the way. She was glad he was in a good mood after all the frustrations with the CRA he’d had this week.

He came right out with the good news as he entered her office.

“I am cleared to go back to surgery.” There was a rare exuberant Shaun smile on his face.

Oh wow! “That’s great news, Shaun!”

“Yes, it is.” He underlined it with a happy little arm flail. “I should try out shorter surgeries first to test the strain on my shoulder, and Dr. Luca said I should not overdo it, but there are enough elective surgeries to choose from that will fit those criteria. I will talk to Dr. Andrews today.”

Lea couldn’t help feeling vicarious excitement. He’d been so apprehensive that his injury would impair his ability to work as a surgeon, and it sounded like those fears were proving to be unfounded. It was such a huge relief, not just for Shaun.

She got up from her chair, walked over to where he was. There was a joyful, excited glint in his eyes that she hadn’t seen for a long time. She took both his hands, and he happily bobbed them up and down a few more times.

“I’m so happy for you,” she told him.

“I’m so happy for me, too.”

She laughed. “Let’s go out tonight, celebrate.”

“Yes,” he easily agreed. “Karaoke and Tequila. It will be perfect.”

+-+-+-+-+

Chapter 18: Will I hold my own and drive?

“Polyglactin sutures, please,” Shaun told Nurse Fletch. She handed them to him with the precision he’d come to expect from her. They usually worked together efficiently, and he liked having her on his team.

He was wrapping up a proctosigmoidectomy, his first surgery since the bus accident. It was a simple procedure, and everyone had worked with practiced proficiency. The OR timer showed 41:06 minutes, and Shaun felt in his element.

He’d missed this, and he took a brief moment to acknowledge just how grateful he was that his shoulder was cooperating, that with Asher and experienced nurses by his side, he had a great team who knew what they were doing and knew what assists were needed where and when.

With Dr. Luca’s words in the back of his mind, he had let Asher take over part of the surgery, both for his own and Asher’s benefit. Soon they’d have new surgical residents with whom he’d have to get back into teaching mode, would have to be ready to deal with colleagues who were still wet behind the ears and wouldn’t know how to anticipate his surgical routine.

But he knew he could do it, was even looking forward to it to a certain degree. Teaching could be frustrating when he got stuck trying to communicate his knowledge but failed to do it in a way that the other party understood, when it was all outlined so clearly in his head. It could also be

rewarding when the trainee succeeded, when there was a true sense of accomplishment and team spirit.

He knew he had to try and remember more often how his own mentors had taken Shaun himself on and taught *him* what he needed to know, all the things he now took for granted that he wouldn't be able to do if someone hadn't made the effort and taken the time to impart their knowledge on him, had patience with him.

Interestingly, Shaun's fears about working with Dr. Ricci had been unfounded. Granted, with Shaun still working on the clinical trial part time, his exposure to Ricci had been limited, but the interactions they'd had had not been hostile or tense. He'd found Ricci to be level-headed and rational. Yes, the man was quick to correct people's mistakes in front of others, but that didn't bother Shaun. He was still a resident. He still had a lot to learn.

Shaun placed another practiced stitch, felt his right shoulder protest just a tiny bit, but not enough to impair him in any way. It was good—after all, this was his first time back in the OR after one and a half months. Everything was going well and he knew it would get better yet.

That weight on his shoulders had just gotten a lot lighter, and he felt an immeasurable sense of relief. For the first time since the accident, he knew that he was still a surgeon, that he *could* still be a surgeon.

+-+-+-+-+

Aaron hadn't made the connection when he'd seen the name Theo Bowden on the list of upcoming clinic patients, but it made so much sense when he entered the treatment room and saw Jen and Theo there. He knew Jennifer was divorced, so the children apparently had her husband's last name.

"Who do we have here?" Aaron addressed Theo, who was already sitting on the examination table, his legs dangling over the edge.

"Dr. Aaron!" the latter beamed at him.

Jen held out her hand with a, "Hello, Aaron."

He shook it, hearing Theo say, "Can Dr. Shaun take out my stitchures?"

"Stitchures, huh?"

Aaron sat down on the wheeled stool and rolled over to Theo, adding, "I'll have to check if Shaun is available, but if he can't come, I can also take out your stitches."

Jen contributed, "We already asked for Shaun, but they said he was in a surgery."

"Yeah, it's his first since the bus crash."

Jen nodded, and Aaron turned to Theo, "Shaun is operating on someone right now. He hasn't done that for a very long time because he was hurt, but now he can do it again. He was really happy about that, but I know he'd also be happy to see you if he could. Tell you what, let me send him a quick message. If he finishes soon, maybe he can still come say hi."

“Okay,” Theo agreed and Aaron typed Shaun a short note.

“Let’s take a look at your stitches, shall we?”

Theo’s chin wound had healed well, the sutures that Aaron knew Shaun had made were clean and neat. Theo didn’t so much as flinch when Aaron took them out, and when he was done, he proudly told Aaron, “Dr. Shaun said it’s important that I hold still, so I didn’t moved my head.”

“That’s very good advice, and you did very well.”

Theo beamed at that, and Aaron dug around on the supply shelf to find the band-aids for children. He held two different ones out to Theo. “Which one do you want, cats or panda bears?”

Theo looked at both, took a long moment to decide, then eventually said, “Pandas.”

“Pandas it is.” He applied the band aid to Theo’s chin. “Okay, all done.”

Just as Aaron was explaining to Jen that they should keep the band aid on for at least another five days, the door to the exam room opened, and Theo immediately said, “Dr. Shaun!”

Aaron turned around, Shaun was still in his scrubs, even had his scrub cap on. He must have come right away, good thinking that Aaron had sent him the message.

“Hello,” Shaun greeted the small group.

Theo pointed to his freshly bandaged wound. “Dr. Aaron took out the stitchures, and I tried to hold very still.”

“That’s very good,” Shaun complimented him. “I couldn’t be here earlier, I was in surgery.”

“Yes, Dr. Aaron said you were very happy because you hadn’t done operating for a really long time.”

“Yes,” Shaun said with a little smile to his expression.

“How’d it go?” Aaron inquired.

“Very well. The polyp resection was not very complex and there were no complications.”

“No, I mean with your shoulder.”

“Oh. Also very well. Dr. Wolke performed part of the procedure, and there was only very minor pain when I was placing the sutures. It didn’t impair me during the surgery.”

“That’s great to hear.”

Shaun nodded as he took off his scrub cap, straightening out his hair. “Yes.” He turned to Jennifer. “How are Pickles and Pancake?”

“Yeah, doing okay, though we’re watching Pickles a little more closely right now. There were some indications that she might be developing mastitis.”

“Oh no,” Shaun said, his face falling.

“It’s nothing too worrisome, it can happen. Maybe we caught it early enough so she doesn’t have to go on antibiotics, but if she does, we’ll have to bottle-feed Pancake until it clears up.”

“Would that be detrimental to the foal?”

“Not usually, no. Mostly it’s annoying because you have to live on a timer for a while, making sure that the foal is fed regularly. We’ll deal with it when it comes to that. Very rarely, the mother won’t take the foal again afterwards, so you have to keep bottle-feeding, but I’m hopeful that won’t be the case. I think Pickles has good mother instincts.”

“I hope so.”

“Yeah, as do we all. Oh, and by the way? You should know that Theo bragged about his ‘Dr. Shaun stitches’ to everyone in school. Almost like falling off the fence became something super cool.”

Shaun turned his attention to Aaron. “Do you think there will be visible scarring?”

“If anything, only very minimal. You took great care to minimize that.”

He saw Shaun nodding. “Yes, I did. And I don’t think falling off a fence is cool, especially if it results in injury.”

Jen turned to her son. “You hear that, Theo? Falling off a fence is *not* cool, and neither is having to get stitches.”

“Yeah, I know,” he moped.

Jen asked Aaron, “So we’re done here, right?”

Aaron put his hands under Theo’s armpits and helped him off the exam table. “Yep, we’re done here.”

“All right,” she said, “don’t be a stranger. We’re always happy to have you.”

“I’m actually gonna drop by on Saturday to pick Ira up. We’ll be heading out to Cinnabar Hills.”

“Golfing?”

“Yeah. Not a fan?”

“I don’t know, I can’t really see the appeal.”

Theo moved a step closer to Shaun. “Are you coming too?”

“I don’t play golf.”

“No, to visit us.”

Aaron turned to Shaun. “I could give you a ride and drop you off if you want.”

Shaun stayed quiet for a moment, then said, “I… will think about it.”

Jen took Theo’s hand. “Come on, Theo, we need to go. Aaron and Shaun have other patients they need to see, and we need to pick up some things in town.”

“Can we go to the Lego Store?”

“Not today, Theo.”

“But I wanna go.”

“Yeah, I know. But we’re not going to the Lego Store today. End of discussion.”

Theo drew a pouty face that Aaron thought was adorable. He couldn’t help but smile.

Jen looked at Aaron and Shaun. “Well, I guess we’re off, then. Thanks again. I’ll see you around.”

“Bye,” Aaron saw them off.

Theo turned around and waved at Shaun, and Shaun hesitantly lifted his hand in a goodbye gesture.

Aaron turned Shaun. “The kid really likes you, you know?”

“Yes, I know.”

“You like him too, don’t you?”

Shaun briefly met Aaron’s eyes, then looked away again. “Yes,” he said without further explanation.

Aaron gave Shaun a long look, realized once more how grown up he was, how much he had matured and learned over the last few years, how grateful he was that he didn’t have to worry about Shaun’s future anymore.

Shaun’s phone buzzed in his pocket and Shaun took it out. He made a face and decisively declined the call. Aaron asked, “Trouble in paradise?”

“It’s the CRA. He wants to talk to me about the data queries that I answered. He wrote an e-mail to tell me that answering queries with ‘This is wrong’ is not helpful.”

Aaron had to hide a small smile. This was typical Shaun, but ultimately a problem he’d have to figure out on his own. “Okay. But is it possible that maybe he was right and it *wasn’t* helpful?”

“No. What they were asking for was wrong.”

“Yeah, well, you’ll have to sort it out eventually. I don’t think ignoring it will make it go away.”

Shaun made another unhappy face. “Yes, I know. I will call him back. Later.”

“Yeah, you do that. Listen, I’m really glad your first surgery went well. That must be a relief.”

“Yes, it is. I have another one scheduled for tomorrow.”

“Be careful, though, and don’t overdo it, okay?”

“Yes. Dr. Luca said I should try it out and scale back if I need more time. That’s what I’m doing.”

“Okay, good. Do you want me to pick you up on Saturday and give you a ride?”

Shaun was already on his way to the door. “That would be very nice, but I want to talk to Lea first.”

“All right. Let me know, okay?”

“Okay,” Shaun said and then was out the door. As usual.

+-+-+-+-+

When Saturday came around, Shaun was getting ready to go to the farm in the morning. He stood by the wardrobe to get out his clothes. Lea was still in bed. He knew she was awake, but she’d been taciturn and Shaun had left her alone. Lea wasn’t always a morning person.

However, it was getting late and Shaun looked at his watch. He turned to her. “You have to get up now if you want to be ready in time for Dr. Glassman to pick us up. Your average time in the bathroom is 17 minutes, and we haven’t had breakfast yet.”

Lea let out a sound that was halfway between a hum and a moan and moved a little. Shaun waited, but she didn’t say anything else. “Lea?”

She rolled over slightly to face him, her eyes still half closed. “Would you mind going without me? I think it’s gonna be one of those migraine days.”

“Are you on your period?”

“Yeah,” she sighed. “Started yesterday.”

Without preamble, Shaun went to the living room and picked up the orange pill bottle that stood on the coffee table. He took it to her and sat down on her side of the bed. He held it up and she eyed it warily. “You can take one of these.”

“Your Percocet?”

“Yes. They also help with migraines if you don’t take them very regularly. They can cause rebound headaches with frequent use.”

She made another unhappy sound. “It’s not that bad yet. Maybe I’ll stick to aspirin for now, but I’ll keep it in mind. Thanks.”

“Would you like me to stay home?”

“No,” she said immediately. “I’ll be terrible company anyway. Please go and have fun. Say hi to everyone for me.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure.”

“I want to help. I can get you something to eat or drink.”

She exhaled audibly. “Shaun, that’s super sweet, but I’m really okay for now. Actually a little nauseous, but usually that goes away when I take the painkillers. Please go and get ready, I’ll be fine.”

Shaun hated not being able to help. Maybe at least he could get her the aspirin. He fetched the bottle from the bathroom and a glass of water, took it to her and opened the bottle. “How many?”

“Three should do it.”

He sat down again, shook the three Aspirin out into his hand and held them out to her, along with the glass of water. She took them, washed them down, then put the glass on the bedside table.

Shaun kept sitting next to her, watched her for a moment until she said, “Shaun, you’re hovering.”

“I want to help.”

“I know. But this isn’t something you can help with.”

“You helped me. When I had the brace, you always did.”

“Yeah, because you had your arm immobilized and couldn’t really do much without help. Don’t you think that’s a little different?”

Shaun let out a short hum. It was different, but it also wasn’t, in the sense that she’d been there without question when he had been incapacitated.

Lea pushed herself up to a sitting position and reached out with her hand and took one of his. “Hey. I appreciate the offer, but I’m okay. It’s a headache and I just took the meds. I’ll be fine, and I love you, but it’ll be nice to have a quiet day to myself. So please go see Pickles and Pancake. Oh, and please tell Ira I’ll help with the old tractor next time. I think he had ordered a part we needed and I said I could look at it today.”

He let out a long breath. “Okay.”

By the time Shaun was ready, Lea was on the couch, sipping from a mug of tea and nibbling on a piece of toast with butter. Shaun’s phone dinged, it was Dr. Glassman letting him know he was outside.

“Dr. Glassman is here.”

Lea turned her head. “Okay. Have fun.”

“Thank you,” Shaun told her, grabbed his backpack and went outside.

As he got into the car, Glassman remarked, “Lea not coming?”

“She is on her menstrual period and has a migraine.”

Glassman just let out a confirmatory hum and nodded, then proceeded to pull out of the apartment building’s driveway.

The drive was mostly silent, which Shaun didn’t mind at all. He loved looking out the window, taking in the city and later the outskirts of it. Dr. Glassman asked a few questions, Shaun talked a little about his work. There was a brief discussion about a new less invasive brain surgery technique that they’d both read up on.

As they pulled up at the farm, Shaun got out of the car. The weather was overcast today and not oppressively hot, which he welcomed very much. He took a moment to take in the surroundings, the lovely rolling hills around the valley the farm was situated in. Now that he was getting back on a surgery shift schedule, he knew he’d have less opportunity to come out here. He was going to savor it as it lasted.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Ira coming towards them, golf gear slung over his shoulder. “Hey Shaun,” he greeted him.

“Hello,” Shaun greeted back.

“Don’t wanna join us for golf?”

“No.”

“Not a fan?”

“No. Dr. Glassman took me once. It was very boring and I wasn’t very good at it.”

Ira shrugged. “Oh well, fair enough. If you’re looking for Jen, she’s out by the paddocks, I think.”

Shaun remembered what Lea had told him earlier. “Lea is not feeling well today, so she didn’t come, but she said to tell you she will look at the old tractor the next time.”

“That’s a shame, but that’s okay, there isn’t any urgency to it. Hope she feels better.”

“She has a menstrual migraine, she is likely already feeling better after taking some painkillers, but she wanted to stay home where it’s quiet.”

Shaun wasn’t sure why Ira was giving him a lopsided grin. He told Shaun, “Okay, thanks for that, and I look forward to fixing up that old thing with her next time.”

Shaun wasn’t sure if that needed a response, so he waited for a short moment and then went to go. Glassman called after him through the open car window, “I’ll see you later, Shaun.”

Shaun deposited his backpack in the tack room for the time being. He found Jen out by the paddocks like Ira had said. It looked like she was putting up some kind of wire mesh fence there. Shaun approached her and she looked up when he got closer, wiping a hand along her brow.

“Hey Shaun.”

“Hello Jennifer.”

She gave him a smile. “When will you learn to call me Jen?”

He looked at her quizzically. “Do you prefer that over Jennifer?”

“Yeah. Jennifer is something mom and dad used to call me when I did something wrong.”

“Okay. Hello Jen.”

She let out a chuckle. “Well, hello Shaun.”

He pointed at the fencing, not sure what the purpose of it was, seeing how the paddocks were all already fenced with wooden ones at horse height. “What is that for?”

“Rabbits. They run rampant in the paddocks, eat all the grass, use certain areas as latrines, not to mention the holes in the ground. It’s kind of annoying, but fences are the only way to keep them out.”

Shaun looked around, didn’t see any rabbits, so he had to trust Jen’s word. She focused her attention back on the fence and said to him, “I know you didn’t come out here to work, but Parker is out with friends today and with dad golfing, I could really need a hand.”

“Okay,” Shaun easily agreed. He’d been so useless with his dysfunctional shoulder all these weeks, it felt good to do something physical. The ribs were still a bit sore if he jostled them too much, but by now he knew his boundaries pretty well.

Jen was good at giving precise instructions, and they worked in tandem for a while with Shaun assisting where he could. It wasn’t very long before Jen’s phone beeped audibly. She looked at her watch. “Pancake feeding time,” she said.

Oh. Shaun had completely forgotten about Pickles’ mastitis issues. He should have checked on her.

“Wanna give me a hand?” Jen asked as she got up from her crouching position and wiped her hands on the thighs of her jeans.

“Yes!” Shaun said enthusiastically. Of course he did.

“We need to go back to the house first, warm up the milk. You know, it’s very much like baby feeding, except the formula is a bit different. Have you fed babies before?”

Shaun could honestly say he hadn’t. There was a small pang of regret, maybe even grief in the pit of his stomach when it reminded him that he and Lea never got the chance to experience any of that.

He noticed that Jen was giving him an inquisitive look. “Is something wrong?”

He stood for a moment, opened his mouth, wasn’t sure what to say and closed it again. It was deeply personal, but Jen and her family had become trusted friends over the past few weeks. Before he knew it, the words were out of his mouth. “Lea was pregnant. We lost the baby.”

He could tell Jen's demeanor had changed. People usually got quiet and apologetic when this topic came up.

Jen took a step towards him and reached out a hand, Shaun braced himself for the touch and tried not to flinch, but she stopped herself at the last moment. "I'm sorry, Shaun."

"It was over a year ago."

"Yeah, but it's still hard. A year and a half after Parker was born, I miscarried at 16 weeks. Took my husband and I a long time to want to try again. One of the reasons why there's eight years between Parker and Theo. And, you know, I think that was the first blow to our marriage. Took us a while to finally admit it, but it's tough. So I truly mean it when I say I'm sorry."

"Thank you," Shaun told her.

"You don't have to come if you'd rather stay out here."

"No," Shaun said immediately. "I want to help feed Pancake."

She gave him a nod. "Okay."

They didn't even have to go to the house, Tammy met them halfway with a bottle with a white liquid in her hand. Jen took it from her. "Mom, you're a Godsend."

Tammy smiled at her. "I try." She looked over to Shaun. "Hi Shaun."

"Hello Tammy."

"Haven't seen you in a while. How are you?"

"I'm okay. I performed my first surgery after the accident this week."

"Oh, that's great. Did it go well?"

"Yes, very well."

"I'm glad to hear it." She nodded over to where the horse paddocks were. "I assume you wanna help with the foal feeding?"

"Yes."

"Well, if you're in the mood for fresh raspberries later, come to the house. Don't tell Theo, but there's vanilla ice cream too, if you want it."

That sounded great, although Shaun wasn't generally a fan of raspberries—he didn't like the way that the seeds felt in his mouth when you chewed on them.

Jen leaned a little closer to Shaun and stage-whispered, "She tries to advertise them well. Truth is, she has way too many this year and really needs to get rid of them."

Tammy sighed. "I do, and there's only so much raspberry jam I can make. Maybe you wanna take some of them home later?"

“Okay,” Shaun agreed. He was pretty sure Lea would like them.

“Well,” Jen remarked, holding up the formula bottle, “we better get to it.”

Shaun followed Jen back to the paddocks, this time one a little further out. He saw Pickles from a ways away, nervously pacing along the fence. She let out a little whinny when Shaun and Jen approached. Jen told him, “She hates being away from Pancake, but we had to separate them while she’s still on the antibiotics. The mastitis is clearing up now, another three or four days should do it.”

Shaun looked around. “Where is Pancake?”

“He should be around somewhere, he’s in the paddock next to her. He stayed close for the first day or two, but we found that he made fast friends with Barney, so we put them together, and now he wanders off sometimes with the donkey. He’s already a feisty little thing. We’ll probably have to get him castrated before long.”

“When does that happen?”

“Not before 6 months, if we even keep him that long. We’ll see how it goes.”

Shaun still hated the idea that Pancake might not be around whenever he wanted to see him. He’d grown more attached to the little colt than he wanted to admit. After all, he’d helped birth him and greatly contributed to naming him.

Jen opened the gate to the paddock that housed Pancake and Barney. Shaun could see the donkey out in one of the corners. Jen pointed to a spot beneath one of the trees. “Look at him.”

Pancake was lying flat on his side, apparently sleeping. He and Jen approached carefully. Pancake’s ears were twitching slightly with flies trying to settle on them, but his eyes were closed the whole time. Jen whispered to him, “Foals can sleep really deeply when they feel safe.”

She crouched down next to Pancake, gently touched his jaw. Pancake jerked awake, lifting his head. “Easy,” Jen said in a soothing voice. “Time for your second breakfast, little man.”

Shaun edged closer, also crouched down when Pancake didn’t get up. He reached out a tentative hand to pet the young horse, skritched him between the ears. Pancake seemed to enjoy it and relaxed again, his eyes were starting to droop.

“That’s not helping, Shaun,” Jen said with a little laugh in her voice. “We need to get him up if we wanna feed him for as long as the formula is still warm.”

Jen straightened up, shook the bottle a little, trying to entice the foal, making vague clicking noises with her mouth. “Come on, Pancake. Aren’t you hungry?”

Shaun tried to encourage the foal and gave him a few nudges. Eventually, he got the message and got to his feet. Jen commented with, “There you go.” She looked at Shaun, held up the bottle for a moment. “Watch me, then you can try if you want.”

She held the bottle a little bit away from where Pancake was standing, and he immediately reached with his little mouth for it and found the nipple very quickly. Jen explained, “You need

to hold the bottle slightly higher than the head and make sure the neck is extended. You know, as if he was nursing naturally. Basically just hold the bottle and let him do his thing.

“He might stop for a little bit in between, that’s normal. Just give him a minute and then try again. He’s gotten pretty good with it. Here, wanna try?”

She held the bottle out to Shaun and he took it, stood near Pancake’s head and did as Jen had explained. Pancake seemed thirsty enough, although he messed around with the nipple a bit before he found his groove and sucked at it.

And some point he shook his head and let go of the nipple. White formula dripped from both the mouth and the bottle. Shaun felt some of the lukewarm liquid slobbering into his hand, but before he could think about it any further, Pancake’s lips were around the nipple again, sucking with fervor.

The bottle was emptied in no time, and Shaun pulled it away from Pancake’s mouth when there was only air to be sucked out. Jen was smiling at Shaun. “See, you’re a natural.”

Pancake was shaking his head a few times, then came back up to Shaun and nudged him with his messy milk muzzle again before he trotted off, then let out a little squeak and went into a gallop to run straight to where Pickles was whinnying in the paddock next door, coming to an abrupt full stop as to not collide with the fence.

Jen laughed next to Shaun. “He’s such a rambunctious little scoundrel. But it’s great to see he’s doing well.”

Shaun was still a little worried. “Do you think Pickles will let him nurse again?”

“Yeah, pretty sure she will. Of course we can’t know for certain, but she’s still pretty attached and calls for him every so often. I think they’ll be fine.”

It sounded reassuring, and Shaun went over to where Pancake stood with Pickles, watched him stick his nose through one of the wide-meshed fence squares between the wooden fence rails. Pickles briefly nudged Pancake’s nose, then lifted her head over the fence when Shaun approached, and he gave her a few well-deserved pets while Pancake pressed his body against Shaun’s thighs.

Shaun vaguely registered that Jen had taken out her smartphone and was taking a photo of the trio. She joined him and held the phone’s screen up to him to see the photo. “I think that’s a nice one.”

Shaun had to agree. He told Jen, “You can send it to Lea. She’s not feeling well today.”

“Oh no. The flu?”

“No, a menstrual migraine.”

“Oh, those definitely suck.”

He saw Jen typing something into her phone, then put it away again. “Well, I’ll finish up with the rabbit fencing. Feel free to sample Mom’s raspberries and ice cream if you want in the meantime.”

“Do you not need my help anymore?”

She shrugged. “Nah, it’s just the last few yards now. I’ll be fine on my own. Anyway, thanks for the help. Oh, one more thing. I think Theo’s back at the house. Can you take a look at his chin wound?”

“Is something wrong with it?”

“No, no, I think it’s healing well, but he’s been whining about the band aid. Would be nice if we could get rid of that. And remind him to be careful with it, he’ll listen to you more than me.”

“Okay, I will look at it.”

“Thanks, Shaun.”

He did as suggested and joined Tammy in the house. She was in the kitchen, working on the raspberries, straining them through a sieve. She turned her head at Shaun when he entered. “There you are.”

He put the empty milk bottle on the kitchen island that Jen has asked him to take back to the house. “Where is Theo?”

“Oh, I think he’s upstairs, playing in his room. Don’t want any raspberries?”

“Not right now, thank you.”

He wasn’t sure if Tammy was disappointed or not, but Shaun made his way up to where he knew Theo’s room was. The boy was sitting on the floor in his room, building some intricate labyrinth from Lego, by the looks of it.

When he saw Shaun approaching, he immediately perked up. “Dr. Shaun!”

“Hello Theo. Your mother wanted me to look at your chin.”

Theo’s hand came to where the band-aid was. “Why?”

“To see how it’s healing. You may not need the band-aid any longer.”

Theo seemed unimpressed and turned his attention back to the Lego. Shaun hovered uncertainly in the door. “Can I look at your chin?” he tried again.

“Now?”

“Yes.”

“I’m busy.”

“You are playing.”

Theo didn’t respond to that and instead put another piece of Lego onto the existing structure, then changed his mind and used a different one.

Shaun wasn't sure whether to give up and try again later or push for it. It wasn't anything urgent, but it seemed strange that Jen had said Theo wanted to get rid of the band-aid. It didn't seem like a big concern to the boy.

When Shaun was about to turn and go, Theo said, "Dr. Shaun, you have to play with me."

"I want to look at your chin." He didn't want to play.

"Will you play with me after?"

Bargaining. Children were very adept at that, Shaun had learned that by now. He probably could play with Theo for a little while. "I will play with you if you let me look at your chin."

"Yay!" Theo said enthusiastically, then let go of the Lego brick he had in his hand and looked at Shaun expectantly.

The latter drew in a breath of air, looked around the room. More light would be good. He went over to the window, asked Theo, "Can you come here, please?"

Theo complied and stood in front of where Shaun was now kneeling. Shaun was about to remove the band-aid, but remembered at the last minute that some prompting would probably be helpful. "I will take off the band-aid now. It might hurt. Do you want me to do it slowly or fast?"

Theo just shrugged, and when Shaun was about to peel off the band-aid on one side, Theo asked him, "Can I touch your shirt again?"

Shaun raised his eyebrows. "I am not going to suture you today."

"You said it would hurt."

"I said it might hurt."

"I want to touch your shirt."

Shaun inhaled. "Okay." He pulled a fold of fabric of his t-shirt away and held it out so that Theo could hold on to it.

Shaun opted for the slow method as he pulled off the band-aid as carefully as he could. Theo flinched a little, and Shaun could empathize. He had sensitive skin, sometimes it was the small things that bothered him more than anything. Pulling off a band-aid qualified.

The cut had healed well, the wound was fully closed—a neat reddish pink line on Theo's skin. Shaun gently palpated it. "Does this hurt?"

"No," Theo told him.

Shaun let go and leaned back on his heels. "Okay. It has healed very well. You can keep the band-aid off, but please don't touch it if you don't have to."

"Okay," Theo told him. "Can I go now?"

"Yes."

He happily went back to his Lego, then urged Shaun, “Can you play with me now? I’m making a labbinth.”

“You mean labyrinth.”

“Yes. Look.” He took a Lego figurine and moved it through the paths in staccato steps. Shaun was actually impressed at the somewhat intricate patterns and turns that Theo had put together. He definitely had good spatial imagination.

Theo explained, “You go here, and then you go here, and here, and then there’s a corner. I still have to finish this.” He pointed at an open space on the grey Lego baseplate.

“Do you want me to help you?”

Theo handed Shaun an empty baseplate in blue. “You can make your own.”

Okay then. Building a labyrinth from Lego was definitely among Shaun’s skill sets.

Shaun found that he started to enjoy building the three-dimensional structure as he went along while Theo did his own thing, commenting every now and then, urging Shaun to look at what he was doing, adding explanations that didn’t always make sense.

Shaun had learned that Theo didn’t always want clarifications or to be corrected. Sometimes he just needed to talk, and when he wanted Shaun to answer something, he would actually ask or prompt him.

As he was digging through the pile of Lego for a fitting piece, he felt his phone vibrate in his pocket. It was a message from Lea. She’d taken a selfie of herself on the couch with her fingers up in a V shape next to her face, telling him the painkillers had kicked in and she was doing fine. It was good to hear.

Shaun, in turn, took a photo of his half-finished Lego build and sent that back. Lea replied right away and Theo asked him, “Why did you take a picture of the Lego?”

“I showed it to Lea.”

“Why didn’t she come?”

“She’s not feeling well today. She wanted to stay home.”

His phone vibrated again, and Shaun read the message, then held up the phone to Theo. “She says hello.”

“Can she come next time?”

Before Shaun could answer, it was Jen’s voice calling up the stairs. “Theo? Wanna come down for some horse-riding?”

Theo immediately dropped the Lego and left the room with an enthusiastic, “Yes!”

Shaun tentatively followed. Jen was telling Theo, “Come on, get your half-chaps, boots and helmet.”

She turned to Shaun and said, “I promised him we’d do some galloping today. You’re free to watch.”

Shaun was definitely game. It would be interesting to see and maybe he could learn something, not that he was very inclined to get on a horse himself.

Theo came back with the gear that Jen had mentioned. “Am I riding Pepper today?”

“Yeah, who else, dummy?”

Shaun wasn’t sure, but he thought Pepper was one of the ponies. It made sense.

“Come on,” Jen urged them, and Theo was already running out the door, pulling on his paddock boots out on the front porch.

Together they went out to the paddock where Pepper was already standing by the fence. Jen clicked a lead rope into the halter and they went to the stable. Theo was in the tack room, fastening the half-chaps to his lower legs. Jen gave him a brief look. “Need help with that?”

“No, I can do it.”

“All right. Shaun, have you ever saddled a horse?”

“No,” he said. Of course he hadn’t. Wouldn’t Jennifer know that?

“Want me to explain how it’s done?”

“Yes, please.”

Jen went through the tack room and explained to him all the equipment they’d need. He took the saddle pad that she held out to him while Jen took one of the smaller saddles off its rack. Of course this was a horse sanctuary. Shaun tried to imagine how much bigger and well-equipped the tack room of an actual riding stable would be.

To Shaun’s surprise, Jen unfastened the rope on Pepper’s halter from one of the rings mounted into the wall so that it hung loose and fell to the floor. Jen must have seen his confusion, so she explained, “Horses are better saddled when they’re not tied up. Helps keep them calm and relaxed, and Pepper’s a seasoned old boy. He knows the drill.”

Together they went through the steps of how to saddle a horse, from putting the saddle pad in the right place to gently swinging the saddle onto the pony’s back and how to fasten and tighten the girth. Shaun listened attentively and made some mental notes.

When they were done, Jen let Theo lead Pepper outside to the horse pen, carrying the lunge line in her hand. Pepper indeed seemed pretty relaxed and trudged after Theo into the pen.

Jen did a last check of the equipment, fastened the lunge line to the halter, then helped Theo onto the pony. She told Shaun to stand with her in the middle of the horse pen. Shaun hesitated for a moment, then followed her, watched attentively as she guided Pepper to the right distance.

Theo looked comfortable and happy in the saddle. Shaun figured he'd done this countless times, had basically grown up around horses. Jen gave Theo a few verbal commands, reminded him to remember how to hold his hands and legs, how to signal to Pepper what to do.

Shaun was still impressed how Pepper yielded to all of Jen's commands that were just hand and arm signs while Theo was doing his own work in the saddle. He thought Jen was a very good teacher.

They started with slower walking, then trotting, and then Jen asked Theo, "Okay, are you ready for your gallop?"

"Yes," Theo called out with enthusiasm, and somehow that made Shaun excited, too.

Jen gave another arm command and reminded Theo to use his legs too, and Pepper fell into a slow canter. Jen gave more verbal instructions to Theo, saw with a practiced eye where he could improve. It all looked so easy, but in reality it probably wasn't.

When eventually Jen signaled to Pepper to slow down, Theo disappointedly complained, "More, Mom."

"In a little bit, let Pepper take a little breather, okay?"

The pony was back to a walk, and Jen turned slightly towards Shaun, holding out the end of the lunge line to him. "Wanna try for a bit?"

He did, but he knew his shoulder still wasn't back to full functionality, and he'd only just gotten back into the OR. He didn't want to take risks to jeopardize any of that. "I don't think I should."

"Oh, right, your shoulder."

"Yes."

"Maybe we can give it another shot in a few weeks. If you want."

"I would like that."

She nodded a few times. "All right, consider it a rain check."

They went another two rounds of letting Theo gallop on Pepper, who seemed incredibly comfortable and happy up on the pony, even though he looked tiny up on that saddle with the large stirrups.

When they were done with the exercise, Jen fastened the lead rope so that Theo could use it as reins and Jen let him ride Pepper to the stable by himself. Jen took great care to explain to Shaun also how to unsaddle the pony and how to ensure that Pepper was properly groomed and tended to afterwards.

Truth be told, Shaun actually enjoyed the grooming part. It was calm and relaxing, and Pepper seemed to be enjoying it too. When everything was good to go, Jen looked at her watch and then told Shaun, "It's almost time to feed Pancake again. Wanna do it on your own?"

Did he? It had seemed easy enough, and Jen apparently trusted him with it. “Okay,” he agreed a little hesitantly.

Maybe Jen had read his hesitation. “I can come with you if you want.”

“No,” he said with more confidence. “I will try it.”

“Okay. I’ll take Pepper back out to the pasture. Mom knows what to do, go check with her for the formula, and you know where Pancake is.”

“Yes,” Shaun confirmed.

Back at the house, Tammy made the horse formula while Shaun waited. They engaged in a bit of easy conversation. He then took it to the paddock that held Pancake and Barney. The little foal was standing side by side with Pickles this time with the fence separating them, his tail twitching every now and then to shoo away insects.

Shaun took a moment to give Pickles a pat on the neck, then turned his attention to Pancake. He seemed eager, but took a while to latch on to the bottle’s nipple, making drops of formula spatter onto Shaun’s clothes. Eventually, he started suckling and the bottle was emptied pretty quickly.

Barney came trotting over at some point, interested in what was going on. Shaun was a bit wary of him, he seemed more unpredictable, but he only sniffed Shaun out once and then walked away again.

When he was done feeding Pancake, the foal hung around for a minute, probably eager to see if there was going to be more milk, but eventually trotted away, then got a case of the zoomies. Shaun stood with fascination by the fence with Pickles lifting her head over the fence to watch her little one along with Shaun.

Pancake galloped wildly around the paddock with Barney soon joining him. The pair chased each other around the paddock at record speed, bucking a few times, and Shaun decided to just sit down cross-legged on the ground to watch the two enjoy themselves. They continued this game for a good few minutes until both slowed to a trot and then a walk. Pancake snorted an equine horse snort, and shook his head.

To Shaun’s surprise, Pancake came back over to where Shaun was sitting, and started nuzzling his shoulder and back, and then bent his front legs and flopped down pretty much in Shaun’s lap. Shaun let out a surprised sound, but Pancake seemed unimpressed. He kept nudging Shaun here and there with his muzzle, and Shaun decided to just give in to it.

He skritched Pancake’s short fur, feeling the foal’s body heat and his ribcage rising and falling on his thighs. Pancake quieted down and just enjoyed the cuddles from Shaun for a minute or two, and Shaun relished the moment of bonding until Pancake eventually got his legs under him again and trotted away, his tail and head held high.

Shaun smiled. There was such a deep, primal happiness to enjoying the time he spent around the horses that he hadn’t expected when Dr. Glassman had first suggested the visit to the sanctuary.

Everything was falling into place. He was getting back into surgery, he wasn’t in constant pain anymore, he had new horse and human friends. There was always something interesting happening at the farm, and he’d have plenty of things to tell Lea later when he got home.

+-+-+-+-+

Chapter 19: Whatever tomorrow brings I'll be there

"Thank you again, and I'll be in touch about the questions you had," the woman around Shaun's age signed off on the video call that Shaun, Jerome and Tricia, the study coordinator, had just had in one of the conference rooms.

The clinical research organization company had assigned a new CRA a few days before, and the new person had suggested an introductory call with the St. Bonaventure core study team. Shaun felt relieved. This new lady with the Eastern European accent by the name of Natalya seemed a lot nicer, a lot more organized and a lot more knowledgeable. Shaun was hopeful things with the trial would look up from here on out and he wouldn't have to repeatedly clash and argue over data queries or suspected protocol deviations that actually weren't.

Jerome looked at Shaun. "I'd say that went well."

"Yes, it did."

Tricia mentioned, "Boy, am I glad they swapped out CRAs. The Winter guy was all kinds of terrible."

Shaun could only agree. "He was."

"Yeah, I heard you arguing over those queries the other day. Dude was kinda clueless, wasn't he?"

"He kept insisting that my entries were incorrect when they weren't."

"Was it that time zone thing with the ECG assessment from the central reader?"

"Yes."

"Yeah, that's still pretty annoying, but I guess now we know what to look out for. Oh, and Dr. Murphy? There's a bunch of queries in the system that you'd have to take care of that need medical input."

"Okay, I will look at them."

"Ortho reached out that they may have a new patient coming in tomorrow. I don't know what you told them, but they've been referring more pre-screen patients than any of the other departments. That's been super useful."

Shaun could only agree with that. It helped that he was a patient there himself and had made a few connections in the process. Tricia paused, then looked at Shaun. "And I gotta say, you've been a godsend, too. I've never had a sub-I who was so on top of things. Most investigators never have time for the trial stuff, and I have to chase them down for all the paperwork. With you, I feel guilty when *I'm* the one who's behind on their data queries. Sometimes I think you know the study protocol better than the sponsor."

Shaun felt a small amount of pride swell up in him. It was always nice to receive positive feedback, particularly since he was often on the receiving end of resentment and prejudice, even among hospital staff.

He remembered that it was common courtesy to return the favor, even though that kind of thing didn't always come naturally to him. "You are very good at your job, too."

"Why, thank you." She was now smiling at him. Shaun was satisfied he may have done this right. "I gotta jet, though. Let me know when Natalya is coming for an actual monitoring visit."

"I will," Shaun confirmed, then watched Tricia leave.

From the corner of his eye, he saw that Jerome was swiveling his chair to face Shaun. "Hey, uhm, have you thought any more about the *Tales from the Loop* session?"

Shaun had to think for a short moment, then recalled it was the roleplaying game they had discussed. "I received your e-mail but I haven't looked at the materials yet."

"Okay. I think we have an opening for a session Saturday after next. Adam said he was game, Asher checked your schedule and looks like you're also free. Would be great if you could let me know if you're interested in the next day or two."

"Okay," Shaun told him. "I will talk to Lea."

"Yeah, sure."

They left it at that, and when Shaun got home that night, he made it a point to look at the PDF files and internet links that Jerome had mailed him a while ago. Eventually he called Lea over and they looked at it together. Lea was immediately enamored with the very expressive artwork that was tied to the game, and Shaun had to admit it looked intriguing, although he still wasn't sure how this whole spiel of pretending to be someone else and acting as a wholly different person was supposed to work. The idea seemed very alien to him.

Lea clicked on the laptop again and brought up the graphic with the character archetypes. She asked Shaun, "You already know who you wanna play?"

He'd looked at the eight types, wasn't exactly sure how he was supposed to choose. Lea contributed, "Maybe pick someone who isn't too far away from your own personality for the first time? 'The Weirdo' might seem the natural go-to for you, but I don't know if you really wanna play into that stereotype. I could also see 'The Bookworm' for you."

"Then you should be 'The Computer Geek'."

She chuckled. "Yeah, probably, but I think 'The Rocker' might also be fun. Definitely not 'The Popular Kid' or the 'The Jock'."

Shaun read the text in the file again. "I don't think 'The Weirdo' is an appropriate choice for me. I'm not good with empathy, and this says it's a key skill for that kid type."

"You don't give yourself enough credit sometimes. You have plenty empathy. You were so concerned when I had the period migraine. That's pure empathy because you knew I was feeling bad. You also probably shouldn't take all of that quite so literally."

“But it’s what it says. How else am I supposed to take it?”

“Talk it over with Jerome, I’m sure he can give you a few more pointers and help you with the best choice for you. I’m partial to ‘The Rocker’, but I’m easy. If they’d rather have me pick another type, I’ll play whatever fits best.”

“Okay. I will talk to Jerome.”

He felt her eyes on his and looked at her. She told him, “I think it’s really awesome that you wanna do this.”

He frowned. “Why?”

“Well, it’s a little outside of your comfort zone, isn’t it?”

It probably was, but he hadn’t really thought about it that way. Should he be getting nervous about it? It seemed Lea had read him right away when she added, “Hey, I’m sorry, I didn’t wanna make you feel apprehensive about it. It’s supposed to be fun, right? I’m sure we’ll have a ton of fun, and you already know everyone, they know you, and I’m sure it’ll be a cool thing to try out. I’m excited.”

“I… am not excited but I think it will be fun.”

“There you go, bookworm. You still gotta pick a name for your kid.”

“Can I not be Shaun?”

“No, that kinda defeats the purpose of pretending to be an RPG character. I mean, I’m sure you could if you really wanted, maybe spell it with an EA or AW, but I think you should really take that leap and pick a wholly different name. Come on, think about it. What would a 13 or 14-year-old kid in the 80’s out in Nevada be called?”

Shaun had absolutely no idea. “How am I supposed to know that?”

“You’re not. You can just make something up. Or look at the most popular names parents gave their children in the 70’s. You can be anyone you like. Herbert, Quentin, Mario, Buster, Caduceus, Edward, you name it.” She added, “Pun not intended.”

Shaun made a mental note to research male names from the 70’s later. “I do not want to be named Buster.”

Lea laughed. “Yeah, Buster is not a bookworm name.”

“What will be your name?”

“I don’t know yet. Gretchen?”

“Gretchen does not sound like a rocker name.”

“No, but I think it would be fun to use just *because* it doesn’t. I’ll think about it some more. And I’ll have to go and add a bunch of rock songs to my 80’s playlist to get in the mood.”

“Do I have to read a lot of books to get in the mood?”

Lea laughed again. “Shaunie, you do that anyway. I think you’re more than well prepared to be a bookworm.”

Shaun smiled with a certain amount of self-satisfaction. She was right, he did love reading, he always had. Dr. Glassman had made sure he had access to all the medical books he could as a teenager, and the Casper Town Library had later proved to be a treasure trove as well.

“I will be a bookworm,” he confirmed. “With a 1970’s name that I still have to research.”

“Yep, and I can’t wait to see what you do with it. Now come here and let me kiss you.”

“Tonight is our scheduled sex night. Do you want to have sex right now?”

Her mouth formed into a small smile. “You know what? Why not?”

+-+-+-+-+

Shaun’s eyes lazily trailed the passing landscape on their way out to the horse farm that Saturday. Lea had suggested they go again, saying something about a dinner invite. Shaun was looking forward to it, he really enjoyed his time there. There was always something to do or to see, he liked the fresh air, and of course he wanted to see Pancake and Pickles again.

Lea turned into the driveway to the farm, then stopped the car near the house. Dr. Glassman’s car was already there.

“Let’s go to the house first,” Lea told him as they got out of the car.

“Why?”

“Well… I know how much you hate surprises, but I'm hoping you won't hate this one quite as much.”

“What kind of surprise?”

She sidled up to him. “I know I should have told you, but that kinda defeats the purpose of a surprise. Just… Do you think you can keep an open mind? I promise it’s not anything jarring or wild or loud.”

He breathed in. “I… can keep an open mind.”

She looked at him. “Thank you. Come on.”

She took his left hand and directed him straight to the back garden. When they rounded the corner, Shaun noticed that it had extra decoration that wasn’t usually there. There were colorful balloons strategically placed, and when they walked closer, he could read a garland with balloons that spelled out ‘Happy Birthday Sean’ and the number 30. There were two extra foldable tables with benches that weren’t normally there and three bar tables, a few garden torches placed all around the garden.

Lea slowed down next to him and he matched her pace, then she stopped on the edge of the garden, looking at him expectantly. Just at that moment, Tammy came down the stairs from the deck and walked up to them.

“So?” Lea asked.

He hoped he was coming to the right conclusion here. “So… this is a birthday party?”

She nodded. “Yep.”

He looked at the lettered balloons again. “For me?”

“Yep,” Lea confirmed again.

“My name is spelled wrong.”

Tammy looked at him. “Is it? I’m sorry, that would have been my fault. How do you spell it correctly?”

Shaun spelled out the five letters to her and she said, “Okay, noted for the future. I can take the name down if you want.”

He considered it for a moment. “It’s okay,” he confirmed.

Lea added, “I actually think it’s kind of amusing.”

“It *is* a common mistake to make.”

“So here’s the plan,” Lea told him, “Some of our friends will be arriving, you know, around 6-ish. There’s gonna be some barbecuing, we’ve asked people to bring more food, and we’ll just… hang out, I guess. You know, everything kinda chill and relaxed. We thought you’d like that. Please say you’d like that.”

Shaun looked at the garden again, tried imagining what it would be like with his friends here. A laid back barbecue, his favorite people all gathered here with him, nice food, nice weather. It sounded great. “I’d like that,” he confirmed.

“Phew. Okay. Oh, and there’s dessert, of course. Let’s go see exhibit A in the kitchen.” She looked at Tammy. “It’s in the kitchen, right?”

Tammy laughed. “Yeah, it’s in the kitchen.”

Shaun followed Lea to the kitchen, but before he could walk through the door, she said, “Close your eyes.”

He hummed unsurely, and Lea assured him, “It’s nothing weird, I promise. I just wanna see your reaction.”

“Okay,” he acquiesced and closed his eyes while Lea guided him a few steps into the kitchen with her hands on his arm.

“Okay, open them.”

In front of him was a rectangular cake with four different tiers, very much like the one he had planned for their wedding that never came to fruition. There was a '30' neatly drawn with frosting on the uppermost tier.

Lea made a presentation gesture at it. "Ta-da! Happy Birthday, husband." She smiled at him.

A smile spread across his own lips. "Our wedding cake."

"Yep. Your brilliant idea, except we never got to have it."

"We had a birthday cake at our wedding instead, so this is very fitting."

"Oh my God, you're right."

Dr. Glassman was also entering the kitchen. "Oh Shaun, you're here. Did I miss the surprise?"

"Yes, you did," Shaun told him.

"Was it good?"

"It was… surprising."

Lea leaned close to Dr. Glassman and audibly whispered, "It was good."

Glassman fetched something from the next room, handed Shaun a gift-wrapped rectangular item the size of a shoebox. "Happy Birthday, Smurph," he said with what Shaun thought was maybe a mischievous grin. He wasn't sure if that boded well.

"Smurf?" Lea asked.

"Long story," Glassman just said.

Shaun inquired, "Should I open it now?"

"Yeah, go ahead."

Shaun started unfastening the Scotch tape, meticulously peeled away the gift wrap. He turned the cardboard box over, it read, 'Whiskey Tasting Set'. Glassman was still smiling at him when he looked up. Shaun held up the box, "You *did* say I had a lot to learn."

"Yeah, and you said you preferred Tequila, so I also got you this." He produced a larger bottle from behind his back, which he held out to Shaun.

"This is the brand I like very much."

"Well, sometimes I do pay attention, you know?"

"Yes, I know." He met Dr. Glassman's gaze. "Thank you."

Glassman just gave him a nod.

Lea said, "Okay, I gotta ask, what's the story with the whiskey?"

Shaun supplied, “The morning after you ingested the magic mushrooms casserole and Dr. Glassman and I operated all night, we had scotch together in his office. I said I preferred Tequila and he said I had a lot to learn. I assume this,” he held up the whiskey tasting set again, “is to facilitate the learning process.”

“I wouldn’t have put it quite so eloquently, but yeah, excellently deduced, Sherlock.”

Tammy was chuckling softly. “Okay, magic mushrooms casserole sounds more like the story I’d want to hear.”

“Oh,” Shaun said, “We had a potluck at the hospital and Dr. Wolke contributed a sweet potato casserole that accidentally had psilocybin mixed in. Most of the surgical department ingested it, except Dr. Glassman, Dr. Reznick and I, with a number of staff also away at a conference. It was a very stressful and a very strange day.”

Tammy laughed. “That sounds like a fun story, though.”

“Not the worst trip I’ve ever been on,” Lea commented.

Shaun looked at her. “You had a very odd fascination with my hair.”

She giggled a little. “I did, didn’t I? You *have* very nice hair, though.”

Shaun self-consciously touched his hair, watching how Lea turned around where she fetched something from over on the kitchen counter and put it on the kitchen island near where they stood. It was a gift basket of some kind, wrapped in transparent cellophane.

“And while we’re at it,” she told him, “this is from my parents.”

He took a closer look, saw a tag attached. He tried not to touch the cellophane when he turned it over to read it. It said, ‘Happy Birthday, Shaun. Hope you enjoy the best of Pennsylvania.’ It was signed *‘Pam & Mike’*.

Lea explained, “Yeah, this is all stuff from the area we grew up in. You probably won’t like all of it, but if you don’t want them, I’ll take the ginger snaps right off your hands, because they’re amazing.”

He studied the items inside, it looked to be mostly sweets and foods that didn’t need refrigeration. Lea added, “You know, it can be like the whiskey tasting. A food sampling adventure. Might be fun, and you’ll have a little taste of my home.”

He smiled, he liked that idea. “I think it will be fun, even if I don’t like all of it.”

At that moment, Ira entered the kitchen with an assortment of larger Tupperware containers in his arms. He put them on the counter. “Okay, woman. How do you want the meat prepared?”

Tammy slapped him playfully on the arm. “Shush. Go and get the barbecue ready. You’ll be manning that all night, and you know it.”

“I do, but you also know I enjoy it.”

“That I do, which is great because it sounds everyone is happy. Now, unless you all want to get your hands dirty, I suggest you let this *‘woman’* get on with the last preparations, your guests should be arriving before long.”

“I’ll help,” Lea supplied easily.

“I can help, too,” Shaun said, but Lea gave him a look.

“You’re the birthday boy today even though, yes, we know it’s not really your birthday, but this is the next best thing since your actual one kinda sucked. So, Shaunie, go pay a visit to your favorite food-named horse friends, or go play with Theo or do something otherwise fun.”

He hadn’t visited Pickles and Pancake yet, had he? That wasn’t a half bad idea. “Okay,” he just said.

“Okay,” Lea echoed.

Shaun made his way to the stables to check Pickles’ stall, which was empty. He checked the paddocks next and saw Pickles and Pancake not too far away, now reunited as mother and son. Pickles was grazing lazily, Pancake was nudging her side, his little tail whipping around excitedly. Shaun watched them for a few minutes, then Pickles actually raised her head, looked in his direction and came trotting over. Shaun immediately regretted not having brought any treats.

She walked right up to the fence and reached her head over, nudging Shaun’s arm. He petted her on the neck. “Hello, Pickles.”

She kept nudging but eventually relented when there were no treats to be collected. She let Shaun rub the space between her ears for a few long moments as she let out a contented breath through her nose. It made Shaun happy.

Pancake was still prancing around, repeatedly nudging his little nose into Pickles’ udder. Shaun was glad to see that the mastitis had all cleared up and Pancake was back to udder feeding. They’d talked about there being a chance that Pickles wouldn’t let him, but apparently it had all worked out for the best, and Pancake was strong and healthy.

He hung out with the two of them for a few more minutes until Pickles retreated and went back to find a tasty patch of grass, Pancake in close pursuit. Shaun remembered a question that Dr. Glassman had asked him a while ago – if he ever wanted to try and ride a horse.

He still wasn’t sure, but now that his shoulder had healed and the ribs were only a nuisance when he made the wrong movement without thinking about it, he considered the notion. He wondered what it would be like to ride on Pickles, but he didn’t even know if Pickles was broken in for riding. He recalled that he had overheard Jen talking about it with Ira, but with Pickles having been so heavily pregnant, they hadn’t had the chance to see how she would perform under the saddle. He himself was curious about that now.

Dr. Glassman had talked about leaving comfort zones, about trying something new. Maybe horse riding would be something new to try. He realized he wasn’t actually adverse to the idea anymore, although he couldn’t picture himself taking that on as a new hobby. He wouldn’t have the time for it. Still, the idea to try out the experience intrigued him now, he made the decision right there and then to ask.

On the way to the house he stopped by the tack room to wash his hands, but not before he had run his palm over one of the leather saddles that hung on the racks. The material felt smooth under his hand, it was slightly worn in places. He'd helped Jen saddle up Pepper the pony before, had watched Theo ride him. He'd also seen Jen and Parker taking two horses out for a ride once. He could only imagine it might be fun and he almost envied Parker and Theo for a moment, having grown up here, it all coming naturally to them.

Jen was outside the stables as Shaun exited, trying to reaffix a handle to a pitchfork. She looked up as Shaun approached her. "Hey Shaun," she greeted him.

"Hello," he greeted back.

She straightened up for a moment. "I suppose I should wish you a Happy Birthday, although I understand it's not actually your birthday?"

"My birthday is on June 24th."

"Well, I guess it's never too late to wish you a belated one. I'll come by later when I'm done around here. Dad's steaks are always a highlight."

"Okay," he confirmed. She bent down again to continue fixing up the pitchfork, but Shaun hesitated, wondering how to approach the question.

Jen seemed to have noticed he was still standing there. She looked up again. "Was there anything else I can help you with?"

"Yes," he said.

"Okay. What can I help you with?"

He let out a hum. Jen was now smiling at him. "Come on, out with it."

"I want to try horse riding."

She nodded. "Okay. Yeah, I mean, this is the right place for it. I take it you've never been up on a horse?"

"I have. Once. When I was a child."

"Let me guess, one of those children's fair pony rides?"

"Yes."

"No offense, but that's not horse riding."

"Yes, I know, but you asked if I had been up on a horse before."

"Heh, I suppose I did. I'm not exactly a qualified riding instructor, but I can definitely get you started. I'd recommend maybe Rio or Barbagal for your first attempt. They're both dead chill as saddle horses. I think Barbs may be the better fit for you, she's also really good on the lunge."

"Is that the brown and white pinto?"

“Yeah. How do you feel about that?”

He shrugged. “I trust your judgement.”

She nodded at him. “Okay, sounds like we have a plan. Maybe next weekend?”

“I may be on-call next weekend, it will depend on whether I can go back to surgery full time.”

“Oh wow, that’s great news, though, right? I know you’ve been itching to get back in the OR full time.”

“Yes,” Shaun beamed. “I miss it very much, although I have been doing shorter surgeries in the past three weeks.”

“Yeah, we came by the clinic when you were doing your first one, remember?”

“Yes, I remember.”

“You know, I really admire you and Aaron. I find all of that pretty gruesome.”

“It is very fascinating.”

She chuckled. “To you, maybe. But hey, to each their own. Anything else I can do for you?”

“No,” he said and continued on to the house. He heard Jen call, “See you later, Shaun,” after him.

Just as Shaun approached the house, he saw Dr. Park’s SUV pulling into the driveway of the farm. Shaun lifted his arm to give a little wave, followed the car to where Alex parked it. Jordan emerged from the passenger seat, which made perfect sense to Shaun that they’d car-pool it out here.

“Hey, Shaun,” Alex greeted him.

“Hello,” Shaun greeted back.

Alex turned his head to survey the surroundings. “This is really nice.”

“Yes,” Shaun agreed, “it is.”

He noticed that Jordan was wearing a pair of jeans and a unicolored yellow cotton top and sneakers. It was the most casual he’d ever seen her dressed. She got a basket out of the trunk that looked like it had food in it and asked, “So, where’s the party at?”

“Oh. It’s in the garden behind the house.” Shaun gestured at it. “I will show you.”

When they approached, he saw that Lea was setting up one of the tables with some sauces and dips, came to greet them as they entered the garden. Tammy was coming down the stairs of the back porch with two more bowls of food and Lea introduced her to Alex and Jordan. Shaun stood and listened, gladly let the more adept handle the small talk.

It didn't take long for Asher and Jerome to arrive, and Shaun immediately felt the buoyancy and positivity in the air that Asher often brought to the table. He thought Asher and Jerome made a great couple, they both seemed happy.

At some point, Lea walked up to Shaun and touched him lightly on the shoulder. She held out her phone to him. "Look who wants to say hello."

Shaun looked at it, Claire's face was smiling at him on the screen. "Hello, birthday boy," she said over the speaker.

"Claire!" he beamed happily, taking the phone from Lea.

"Yep, thought I'd say hi at least. Wish I could be there with you."

"I wish you could be here, too."

"Yeah, well, I guess this is the next best thing. The farm sounds amazing, show me around," she prompted him.

Shaun started walking around the garden, pushed the camera button so that it switched to the front camera. He gave Claire the best tour he could, asked her if she wanted to also see the horses, but she said maybe another time.

They talked for a good while over video, caught up with recent events, had the other colleagues say hi, Lea eventually rejoining them for a few minutes before they hung up.

The big surprise arrived twenty minutes later when everyone was already sipping drinks, standing at the bar tables with Ira getting the barbecue fired up to the side. Audrey Lim gave a little wave as she entered the garden, and Shaun's heart skipped a beat.

He hadn't seen her since she'd been discharged from the hospital over two months ago, and he didn't know that Lea had invited her. He knew she'd come and visited when he was in the coma, but not surprisingly, he had zero recollection of it.

He walked up to her. "Dr. Lim."

She gave him a look. "Shaun, I'm not here as your boss. Please call me Audrey."

He let out a short hum, not sure if that was going to work for him. She had always been Dr. Lim, just like Dr. Glassman had always been that. "How are you?" he asked her.

"Now, I know when you're asking this, it's not just a casual greeting, so I will be honest and say it's a process, but I'm getting there." She let her eyes wander over the garden. "This looks very cozy, though. Thanks for inviting me."

"That wasn't me. This is a surprise party. I didn't know it was happening until we arrived here today."

"Oh, I know. I guess I'm trying to say I'm happy to be here."

"So am I. And I'm glad you're doing better."

“I could say the same about you. Last time I saw you, you were heavily sedated and intubated. This is a huge improvement.”

“Yes, it is. And thank you for visiting me in the hospital, even though I don’t remember it.”

“Oh,” Lim said, taking an envelope out of her purse that she held out to Shaun. “Happy Birthday, even if it’s a little late.”

Shaun took it with a, “Thank you.” He gestured at the garden. “There are drinks and there will also be food, once the barbecue is ready.”

“Sounds great,” she said, then went over to where Lea was in conversation with Jordan. Shaun watched them shake hands and hug. Everyone was smiling. Shaun couldn’t be happier.

There was a little bit of hubbub that he soon noticed, the guests and the hosts all assembling up on the wooden deck. Lea came over to Shaun and handed him a glass of champagne just as everyone was starting to sing *Happy Birthday*.

Somewhat abashedly, Shaun stood and listened to the medley of singing voices, raised his glass along with everyone else as they finished the song and Dr. Glassman added, “To a well-deserved postponed birthday!”

There were a few “hear, hears” from people. Lea, still standing next to him, planted a kiss on his cheek. “Happy Birthday, Chickpea.”

He smiled at the reference, she hadn’t called him that since that day, not sure if it was now a thing, but he thought that as pet names went, he quite liked it.

People were now coming up to him, clinking glasses, expressing more birthday wishes. He took a few sips from his champagne glass, found that he didn’t much like it but he drank it anyway, not a fan of the particular mixture of carbonated and dry.

He was also handed birthday presents, gave in to people urging him to unwrap them all. They were just about to get started with the food when Jen, Parker and Theo joined them. Theo was immediately animatedly meeting people. Park actually crouched down and talked to him for several minutes. Parker seemed less interested and vanished inside the house.

Jen offered a tour of the stables and horse paddocks to the guests, and everyone without exception joined. Shaun decided to stay behind and help Tammy and Lea with the finishing touches to the food buffet.

By the time everyone got back, Ira was happily manning the barbecue like he’d said, and people were starting to load up their plates and sat down at the tables to eat. Shaun did the same, found a seat next to Dr. Glassman and opposite Lea with Jordan and Park on either side of her.

He started eating, quite enjoyed the selection of food that he could only guess Lea had pre-approved as Shaun-suitable. One of the bread options had olives baked into it, but there was enough to choose from, so Shaun didn’t mind.

When he was halfway through his first helping, he couldn’t help but notice Theo approaching their table, stopping next to Dr. Glassman with a plate that had a hotdog, what looked like meat from the chicken wings and some cut up steak on it. “Can I sit on your lap?”

Dr. Glassman looked at the boy, raising his eyebrows. Shaun couldn't help but notice that Dr. Glassman was briefly looking at him. He gave a nod in Shaun's direction. "I think Shaun would be happy to help you with that."

"No," Theo said immediately in a reproachful tone. "Dr. Shaun told me he doesn't want me to touch him."

Dr. Glassman gave Shaun a look over the rim of his glasses. "Is that so?"

"Yes," Shaun said easily.

Glassman turned his attention back to Theo. "Well, sometimes people change their minds. Maybe Shaun has changed his mind. Why don't you go and ask him, tell him that you'd really like to sit on his lap?"

Theo turned around and faced Shaun, took a step closer. He was holding his plate askew so that Shaun was afraid the food would slide off of it. Perhaps predictably so, Theo said, "Have you changed your mind about that I can't touch you? I really want to sit on your lap."

Shaun suddenly felt very uncomfortable. He didn't think he had. He was perfectly fine with Theo not touching him. He looked over to Lea who just gave him a shrug. He thought maybe it was the one that said, *"You're on your own,"* or, *"You decide, Shaun."*

Shaun pondered it for another long moment. Theo had been proven to be a reasonable and intelligent child, and Shaun didn't mind being around him. In fact, a lot of the time he enjoyed Theo's company these days. It wasn't like Theo would be squeezing him into a hug. Maybe this would be okay. And if not, he could always tell Theo to get up again, couldn't he?

He shifted a little on the chair to make room for Theo. "Okay."

They put Theo's plate on the table next to Shaun's own, and Shaun had to help Theo onto his thighs where he settled in quickly, diverting all his attention to his hotdog.

Shaun knew his muscles had gone tense, he tried to relax a little as the new sensation settled in. He and Lea would hopefully have kids one day. They would want to sit in his lap like this. Maybe it would be different, maybe it would come more naturally to him if it was his own child. But he also wanted to know, to be reassured he could do this.

In between bites, Theo asked, "If it is your birthday, how old are you?"

"It is not my birthday," Shaun replied.

"But grandma said this is your birthday party."

"Yes, it is. I was in the hospital on my birthday, so we're having a party now because I'm better."

"So how old are you?"

"Thirty."

"That's really old." Theo took another bite and chewed, then asked with a full mouth, "Did you get lots of birthday presents?"

“Yes, several people gave me presents.”

“Can I see them?”

“I don’t think they will be very interesting for you.”

“Why?”

“They are not toys.”

“I want to have the Playmobil fire truck for my birthday. The big one with the tower ladder.”

Shaun let out a hum, not sure what to say to that. He didn’t want the Playmobil fire truck for his birthday.

Theo kept peppering him with more questions while he ate his food that Shaun tried to answer to the best of his ability, with Lea entering the conversation a few times. Shaun found it a bit exhausting because Theo was very curious and didn’t always fully grasp the answers or sometimes abruptly changed the topic with no discernible context.

After he had finished the last piece of chicken, Lea reached over with a napkin and helped Theo clean the ketchup and grease off of his hands and mouth.

Theo let out a sigh and leaned back so that his back was resting against Shaun’s chest. It triggered a slight dull ache from Shaun’s not yet fully healed ribs, but it was faint now and Shaun ignored it.

“I’m really full,” Theo said. “Can you tell me a story?”

Story. Uh oh. Shaun wasn’t real good at stories. There was nothing going on in his life that would be of interest or consequence to a five-year-old boy. He opened his mouth, then closed it again. Lea must have seen it, because she suggested, “You probably have a few fun patient stories to tell. Why don’t you start with those?”

Shaun tried to think of something that could be interesting and relevant to a small child. “I once treated a child with a lightbulb in his mouth that he couldn’t get out. We had to be very careful, it was very dangerous.”

“Because it can break?” Theo asked.

“Yes, the glass shards would be very hazardous, especially if they were swallowed or inhaled.”

“So what happened?”

“I suggested we put a surgical pouch around it and then break it.”

“What’s a surgipal couch?”

“It’s a bag you use when you want to get something from inside the body. It is very hard to break or cut.”

“And it worked with the lightbulb?”

“Yes. When the pouch was placed around the lightbulb, we wanted the patient to bite down on it, but he was afraid to. It was his sister who hit his chin that made the glass break. She called him a wuss.”

That made Theo giggle and wriggle around a little in Shaun’s lap. He felt his muscles tense again, but tried to work against the discomfort. It was only Theo, he liked Theo. He tried to concentrate on the patient story again. “Once the glass shards were in the pouch, we could safely extract them from the patient’s mouth. The patient was sent home with his family.”

“That was a funny story. Tell me another one!”

Shaun knew he had lots of weird patient stories to share. ER consults tended to be interesting sometimes. There was the one with the older brother whose toddler sibling had repeatedly stuck toys up his nose – first a policeman, then a fireman, then a tiny fire truck. All to send a team to retrieve a tiny cat figurine that they’d found stuck very deep up the boy’s nose.

Theo was enjoying the stories, and Shaun suddenly noticed his audience had expanded to the people sitting around him beyond Theo and Lea.

Shaun shared another story, Park and Jordan started providing a few of their own. There was a lot of laughter at the table, and Shaun felt a real sense of contentment and joy. This party had been a great idea.

Audrey was the first to bid her farewells shortly after dinner, but the rest of the group was still happily engaged in conversation. Ira and Dr. Glassman were in animated discussion over something. Parker was still in the house, and Theo had made the rounds to everyone to say good night after Jen had told him much to his protest that it was time to go to bed.

Shaun looked up when Jen came back from the house and approached him where he was currently standing with Alex in conversation at one of the bar tables. “Hey, Shaun?”

“Yes?”

“Would you be able to spare ten minutes to read to Theo?”

Shaun frowned. “Why? Can you not do that?”

“Sure I can, but he was very insistent that he wanted ‘Dr. Shaun’ to read to him. He really likes you, you know. And he gets kinda overexcited when there’s a lot of people, and then he takes a long time to go to sleep, even though it’s way past his bedtime. I think it’ll help make him fall asleep, otherwise he’ll probably come down here three million times with one made-up reason after another why he can’t sleep.”

Shaun noticed that Alex was looking at him intently. Alex was a father. He’d have read books to Kellan. Alex nudged his head towards the house. “Go on, Shaun. I’m sure Theo will love it.”

Shaun sighed. He didn’t think he was very good at reading books to people, let alone young children. Then again, if he wanted to be a good father, it would be something he could use some practice with. “Okay, I will read to him,” he told Jen.

She nodded. “Thank you. Let him pick a book. He knows them all inside out anyway. Don’t give in to him making you read it five times.”

Shaun went inside the house and up to Theo's room. He was clad in his pajamas, sitting in his bed, playing out a pretend dialogue with his toy rabbit that Shaun knew was called Milly-Moo.

Shaun carefully edged closer. "Hello, Theo."

The latter beamed at him. "Dr. Shaun! Can you read me a book?"

"Yes," Shaun said. "You can pick one that you like."

"Gorilla!" Theo said immediately.

Shaun looked around, found a pile of books on the floor next to the bed. He looked through them, figuring it was probably the one with the title 'Good Night, Gorilla'. He picked it up and held it out to Theo. "This one?"

"Yes!"

"Okay."

Shaun sat down on the floor with his legs folded, but Theo quickly protested. "No, you need to sit here." He pointed at the space just beside him. "I want to see the book."

"Your mother said you already know what's in it."

"But I want to see it when you read it."

Shaun blinked, tried to figure out what to do. He understood Jen had asked to help make Theo fall asleep quickly. So if he had to play his part in making that happen, he realized he'd have to try to cater to Theo's requests as best as he could. He got up, took off his shoes and sat next to Theo on the bed, folding his legs under him.

Theo scooted a bit closer as Shaun opened the book. He noticed right away it was very image heavy, which made sense for a boy Theo's age. What was he supposed to read when there wasn't any text to speak of at all?

He studied the drawings, took in the details. Why was there a bicycle in a gorilla's cage? The cage also seemed inordinately small for a gorilla and why was there only one gorilla? Was that a mouse or a rat sitting on the lock, holding the string of a red balloon?

"Dr. Shaun, you're 'sposed to read it," he heard Theo's voice from next to him.

"Oh," he said. "What do you want me to read? There is very little text."

"You have to say what happens."

Shaun let out a hum. What was happening here? "There… is a gorilla who is taking a ring of keys from the zoo keeper."

"Yes," Theo said enthusiastically. "And then he uses them to open his cage, and he escapes and he follows the zoo keeper to all the other cages. And then he unlocks them all, and the lion and the elephant and the giraffe and the hyena and the armadillo go to the zoo keeper's house and sleep in his bed."

“Hm,” Shaun supplied. It sounded like Theo had just described the contents of the whole book. What was he supposed to do here?

“Okay,” Shaun said, turning the page. It depicted the gorilla leaving the cage and clandestinely following the zoo keeper.

Theo scooted closer and leaned in, turning the page back to the one with the gorilla still in the cage. “No, you haven’t telled me everything yet.”

“Told.”

“Told me,” Theo corrected.

Shaun let out another hum. This was proving to be quite a challenge. If they were having arguments now, Theo wouldn’t be sleeping for a long while.

“Okay,” Shaun started. “This is the gorilla’s cage. It seems to be very small, but there is a tire hanging from a rope and a bicycle inside the cage. They… must be feeding him with the bananas that are also hanging there, even though it is unrealistic that they would offer this many bananas to one gorilla. There is a mouse or a rat sitting on the lock, holding a red balloon.”

Theo perked up, “The balloon is in a lot of the other pictures, too.”

“Is it?”

“Yes.” Theo leaned in again, turning to the next page, pointing at the balloon. “Here.”

“I see.”

“Read this one.”

Shaun looked at it. There was no text at all. “The gorilla has managed to open the door to the cage and is climbing out of it. He’s following the zoo keeper.”

Theo snuggled closer to Shaun so that he was sitting right next to his thigh. He wormed his way under Shaun’s arm, leaning right into Shaun’s chest with Shaun’s arm now wrapping around his body as he was still holding the book.

Shaun had to fight an initial resistance to the intimate body contact, but then found that it didn’t bother him quite as much as he thought. Theo’s back was warm against his chest—there was something reassuring and soothing about it that he couldn’t quite put his finger on.

Shaun tried to relax and focus his attention back on the book. Theo pointed at the zoo keeper in the picture on the right. “Look, he has a torch. It’s really bright.”

Shaun studied the drawing again. “The zoo keeper’s name is Joe.”

“How do you know that?”

“He has a name tag on his uniform.” Shaun pointed it out.

“Does the gorilla also have a name tag?”

Shaun took another look. “No.”

“Yeah, he’s not wearing a uniform.”

“A gorilla would not be wearing a uniform.”

Theo giggled, though Shaun was not sure why. “That would be really funny, if a gorilla was wearing a uniform.”

Would it? Shaun wasn’t sure he understood the humor in the idea, but he let Theo roll with it.

Theo turned to the next page. “Next one.”

They went through the rest of the book with Shaun trying to describe what he was seeing and Theo supplying his own ideas. Indeed, the story went on to see the animals following Joe, the zoo keeper, into the house to sleep with him – until his wife discovered the ploy and took the animals back to their cages.

Theo giggled again when they got the page where this happened, and Shaun smiled. There was something strangely gratifying about the boy enjoying a simple story like this. Shaun could definitely relate, he liked the simple things in life.

The story ended on the gorilla outwitting the humans by holding on to the keys and stealthily following back to the house to sneak into bed with Joe and his wife after all, the mouse or rat telling him, ‘Good night, Gorilla.’

Shaun closed the book when they had finished, and perhaps predictably so, Theo said, “Again.”

“No,” Shaun told him.

“Please…?”

“Your mother said you had to sleep.”

Theo made a huffy sound. “She always says that.”

“It is very late. You should be sleeping.”

“I’m not tired.”

Shaun wasn’t sure that was the case, Theo had yawned twice during their book reading. “I think you are.”

“No, I’m not.”

Shaun had no idea what to do from here. How did you convince a five-year-old to sleep when he didn’t want to? “Theo…” he started.

“Yes, Dr. Shaun?”

“It is very important that you sleep.”

“Why?”

“Because it will have a negative effect on your body, your mind and your health if you don’t sleep enough.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“Okay. If you lie down, I will explain it to you.”

Theo looked up at him questioningly, but then actually crawled away from Shaun and under his blanket. Shaun took that as a good sign. He sat up a little straighter.

“Can you lie down with me?”

For the sake of acquiescence, Shaun actually stretched out his legs and lay down next to the boy. Before he could say anything Theo had nestled against him. Shaun didn’t protest, hoped it would help him fall asleep more quickly.

“Why do I have to sleep?” Theo inquired.

Shaun noticed that his voice was already a lot less energetic. “You are still growing up, and your body needs to get enough rest so that it can grow and make you strong and healthy. Sleep is very important because when you sleep, your brain gets rest and you can recharge. It also needs sleep so that you can have enough energy tomorrow.”

Theo had gone quiet, and Shaun waited for the next question, which never came. Shaun tilted his head to look down, but could only see the top of Theo’s head. He didn’t dare move, in case the boy had fallen asleep.

Shaun lay still for an indefinite amount of time, he wasn’t sure how long exactly. Theo was breathing deeply right next to him, and Shaun felt strangely at ease and content lying here in the half dark with only the bedside table lamp still on. The hubbub from the party outside was very faint, almost inaudible with the exception of the occasional laughter penetrating the distant chatter.

He heard the soft footfall of someone ascending the stairs before he saw Jen appear in the doorway. She stopped there, leaning against the doorframe with a smile on her face.

She pointed at Theo, whispering, “Is he asleep?”

Shaun whispered back, “Yes, I think so.”

“Good job. Come on, let’s release you from Theo duty.” She pointed in the direction of the stairs.

Shaun didn’t want to get up, Theo was still lying so close to him. Jen had already turned around, but she peeked her head through the door again when Shaun hadn’t moved. “Is something wrong?”

“I’m… afraid I will wake him.”

Jen let out a soft laugh. “Oh, don’t worry about that. He sleeps like a log, once he’s down. Come on.”

Shaun very slowly and carefully extricated himself from the bed. Theo shifted his position a little but as Jen had predicted, he didn't wake up. Shaun switched off the bedside lamp before he exited the room.

Jen pulled the door close behind Shaun but left it ajar. On the way down the stairs, she asked, "Was that okay for you?"

"Was what okay for me?"

"Well, it looked like Theo got a little cuddly."

"Oh. Yes. That was okay for me."

"Are you sure? You can tell him if he gets too close, you know. I want him to respect boundaries."

"He *has* respected boundaries. I told him it is okay."

"Okay, that's good to know. Thanks, though. I think he would have been down here a lot to drive me crazy otherwise. You really helped tonight."

Shaun couldn't help but smile. "You're welcome."

As they entered the living room, Shaun could see Parker on the couch, playing on his Nintendo Switch. Jen gave him a brief look but didn't comment on it. She asked Shaun, "You like the party so far?"

"Yes. A lot. Thank you."

"Oh, it's our pleasure. All of this has been great."

They walked out onto the deck, and Shaun stopped for a moment to survey the scene. The coal in the barbecue was smoldering its last muted red, the last remnants of daylight were bathing the sky in a soft pink-orange-blue hue. The faint smell of grilled meat mingled with scented candles and torches that Tammy had said would keep the mosquitos at bay.

All his closest friends were here, having conversations, laughing, eating, drinking. It was the most perfect 30th birthday he could imagine, despite the hardship of the last two months. He would have to thank Lea and Dr. Glassman later, he suspected they had organized or at the very least suggested all of this.

It was Asher and Jerome who first came to speak with Shaun, meeting him where he stood. Asher told him, "Well, we'll be off now, but thanks for the invite. This was really nice."

Jerome added, "Yeah, really cool place, and the food was great."

"I am not the person you should be thanking," Shaun told them. "I'm not responsible for any of this."

"Oh. Yeah," Asher said, "We already thanked Lea. But we wanted to say goodbye to you, of course."

"Okay."

Jerome lifted his hand and gave a little wave. “I’ll see you next week.”

“Yes,” Shaun confirmed.

“See ya, Shaun,” Asher added.

Shaun said nothing more and watched them go. Alex and Jordan were the next to approach, also saying their farewells, thanking Shaun for the lovely evening. He was glad that everyone seemed to have been enjoying themselves.

Shaun used the opportunity to go to the bathroom, and when he came back, he saw Dr. Glassman waving him over to the table where he and Lea were now sitting with the Greenbergs. Shaun saw the bottle of Tequila that Glassman had given him, which he held up as Shaun sat down with them.

“Time to break out the good stuff, don’t you think?”

“Yes,” Shaun easily said and Glassman popped the corked bottle cap with a very satisfying *thunk*. Shot glasses were already lined up, although Ira waved no with his hand.

“No offense, but Tequila isn’t my bag. I’d prefer a good grog right about now.”

Glassman looked up at him, “I might just join you for that.”

Ira went to the house and came back with another bottle and eventually everyone had a strong drink sitting in front of them. It was Lea who lifted her glass first. “To an awesome birthday party and an awesome birthday boy who technically isn’t a birthday boy but who was incredibly good at pretending he is today. And of course to recuperation from traumatic injuries and hopefully long lasting good health. Bottoms up, guys!”

Everyone affirmed the sentiment and Shaun relished the momentary sting of the Tequila going down, basked in the ensuing feeling of warmth that spread through his stomach.

He sat in silence for a while, just listened to the people talking around him. At some point Lea placed a hand on his thigh which prompted him to look at her. “You’ve been quiet,” she said.

He gave a little confirmatory sound, and she followed up with, “Are you okay?”

His mouth spread into a small smile. “Yes, very.”

“It’s been a lot, do you need some alone-time?”

He looked at her with mounting surprise, but really, he shouldn’t be too astounded. She knew him well by now, often anticipated his needs or at the very least inquired about them. It wasn’t that he felt in any way uncomfortable, quite the opposite, but the sensory input from all the talking and new impressions could get a little too much, and he needed time to process and unwind after busy days like this.

“Do you wanna go in the house?” she asked.

He looked at the people around the table, felt a strange level of gratitude and belonging. “No. This is fine. I just don’t want to talk.”

Her thumb gently stroked his thigh. “And that’s totally fine. But you know that you can go and find a quiet place for yourself if you want, right?”

“Yes,” he told her. Oddly enough, he hadn’t even felt the need to do so. It had been that perfect a day, and it still was. The strong alcohol was also doing its part, it always took away some of that sensory sensitivity, made everything just a little bit more chill and mellow.

He happily kept listening to the conversations all around, sometimes contributed a few things when he felt like it or was asked a direct question, accompanied by a couple more Tequila shots until the bottle was jointly emptied.

Shaun’s bladder eventually asked for another bathroom break, and when he exited the guest bathroom, he heard some noise from the kitchen. Tammy was there, transferring remains of the dips and salads into empty Tupperware containers. The dishwasher door stood open with a good amount of dirty dishes on the counter and kitchen island.

Shaun went in and wordlessly started to fill the dishwasher. “You don’t need to do that,” she told him.

He nodded. “I know. I want to. You have been doing a lot of work today.”

She looked at him. “Oh, but I don’t mind. This turned out great, so that’s enough for me to make it more than worth it.”

Shaun straightened up from loading the dishwasher, let his gaze linger on Tammy, met her eyes. There was something there he couldn’t explain or fully understand, a subliminal sense of comfort and reassurance that he rarely felt with people in his life.

This family had been so wonderful, had been welcoming and made him feel safe with no questions asked. Even though it had only been two months, the farm had become an oasis of sorts for Shaun.

“Tammy,” he heard himself say.

She looked at him, met his gaze. “Yes?”

“You… once said you wanted to hug me. Do you still want that?”

She immediately smiled. “Yes, but not like this.”

“Like… what?”

“Like me being the one to want it and you just accommodating me.”

“That is not what it is.”

He could see that he had her attention. “Shaun, the last thing I want is to force you into situations you’re uncomfortable with. I know physical touch is a big thing for you. It should be your choice.”

“It is. I want to thank you.”

“There are other ways to do that, you know?”

“I know. I want to hug you.”

He awkwardly took a step towards her and she met him halfway. Her arms came around him very tentatively, and he returned the gesture. He used to hate hugs, and it had taken him a long time to find that they could be moments to draw comfort from if it was with the right people, the people he knew he could trust. Tammy was now one of them.

“Thank you, Shaun,” Tammy whispered next to his ear.

He squeezed her a little extra, then let go and they separated. There was a small smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “This was the best birthday I could wish for.”

Tammy smiled. “Your friends are all very nice people, and Jordan is a force of nature.”

Shaun raised his eyebrows. “She *can* be very exuberant. She and Lea are good friends. So are you.”

Tammy looked away from him. “Aw, thank you, Shaun. You’re a good friend, too. I’m so glad Aaron decided to visit with you and Lea. I hope you won’t be a stranger.”

Shaun frowned. “I… don’t think I can go back to being a stranger.”

She let out a chuckle. “That was a figure of speech. What I mean is that I hope you still come visit when you have time.”

“Oh. Yes. I will.”

He helped Tammy clean up the kitchen as best as they could. When the dishwasher was full and there were still dirty dishes on the kitchen island, she turned to him and said, “Let’s just leave it, I’ll take care of this tomorrow.”

“Are you sure? I can help with washing up.”

“Yeah, it’s fine. Come on, let’s go back outside and join the others.”

Shaun thought back to what Lea had said before, thought maybe a little more peace and quiet might be nice. “Do you… have a picnic blanket?”

Tammy nodded. “Yeah, sure.”

+-+-+-+-+

With Glassman and Ira chuckling over some inside joke next to her at the table, Lea looked up to the deck of the back porch that was now illuminated in a soft yellowish glow from the fairy lights that they’d hung there. Shaun had gone inside the house a while ago, she wondered if he’d finally decided he wanted the quiet time to wind down and process.

She allowed herself a small smile, downed the last of her Tequila. This had been such a wonderful day, better than she could have hoped for. Things in their life were often unpredictable, particularly with Shaun around, but everything had gone so well. There had been

no complaints, no mishaps except maybe for an inadvertently dropped piece of steak that Ira had easily shrugged off with, “The cats will be happy.”

She noticed Shaun coming out of the house, a folded up checkered blanket in his hands. He approached her and lightly tapped her shoulder from behind. “Please come with me.”

She looked up at him. “What is this?”

“I want some quiet. With you.”

Lea wordlessly got up from her seat and followed Shaun to the back of the garden, a good distance away from the others. Shaun folded the blanket open and draped it on the mowed grass for the both of them to sit down on.

Shaun chose a comfortable cross-legged position, Lea lay down, rested her head on his thigh, her body stretched out across the blanket. The light chatter from the other adults was now faint background noise, almost drowned out by the monotonous song of crickets chirping everywhere around them.

A scented torch was flickering near them to their right, the occasional moth was fluttering around the few lights more in the distance that gave their surroundings a dim glow in tandem with the strings of fairy lights. It all had a magical air to it.

Lea shifted slightly so that she could look up at Shaun. There was a serene smile on his face, a calm contentedness, a true sign of him being happy and relaxed.

“This was such a perfect night,” she said just above a whisper.

She hoped he would agree, was pretty sure he’d very much enjoyed it too, but what he said was a gentle, “Thank you.”

“Tammy is the one you should be thanking. This was her idea, and she did most of the work.”

“I… already have. I gave her a hug.”

Wow. That was a big statement, and Lea was fairly sure that Tammy would know that, too. “I’m sure she loved that.”

He nodded, still smiling. “She did. It was very nice.”

A sense of pride spread through Lea. He’d changed so much these past few years. The Shaun she’d first met, looking for batteries, would never have hugged anyone of his own volition. Yet, she also knew there were some things about him that would never change.

Although she was fairly sure she already knew the answer to this question, she wanted some reassurance he hadn’t been masking too much. “You’re not mad that we made it a surprise party, are you?”

“No.” His smile widened. “It was a very good surprise and a very good way to celebrate my birthday. A lot better than when I was in the ICU.”

She shifted her head a little and wondered… “Do you actually remember anything from that day?”

He took a moment to come back with an answer. “Not a lot. I have scattered memories but I don’t know when this happened and they are… very strange.”

“Strange how?”

“I think my brain was trying to make sense of the situation.”

“Do you remember anything specific?”

“I… remember sitting in a pit on a beach. They shoveled very heavy sand on me so that I… I couldn’t move. Dr. Glassman was there and I told him to stop, but he didn’t. Waves from the sea came in and water seeped through the sand and up my arm. First it was warm, then it was cold. It was very unpleasant.”

Lea sighed. “Yeah, I think that actually *was* the day of your birthday.”

“What happened that day?”

“Shaun, I don’t know if you really wanna hear this.”

“I want to hear it.”

She sighed again and pushed herself up so that she could sit next to him. “You know how people who wake up from a coma sometimes get agitated for no reason?”

He nodded. “Yes.”

She thought so, he’d probably seen it a number of times. His eyes sought out hers. “Did I get agitated?”

“Yes, you did.”

“What did I do?”

“You know, I don’t remember all of the specifics, but I think you were confused that your arm was in a brace, that you had the IVs and the oxygen cannula and all that. You were fighting all of that, and Aaron tried to get you to stop because you were hurting yourself. You struggled a lot and pulled out your IV. It was… to be honest, it was pretty awful.”

“Did they sedate me?”

“Yeah, I think they did. They asked us to leave, but they said they gave you a mild sedative. Maybe that’s what felt warm or cold on your arm.”

He let out a short hum, his expression pensive. She added, “And I think you’re right. Your brain probably did try to parse it in a way that made sense to you at the time.”

They both stayed quiet, watched the muted lights around them, listening to the chirping in the distance in comfortable silence.

Lea reached out a hand and lay it on Shaun's thigh with her palm facing up. He briefly looked down, then let his own hand slide into hers and intertwined his fingers with hers.

She looked at him, drank in the sight of him. "All the more amazing that you're here now, alive and pretty much back to normal. And look at all this. An amazing birthday party with new and old friends. You and Theo were very cute together today. We should be grateful for that."

"I *am* grateful for that. And for you."

She leaned in, and he met her for a long kiss, let his hand find the back of her neck to pull her a bit closer.

There was that feeling of bliss in her stomach, a sudden flutter of desire and longing. She hadn't really wanted to say it out loud, and maybe it was the alcohol playing its part, but she heard herself whispering, "I want you so bad right now."

He pulled back a little, and there was the smallest hint of mischief in his expression. "There *is* a tack room in the stables."

She gaped. "Are you saying what I *think* you're saying?!"

The mischievous expression was still there. "You said you wanted to have sex with me."

"In a tack room? Are you sure?"

"I also want to have sex. I don't think we can use the house. It has a padded bench."

She let out a laugh, then scrambled to her feet, holding out her hand to help him up. "I hope I'm not gonna regret this."

Shaun said nothing but let her pull him up and wordlessly started walking towards the stables, never letting go of her hand. Lea followed, the butterflies in her stomach only intensifying. Sometimes Shaun was full of surprises.

+-+-+-+-+

Another Monday, another week to tackle. Aaron rounded the corner to his office and was greeted with an all too familiar sight, but one that was ultimately gratifying after the events of the past couple of months. Shaun was sitting in one of the chairs across from the desk in his white lab coat, just the way he used to all these years.

Aaron entered, hung his own lab coat on the coat rack with the words, "Hey Shaun."

"Hello, Dr. Glassman."

Aaron went around his desk, standing there, looking at Shaun. There was a bit of a worry frown knitting his brow, which usually meant he was trying to solve a problem or conundrum. "What's going on?"

Shaun came right out with it, the way he always did. "How do you read children's books to children?"

Aaron frowned. Where was this coming from? He shrugged. “I don't know, you just… read them, I guess?”

“There was very little text.”

“Did someone ask you to read a book to a child?”

“Yes. Jennifer asked me to read to Theo.”

“And you did?”

“Yes.”

“And how did that go?”

Shaun’s face didn’t betray his unhappiness. “Not very well.”

“Okay. Did Theo say he didn’t like it? Was he unhappy with what you did?”

“No.”

“Then what didn’t go well?”

Shaun stayed quiet for a moment, and Aaron sat down in his desk chair.

“I didn’t know what to say.”

“Well, what *did* you say?”

“I described the drawings after Theo told me that was what I should be doing.”

Aaron had to try not to smile. He had a good idea of how that might have gone, but he also knew Shaun was very good at adapting and trying to succeed. “That doesn’t sound to me like you did anything wrong.”

“No,” Shaun said with a *‘you don’t get it’* undertone. “I don’t think I did anything wrong, I just didn’t think I was very good at it. I want to be better at reading children’s books when Lea and I have a child.”

Aaron paused for a moment. “Is this your clandestine way of telling me Lea is pregnant again?”

Shaun seemed to be taken aback by that. “No. Lea is not pregnant.”

“Ah, so this is a hypothetical conversation.”

“No. I want to have children. I want to be able to read books to them.”

Aaron sighed. “Okay. Well. First of all, that’s kinda what you do when you read to children. You describe what you see. You know, maybe,” he waved a hand in the air, “embellish it a little.”

“Embellish?”

“Yeah, you know, add few details, make up a story to add some context to what you can see in the pictures.”

Shaun’s face fell. “I am not very good at making up stories.”

Aaron wondered if maybe there was a bigger underlying problem here than just Shaun trying to figure out how best to approach something. “So you think because of your ASD, that’s not something you’re equipped to do?”

Shaun’s shoulders sagged. “Yes,” he said dejectedly.

Aaron felt for him, he was always so disappointed when his autism got in the way of things he wanted to excel at, goals he felt were important to reach. “Shaun, listen. What I’m hearing is that you think you didn’t do well, when actually I think you did. You didn’t know how to approach the situation, and then you figured it out. And Theo was happy, right?

“Because that’s what matters. Maybe you think you failed because, I don’t know, you didn’t deliver a voice acting performance or come up with some elaborate backstory for a children’s tale. But that’s not what kids want. They wanna engage with someone who cares about them and who listens to them, tries to understand them. And it very much sounds like you did all of that.”

“So… you’re saying I shouldn’t try to improve?”

Aaron shrugged. “I don’t know, do you think you need to improve?”

“Yes. It is why I came here.”

“Yeah, okay, let’s see. You could try to look for books that have both pictures and more text you could read. You could also tell a child other things, things that you *are* good at. Didn’t Theo have an interest in dinosaurs? You could talk to him about that. You know, look up some facts about evolution and the Jurassic era. Reading up on science is your thing, right? So use that.”

Perhaps predictably so, Shaun had produced his little grey notebook and was taking notes, and that made Aaron think of something else. “You’re smart, you can deduce and infer things you see, put them into context. Think of it as explaining a complicated surgery to a first year resident. I know you know how to do that, I’ve seen you do that. This is kinda like that.”

Shaun was scribbling furiously, and Aaron couldn’t help but grin. He waited for Shaun to stop, then added, “And Shaun?”

The latter raised his head and briefly met his gaze. Aaron continued, “It’s not about being good at one specific thing. With children it’s about finding ways to understand each other. It's… You know, it’s a bit of a learning process. And kids *always* have a way to get under your skin. So here’s the thing: Love is what really matters—love and a whole lot of patience. And I know you have plenty of both of those.”

After a short pause, he added, “I hope you’re not writing down ‘*love and patience’*.”

Shaun looked up, gave him a *‘fingers in the cookie jar’* kind of glance that Aaron found amusing and maybe just a little adorable.

Shaun defended himself with, “You outlined those as most important.”

He sighed. “Yeah, I guess I did. But you don’t have to write that down, Shaun. And you know what? Look at Theo. He adores you. Because you respect him and care about him and you have all the patience in the world.

“And I think you remember some of that from being with your brother. You’ve grown attached to Theo, maybe you want to protect and comfort him. You’ll want to do that for your own child, too. A lot more than with someone else’s child. You know how important it is to have someone you can look up to, who will protect and love you, no matter what. So if this is you still having doubts about being a good father, I promise you, that will come naturally to you when you have your own children.”

He looked at Shaun, waited to see his reaction. There was some pensiveness there, maybe it would need time to be digested and sink in. “Have you talked to Lea about this?”

Shaun let out a short hum. “Yes. Not the book reading, but we talked about having a child.”

“And what did she say?”

“She thinks I will be a great father because I care and I will love our children.”

Aaron raised both hands to make a point. “Well, there you go. Glowing endorsement from the both of us. And you know what? Lea’s got a lot of intuition with how to help you get past those things you’re not so great at. You’re really good at adapting, and I think you know that. I’m sure the two of you will do perfectly fine.”

There was another hum from Shaun, this time one of those that said he was satisfied with what he was hearing. Aaron moved a patient file on his desk a little to the right, then looked at Shaun again. “Didn’t you have an appointment with your orthopedist today?”

“Yes, at 4 pm. I hope he will clear me to go back to surgery full time.”

“Yeah, I hope so, too. You really miss it, huh?”

Shaun nodded enthusiastically. “I do.”

“And the shoulder’s fine?”

“Yes.”

“That’s good.”

“Yes, that’s *very* good.”

“You wanna grab lunch later?”

“No. I am having lunch with Lea today.”

“Okay.”

Shaun got up from his chair. “I have to go and see a study patient now. She is having her Visit 4.” And off he was, although he peered round the door frame a second later with an afterthought. “Do… you want to have lunch with me and Lea?”

Aaron smiled. “Yeah, I’d like that.”

“Okay,” Shaun said and vanished again.

Aaron shook his head, but knew this was just Shaun. And he loved him a little bit for it.

+-+-+-+-+

Chapter 20: When I drive myself my light is found

Chapter Note:
Thanks go out to my friend Spearhead for the help with the *Tales from the Loop* one-shot adventure!

Shaun had a spring to his step as he approached Dr. Andrews’ office. He had just received the good news and was eager to share it. When he entered the anteroom, however, he stopped dead in his tracks.

The door to the office was ajar, and there was another voice filtering through to Shaun’s sensitive ears that he knew very well: Dr. Lim, who seemed to be in heated discussion with Dr. Andrews.

He considered leaving again, but stood rooted to the spot when he heard Andrews’ raised voice say, “—remember all the troubles we went through with Shaun, right?”

Lim responded, “Yes, but Shaun’s situation is and was a little different.”

Shaun knew all too well that he shouldn’t be listening to this conversation, that he should leave *right now*. but how could he not listen when they were talking about him?

Lim continued, “I just want to make sure that we’re considering this resident for her skills and qualifications and not to tick a diversity or disability box.”

“Of course we’re considering her for her skills and qualifications. But the fact that she has a prosthetic doesn’t mean she can’t be an excellent surgeon.”

“And I didn’t say that or even wanted to suggest that, because that would be incredibly ableist. You’re the president of his hospital now, and I know you care about St. Bon’s having the best track record it could possibly have. Adding more disabled staff will be a great positive media magnet, I’m sure.

“*My* personal first concern is picking the best first-years we can get, and I don’t care if they’re on prosthetic legs or in a wheelchair or are perfectly healthy. And I want assurances from you that we’re not factoring her disability status into this decision.”

There was a small pause, then Andrews said, “You have my full and heartfelt assurance that we’re evaluating all resident applicants based on their professional qualifications. But you have to admit that her track record sounds extraordinary, and her disability might have shaped her personality in a favorable way that could be an asset to this hospital, irrespective of media representation or any publicity aspects.”

“Yes, I will admit to that. She was also at the top of my list, along with seven others.”

“Okay, then let’s compare notes.”

“I would love to, but I actually have an appointment I need to get to. I can drop by again tomorrow and we can continue this conversation.”

Shaun realized Lim was about to leave, so he had to do something quickly. Either he left and came back later, or he could—

He knocked on the door to the office, then opened it to poke his head in. “Hello,” he said, “I would like to give Dr. Andrews a message.”

“Shaun,” Andrews said.

Shaun looked at Dr. Lim. “Hello Dr. Lim, are you coming back to work?”

“Yes, week after next. Dr. Andrews and I had something to discuss, but I was on my way out.”

“It is good to see that you are ready to come back to work, we have missed you.”

“Thank you, Shaun. I have missed you, too.”

Shaun turned his attention back to Dr. Andrews. “I have been cleared by my orthopedist to go back to surgery full time. I wanted to tell you so that you can put me back on the regular surgery schedule.”

Andrews nodded at him. “That’s great, I’m very happy to hear it.”

Shaun smiled. “So am I.”

Lim was slinging her purse over her shoulder and was about to leave, but Shaun had something on his mind that he also wanted her to hear. “When I apply for the attending position, will you also be discussing whether I should be hired to tick a diversity box?”

That stopped Lim dead in her tracks. “You heard us talking about that?”

Shaun gave a little nod. “Yes. I know I should have left, but you were talking about me. What troubles with me were you referring to, Dr. Andrews?”

Andrews didn’t answer right away, and Shaun thought he had probably caught him off-guard. Andrews harrumphed. “Well, we all know that there have been a few instances where your ASD has adversely affected your professional performance. Some of them even made it into your file.”

“Would you have hired me if I had applied to the residency program along with all the other first year applicants in my year?”

Andrews looked at Lim, who looked back and Andrews. He hesitated a moment before he responded, “You know, I’m not sure I would have.”

“Dr. Glassman also said you weren’t in favor of hiring me.”

“Yes, and you know what? I’m very glad that Dr. Glassman made such a convincing case for you, and that we *did* end up hiring you, because you’re a great asset to this team, and we will be happy to review your attending application when you submit it and make a fair judgement across all the applications we get for the position.”

“So I won’t be getting any preferential treatment because of my ASD?”

“Obviously I can only speak for myself, but I would very much hope not,” Andrews said.

Shaun wasn’t sure if he was truly happy with that answer, but what else could he do than take Dr. Andrews at face value? And he was curious now about this new potential resident that he might be working with in the future. “What disability does the resident applicant you talked about have?”

It was Lim who answered the question. “She’s an above-the-knee amputee. And I’d like to ask that you keep this information confidential and not share it with anyone. You shouldn’t have been privy to it in the first place.”

“Yes, I know. I will not discuss it with anyone. Not even Lea. Unless the resident is considered for the position, then everyone will know anyway.”

“Yes, that’s right. Thank you, Shaun. I hope we can count on your discretion, because while we’re being blunt about your ASD, I know that you have trouble telling lies.”

Shaun considered that for a moment. “I don’t necessarily have to lie. I can just not say anything when someone asks me about it. Although I doubt anyone will ask me about it. Fifth year residents are not expected to be involved in hiring decisions, so I don’t think anyone will assume that I have any knowledge about this topic.”

Lim nodded. “Yeah, you may be right. And I’m glad to hear you’re back on full surgery rotation. I look forward to working with you again when I’m back.”

“So do I, Dr. Lim.”

Andrews looked at Shaun while silence ensued for a brief moment, then asked, “Was there anything else I can do for you, Shaun?”

“Oh. No, thank you. I will leave now.”

Andrews gave him a curt nod, and Lim said, “Bye, Shaun.”

“Goodbye,” he responded and then headed to the locker room. His shift was over and Lea was waiting so they could drive home. He hoped they could celebrate the good news with a glass of wine and some sweet unscheduled sex.

+-+-+-+-+

“This is your first lead surgery since you got back, right?” Jordan asked Shaun as they were scrubbing in, standing next to each other at the metal sinks.

“Yes.”

“Are you excited?”

“This is a routine splenectomy, it isn’t something to get very excited about.”

“I don’t mean the actual surgery. Must feel good to get back in the game after all that you’ve been through with the shoulder and everything.”

“Yes,” Shaun confirmed again, “it does feel good. Did you not feel good during your first lead surgery?”

Jordan had inadvertently gotten to lead Alex Park’s laparoscopic appendectomy during that disaster with the spiked potluck, even though she was only in her second year.

“Oh, it felt amazing. I can’t wait for next year when we get to officially do leads. I’m so ready. What was yours?”

His first lead surgery. It hadn’t gone very well. “It was an esophageal resection, but I didn’t get to finish it.”

“Oh? What happened?”

“When we opened up the patient and examined the esophagus, we found that there was a larger area of tumor-free esophagus than initially anticipated, which meant that instead of a full resection, we modified the surgical plan to a jejunum free flap reconstruction so that the patient wouldn’t have to live with a feeding tube. It was too complex for me to lead, so Dr. Lim had to take over.”

“You assisted on a jejunum free flap?”

“Yes. I had studied the technique they used in Japan and Dr. Lim wanted me to walk them through it. She let me place the last stitch, even though it was completely symbolic.”

“Wow, that’s a pretty cool surgery, even just to assist on.”

Looking back at it now, Shaun had to agree, and it had ended well for everyone involved, even though Shaun remembered he’d been very upset at the time. Yet, he’d gotten his chance a week later. “My first full lead surgery was an open appendectomy. It didn’t go perfectly either, but at least I got to finish that one.”

“More complications?”

“No. I sent Nurse Hawkes away because she handed me the clamp the wrong way. She filed an official complaint afterwards because I didn’t apologize to her.”

“You didn’t apologize?” Jordan asked.

“I tried to explain to her why it was important to hand me the straight clamp the right way, but she didn’t want to listen.”

“How *did* she hand the clamp to you?”

“It was not at a 45 degree angle.”

“Okay. And you got upset about that enough to throw her out of the OR?”

“Yes.”

“That doesn’t sound like the Shaun I know.”

Shaun looked at her. “What does that mean?”

“You’re usually very focused and collected in the OR. I’ve never seen you upset while you’re operating, so I guess that’s just a little surprising to hear.”

Shaun reflected on that for a moment, and maybe Jordan was right. He had learned a lot about himself in these last two years, had become a lot better at self-regulating, at navigating his professional environment more steadily.

To Jordan, he said, “It hasn’t happened since, and I later apologized to Nurse Hawkes. She said thank you and we have worked very well together since.”

“See, all’s well that ends well. You’re gonna apply for an attending position after your residency, right?”

“Yes,” Shaun confirmed, “I will.”

“Well, I hope you get it, because you’re a great surgeon and I’ve learned a lot from you.” Jordan rinsed the foam off her hands and arms and started stepping backwards towards the OR entrance. Before she took one of the sterile towels, she told him, “Looking forward to assisting on Dr. Murphy’s welcome-back surgery, and don’t be afraid to tell me if I hand you any instruments incorrectly.”

“Oh, I will,” Shaun said as he rinsed his own arms, incredibly happy to have such a great team to work with, and very much ready to lead the impending splenectomy.

+-+-+-+-+

Jerome harrumphed after he sat down at the head of the table, the gamemaster screen put up in front of him to shield what he was doing from the players. “Shall we get started?”

Everyone else was sitting in their designated seats at the dining table in Jerome’s apartment – Shaun, Lea, Asher and Adam – their *Tales from the Loop* character sheets and cheat sheets in front of them. A dice rolling tray with a handful of six-sided dice stood in the center of the table.

Shaun had decided to go with a simple name for his bookworm and had called him Brett. Lea’s rocker girl was called Kari, Asher was a hick called Nathan and Adam had decided to play a troublemaker girl called Amber. Their character sheets were already pre-built, which made it easier and saved some time.

Jerome had spent some time earlier, giving them some general introduction to the game mechanics and how the characters knew each other. Shaun had taken a lot of notes.

He was still struggling with the concept of trying to imagine that the people sitting around the table with him were teenage children in a small town in Nevada in a wholly different fictional

universe, particularly since Adam had chosen to switch genders. He hoped he could get more acquainted to the idea as they went into the game.

“Okay,” Jerome addressed Adam. “Let’s start with you, Amber. You’re currently on summer break from school, today the weather isn’t as oppressively hot as it often gets out here, you’re trying to figure out what you could do with your time to battle the daily boredom, and you realize you’re feeling a little hungry. You go to the kitchen and open the fridge, take out the last piece of pecan pie that’s in there on a small plate and stuff a bite into your mouth.

“Your mother comes in just at that moment, scolding you, »Amber, didn’t I tell you to leave that for your brother?«”

There was a short pause, Jerome looking at Adam, who promptly said in a slightly higher voice than his usual one, “»Why? He’s fat enough as it is.«”

Jerome answered in a somewhat modulated voice, “»Amber, don’t talk like that about your brother!«”

Adam-Amber responded, “»I’m going out now.«”

“»Please be back for dinner.«”

“»Yeah, whatever.«”

Jerome contributed, “Munching on the last bite of the pecan pie, you put on your shoes, grab your backpack and leave the house. You don’t really hang out with the other kids from school much, but you also don’t mind their company, and there’s nothing better to do around these parts right now, so you make your way to the park in the center of the city where you know some of the kids tend to meet up.”

He paused, looked over to Lea. “Kari. You’re out in the park, sitting on that concrete table tennis table with your legs dangling over the edge. Brett is sitting next to you, and you put the audio tape back in the walkman that you just wound up with your finger from the tape spaghetti you had to fix. Brett is not exactly your type and you think he may have a little crush on you, but lately he’s been really interested in your music, and you’re always happy to talk music to anyone who’s willing to listen.”

Jerome paused and looked at Lea to prompt her to say something. She responded fairly quickly with, “I put the headphones with orange foam over Brett’s ears, tell him, »Here, you gotta listen to this! It’s so sublime,« and hit the Play button.”

Lea stopped, and Shaun saw her and everyone else looking at him. He felt a little self-conscious, knowing he was supposed to say something. “I… listen to the music.”

Lea added, “It’s a rock song by a band called the Ramones. It has a fast drum beat and loud and kinda wild electric guitars with a male singer.”

Shaun drew up his shoulders. He was fairly sure he wouldn’t like loud and wild electric guitars. “I take off the headphones.”

Lea chuckled. “Kari says, »Hey, don’t you like it?«”

“»No, it’s very loud.«”

Jerome cut in, “As you’re talking about the music, Nathan sidles up to you both, saying…”

He looked at Asher, who supplied, “»Hey guys, what are you up to?«”

Lea-Kari answered, “»You gotta listen to this new Ramones song, it’s so cool.«”

Asher-Nathan responded, “»Okay, I’ll give it a try.« I take the headphones from her. Or Brett, if he’s still holding them and put them on.”

Lea-Kari said, “You hear a rock song by a band called the Ramones with a wild drum beat and electric guitars.”

Asher chuckled. “Nathan pretends that he thinks it’s pretty cool and listens for a while.”

Jerome added, “While you’re listening to the song, you can see from the corner of your eye that Amber, the troublemaker, is approaching your little gathering from across the park. But what grabs your attention more at that moment is that there are two pigeons on the backrest of one of the benches near the table tennis table who seem to be… acting a little strangely.”

When Jerome didn’t say anything else, Adam asked, “Strangely how?”

“Well, they’re facing each other and as you, Amber, come closer, you stop dead in your tracks because what’s really odd is that the pigeons are actually talking. In English, which is unheard of. Birds don’t talk. Their voices sound a little robotic, kinda like mechanical bird voices.” Jerome tried to imitate it, saying, “»Tomorrow the people will put out their garbage, maybe we can steal more shiny things and take them to our nests. Shiny things, always want more shiny things.«”

Adam-Amber said, “I look around to see if anyone else has noticed the talking pigeons.”

Jerome prompted him, “Roll a check to investigate. You’d be using the Investigate skill for that.”

Adam looked at his character sheet. “Uh oh, I’m not real good at that.” He took one of the six-sided dice and rolled it. It was a four. “Nope, I guess I don’t see anything.”

Jerome explained, “You see Kari, Nathan and Brett by the table tennis table, in discussion with each other. You’re not sure what they’re talking about, maybe it’s the talking birds. You’d have to get closer to find out.”

“Okay, I walk towards them.”

As the scene progressed, Jerome reminded everyone to keep their kids’ ‘Drives’ in mind that were noted on their character sheets and how that might influence their decisions.

Shaun got to roll his first ability check when the group of kids managed to catch one of the pigeons and asked Brett if he knew anything about talking birds from books he’d read. Since he had extra bonus dice for the Comprehend skill, he rolled four dice and had one success, so Brett was able to recite what he knew from his research in the library.

Shaun found that he was starting to enjoy the game as they went on, even though he mostly listened and stuck to the basics when he was being asked or prompted, but the rest of the group

was lively enough that it didn't matter, and they advanced quickly to take the kids on an adventure to find out what was with the birds that could talk and had microchips implanted in their heads.

Twice, Shaun challenged Jerome on decisions he made, quoting what he'd read about the rules or the attributes and skills until Lea reached over, touched his thigh and said in a low voice, "Shaun? Remember that Jerome is the gamemaster. He has the final say."

Shaun objected, "But the rulebook—"

"Shaun…"

He knew this was her no-nonsense *'you better shut up*' expression, so he said, "Okay, I will try to be flexible."

Jerome added, "Shaun, you can tell me if you don't agree with something, but I wouldn't want to interrupt the gameplay with frequent rule discussions."

"I understand. I will try to be flexible," he reiterated.

"Okay," Jerome nodded, "Excellent. Where were we?"

All in all, it took them over six hours to wrap up the adventure, with a break in between for dinner. Lea was getting really into it, and the others seemed to also be having fun. Shaun had enjoyed himself but wasn't sure it was an experience he needed to repeat. Maybe he'd want to try a session of actual *Dungeons & Dragons* once if the opportunity arose. It would be something for the backburner.

With the Boulder City adventure solved and wrapped up to everyone's satisfaction, they parted ways just before midnight, and Shaun happily listened to Lea chatting away in the passenger seat as they drove. The two bottles of red wine Lea, Asher and Jerome had shared had loosened her tongue, and he knew she was at that stage where she was happy just to talk without him needing to necessarily respond.

He concentrated on the road, let his mind wander until he registered Lea repeating, "Shaun?"

"Yes," he responded.

"Did you listen to anything I said?"

"Hm. Not… everything."

"Did you have fun today?"

"I did."

"I wasn't sure. You didn't seem overly enthusiastic."

"I wasn't, but it was nice. I'm not sure I want to do it again."

"I thought you did great, though. You had some pretty good interactions in the game. And your smarts totally saved the day in the final showdown. We'd have been totally lost without Brett."

“You think so?”

“Oh yeah. That move with the distraction so that Amber could execute her plan was pure genius. That totally saved our butts. I know the others also thought it was brilliant. Adam even said so. What was it that you didn’t like about it?”

“There was nothing that I didn’t like about my distraction idea.”

“No, I mean about the game or playing with us.”

Shaun wasn’t even sure how to answer that. He’d had fun in the moment, had liked the puzzle solving mystery aspect, but had struggled a little with the social interactions. Ultimately, he knew that wasn’t surprising. Social interactions weren’t his forte in any situation.

Before he could form those thoughts into words, Lea asked him, “It was pretty taxing for you, wasn’t it? All the roleplaying and made-up dialogue, that doesn’t come very naturally to you.”

She knew him so well, because that had been part of it, too. He was definitely looking forward to some downtime at home after the game, away from social norms and obligations and expectations.

Lea added, “But don’t you think doing it more often could be beneficial for you? You know, it’s kind of a fun way to practice social interactions, cooperative efforts, walking in other people’s shoes. I think those are things you struggle with a little sometimes.”

She paused, then added, “Oh God, I make it sound like this would be a therapy session for you. That’s not what I mean. I just think it could be a fun way to hone some of your skills.”

“Do you think my skills need honing?”

She turned her head to look at him. “Don’t you?”

What could he say to that? In the past years, he had worked so hard on the challenges his autism presented, thought he had already gotten a lot better at socializing with people. He had made a lot of friends here that he’d never had in Casper, didn’t that count?

He was momentarily distracted when they were pulling into the driveway to their apartment building and he had to maneuver the car into their parking spot. When he opened the driver’s side door and got out of the car, Lea was coming over to his side of the car and stood in front of him.

“Hey. I’m sorry, maybe what I said didn’t come out right. I didn’t mean to say you’re bad at social interactions.”

He stepped around her and started walking to the front door. “Sometimes I am.”

She jogged a few steps to keep up with him. “Don’t you see the merit in this, though? There’s some really interesting articles about how RPGs can benefit neurodivergent people. I thought it was quite fascinating.”

“You looked into this?”

“No. I mean, maybe a little. I looked up online how the game worked, and then I stumbled across a post where someone with autism talked about how game mastering helped him with certain aspects of his ASD. That led me to a few blogs and Reddit posts and I really liked what I read. I wanted to discuss it with you, but you were at work and I guess I kinda forgot about it. That’s all there’s to it, I swear.”

“Okay,” he told her. He didn’t really know if she was giving him a white lie to make him feel better. It sounded like it could be one. He could never be sure about these things.

They walked the rest of the way to their apartment in silence and Lea gave him space when they got home, which he spent just sitting on the couch, letting his mind wind down and process the eventful day.

He noticed that Lea was starting to get ready for bed now and he tried to reflect on what she’d said, Deep down, he knew there lay value in her suggestions. Social interactions would never come very naturally to him, he’d always struggle in one way or another. Deep down he also knew it wasn’t something he needed to be ashamed of, least of all among the people he knew and considered friends.

Did he want to turn to RPGs to help him with that, though? He still didn’t know the answer to that question. Maybe he’d have to think about it, do some of his own research, consult a few people. Maybe talk to Dr. Glassman about it.

Lea eventually came out of the bathroom and gently brushed his left shoulder with a hand from behind, telling him, “I’m off to bed. Do you need more time?”

He inhaled audibly. “No. I will join you.”

She bent down to kiss the top of his head. “Okay.”

He pushed himself off the couch, now more certain that Lea hadn’t meant to offend him in any way. She wanted him to be the best version of himself that he could be, wanted him to be happy and feel good about himself. She always wanted that. It reminded him how grateful he was that she knew and understood him so well. He was one lucky man to call her his wife.

+-+-+-+-+

It was a few nights later that something rose Lea from her slumber. There were muted noises from the living room, then the door to the bedroom opened quietly. It was Shaun, and it had to be the middle of the night, judging by how tired she was and the total absence of daylight.

She rolled onto her side so that she faced the door that was letting in a bit of light from the living room. Tiredly, she asked, “What time is it?”

Shaun looked at his phone. “3:02 am.” He sounded tired.

She sighed. “Have you been at the hospital until now?”

“Yes.”

“Long surgery?”

He didn't respond, and she tried to gauge his state of mind. He was standing with his phone in his hand, forlorn and silent. Was he just tired, was he trying to process, was something else going on?

"Hey," she prompted gently. "You wanna come to bed?"

To her surprise, he lay down next to her in his street clothes, reaching for her hand. Okay, so something was definitely going on.

She took his hand and waited if he was going to say anything. Sometimes it took time with him, sometimes he'd just stay in his head. She wished she could see his face, but it was dark and she could only make out his silhouette.

When the silence stretched on, she gently asked, "Shaun. What's wrong?"

His voice was just above a whisper. "I almost died."

Lea was suddenly alarmed. "Today?"

"No. In the bus crash."

The bus accident. It was still on his mind. Of course it would be. It had been over two months, but the healing process had been so long, and it wasn't unreasonable that it would come back to haunt him every now and again.

She'd been so focused on Shaun's physical recuperation—they both had been—sometimes she wondered if they should have talked about it more. She wasn't sure where he was going with this, what it was that was on his mind, so she scooted closer, signaled that she was here if he needed her comfort or wanted to talk.

He mirrored the gesture, drew her close to him—a rare moment where he yearned for the physical connection. "You… must have been scared."

"I was, but that's not important anymore. What's important is that you're here with me." She let her fingers glide gently back and forth along his arm. "Did something happen today that you're thinking about this?"

"Our patient died. We operated for ten hours, and she died. We couldn't save her."

Lea's heart went out to him. "I'm sorry, Shaun."

"It is not your fault."

"No, I know, but I know that's hard on you."

"We lost another patient today. He was in a car accident and his organs kept failing, he was finally declared braindead. He also had brain swelling and rib and shoulder injuries."

Ah, now Lea could see the parallels, had an inkling what had Shaun upset. "So seeing him made you think of your own accident."

He took a long moment to answer with a soft, “Yes.” He inhaled heavily, then exhaled audibly. “The family didn’t want to donate his organs, even though he was on the registered donors list. Would you have given consent to donate my organs if I had died?”

Oh wow. It was something they’d never discussed until now. “I probably would have. Would you have wanted me to?”

“Yes,” he said very quickly. “I want to save as many lives as I can, even if I’m clinically dead.”

It didn’t surprise Lea in the least. “Yeah, and I was pretty sure that was the case. Maybe we should talk more about this. Not now, some other time when it’s not 3 am in the morning.”

He stayed quiet and she just lay with him, held him close, let him dictate what he wanted. He shifted away from her eventually, and she let him go, watched how he sat up on the side of the bed with a slight groan, rolling his right shoulder.

“Is your shoulder sore?”

“Yes,” he just said.

She knew it was the middle of the night, and she was tired herself, but she also knew she wouldn’t be able to catch more sleep with the knowledge that he was uncomfortable, so she got up and out of bed to help him with that. “Ten hours is a really long surgery and it’s only been a week since they put you back on full surgery rotation. I don’t think it’s reason to worry.”

He got up and fetched his pajamas. “I’m not worried.”

While Shaun vanished into the bathroom, she got the red and white checkered grain pillow and put it in the microwave to heat it up, then brought it to him when he was ready to go to sleep. He was getting settled on his side of the bed and she sat down on his mattress, holding up the now heated grain pillow. “Let me help.”

He just let out a low mumble and turned to lie on his belly to make his shoulders accessible. She carefully placed the heating pillow on his right shoulder. “Is that okay?”

He uttered another low hum that she took as affirmation. He had his eyes closed now, looked a little more relaxed. It was always hard when he brought home the emotional repercussions that were invariably tied to losing patients. It was a burden she couldn’t help much with other than try and get him to talk about it. He didn’t always want to.

She sat with him for another long moment and told him, “You’re off tomorrow, right? I’ll let you sleep in, you should take it easy.”

His voice was barely more than a mumble into the mattress. “I will go to the farm.”

She smiled. He liked it so much there, and she loved everything about it. “You do that, but I really think you should sleep in before you venture out there.”

He was already halfway on the way to a slumber as he muttered, “I will try.”

She kept rubbing gentle circles on his back for another half minute, felt his chest rise and fall evenly beneath her fingers. He didn't stir when she pulled the blanket over him and went back to her own side of the bed.

She gave it another few minutes before she removed the grain pillow from his shoulder, feeling the comforting warmth still radiate from it. He didn't move, and she knew he was asleep. She hoped he could unwind a little tomorrow, some time away at the farm was definitely a good idea.

"Night, Chickpea," she whispered, knowing that she wouldn't get an answer. "I love you."

+-+-+-+-+

"All right, Shaun, here we go. Are you ready?" Jen said as she stood next to Barbagal's head in the horse pen, adjusting the lunge line to the brown and white pinto's halter.

Was he ready to ride a horse? He wasn't sure, but they were here, and what choice did he have now?

Jen didn't actually wait for his response, and moved to Barbagal's side where the saddle was. He watched her folding her hands and cupping them to give him a leg up. "Professional riding stables would have a block for this, but we'll have to wing it. Put your foot in here, and then up you go. Try to be gentle."

His mounting of Barbagal probably wasn't very graceful, but he found himself in the saddle with a bit of Jen's help. He took a moment to take in the new sensation, the way the saddle felt under him, the way he was sitting on a living animal. His head felt constricted under the riding helmet Jen had given him, but he knew it was a sensible safety precaution.

Jen's voice pulled him back. "Okay, remember what we talked about? Put your feet in the stirrups, heels down, feet parallel to the horse. Gentle pressure with your knees, that's how you keep steady in the saddle. Always remember to grip with your knees."

Shaun tried to do all those things, and he seemed to be doing okay since Jen said, "That's good. Now, you'll probably have the impulse to hold on to the horn, because it's conveniently there, and you can do it if you feel really unsteady, but balance is important and it's better if you learn how to keep steady with your hands free. You can rest them on the gullet for now, or take the reins and hold your hands in front of you, but remember to keep them as steady as you can."

He tried to make mental notes of all these things, but it was a lot all at once, and the horse wasn't even moving yet. Jen had spent almost an hour with him at the house, giving him the horse riding 101 introduction. It hadn't sounded so complex then, but up on an actual horse, it felt very different.

Jen looked up at him. "Are you okay up there? Want me to go get her moving?"

"Okay," Shaun said a little unsurely.

Jen laughed a soft laugh. "It's okay to feel a little intimidated. We can stop whenever you want to. But you're looking good to me right now. Wanna get moving?"

"Okay," Shaun said again.

“Okay,” Jen echoed.

She walked away to the center of the pen, the lunge line in hand and made a clicking sound with her mouth and gave Barbagal a hand signal. The horse started walking, and Shaun tried to roll with the gentle swaying of Barbagal’s gait, tried to remember all that Jen had said he should do.

Jen’s voice complimented him again. “Looking really good, Shaun. How does it feel?”

“Strange,” he said.

Jen chuckled again. “I hope it’s a good-strange.”

“Yes.”

“Okay, let’s go another round or two.”

Shaun slowly grew accustomed and more comfortable to the horse movements, felt a little more secure after another two rounds around the pen. Jen was seeing it too, so she told him, “How do you feel about holding your arms to the side to hone your balance a little? Remember that you can keep steady in the saddle with your knees.”

Shaun gave it a try, applied some extra pressure with his thighs, tried to lean into the sway of Barbagal’s steps. It worked pretty well. Jen instructed him to do a few more balancing exercises to move his arms up and turn his torso to the side and back to neutral.

At one point she instructed him to take the reins that were loosely lying in front of the saddle’s gullet, reiterated how he should hold them, and he gave his best to comply. After a few more rounds of this, Jen gave Barbagal a sign to stop, and she did.

“All right, Shaun, let’s get you a little more in control, because now you’re holding the reins, and you can work a little with those. Remember what I said about that?”

“Yes.” He hoped he did, but there had been basic instructions on how the horse would react to rein commands.

Jen walked up to where Barbagal stood with him on it and explained to Shaun how he could signal to the horse to walk and stop. “Okay, you wanna try?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll go back to the center of the pen but I won’t give her any signals. It’s gonna be all you. Go for it.”

He knew he was supposed to give a good squeeze with his legs to get Barbagal moving, so he tried it. She made a hasty step forward that Shaun wasn’t prepared for, so he grabbed the gullet and instinctively squeezed his knees a little tighter.

He immediately saw Jen give a hand sign and Barbagal stopped again. “Are you okay?”

Shaun steadied himself. “I’m okay.”

“That was probably a little too eager on your part. You wanna try again, maybe a little more gently?”

Shaun took up the reins again, gave Barbagal’s rump a gentle squeeze with his legs, and she fell into a slow walk. Yes, this was much better. When the horse turned towards Jen, she reminded him to use the reins to steer her back to the rim of the pen, which Shaun did with success.

They practiced stopping and walking a few more times, even steering Barbagal around a little, eventually having Shaun turn her so she could go the other direction. He was definitely getting the hang of it, and he was starting to enjoy it more.

Jen took out her phone and held it up, asked him, “Mind if I take a photo for posterity?”

“No,” he told her. “Please send it to me.”

He hadn’t told anyone he was going to try riding today. He had no idea if it would be working for him, and he didn’t want the disappointment of having to tell his loved ones he failed. Now that he knew it had been a success, he would love to have a photo he could show Lea later. He was sure she would love seeing it, that she would be proud of him.

At some point, Shaun noticed that Zoe was standing near the pen’s gate, lifting her hand in a greeting. “Hey Jen. Just wanna let you know I’m here now.”

“Okay,” Jen called over to her. “You know what to do.”

“I do,” Zoe confirmed and left.

Jen turned her attention back to Shaun. “You want to try a little trot?”

Shaun could already feel his leg muscles getting tired and the right side of his ribcage was aching ever so slightly from the unusual activity. Jen had talked to him earlier about something she’d called two-point where he’d have to lift slightly out of the saddle with every second stride of the horse. He didn’t think he was ready to try that just yet.

“No,” he told Jen.

“Okay, no problem. You’ve been doing really well, want to go another round or two, or should we call it a day?”

“I’ve had enough for now.”

Jen nodded and folded up the lunge line as she walked up to Barbagal’s head, giving her a gentle pat on the neck. “You’ve had a nice little workout, girl, and you’ve been very good with Shaun,” she said to the horse. To Shaun, she said, “Go on and pat her neck, show her she’s been a good girl.”

Shaun leaned forward and did as Jen suggested, saying, “You’ve been a good girl.” It sounded strange to him, but this was probably what horse riders did.

Jen held on to Barbagal’s halter with one hand and turned to Shaun to explain to him how to dismount. Shaun managed to get off without her help, took a moment to steady himself back with both his feet planted on the ground.

Jen was giving him a long look. “I think you did great for your first time. How did it feel? Did you like it?”

“Yes, I liked it very much, but my legs are very tired.”

“Oh yeah, you’ll be feeling those tomorrow and probably the next couple of days. Should have warned you of that before.”

Jen held the reins out to Shaun. “Here, take her to the stables. I want you to have the full experience.”

They walked back to the stables, Barbagal placidly walking next to Shaun. Jen fastened her to one of the rings in the wall and together they unsaddled her and went through the post ride grooming routine. Shaun enjoyed that part, too. There was just something soothing and satisfying to it, and Barbagal seemed to be liking it.

Eventually, they took her back out to the pastures, walking past Zoe who was mucking one of the stalls. Jen opened the gate to the pasture and let Barbagal roam free. She trotted away and joined the other horses further back, immediately lowering her head to start grazing.

Jen leaned her folded arms on the topmost fence rail, turned her head to look at Shaun. “I’m really glad you gave that a try. We can do it again some time if you want.”

Shaun looked out across the pasture, sought out Pickles and Pancake whom he eventually spotted way in the back. “Do you think I could ride Pickles?”

Jen raised her eyebrows. “I have no idea if she’s broken in or how well she’d do with a beginner in the saddle. They recommend not riding a mare for at least six weeks after foaling, but I’m curious to see how well she’d perform under the saddle myself. Or if she does at all. But yeah, if she’s safe for you to ride, you can definitely try. But I think before that, we’d have to work a little more on the basics.”

“Yes, I would like that.”

“Awesome. I’ll definitely make room for that at your next visit, provided I’m here. I’m guessing your shift schedule is a little unpredictable.”

“Yes. Today is my day off.”

“Yeah, today is my half day at work, so that worked out well. But, you know, Dad can also do it, he’s a seasoned rider, even though he doesn’t get in the saddle so much anymore.”

“Okay.”

“Well, I gotta get to it. Dad had some paperwork he wanted me to look at. Feel free to hang out here, or come to the house if you want a snack.”

“Thank you,” he told her.

“You’re welcome. Always happy when I can win another horse person over, you know.” She winked at him and then she turned and left.

Shaun watched her walk away, then made his way back towards the farm yard. A soft breeze ruffled his hair, and Shaun eyed the bench by the barn, approached it to enjoy the fresh air a little longer. It made him appreciate so much more how nice it was out there, compared to the air-conditioned sterile atmosphere of the hospital. Now he knew to be grateful for either of their unique virtues.

As soon as he had sat down, Maeve, the grey tabby cat, came strutting over, jumped up on the bench and arched her back as Shaun started petting her. She eventually settled in, curled up next to him, her warm body against Shaun's leg.

It was with a little bit of dread that a minute later, Shaun saw Theo approaching. As much as he loved the boy, he was always inquisitive and wanted Shaun to do this or that thing with him. Shaun knew it was just how children were, they always wanted to be occupied with something. He could now feel the tiredness of his muscles from the unfamiliar exercise hitting home, and he'd looked forward to just a bit of quiet time to himself.

And of course Theo had spotted him, came towards him with an enthusiastic, "Dr. Shaun!"

Shaun said nothing, and Theo clambered up onto the bench on the side not occupied by the cat. "You rided a horse!"

Shaun normally would have corrected him to 'rode', but didn't quite feel it right now, so he stayed quiet. "Did you like it?" Theo asked.

"Yes," Shaun said.

"Mom let me ride with her on Barbs once, but she's really big. I like riding on Pepper better. He's not so big and I can do it on my own."

Yes, Shaun thought, that was fairly obvious, seeing how Barbagal was a quarter horse and Pepper was a pony.

"Did Mom let you gallop?" Theo asked.

"No," Shaun answered.

"Galloping is super fun. Did you ride in the pen?"

Shaun really wasn't in the mood for answering questions, so he just let out a hum.

Theo kept them coming. "When I first rided a horse, I didn't gallop either. But I trotted and I fell off. I hurt my knee. Did you fall down?"

Shaun didn't say anything, and Theo prodded, "Dr. Shaun? Did you fall down?"

Shaun sighed. He knew Theo wouldn't stop peppering him with questions unless he explicitly told him to. He'd been there before, had learned that Theo was too young to read Shaun's moods or wishes. He tried to make his voice congenial, not sure how good he'd be at it. "Can you stop asking me questions, please?"

Theo looked up at him. "Why?"

What could he say to that? That he wanted to wind down, that he just needed some quiet time sometimes, that he had hoped to have a moment to himself? He settled for, “I’m very tired.”

“Okay,” Theo acquiesced more easily than Shaun had expected.

He saw Theo pulling two Lego figures out of his pants pocket, taking one in each hand, and suddenly there were two Lego figures moving up and down Shaun’s thigh, Theo making them hop around on his leg, uttering some pretend dialogue between them as he moved them.

After an initial moment of apprehension, Shaun quickly relaxed. There was no harm in Theo just playing a little. His attention still on the Lego figures, Theo started softly singing a song to himself. Shaun listened, wasn’t familiar with what it was. There was something strangely soothing to it, with Theo still tapping the Lego figures rhythmically but gently on Shaun’s leg.

After a few minutes of this, Theo stopped moving the figures, which prompted Shaun to look at him. Theo was looking back at his face. “Dr. Shaun? I’m tired too.”

Before Shaun knew it, Theo was leaning against him, resting his head and shoulder against his upper arm. Theo wasn’t usually the cuddly type with Shaun, but they’d had their moments, and Shaun was no longer reticent about Theo’s touch, particularly if it was a quiet, peaceful moment like this.

Shaun moved his arm a little so that Theo could sit more comfortably. With the cat purring softly against one side and the child that Shaun had grown to love and accept on the other, he felt a wave of true gratefulness wash over him.

As harsh a blow as the bus accident had been to his life, as difficult as the recovery had been, he’d gained so much over the past two and a half months. He’d won a whole new family out here, everyone here now dear friends. He was back at work—the passionate and capable surgeon he’d always been—given back the gift to save lives.

He was married to a beautiful wife who had stood by him and been his rock through all of it, who had helped him without question, who had been patient beyond belief. He had Dr. Glassman by his side, the person he thought of as a father, who had been there every step of the way and offered his unwavering support.

He had a true chance to become attending at St. Bonaventure hospital, had colleagues and superiors who believed in him, who believed that he could be a good doctor whom they’d trust with the responsibility of being a supervisor and teacher.

There had been times when he didn’t think he could have any of those things, and it hit him just how lucky he was.

Theo stirred a little against him, weaved his arm underneath Shaun’s to hold on to it and snuggled a little closer against him. Shaun allowed himself a smile.

Life was good. He even dared say it couldn’t get much better.

+-+-+-+-+

THE END.

Chapter 21: Epilogue

“Lea?”

“Yes, Shaun?” She looked up from where she stood at the kitchen island, opening the package of chocolate chip cookies she’d had a sudden craving for.

He shifted on the couch to face her across the room. There was that subdued excitement in his voice, a buoyant expectancy that said he was proud of something he wanted to share with her. “I want to show you something.”

She assumed it had something to do with his earlier visit to the horse farm where he’d gone on his own on his day off. “Okay,” she told him, “I’m coming.”

She took the cookies with her, put them on the coffee table as she stuffed one in her mouth. “What have you got?” she said, chewing.

He was bringing something up on his phone, held it up to her. “Please look at this.”

She took the phone from him, looked at the photo that was up on the screen. It was Shaun, sitting in the saddle of a brown and white horse, holding the reins, and… riding a horse, by the looks of it.

She gaped at him. “Shaunie. You rode a horse?”

His smile was exuberant and proud. He nodded. “I did.”

“Wow. How was it?”

He was still smiling. “It was very nice. I enjoyed it very much.”

“So this was today?”

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t you tell me and Glassy? We could have been there with you to share the moment.”

His face fell a little. “I wasn’t sure I could do it.”

“So you were afraid you might fail and you didn’t want us to witness that?”

His eyes roamed around a little, like he was embarrassed about the admission. “Yes,” he said in a small voice.

“Okay, that’s fair.” She smiled at him. “But still, this is pretty awesome, I’m super glad that worked out well and that you really enjoyed it. Do you wanna do it again, do you think?”

“Yes. And I want you and Dr. Glassman to be there.”

“Oh, totally. I would love to see you up on a horse. Which one was this?”

“This is Barbagal, but Jen calls her Barbs. She was very gentle.”

Lea looked at the phone again, zoomed into the picture with her fingers. Shaun was wearing a riding helmet and looked fairly comfortable up in the saddle. He was holding the reins, the lunge line hanging a little slack. He looked very focused and wasn't looking at the camera, but he very rarely did that anyway.

She tried to imagine him taking this up as a hobby, him going out on rides, working with horses under the saddle. She wasn't sure she could really picture it, and she knew next to his busy job, it would be tricky to do it in any regular capacity, but she could definitely see the appeal for him, to feel a deeper connection to an animal and to work with it in tandem like this.

"So tell me more," she tried to prompt him. "When did you decide you wanted to try riding? Was it a spur of the moment thing?"

"No. I decided on my birthday that wasn't my birthday."

"At the party? How come?"

"I was watching Pickles and Pancake, and I was thinking about something Dr. Glassman had said to me."

Lea gave him a long look and there was still just all happiness and joy there. Shaun and Pickles, it was just an epic ironic love story. "You wanna ride Pickles one day, don't you?"

He briefly met her eyes. "Yes. But I don't know if I can."

"Oh, if you keep at it and keep practicing, I'm sure you could."

"No," he said, "I don't know if *anyone* can ride Pickles."

"Oh, yeah. I forgot they got her when she was already in foal. I guess they don't know if she's broken in, do they?"

"Jennifer said they don't. She wants to try when Pickles is ready. They need to wait until at least six weeks after foaling."

"Yeah, that makes sense. It would be super sweet if you could ride Pickles, though. You two love each other, I'm sure she'd let you ride her."

Shaun's smile widened at that. Lea probed some more. "What was Barbie Girl like today?"

"No," he corrected her immediately. "It is Barbagal."

She frowned. "Are you sure you didn't misunderstand that one?"

"Yes," he said immediately, then hesitated. "Perhaps… not very sure. I will check with Jennifer."

She chuckled. "Yeah. Though I admit Barbie Girl would be kind of a strange name for a white and brown palomino."

"No, Lea, she is not a palomino. Palominos have a gold coat and white mane and tail. This one is a pinto."

“Okay, Mr. Horse Expert. I shall stand corrected. Pinto Barbie it is,” she said, trying to make extra sure he understood that she was being ironic. “You haven’t answered my question, though.”

Of course Shaun still remembered the question. He never seemed to miss a beat. “I already said it was very nice.”

“Yeah, but give me more. Use your words. What did you like about it?”

“I liked…” He paused, probably had to think about how to put it in words for her. He operated on such a primal emotional level, sometimes couldn’t really discern the nuances or wrap them in phrases. “I liked how she and I moved together, especially when Jennifer let me give my own commands. I was too hasty with my legs, but only the first time.”

“You didn’t fall off, did you?”

“No. Theo asked me that, too.”

“Was he there to watch you?”

Shaun shrugged. “I don’t know. I didn’t see him.”

“I bet he was proud of you, too.”

“He asked me a lot of questions, but I told him to be quiet.”

Lea lifted her eyebrows. “Oh? Why is that?”

“I… wanted some quiet time.”

“Yeah, okay. Was he okay with that?”

“Yes. He played with Lego figures on my leg and then he sang something before he just sat with me. That was nice, too.”

She could only just imagine it. Theo being all *Dr. Shaun Is A Little Weird But I Love Him*, pushing right through Shaun’s boundaries, now that Shaun had learned to let him in. “It sounds like you had a pretty perfect day out there today.”

“Yes,” he agreed. “It was… pretty perfect.”

She smiled at him. “I’m so glad that we went there, this has been such a blessing. You up on a horse, that’s… I don’t know, that thought never even entered my mind, and yet I totally love it. Did you show Glassy?”

“No. I will tell him tomorrow at work.”

“Yeah, please do. I’m sure he’ll love it, too.”

“Do you also want to try horse riding?”

That was a good question, and hadn’t really had the urge that she could say. “I don’t know. Not particularly. Would you want me to so we can do it together?”

“Hm. Not if you don’t want it.”

“I’ll think about it, okay?”

“Okay,” he easily agreed.

+-+-+-+-+

It was the next day that Lea’s phone popped up with a notification that Shaun had added something to their joint playlist. Her interest was piqued when it was a song called *Barbagal*.

She clicked on it, and immediately frowned. It was an acapella track in a language that sounded like gibberish and that she couldn’t discern. She made a screenshot of the track from the app and sent it to Shaun with a, *‘What is this?’*

It took a while for him to answer, he was probably busy with patients, but when he did, he forwarded a message from Jennifer that said, *‘omg Shaun lol. No, not barbie girl, its Barbagal.’* Shaun added the following text to it: *‘It is not Barbie Girl. I found the song when I did some research.’*

‘So what language is this?’

She watched the animated dots for a long time until his next text came through. *‘The band is Belgian, the song is in a dialect from northern Italy called the Piemonte region. It’s about a drunken man named Barbagal riding through the town only in underwear in the middle of the night and waking up everyone with his loud shouting that he is a drunken fool.’*

‘Ok, TMI, but that’s kinda funny.’

‘Barbagal is a mare but the name is male. They got the gender wrong.’

‘Maybe they thought it had to do with gal=girl.’

‘But it is not pronounced like that.’

‘Kinda doubt whoever named her speaks that particular Italian dialect, Shaun.’

‘Maybe not. I have to go.’

‘Ok. TTYL’

He didn’t respond, of course, but she also didn’t expect him to.

+-+-+-+-+

This was kind of a big day. Shaun was following Jennifer to the donkey paddock that also seconded as riding area. Jennifer had Pickles all saddled and geared up for the first horseback tryout.

Shaun knew Jennifer had lunged her a number of times, now that Pancake was going on two months and getting stronger every day. She had said Pickles wasn’t a great lunger, but the

lunging work had gone okay—with and without saddle—and Jennifer was pretty sure that Pickles was used to a saddle and had been ridden before.

Shaun opened the gate and Jennifer led Pickles through. Shaun went in with her and closed the gate behind him.

Jennifer had her stop just inside the paddock and said, “Okay, girl, here goes nothing.” She double-checked that the bridle was fitting right over the halter she’d left on underneath, then said, “Shaun, can you hold her while I try to get on, just in case she tries anything funny?”

He wordlessly took the reins from Jennifer and took hold of the halter, watched as she readjusted the girth, then put her foot in the stirrup and made a first attempt to mount. She didn’t fully get on at first, just put some weight on the saddle to see how Pickles would react.

Pickles moved a step to the side, but seemed fairly okay with the whole thing while Shaun held on to the halter.

Jennifer eventually made another attempt and swung her leg over to sit in the saddle. Pickles was standing still for it, which was a good sign. Shaun looked at Jennifer who said to Shaun, “So far, so good. Let’s see what she can do.”

Shaun handed Jennifer the reins and stepped back to stand by the fence. A seasoned rider, Jennifer gave the known cues, and Pickles seemed to be familiar with them. Jennifer had her walk a round, then had her fall into a 2-step trot. Yes, Pickles was definitely used to being ridden, even Shaun could see that.

He watched Jennifer do two more rounds, then she had Pickles pick up a canter, although Shaun could now see some resistance. Jennifer was trying to give more cues, started giving verbal commands as well, expressed her displeasure at Pickles apparently not exactly doing what Jennifer wanted.

Jennifer had Pickles slow down to a walk, but she clearly wasn’t happy now, and pulled against the reins, then started walking backwards which from Jennifer’s verbal exclamations Shaun knew was not intended. It took Jennifer a few tries to get her back to where she wanted Pickles, and they made another few rounds around the paddock in a slow trot before Jen came back to the gate and dismounted.

She let out a sigh. “Well, that could have gone better.”

Shaun thought he had to agree, although he didn’t know enough about riding that he could really tell where the issue may have lain. “What was the problem?” he asked.

“I don’t know. Could be that she’s not been under the saddle for a while. Could be that she’s not well trained. Or, you know, could just be that she’s a difficult horse.”

“Or it could be that she doesn’t like you.”

Jennifer let out a chuckle. “Thanks for the reminder, but yes, I suppose that’s also possible.”

Shaun wasn’t even sure why he said it, but the words were out of his mouth before he consciously registered wanting to say it. “Can I try?”

It had Jennifer look at him with an expression he was trying to discern. Surprise, maybe concern. “No offense, but you’re still a rookie. I know you’ve put in some work with Barbagal but I’m not sure that’s such a good idea.”

He couldn’t tell where the sudden determination was coming from, but he knew he really wanted it, if only just to try. “I will get my riding helmet, but I want to try.”

Jen inhaled audibly. “I don’t know, Shaun…”

“Pickles likes me. It may be different. You can lead her.”

Jen sighed again. “All right, I’ll wait.”

Shaun couldn’t help but smile, then jogged to the tack room where he was now keeping his own riding helmet that he’d bought when he’d realized that he wanted to keep learning how to ride. It had been a great pastime for the weekdays where he was off-shift and Lea was at work.

Back at the paddock, he put the helmet on, then went into the paddock and briefly patted Pickles’ neck. She was the picture of calm now, but she usually was with Shaun.

Jennifer said again, “Are you sure you want to do this?”

“Yes,” Shaun confirmed.

“Okay, but this is at your own peril. Remember to grip with your knees if she does anything funny.”

“Yes,” he confirmed again.

“Shaun, I really don’t know, this could be a bad idea.”

“I want to try, please.”

There was another audible inhale from Jennifer. “All right. But at the first signs of trouble, we’re stopping this.”

“Yes,” he assured her.

Shaun put his foot in the stirrup, waited to see if Pickles was giving any signs of discomfort. She stood still, and Shaun got into the saddle while Jennifer held the reins. Shaun remembered to briefly stroke her neck, give her a sign that he was now up there and not meaning any harm, but he thought Pickles knew that anyway.

He adjusted his position, felt the saddle under him. It was a different one than the one he usually used on Barbagal and the stirrups were a little too short, but he decided not to bother with adjusting them for now. Jen was looking up at him, Pickles was still standing perfectly still. “You good?”

“Yes, I’m good.”

“Okay, so far, so good. Let’s walk a round. Try to give gentle cues, maybe.”

Shaun did so, paid extra attention to use the right amount of pressure. He was still struggling sometimes with figuring out how much was appropriate. Pickles started walking when Shaun gave the signal with his legs, Jen still holding the reins.

Shaun knew he was a bit apprehensive, tried to counteract it by trying to get into a rhythm with Pickles' strides. It didn't take long for him to feel more comfortable. They made a round through the paddock like that before Jen stopped her near the gate.

There had been absolutely no sign of resistance from Pickles at all, and she still appeared to be perfectly relaxed. Jennifer looked up at him. "Were you right, Shaun?"

"About what?"

"That maybe she just doesn't like me."

He shrugged lightly. "I don't know."

"I'm not comfortable with letting you do more on your own just yet. But tell you what, I'll put Parker on her in the next day or two. If that works well, we'll see about having you go a little further. How does that sound?"

"That sounds very sensible."

"All right, then let's do that. And let's look at it this way, you've been up on Pickle's back. That's a pretty cool milestone."

Shaun smiled. "Yes, it is. Can you take a picture?"

"I sure can."

Jennifer slung the reins over the fence to ensure Pickles wasn't going to abscond, then took out her phone and took a few steps back to get the right angle. "Here we go," Jennifer told him, "smile."

Shaun tried his best, hoped it wasn't going to look too fake. He definitely wanted the memento, and he was looking forward to sharing the moment with Lea later. The photo would be a nice visual supplement.

He lightly patted Pickles' neck again before he dismounted. Unfastening the reins from the fence, he let the moment sink in. He'd been up on Pickles' horseback, and it had gone very well. Pickles had offered no resistance at all, they now knew she was definitely fit to be under the saddle. And there was a prospect he could ride her again, could work with her more.

He loved the idea, wanted to hope that Pickles wanted it as much as he did. Pickles was now nudging his arm with her muzzle, and Shaun said, "Okay."

Time to get her to the stables and out of the saddle so she could enjoy being carefree and back with Pancake whom they'd put one paddock over.

Jen came up to Shaun and showed him her phone. He couldn't see the photo all that well in the sunlight, but it seemed okay to him at first glance.

She commented, “The Shaun and Pickles love story continues.”

He smiled. “I hope it will have a happy ending.”

Jen nodded, “Yep, so do I.”

+-+-+-+-+

It had been a particularly nice trip to the golf course for Aaron and Ira today. Aaron had finally managed to get that one hole right without hitting the bunker, and the two had engaged in interesting conversation. Aaron wondered why he hadn’t done this more often before Lea had urged him to help get cabin-fevered Shaun out of the house.

Standing by the fence to the paddock where Shaun was doing some horse work with Pickles under the saddle, he noticed some movement out of the corner of his eye, saw Jennifer ambling closer. She stopped beside him and watched Shaun and Pickles for a few moments with him in silence.

Eventually, she commented, “Those two, they really hit it off, didn’t they?”

He looked at her. “You mean him and the mare?”

“Come on, you know her name is Pickles.”

Of course he did. “I never thought it’d be this easy to get him up on a horse, let alone actually pursue horse riding.”

“He’s full of surprises, isn’t he?”

“Oh yeah, more than you know.”

Jen’s gaze lingered on him for a long while, then she asked, “You and Shaun, how did that happen?”

Aaron drew in a breath. Shaun had just given Pickles the signal to go faster, and they fell into a leisurely 2-step trot. Shaun looked very comfortable in the saddle, and Aaron could feel immense love and pride swelling up in him.

He swallowed, then said to Jen, “When he was fourteen, he and his brother came to me, asking for help. You know, back when I was living in Wyoming.”

Slowly, he told her the whole story of how he had to tell Shaun and Steve that he couldn’t do anything for their rabbit, how Shaun and Steve had run away from home and lived in a bus, how Aaron had tried to keep an eye on them but hadn’t been able to prevent the tragedy of Steve’s death.

He gave her the abbreviated version of Shaun’s journey through several foster families until Aaron had finally had Shaun move in with him to get him through his teenage years and into med school and then into the residency program.

He knew Jen was impressed, maybe even amazed. Her eyes were still on him as she said, “It was a wonderful thing that you did, Aaron. I’m sure Shaun sees that, too.”

He had never seen it as an act of mercy or an act of pity. And he very much knew that Shaun was grateful. Aaron was, too. It had been important for both of them to find each other, despite all the hardships it had brought.

He watched Shaun and Pickles for another moment in silence, then said, “He wasn’t always like this, you know.”

“What do you mean?”

“He was… The Shaun you met, he’s so much more mature than just five years ago. He used to be a lot more… I don’t know… unstable, a lot less at ease and confident. You’ve never seen him off-balance, but—”

“Actually,” Jen interrupted, “I have.”

Aaron frowned. “Have you?”

“Yeah, he had a moment during the foaling when Pickles was in distress. I think there was also an incident with Mom at some point. But, you know, we talked about it, and it got sorted out. I guess those things just happen and you deal with them as they come, right?”

Aaron had to think back to the big ones, the memorable ones. The pharmacy came to mind. He tried to push it from his mind. “Yeah. You hope they’ll never happen, but he’ll always be struggling with that in one way or another. But the big meltdowns, they’ve become a lot less frequent, and that’s a sign of maturity, too. “And this,” he pointed at Shaun, “this is remarkable.”

“You didn’t think he could ride a horse?”

“Oh no, I knew he could. I just never thought he’d want to. Trying new things, that can be a hurdle, and that bus accident was a setback. But he’s recovered well, and, you know, finding this place has been a real blessing. It’s done him a world of good, and you welcomed him with open arms. He’s never had a lot of friends, and all of this—you, Ira, Tammy, your kids—it’s given us all so much. I hope you know that.”

She smiled at him warmly. “Yeah, I had a feeling. We didn’t really do much, but that’s great to hear.”

“Oh, you did plenty. Shaun isn’t real good at saying these things out loud, but I know he appreciates all of this. More than he’ll ever say.”

“Aaron, I’m not blind.”

He gave her a look. “Sorry, was I mansplaining?”

She let out a little laugh. “Yeah, maybe a little. Shaun communicates way more than you think. Because I’ve seen the little things, his journey with Theo, even with Parker. I’ve seen him and Mom hug, and I know that’s a big deal. No offense, but you don’t have the monopoly on reading him.”

Now it was Aaron’s turn to chuckle. “No, I suppose not.”

He and Jen looked on for another few moments until Jen asked, “Was adoption never on the table?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. It was… complicated. You know what happened with Maddie.”

She sighed. “Yeah.”

He let that sink in, felt he had to elaborate. “You know, thinking about it now, it may have been a bit of a convenient excuse. I don’t know why we never went that route. Maybe I was scared to commit. But I also don’t really know if Shaun would have wanted it, you know?”

“Why wouldn’t he?”

Aaron sighed. “He and his biological parents, it was… There’s a lot of baggage there. They couldn’t deal with a kid that wasn’t… normal, never really tried to understand him or support him. Steve was all he had, until the accident. And with Shaun, things are often black and white. He’s only ever known his father to be abusive and violent. Whatever I was, I don’t think he wanted the label ‘father’ attached. I don’t know if that makes sense.”

She nodded slowly. “Yeah, I think it does.”

“It took him a long time to get over all that childhood trauma. In some ways, he probably never completely will. But then he met Lea, and that opened up a whole other world for him.”

“The two of them are just so perfect for each other. So much so that I’m actually jealous.”

“Yeah, although it wasn’t like that from the beginning. They had a pretty rocky start.”

“Yeah, Parker mentioned he dated someone before Lea.”

“Carly. She was very different from Lea. Ultimately, I think he made the right choice. I mean, I know he did. Lea’s always known how to let Shaun be Shaun. Not many people know how to do that. I wasn’t quite so sure about her intentions in the beginning, may have misjudged her a little. But their wedding, it was really beautiful.”

Jen smiled. “Yeah, I bet. Big church affair and everything?”

“Actually, no, the opposite. Kind of a long story, but it ended up being an impromptu little do on the hospital roof with the president of the hospital officiating.”

Jennifer looked at him with an impressed expression. “Sounds like a very special day.”

“It didn’t end on a high note. Audrey, whom you met, she was stabbed and almost died that night.”

“Wait, what?”

“She got wrapped up in a domestic violence dispute and ended up on the wrong side of the abuser’s knife. Her luck that it happened right at the hospital. The emergency surgery saved her life, and, you know, it actually turned into a really big thing, with the abuser getting hold of a gun and,” he vaguely waved his hand, “an actual hostage situation. It was all resolved and no one died, but it was a pretty rough night.”

“Yeah, wow. Not such a great wedding day to remember after all.”

He shrugged. “Yeah, but you know, I think they’re okay with it. Shaun’s pretty resilient and Lea’s a tough cookie, too. They’ll be all right. They’ve been through some rough times before, they’ll make it.”

“Yeah,” Jen said, “Shaun told me about that.”

That was definitely a surprise. He looked at her. “He did?”

“He said they lost a baby last year. That’s what you meant, right?”

“Yeah.”

“He mentioned it when we were bottle-feeding Pancake. I had made an off-hand remark about feeding babies, I guess it might’ve triggered a memory.”

“Lea was at 22 weeks. The baby wasn’t viable outside the womb, there was nothing we could do. It was a pretty tough time, but I think you know all about that.”

She nodded. “Yeah. It’s the worst.”

They fell silent and Aaron looked at Shaun and Pickles again. The both of them had now slowed down to a walk, making another round of the paddock. Aaron looked up and let his eyes roam across the landscape. “You think you’d let him go out at some point?”

“You mean a trail ride?”

Aaron nodded and hm-hm’ed in confirmation.

“Yeah, why not? Not sure he’s quite ready yet, but he and Pickles seem to have excellent intuition. I put Theo on there once with Shaun because he just wouldn’t shut up about it. Pickles is like super-mom with Shaun. I don’t know what it is, they have some kind of special bond. Maybe on some subconscious horse intuition level she knows he helped her during the birth.

“Cause that’s the thing about horses, they have great intuition. I don’t know why she doesn’t like me. Could be past experience with other women, but she gets super protective of Shaun when he’s up on her. It’s a little bit like magic.”

Aaron chucked again, letting his eyes trail Shaun and Pickles. “I could watch this all day.”

“Have *you* ever been on horseback?”

Aaron almost flinched at the memory. “Yeah, Ira insisted. I hated it.”

Jen lightly chuckled. “Fair enough. Don’t think Lea is the horse type, either.”

“No, you better put her under a vintage engine, she’ll be happier there.”

“Oh, I know. I’m still amazed she helped Dad get that old tractor running. He’s been fussing with it ever since.”

“Yeah, she helped fix up the Roadster, too.”

“I know. It’s still a beauty.”

“It is.”

Shaun was now coming towards them, had Pickles come to a halt near them. “Hello, Dr. Glassman,” he greeted him.

“Hey Shaun,” Aaron responded.

“Did you watch me?”

“I did. You two make a great pair.”

Shaun could only nod. “Yes, I agree.”

Jen asked him, “You think you’re done for the day?”

“Yes,” Shaun confirmed. “I am getting better at the leg cues.”

“Yeah, you definitely are. Good work today, both of you. I’d love to work with you a little more on cantering next time you’re here.”

“Okay,” Shaun easily agreed as Jen opened the gate and Shaun let Pickles walk through it before he gave her a cue to stop and then dismounted, taking the reins to lead her.

“We wanna get you ready for a trail ride some time, right?”

“Really?” Shaun asked in surprise as they walked towards the stables.

“Yeah, don’t you want that?”

“I want that very much,” he told her.

“Keep at it, and you’ll be there in no time. You’ve already come a long way since we first got you up on Barbs, remember?”

“Yes, I remember. My legs muscles do, too.”

Jen laughed a soft laugh. “Well, it’s not like I didn’t warn you.”

“It was worth it.”

“Glad to hear it.”

Aaron followed them into the stables but hung back and just watched Shaun and Jen unsaddle Pickles and go through the grooming routine that Shaun knew well by now. At some point there was a faint whinny from outside, and Pickles responded with her own one that Aaron saw made Shaun momentarily flinch.

Jennifer patted her neck and commented, “Easy, girl, you’ll be reunited with your son soon enough.”

They worked in silence for a while longer while Aaron looked on, drawing a strange kind of pleasure from just watching Shaun being happy and in his element.

He thought back to his conversation with Jennifer, wondered if this would be different if they had actually gone the adoption route. The only conclusion he could draw was that, ultimately, it didn’t matter. He might not always have thought of Shaun as his actual son, but he knew he’d always taken pride in his accomplishments and successes the way that a parent felt about their child. A certificate on paper didn’t make that any more or less real.

At some point, Shaun asked Jennifer, “Your father told me the decision to sell Pickles will depend on how well she performs under the saddle. How is she performing under the saddle?”

“You tell me, Shaun.”

“I am very new to horse riding, I can’t judge that.”

“I think the fact that she does so well with you is actual testament to how well she’s performing under the saddle, don’t you think?”

“So you will be selling her?”

Jennifer stopped curry-combing Pickles belly and straightened up to look at Shaun who was cleaning her croup on the other side. “You don’t want us to sell her, do you?”

Shaun stayed quiet for a moment, then said diplomatically, “That is not my decision.”

“Oh, I know, but I also know you’ve grown really attached to her. I get it, though. I wish we could keep every horse we love, but she’s healthy and doing really well. We’re a sanctuary, so our priority has to be animals in need that wouldn’t find a home elsewhere.”

“I know,” Shaun said, and Aaron thought there was a certain regret and defeat in his voice. He really loved that horse.

Aaron looked at the grey mare, could admire her beauty, even though he wasn’t a horse person. For Shaun’s sake, he hoped the two wouldn’t have to eventually part. But that was a lesson to be learned too, that sometimes things had to happen in a certain way and you had to close certain chapters in your life and move on.

He watched Jen unclip Pickles’ halter and said to Shaun, “Let’s get her reunited with Pancake, shall we?”

“Yes,” Shaun confirmed.

“And we’ll definitely get you trail-ready if you keep coming to visit.”

Shaun smiled at that. “Yes, please.”

Yes, Aaron could only wish for the same. Anything that made Shaun happy was good in his book.

+-+-+-+-+

“Cheers and Merry Christmas!” Ira toasted as he raised his glass with eggnog. Shaun raised his as well, not sure he was actually going to like it.

“Merry Christmas,” it echoed from all around the table. They were sitting at the Greenbergs’ dining table, having taken them up on their offer for an extended family Christmas Day dinner. Seeing how Shaun and Lea’s family in San Jose was small anyway, it had seemed like the perfect opportunity.

The kids were staying with their dad on Christmas Day, so it was just Ira, Tammy and Jen with Shaun, Lea and Dr. Glassman having a laid back meal, all now nicely filled from the traditional ham that Ira and Tammy had served. There had been some explanation as to why they were celebrating Christmas rather than Hanukkah, but as a mixed religion family, Tammy had insisted that they adopt the Thanksgiving and Christmas traditions, and who was Ira to say no to extra gifts and great food?

Shaun looked at the glass he was holding, carefully took a tiny sip from the creamy drink, preparing for the fact that he might find it repulsive. He hoped it wouldn’t be anything like mayonnaise, and was pleasantly surprised that it tasted sweet and velvety on his tongue with a hint of alcohol. He took another sip, and saw that Lea was watching him. He briefly met her eyes, found that she seemed to look content.

Shaun leaned back in his chair, enjoyed the comfortable atmosphere. It was amazing just how much he felt at home at the farm now, even if he couldn’t visit as often as he wanted anymore. Ira and Tammy always welcomed him with open arms, and this evening had felt very casual and natural.

Dr. Glassman was belly-laughing at something that Ira had said, and Shaun was amazed by that, too. He hadn’t seen him be so carefree in a long time. It was like the farm had opened up a whole new world to all of them.

Shaun was pulled from his reverie when Ira audibly harrumphed, then let his gaze settle on Shaun. “Well,” Ira started, “there’s one more very important thing we need to take care of tonight.”

Shaun was unsure why he was suddenly the center of attention. Ira got up from his chair. “We need to go to the stables for that, though.”

Tammy, Jen and Dr. Glassman followed suit and got up. Shaun looked at Lea who was shrugging slightly.

Dr. Glassman added, “Come on, Shaun. You should be there for this.” He turned to Lea. “You too.”

She responded with, “That sounds ominous.”

Shaun felt immediately apprehensive. “I don’t like surprises.”

Glassman smiled at him. “You’ll like this one, I promise.”

Shaun knew he had little other choice, and he knew he should trust Dr. Glassman and the Greenbergs. After all, his 30th birthday party had turned out extremely well, so there was encouraging precedent.

He hesitantly got up from the table, followed the others to the door where everyone was putting on shoes and jackets. Lea sidled up to him when they walked to the stables and took his hand. He turned his head at her. “Do you know what this is about?”

She shook her head. “Nope, as clueless as you are. But I hope it’ll be good.”

He inhaled audibly. “So do I.”

When they got to the stables, Ira switched on the lights, and immediately there were the familiar sounds of horses being housed. A snort from further down the aisle, hooves moving around, some heads poking out over the stall doors to check out who the visitors were.

Shaun followed Ira, Tammy and Jen, saw that there was something unusual to the door of Pickles’ stall. They had affixed silver, red and green Christmas themed garlands to the part of the door that Pickles wouldn’t be able to reach. Everyone stopped in front of that particular stall, as did Shaun and Lea.

Shaun took in the decoration for a moment longer, then asked, “What is that for?”

Ira produced something from behind his back and held it out to Shaun with a, “Merry Christmas, Shaun.” It was a rolled up piece of paper with a ribbon around it.

Shaun tentatively took it. “What is this?”

Dr. Glassman told him, “Go on, take a look.”

Shaun pulled the paper out of the ribbon and unrolled it, read it in the dim light. It said, ‘Certificate of Ownership,’ declaring that one Shaun Robert Murphy was now the owner of a dapple grey mare named Pickles.

Shaun’s jaw went slack. What was this? He looked up, not sure whom to look at first. He chose Ira who was smiling at him. Dr. Glassman had a big smile on his face, too. Lea looked confused, asked him, “What is it, Shaun?”

He wordlessly held the paper out to her, trying to understand what had just happened. “Does this mean…”

He stopped there as Lea took the paper and read it. Ira finished the sentence for him, “That you’re now the owner of your all-time favorite horse? Yes, that’s exactly what it means.”

Shaun couldn’t believe it. This was… It was too much. He couldn’t possibly— “I can’t accept this.”

“Of course you can.” Ira chuckled as he said, “It’s not like we’re expecting you to take it home, you know?”

“This is a horse.”

“Yeah, it’s a horse. And now it’s yours.”

“A horse is very expensive.”

“Oh, that’s all been taken care of,” Ira told him. “We worked that out with Aaron when he pitched the idea.”

Lea stepped closer and handed the paper back to Shaun. “Shaunie,” she just said, and he wasn’t exactly sure what that meant, but he took it as her approval. Was this really happening? Was Pickles going to be his to own?

He looked at the piece of paper again that was making it all real, then looked at every one of their hosts—Ira, Tammy, Jen. They all had smiles on their faces, and it finally hit Shaun what that meant. “S-so… we’re keeping Pickles?”

Ira nodded at him with a smile. “Yes, we’re keeping Pickles.”

“Oh,” Shaun exhaled, feeling the excitement and giddiness taking over. Was this really true? Was he now the proud owner of Pickles?

He looked up, then stepped right into Aaron’s space to give him a hug. The latter chuckled and gently patted Shaun’s back, telling him, “You should say thanks to Ira and Jen, too. They’re the ones who pushed for it when I made an offhand comment.”

Shaun released Aaron from the embrace and stood before Ira. “I would like to hug you.”

Ira laughed and slightly opened his arms. “Go right ahead.”

The hug was short and a lot more timid, but it felt only natural to convey the happiness and gratefulness he was feeling. When he stepped back, he told Ira, “Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome. We know how much that old girl means to you. And we’re happy to house her for you.”

“But…” Shaun turned to Jennifer, “you said that you need to prioritize horses that wouldn’t find a home elsewhere.”

“And we usually do that, but we can make exceptions. There’s a very good reason here to make one.”

Shaun took a step closer to Jennifer. “I also want to hug you.”

“Come on, then,” she said with a smile, inviting him in.

Shaun also briefly squeezed her and then released her, still feeling a happy warmth inside of him. He took a step towards the stall door, looked at Pickles who was hanging back with one hind leg resting, Pancake lying in the stall in the other corner. Both pricked their ears at the movement, and Shaun still couldn’t quite believe it.

He turned back to the group standing near him in a semi-circle, trying to figure out how this was going to work. “If I am now the owner, you should not have to pay for Pickles’ upkeep.”

Ira had an answer for that right away. “Oh, don’t worry about that. That’s been sorted out with Aaron as well.”

“No,” Shaun said. “I should be paying for it.”

Glassman told him, “Shaun, don’t worry. It’s my treat.”

“No,” Shaun protested again, but Ira now cut in.

“You know, if you wanna help us out, we have a donation fund for the sanctuary that you could contribute to. It’ll go towards the whole farm. You can give whatever you think is appropriate, I can send you the web address.”

Shaun was happy with that suggestion. “I’d like that.”

“All right, I guess that’s settled.”

As if on cue, Pickles was now taking an interest in the humans outside her stall and she reached the head over the door. Shaun went to her to give her a gentle caress. In a low and reverent voice, he said, “You are mine now.”

Of course Pickles didn’t truly understand the notion, but she definitely liked the attention, lipping Shaun affectionately on the arm with her upper lip. Pancake had also gotten up and was reaching his little head up, his nose barely reaching the top of the door. Shaun reached out his hand to let Pancake sniff it, but he turned away uninterested pretty quickly.

“What about Pancake?” he asked.

Jen told him, “As much as we’d like to keep him, we’ll need to sell him, Shaun. There’s already someone who expressed interest. They’re not too far out from here, and he’d have a really good home there. They’ve purchased from us before.”

“Where is it?” Shaun asked.

“Out in Bonny Doon. You know, towards the coast. You could even go visit if you wanted.”

“I think I would like that.”

“They’re really great horse trainers and I promise you he’ll have a good life there.”

“Will Pickles not miss him?”

“Oh, I’m sure she will. But she’ll get over it. You know, in wild horse herds, the stallions usually get kicked out of the group at a certain age, too. It’s the natural order of things.”

“But… you said he will be castrated.”

“Yeah, he might. I think we’ll let the new owners make that decision and he can enjoy his unadulterated freedom a little longer.”

Shaun smiled at that, trying to decide how much he hated the idea that he’d have to say goodbye to Pancake before long. Maybe that didn’t matter so much right now, maybe he should just be happy with the new circumstance that he was now an official horse owner and that Pickles had found her forever home here. Shaun vowed he would make sure she’d have the best life she could have.

Tammy was the one to interrupt the brief silence with, “Come on, people. There’s cocoa with gingerbread or sugar cookies at the house to round out the perfect evening.”

Ira said, “That’s a fabulous idea, and we should also draft up an official Bill of Sale to have it black on white, Shaun.”

Tammy turned to Ira. “Does that have to be done today?”

He shrugged. “No, I guess not. Let’s leave the horses to their well-earned rest, and we also have some more celebrating to do. And there’s *The Grinch* to watch, too.”

Jen groaned at that. “Seriously, Dad?”

“Come on, it’s tradition.” Ira turned to Shaun and Lea. “Have you seen *The Grinch*?”

Lea immediately said, “Of course.”

Shaun hesitated, then said, “No.”

That earned Glassman a stare from Ira. “Tsk tsk tsk, Aaron. How could you neglect Shaun’s education like this?”

Glassman shrugged. “It’s not for lack of trying.”

Shaun felt a little sheepish. “I didn’t like it, so we stopped after the first few minutes.”

Glassman looked at him. “How old were you? Fifteen?”

“Yes.”

“Well, you’re twice that age now, maybe this will qualify for a second attempt.”

Tammy sidled up to Shaun as they started leaving the stable. “It’s kind of a family event for us, but you don’t have to feel obligated.”

Shaun considered it, maybe Dr. Glassman was right, and he never could say no to Tammy. “I will give it another try.”

Back at the house, they ended up sitting all over the living room furniture that faced the television, Shaun sandwiched between Lea and Tammy, holding a mug of cocoa and nibbling at a sugar cookie that tasted wonderful and sweet.

Jen was fiddling with the remote control to find the movie in the playlist, and Shaun felt Lea’s hand resting on his shoulder, her arm slung around his back. When he looked at her, she was smiling.

“Are you happy, Shaunie?”

He smiled back at her. “Yes, I am very happy.”

She gave a little enthusiastic raise of her shoulders. “You’re the owner of Pickles now, that’s super exciting!”

He felt his own excitement stirring again in the pit of his stomach. He beamed at her. “Yes, it is.”

“I’m so happy for you.”

“I’m so happy for me, too.”

Lea laughed at that, then pulled him a little closer as the music of the movie’s intro was beginning to play. “I love you, please kiss me.”

Shaun was all too happy to oblige.

+-+-+-+-+

End Note:

So this is really it. I know a few folks have left me comments on the fic and loved what I cooked up. (Thank you so much!) I would love to hear some more thoughts from others about Shaun and horses. Can you imagine Shaun being a horse rider?

I will admit I’m still a little ambiguous on whether I can picture Shaun wanting to be on a horse, but it’s not out of the question. I think he’d dig the connection and bond to an animal, and horses can be really gentle and intuitive creatures. I’d love to hear your thoughts and ideas, also if you have something you’d like me to write in the future. Prompt fic is the best kind of fic!

End Note

Writing this story has been such a huge amount of fun, I can't even begin to tell you. At times it was daunting, and at times it wasn't easy figuring out where I wanted to go and how it was all going to unfold. Initially, it was supposed to be a whumpy "Shaun gets severely injured and we witness the aftermath" one-shot type deal, or at most a mid-length fic with a few chapters focusing on his recovery.

The big turning point really came when NiceNiceDevice, Daniela and I started talking about Shaun and horses. I don't even remember who brought this up initially (probably me watching something that inspired that thought), but we started throwing back and forth ideas how Shaun would fare around horses, and then the horse sanctuary idea was born.

Once we got Shaun there, it evolved into Shaun's new horse farm adventures, and the ideas just kept coming. We met Theo and Parker and the rest of the Greenberg family, and Shaun bonding with Pickles and Theo and that whole wonderful family was just so wholesome, especially after all the hardships he'd been through.

Funnily, a few weeks after the horse farm idea was born and after we had decided that Shaun's new dapple grey horse friend would be called Pickles, Richard Schiff (Dr. Glassman) posted a photo on his Instagram of a dapple grey horse he had bought for his wife and asked for name suggestions. Rachel Bay Jones (who played Salen) suggested the name 'Pickle'. I swear that was a huge but pretty cool coincidence! I don't know how Richard and Sheila ended up naming their horse.

Writing the horse farm and all these new characters brought its own challenges with it. While I am fairly familiar with farm life, horses and donkeys from my childhood, there were many things I had to look up online, had to research and learn about myself (all things Western riding, for instance – or a refresher on the whole equine birthing process).

And not only that. Getting into fairly complex longfic territory, I knew I had to have tracking systems to keep things practical and viable. There's a whole calendar that tracks the timeline of every scene and Shaun's healing process over time. There's a large and intricate mindmap that outlines all the different threads and plot points to ensure I wasn't leaving any loose ends and avoid continuity errors. Sometimes I wish the show's writers would take the same amount of care.

I also love graphic editing, but it took a while for me to figure out a) a good title for the story and b) an idea for the cover graphic that would work. And I gotta say, I kinda love how both came out in the end, because, come on, that cover graphic is all kinds of epic, right? Or maybe I'm just a massive nerd for these things…

All in all, this is definitely the longest fictional story I've written to date, but it has been super fun and I'm a little sad that it's over. Maybe I'll take Shaun back to the horse farm in the future, we shall see. Pancake still needs a Shaun-approved forever home, doesn't he? :-)

Chapter titles are from two different songs: Vertical Horizon – Underwater and Incubus – Drive