

The Gamer's Tale

The RA Volume IV, Part Five

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By Isaac Byrne

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“And for the Promising Up & Coming Noob Award, it’s... Aaron Dodgeson!”

Destiny applauded along with the rest of the club. Also contributing were a few members who indulged in some good-natured boos, boys whose honor prohibited them bestowing honorifics on a freshman. Sophomore, she supposed, in a couple weeks. Or did he not become a sophomore until the fall? Would she be a college freshman after graduation, or when classes started at Lakeview in August? Crazy to think about. Lerwick and Hayes High, the school it shared with two other neighboring towns, were all she’d ever known.

Aaron shook the gold-painted plastic trophy over his head. “Gee, so many people I owe this to,” he said into the microphone even as Barney tried to keep him from it. “I’d like to thank God, for giving me these magic fingers—”

“And there are children present, so we’ll stop you right there.” Barney nudged the twerp offstage. Or, more accurately, out from the front of Ms. Stadler’s classroom, the club’s usual meeting place. The teacher herself was barely listening. She tried to be, Destiny knew, but the stack of papers to grade on the corner of her desk and the toddler waiting for her at daycare meant she could only spare so much attention for the farewell get-together of the Hayes High Gaming Club.

“Next up, we have a little token of our appreciation for somebody everybody wants at their back. When the chips are down, when the stakes are high, you want...” Destiny straightened up. She’d made top 50 on the North American PUBG server and seldom dipped below Master I. It might wind up giving her arthritis when she was 25, but she’d done it. Finally, all those hours of grinding and training and testing strats on her alts were going to— “Michael Soo!”

She quickly slumped back down, hoping nobody had noticed her moment of anticipation. Michael Soo? He was a very solid shooter, but he was also a competitive asswipe. He tended to take charge, bark orders, and if it went well, hoard the credit. Destiny didn’t like having him behind her though. The feel of his gaze on her butt aside, he’d shot her in the back last week because she hadn’t immediately ducked after he ordered the squad to duck. The enemy team cresting the hill in their jeep, which she’d been establishing a lock-on with her rocket launcher, was more than grateful for the warning from the sound of the gunshot, and promptly hunted down the rest of the team.

He’d blamed Destiny for attracting them. This was why she didn’t use her main for HHGC.

Michael marched up, snatched what had been cleverly been termed the Backseat Gamer trophy, and promptly resumed playing whatever that was on his phone. No, she saw, squinting. He was researching a game, not playing one. Michael wasn’t some Candy Crush casual, she’d give him that.

“Now what’s better than an MVP?” continued Barney. He was one of the few members of HHGC who was in any other extracurriculars, in his case, theater. Not that

he was an actor; Barney was on set crew. But he knew actors, if only high school ones, which in fairness was more than Destiny could say of herself.

“Your mom!” yelled Aaron.

Barney ignored him. “Let’s make some noise for your favorite, my favorite, the second most useful finger, Destiny Holbrook!” Destiny rose, smiling. She didn’t win a lot of awards, and however much her stepdad was always yammering on about Gen Z and their goddamn participation trophies, she’d never been given one of those, either. Sure, it was only some stupid plastic thing, and sure, they made sure all the seniors got one for something. Even so, the team had customized them, so everybody was recognized for something unique and personal. As stressful as it was sometimes being the only girl in HHGC, at least for once they’d have to—

She looked at the inscription on the base of the trophy. “Team Waifu...?” she said, looking up at Barney through the lenses of her glasses. Why were they so blurry?

Oh right, she was starting to cry at the humiliation.

She made herself think about headshots and stealth kills and the time the team had browbeat her into adopting the Black Widow Fortnite skin which had cost her an entire month’s allowance and how she’d “accidentally” misclicked and lobbed a gas grenade into the vehicle instead of getting in.

The tears receded. She was almost as good at doing that as she was at gaming.

“Hell yeah!” Barney took her wrist and raised it and the trophy over the petite girl’s head. “Team Waifu, everybody!” Her voice was so small, he must have figured the others hadn’t heard her. Which would have been nice of him to let her leave it that way.

“Wai-fu! Wai-fu! Wai-fu!” he began chanting. The others soon fell in line. Ms. Stadler looked up from her grading, frowning, but said nothing as Destiny hurried back to her seat, cheeks flushing, smile forced and hanging by a thread.

Ms. Stadler continued to say nothing until the ceremony broke up, the members of the HHGC all promising to log on at 8 for the night’s raid. She tried not to hear Michael saying something to the others about how he’d be “all alone” with their waifu at Lakeview next year. Like there weren’t ten thousand other boys there. Like he had dibs.

The young teacher beckoned Destiny with a finger, waiting until the door swung shut behind Barney and his now empty trophy box before she spoke.

“Are you OK, Destiny?”

Destiny snorted. “Um, yeah...? That was so fun. Why wouldn’t I be?” She couldn’t wait to get home and cry where no boys would see it. She always kept her bedroom door locked whether she was in or out, so not even Stan could watch her meltdown. He always made fun of her when she got emotional.

“Team Waifu?” suggested Ms. Sadler.

“They were just teasing,” Destiny said, making herself roll her eyes. She’d seen popular girls roll their eyes at teachers before. She never raised her hands, learned how

not to get called on so they didn't talk to her, so she never needed to. But popular girls did, and didn't seem to get in trouble. "I mean, I guess if they only ever talk to one girl, who else are they supposed to hit on?"

Her sophomore chemistry teacher nodded, disregarding Destiny's rare attempt at sass. "That's true. They were just teasing. During the awards ceremony. Instead of recognizing your skill, they were recognizing your uterus. Not telling you how to feel, but if it were me, I might be kind of upset."

"Boys will be boys," she said. Another thing her stepdad said all the time, usually when one of her stepbrothers did something monumentally stupid or gross or creepy. A few weeks ago one of them had snapped her bra strap, and when she'd yelled at him not to touch her, Stan had laughed and delivered another of his speeches about how boys just wanted attention, and if she kept being hysterical every time they did that, they'd only do it more. But they'd done it before and she'd said nothing, and that had made them do it more, too. She didn't really know what to do about the whole boy portion of the human race. Easier online, where you could just rocket launcher them into nothingness.

"They will, but girls get to be girls, too."

Destiny shook her head. "I'm a girl. Just because I'm a nerd and I don't spend an hour every morning in front of the mirror doesn't mean I'm not a girl."

Ms. Sadler saw she'd been unclear, and put her hands softly on Destiny's shoulders. She flinched, if only a little. Teachers weren't supposed to touch students, were they? Besides, she was already upset over that stupid trophy. Somebody being nice to her would only make her cry harder, and sooner.

In fact...

The teacher squeezed her shoulders, and the valve on the young woman's waterworks spun wide open. Ms. Sadler bent down in her face, commanding her attention. "Hey! Hey, Destiny, that's not what I meant at all. Of course you're a girl. The fact that you're a kick-ass gamer nerd only makes you girlier in my book." Destiny fell into the woman's arms, melting into the instant hug. "I'm sorry that happened. I should have vetted the trophies, so that's on me. I'm sorry."

"Snr frrg furrhr," Destiny sobbed into the woman's blouse, her glasses now unusable from the surge of tears.

"I know, honey. I know. But hey. In a couple months, you're going to go to college. Do you know what you're studying?"

Destiny nodded. "Urrm hrrmhr rrn krnnrrr snurrhs," she mumbled, still weeping way harder than she knew how to control.

"Computer science? That's great. You're going to learn so much, so fast, you'll have to delete memories of dumb high school boys to make room for it. You're going to Lakeview, right? They have a great program."

“Thurrs whrr hrrhrrrd.”

Her teacher held her for a while, letting her get the worst of it out. Destiny felt even more pathetic dumping all this on Ms. Sadler, who she hadn't even had for a class in years. She'd loved class, though. Ms. Sadler had a knack for making her curious about the how of things, stuff scientists had known for years but were fresh and interesting to a novice like her. Ms. Sadler liked to end class – labs, anyway – with a question, something to make them think about the social issues around the scientific aspects, the implications of it for humankind. Along with other notes on the chalkboard behind her was written in red dry erase marker the question, *What is the role of the artist when their computer surpasses their art?* She'd zoned out for the first few awards just thinking about it, and thinking about how much she didn't know and how much she *could* know and how if she knew everything there were some things you could only have opinions on because not every question had right answers.

The main thought Destiny had dwelled on, though, was that it was the main reason her stepdad gave for why he thought she was stupid to want to study computer science, when computers were teaching themselves. Stan still managed to be more progressive than his wife, Destiny's mother, who nominally supported her daughter but mostly wanted her to meet a nice man and start working on making her some grandbabies.

Ms. Sadler being Ms. Sadler, she offered a roll of coarse paper towels in lieu of tissues for Destiny to tidy up her face. Perk of not wearing makeup: less messy cleanup after an outburst like that. She apologized, to which her teacher insisted there was no need, which for some reason made her apologize again, for which she apologized.

Ms. Sadler shook her head. “Can I tell you something, Destiny? A little perspective I wish somebody had given me before I went to college.”

Destiny sniffled, trying not to fixate on that stupid trophy. “Sure. I'm actually the first in my family to ever go, so I have no idea what to expect. Any advice is good advice.”

“Except it's not.” The woman shook her head sternly. “People are going to tell you – have probably already told you – that ‘girly’ is a four-letter word. They'll–”

“Um, it's five letters...” Destiny said nervously. Maybe science teachers were just bad with math, and English?

Her teacher smiled. “Exactly. I mean four-letter word, like a lot of bad words. ‘Fuck,’ for example.”

“Ms. Sadler...!”

She laughed. “Oh, in a couple weeks we'll both just be adults out in the world. Relax. But my point is, they're going to try to make you feel like if you want to succeed, especially in the STEM field, you need to be like men. Not even like men, but like insecure shits – another four-letter word, see? But don't let them. It's OK to have

feelings. Important, even. It's OK to cry. Or laugh. Or, when someone tells you to smile, to tell them 'no thanks, I don't feel like it.' Use that finger you're so fond of, if you like."

Destiny, or as she was better known online, Mittlefinger, picked up the trophy. She wasn't sure what to make of this pep talk, but it was working she was pretty sure. Her eyes narrowed into a scowl driving hard into that plastic as her teacher continued. "Going to college is going to be the best thing for you. You live in Lerwick, right?"

"Yeah. The smell give me away?" Destiny snickered. The only jobs in Lerwick other than agriculture were the meat processing plant, where Stan worked. It was an old joke, but like that Lerwick odor, it stuck. (Better than Bannock, one of the other towns feeding into Hayes High, where the slaughterhouse was. A low bar.)

"No, I just tend to remember things about my favorites," Ms. Sadler said. "Destiny, you're going to see so much and learn so much when you get out of here. You never have to feel ashamed of where you come from, but I hope when you leave that you never have to come back."

Her student – for a couple weeks yet – frowned. "You came back."

"I didn't have a choice. My... It doesn't matter. But trust me, this is an even smaller place than it feels now, and you have so much big in you. Find people who make you feel good about yourself. Who support your choices because they're *your* choices. Don't settle for someone just because they're a decent shot and don't breathe too loud in voice chat. Find the ones who appreciate you for who you are. Competitive, brilliant, feisty, insightful. And yes, total waifu material – but only because of all those other things."

They hugged again, but then Destiny walked across the room and threw the trophy in the trash. "You're a really good teacher, Ms. Sadler."

The teacher walked with her to the door. "You're a really good gamer, Destiny."

Destiny wrinkled her nose. "At least I wouldn't shoot my own teammates in the back."

Ms. Sadler flashed an exasperated look. "Oh my god, I know, right! I can't tell you how good it felt watching Michael get crushed under those tires. MVP my ass."

"Hey, that's another four-letter word!"

"What's a 'waifu?'"

Destiny frowned. "It's Japanese. Kind of. Just means, like, girl I want to marry."

Her mother shook her head. "So why is that bad? It sounds like a compliment."

"It'd just be nice to be recognized for something other than being a girl, that's all."

"There's nothing wrong with being a girl, sweetheart. Especially a pretty girl like you – not that you'd know it in that." Her mother surveyed Destiny's hoodie with

disdain, but settled for stroking her hair and kissing her forehead. “Just try to see the good in people.”

“I know, Mom. Look, it’s almost 8. I gotta...”

Her mother rose with a sniff of disapproval. “You gotta shoot aliens, or whatever it is this week.”

“Communists.”

“Well, at least there’s some good coming of it. Have fun.” She kissed her daughter on the forehead and excused herself. Destiny followed her to the door, locked it with practiced subtlety, and sat back down at her station. She stared at her darkened monitor fretfully for some time after her mother left, even after her headset started issuing the faint sounds of the HHGC voice chat as the boys logged in.

“Sup bitches?”

“How’s it going, gang?”

“Pretty good, just got home from your mom’s house.”

“You mean my house...? Because I don’t remember seeing you come or go.”

“Your mom sure saw me come.”

“Proably had too much in her eyes to see you go!”

“Fuck you, pussy!”

“Yes, Michael, that is what you do with a pussy.”

She could just sit it out. See how these tryhards fared without Mittlefinger. She nodded to herself. Ms. Sadler had been right. These boys only stressed her out and made her feel bad about herself. Yes, they were semi-competent, some of them, usually, and yes, it was better than dealing with random PUGs. At least these doofuses wouldn’t hear a girl’s voice and lose their damn minds over it.

“Where the fuck is Destiny?”

“Says she’s signed in.”

“Well tell that Motherfinger to hurry the motherfinger up already.”

“Bet you wanna smell that finger.”

Destiny cringed at the sound of one of them sniffing so loudly their mic picked it up and broadcast it across her bedroom. Yeah, no way she was going to put up with this. Waifu? Well, dinguses, prepare yourselves to get cleaned out in divorce court.

“Have you guys read the links I sent you yet? The Red Scare DLC is supposed to be way undertuned. Confirmed legendary +18% RoF sniper, day one, brahs.”

“Maybe Destiny’s busy doing your stupid homework.”

“Maybe she’s making us all sammiches.”

“Dude, don’t be a dick.”

“Dude, don’t be such a pussy. She’s never gonna fuck you, man.”

No. No more. She was going to tell these little four-letter words what four-letter words they all were, and invite them to go four-letter word themselves in their big fat

four-letter words. Or... no. Better yet, don't give them the satisfaction. With a broad grin, she jerked her headset out of the USB port. Her speakers were off – they were always off, ever since her stepbrother had nearly caught her masturbating to a Markiplier stream where his AC had busted and he was all sweaty and kept complaining about it in that magical, rumbling voice of his, and it was probably staged and probably elicit exactly that reaction but *whoof* who cared, and...

There. Unplugged. Done. No more HHGC.

Destiny's smile slowly faded over the next minute as she tried to think what else she could do. She didn't really have any other friends. She could hang out with Mom and Stan, but... Ugh, she hated retrosports. Who had patience for games where only mutants could be good at it, where it took three hours of fast food and beer commercials before it was over? It was the twenty-first century, and they hadn't realized the utility of being able to gg when it was obvious they couldn't win?

Maybe she could...

Hmm. Or...

Was there really a high drop rate 18% RoF boost sniper in Red Scare? Day *one*...?!

"Hey guys, sorry I'm late."

"*Waifu!*"

"You shouldn't wear things like that around the house," her mother said sternly.

"Mom, it's like ninety-five degrees outside!"

"It's eighty-eight, and you're not outside."

"It's ninety-five in my room," Destiny grumbled. The heat pumped out by the fan on her CPU was like an oven. Great in winter, but come summertime, upstairs, with Stan's insistence that sweat built character so his house didn't need AC? (He'd conveniently decided to favor his wife with a window unit in their bedroom, though. "More than one way to work up a sweat!" he'd laughed when she complained. *Gross.*) Even that, though, wasn't to be turned down below 80 when he wasn't in it. It was brutal in her bedroom. Only it was even more brutal outside, six acres full of bugs, snakes, coyotes and bored stepbrothers.

Would she have her own air conditioning at college? The thought made her smile. Sleeping under sheets and blankets because it was winter outside of them. It probably said on their website, but sitting at her PC was always too distracting to read some college-crafted commercial for their dumb dorms.

"We live in a house with men, Destiny. We all make concessions. Now go put on some actual shorts, instead of those... shorty shorts."

"They're called booty shorts, Mom, and these aren't even–"

“You watch your language, young lady. You still live in a Christian house. Oh and hey, speaking of you running away from home, this ought to cheer you up. A letter came for you today.”

Destiny blinked. “A letter? Like, on paper?”

Her mother fished it out of her purse and read slowly from the envelope. She wasn't much for reading, having dropped out of school to raise Destiny as a junior. “‘Lakeview University Office of Housing and Resident – Residence – Life.’ Guess it's about your, oh what do they call it. Not apartment, but...”

“It's a dorm, Mom.”

“Don't take that tone, college girl. You still live under my roof. Anyway, I already opened it, took a gander. It's about your roommate, the rules, stuff to bring and not to bring. You make sure you read the whole thing.”

Destiny snatched the letter out of her mother's hands and ran upstairs. Her mother opening her mail, the sweltering heat, her stepbrother Blaine showering with the bathroom door open again... it was all forgotten as she read the letter.

And again.

And again.

Destiny hadn't been this devastated when her level 91 hardcore druid died because Stan started banging on the door and yelling that she had to take the garbage out to the burn pile right that very minute and made her abandon her team in the middle of a boss fight. Those idiots had kited Duriel right to where she'd AFKed, and she was pretty sure they'd done it on purpose. Even that didn't compare to this.

A coed floor.

All that yearning and dreaming of an exclusively female space, no drooling boys staring at her big stupid boobs or forcing her to talk to them when she just wanted to listen to her music and... All the four-letter words, all of them!

Destiny hadn't signed up for a coed floor. What did that mean? Would boys be, like, next door to her? Or like downstairs or something on another floor? (Did dorms have more than one floor usually?) She was pretty sure her dorm room wouldn't have its own bathroom, so... would they share? Would some boy just plop down in the next stall and drop a twosie? And her roommate! The name listed *Charlie* Andrews. Charlie was in quotes, which she assumed meant it was a preferred nickname, but... could that be *Charles*?! They couldn't room her with a *boy*, could they...?!

Just how big were these dorm rooms, anyway?! She better at least have some kind of privacy screen, or, or...! She made sure the door was locked, then sobbed and sobbed into her pillow. It felt like her college dreams had been murdered by the contents of that envelope. Even if it was a girl, like a Charlene or something, it would be a girl who'd probably *wanted* to live with a bunch of boys. One of those girly girls – not like Destiny, the four-letter kind of girly girls – who wore fake eyelashes and had a shoe rack

who'd never played a video game more advanced than freaking *Animal Crossing!* A casual!

(Not to dis *Animal Crossing*, Destiny reminded herself. Cuteness had its place, and it was OK to unwind sometimes. She just preferred to relax smurfing on the bronzies.)

Her mother was no help. The woman still had a flip phone, for crying out loud, and that was the most advanced piece of technology she used. Of course she hadn't read up on Lakeview housing policies any more than Destiny had. Yes, she'd read the letter, but she seemed sure "Charlie" was a typo or else short for some girl's name. In any event, she seemed excited that the pursuit of an MRS degree that was her real hope for her daughter's education would begin on day one. She wouldn't even have to leave the building to find a man. Wasn't that nice?

"Just don't let Charlie knock you up until he's got a ring on you," she cautioned.

Destiny waited as long as she could – almost two hours – before picking up the phone. There was contact information there, and some tips for talking points the roommates-to-be should discuss before meeting in August. Had Charlie even gotten her letter yet? Well, no matter. If something had gotten fouled up, Destiny wanted it addressed and resolved immediately. She was *not* living with a boy.

The phone rang twice before someone picked up. "Well hello."

"Um, hi." Why did this woman's voice sound like she was talking to someone she knew? "Is this Charlie Andrews?"

"Why, yes it is, and you must be Destiny Milligan."

"What? No, Destiny Holbrook." How did she... Oh right, the letter. Destiny was still too relieved to hear a female voice on the phone.

"Really? Oh, I'm sorry, I'd swear my letter said—"

"My stepdad is Milligan. My mom changed her name when she remarried, but I didn't. The school must've messed it up."

"Oh wow. Man, I'm already learning about you. This is so amazing. I've been sitting here wanting to call you all day but I didn't want to be too eager. Which, I guess now that I said it out loud, makes me sound way too eager, huh."

Cautiously, Destiny allowed herself to laugh. At least it wasn't a boy. "No! No, not at all. I've, um, been doing the same, actually. I was actually freaking out because I didn't know they were putting me on a boys and girls floor, and then I saw your name and I was like, uh oh, and..."

"My name? Oh my gosh, did it say Charlie instead of Charlotte? Oh wow, I would have been losing my mind if, like, my letter had said 'yo, here's Doug.'" Suddenly Charlie's voice dropped a couple octaves. "I promise, I am totally a girl. Go ahead, ask me something only a girl would know. Boy bands, tampons, how to be bad at math, anything."

Destiny laughed even harder, unreservedly this time. “I believe you, I believe you!”

Charlie’s voice went back to normal. “Oh thank goodness. I – *I’m fine, Dad, I was only goofing around! I’m talking to Destiny! Yeah, my roommate!*” She had the grace to pull the phone away from her face while yelling. There was a pause, a faint male voice. Destiny could only somewhat make it out, something about bad influences. Was that... something about offering money to fix his poorly raised daughter? “Sorry about that. My dad says hi, by the way. And some other things that he was *DEFINITELY KIDDING ABOUT, RIGHT DAD?!*”

Meanwhile, Destiny waited awkwardly through a less audible response from Charlie’s dad. While she waited, she searched *Charlie Andrews* on facebook. Both her first and last name were really common, but gender and age were excellent filters in this case. The girl had fairly robust privacy settings. The only picture Destiny could access of her was her current profile picture, a group of like forty high school students posing together in caps and gowns dated a few weeks ago. No telling which one was Charlie.

With trembling fingers, she clicked Add Friend. It was the only way she was going to get to see more, and find out if she needed to request a transfer.

“I am so sorry about that,” Charlie was apologizing right around that same time. “My dad thinks he’s very funny, and has very little respect for important conversations with lovely roommates. Which, by the way, did you just friend me?” Charlie asked it in a tone like Destiny had just sent her flowers and a season pass to her favorite game.

“Um, yeah. Is that weird? You don’t have to—”

“No! No, it’s awesome. I love that you just... did that, no hesitation. That’s so kick-butt. But let me put a twist on it for you, yeah? I’m not going to accept it. Not until we’ve met, face to face, and we get to know the real Charlie and Destiny and not the personas we’ve sculpted for ourselves online. And then once we’re officially new best friends slash roommates slash paranormal investigators – I’m sorry, I’m super anxious and I try too hard to be funny when I’m anxious. It’s a coping mechanism. But yeah, I can’t wait to meet you, and once we’re *real* friends, we can also be, bleh, facebook friends, too.”

Destiny grinned. This girl, whoever she was, was something else. Who was she in that big picture? She could probably ferret it out, but... maybe Charlie was onto something. “That sounds cool.” It sounded sort of terrifying, actually, going to a room in a strange building in a strange city to meet a stranger who she’d be locked in a tiny room with for most of a year. Then again, pretty much everything about college sounded terrifying to Destiny. Why couldn’t college just be a Thunderjaw? Sure, it was an eighty-foot robotic T-Rex, but at least it had all its crit spots easily targeted. “So, um, we’re supposed to talk about smoking and stuff?”

“Oh yes, my newest friend, let us talk of smoking and bedtimes and wall hangings and other items of import. For tonight we talk! Tomorrow, we meet.”

“Um, move-in day isn’t until late August. Right...?” Destiny crawled toward her nightstand to check the letter, but Charlie replied in time.

“Metaphorical tomorrow,” pronounced Charlie in the same weird tone.

“Are you, um, drunk?”

“No, just really nervous and bad at first impressions. Why, are you?”

“Uh, nope. Same.”

“I already love you. Just putting that out there.”

“Um, thanks.” Destiny tried not to end the statement with an implied question mark, but she was pretty sure she failed. “So, yeah, do you smoke?”

At least it wasn’t a boy.

Almost there. Thank god. She could see what must be Lakeview in the distance as Michael took the off-ramp. Limestone buildings, tall or broad or both, emerging from a gorgeous green canopy that sprawled around and across a campus the size of Lerwick. Over ten times the population. She was surprised at how many trees there were. It looked almost like a forest that a college had gotten lost in and given up and decided to live there. Farther still, a million sparkles danced across the surface of what she could only assume was Bear Lake. Destiny remembered the name of the lake from the email the Lakeview Admissions Office had sent her encouraging her to apply. She’d never taken the tour. Her mom didn’t have a car, and her stepdad wasn’t about to loan her his.

Here she was, viewing the lake at Lakeview. That was kinda cool. This was really happening. It was the only cool thing about it, but at least it was something.

Michael, it seemed, had gotten the full tour experience. As they drew closer, he named off various buildings. Destiny was listening, but only for what he wasn’t saying. For hours now. But they were close. He would say it again soon. Oh god she wanted to get out of this car.

He still didn’t say it, though. He didn’t even go to his dorm first, like he’d said he would when they first talked about making the drive together. It had been her mom’s idea after asking Destiny if any of her little, you know, nerd friends or whatever you want to call them – “they’re just guys I’m friends with, Mom, you don’t have to say it like that” – was going to Lakeview with her. Once the possibility of not having to make the long drive herself was on the table, she’d called Mr. and Mrs. Soo and set it all up unasked.

Michael drove straight to Higgins Hall, seeming upbeat despite the long drive in the traffic consisting of thousands of freshmen moving in, and despite the tense

situation he'd created in the car back at that "scenic view." Destiny hadn't seen anything, only heard.

Finally they arrived at Higgins. It was pretty small, at least compared to the nearby buildings. Maybe those were where the classes happened? A school that was in multiple different buildings seemed kind of insane to her still. Michael turned into a little circular driveway in front of the building, but some woman with a weird accent told them they needed to go to the back lot to unload. Around they went, another fifteen minutes of snail-paced driving to get from one side of the building to the other.

If not for her PC and the box with all her consoles and gear, Destiny considered, she could have just grabbed her suitcase and run off on foot.

"Excited?" Michael asked as he waited for a minivan to vacate a decent unloading spot.

"Yeah." She managed to make her lips do the smile thing. God, why wouldn't that van move. *Move, you four-letter asshole*, she thought at it. *Stop hugging your stupid kid goodbye and MOVE.*

Her own mom had given her a big hug that morning before she left, even cried a little. That had been nice. Then she'd told her to hug her father and her brothers, too, letting Destiny mentally correct them as her steps. Stan laughed and wondered aloud how many months before she realized she was wasting her time and money on a bunch of communist indoctrination and came crawling back home. That had been less nice.

Michael's eyes strayed to a pair of girls exiting the building hand in hand, one a dark-skinned girl with the dreamiest eyes Destiny had ever seen, the other a lanky dark blonde in a cotton dress so tight she was instantly sure the girl wasn't wearing underwear, both agonizingly gorgeous. Was that something college girls did, holding hands and wearing dresses with no underwear? Or were they...?

Oh she hoped neither of them were Charlie. She'd never met any of the gays before. If Charlie was here and already, like, doing gay stuff? Yikes.

Even with these questions in her head, she was paying more attention to their surroundings than Michael though, and pointed when the space was open. His leer lingered for a moment, then gave her a smile. Almost exactly like his normal smile, but not quite. She hastily unlocked the car door in preparation.

"Thanks so much for the ride," she said, scurrying out before the car was even in park. Leg cramps from the long drive slowed her, though. Not like she could have snatched her stuff and darted off anyway, sealed in Michael's trunk as it was.

Michael quickly caught up with her, though, meeting her behind the car where she was already tugging the trunk handle. "Hey, whoa, what's your hurry, Mittlefinger? This isn't a timed mission – relax." He chuckled.

"Sorry, I'm just... yeah, really excited." She was as afraid as she'd ever been in her life, actually. She'd only thought that's how she felt when he picked her up that morning,

knowing it would be Michael and his waifu alone in the car for hours. But then, the rest stop.

“Same. Say, how about I help you carry your things up to your room? Dude-bro style, you know? Act like I’m one of the retro-jocks.” He laughed at what was, she supposed, a joke. He hit a button on his key fob and the trunk finally swung open. Before she could stop him, Michael hefted the big box containing her PC.

She’d gotten a job at the same Forky’s Diner, the same one her mom used to work at before Stan made her stay home and take care of the house, just to buy that PC. She’d saved her tips for a year. It had save files dating back to elementary school, files backed up nowhere else. She could still load the Borderlands 2 profile she’d made with her dad in 4th grade, when she’d still been innocent about everything, before he’d run off to Myrtle Beach with that skank. Three clicks and she was back then again. That box held her most precious possession in the world.

Now it was in the hands of Michael Soo. Her heart raced. This was no time to upset him. An oopsie with that box would... She shuddered. “Sure. I’ll get my suitcase and the other box.”

He laughed again. “No way you’re going to be able to get that up there by yourself, shortstack.”

Fuck, there it was again. Oh no. Oh fuck no. But he had her box. “Sure. I, um, think there’s some events we’re supposed to go to today, so I guess we ought to hurry up and get it up there? Plus I’m sure you’re excited to get to your dorm, meet your roommate and everything.”

The two started walking, Destiny forced to stop every few paces to wait for the lackadaisical gait of the HHGC’s nominal MVP. “No rush. Besides, you’re on the third floor, right? Gotta pace ourselves. Your setup’s like a pile of bricks, babe. Gonna need a little rest after hefting it up three flights of stairs.”

Babe. Waifu. Shortstack. English didn’t have enough four-letter words, so she started thinking some in other languages.

They were walking past two people wearing matching shirts, Lakeview red with the word “HIGGINS STAFF” written on the front. A girl and a boy. The girl looked miserably hot even sitting on a bench in the shade of a tree, the ground around it littered with cigarette butts. The boy was handsome, though, and smiling brightly. He’d overheard them, plainly, and stepped over to address them.

Before he could though, the blonde girl flopped back on the tabletop with a groan and demonstrated that she, too, had eavesdropped. “Two flights of stairs,” she said.

“Excuse me?” Michael hadn’t expected to be interrupted, much less corrected.

“If she’s on the third floor, then that’s two flights of stairs. One from 1 to 2, one from 2 to 3. Except, fun fact, the bottom floor, this one here up those two steps...” She

waved a sweaty arm at the door people were entering and exiting from with their boxes and families. "That's the 'basement.'"

"Oh. So... it is three flights of stairs," Michael replied, letting his annoyance show. The girl was pretty, but he'd just been invited up to Destiny's room. Not that he knew anything about flirting anyway.

The other boy interjected. "Sorry to say it's actually four." He pointed to the next row of windows. "That's Higgins Ground, ten feet off the ground, and there's Higgins 1, Higgins 2, and Higgins 3. Which means," his smile broadened, "I'm your RA! Hi, I'm Spencer. You're going to have a ton of names to learn though once we get to introducing you to everybody, so I'll spare you last names. And you're...?"

What in the actual hell was an "RA?" Destiny had never heard the term but he used like he'd said he was in the FBI and everyone would obviously know what that meant.

Destiny had already set her suitcase down. If this boy, Spencer, noticed Michael standing there with his heavy load, he sure didn't seem like he cared. She took his extended hand and gave it a shake. "Destiny."

"Destiny! I remember that one from the roster. That's an awesome name. I'm so glad to meet you. And I'm sure you're excited to start moving in and even with the open doors letting the AC out it's still way better twenty feet that way, trust me, so unless you need anything from me...?" He stepped aside. Not that he'd been in the way. A dad and what had to be a little brother, maybe in eighth grade or so, didn't spare them a dirty look as they carried a mini-sofa around the idle duo.

"Come on, babe, this shit isn't light," Michael complained, walking backwards slowly, compelling her to follow.

"Yeah, um, I guess I'll see you around." Would she? (Ranger Associate? Really... Amicable?)

"Up four flights, down the hall, and where it splits, hang a right. You got your student ID, right?"

She nodded and pulled it from her breast pocket. They'd put it in huge bold letters on that letter to bring that today, because it was also her room key and her meal card. At Hayes, the lunch lady just knew who she was and let her by. The Milligans ate on the tax-payers' dime.

"Great! Just swipe it through the slot by your door, just like a hotel except it's your home now. Easy peasy. Welcome to Higgins, Destiny."

"Why do you keep saying everybody's names so much?" the blonde girl asked her coworker as they walked past, though it sounded like more of an accusation than a question.

"Um, to learn my residents' names...?"

"It's creepy," Destiny thought she heard her say.

If this girl thought *that* guy was creepy, she'd love to introduce her to Michael.

Speaking of, she followed the boy up the stairs in silence. There was nothing she wanted to say, and fortunately, that box really did weigh a ton so he was in a hurry to put it down. Four flights of stairs, ugh. Their high school hadn't even had stairs, unless you counted the bleachers at the football field. Destiny had never climbed them. She'd bet Michael hadn't either.

Soon enough they made it to the "third" floor, which was somehow also the fifth floor. Destiny tried not to be too obvious looking in the open doors they passed, but she was curious about what sort of boys they'd be sticking her with. For maybe the first time ever, she almost wished she might see some big pushy musclebound douchebag who'd be keen on interposing himself between her and Michael. Every door she looked in, though, was girls, with a few dads. The boys must be on the left turn side of where she followed Spencer's directions to turn right.

Her own door, 311, was closed. Destiny's heart sank. She'd held out hope that Charlie would already be there. Maybe with her dad. Mom would do. She'd settled for a sibling. But no. Just her, and Michael. The room was tiny, barely bigger than her bedroom at home. She very much didn't like that the furnishing taking up the most space, almost suggestively, were the beds.

"We can just set it down here and go back for the rest," she suggested as they neared her room.

"What, and leave it out here to get stolen?" Michael asked, laughing off her suggestion, hefting the box higher with the help of a knee. Her stomach lurched at the thought of him dropping it.

"It's just one box. I can go get it, if you wanna wait here. Yeah, that looked heavy. Take a seat, and I'll—"

"Come on, let's just catch our breath, and then I'll be happy to go get it for you."

She hated how reasonable he seemed. Seeing no alternative without escalating things, she swiped her student ID in the little slot that guy outside (Repairman Apprentice?) had mentioned. With a little click, the door opened. There was no sign of Charlie having been in here, just two unmade mattresses on two bunk beds, empty closets, bare desks. It was pretty spacious, Destiny thought, way bigger than her room at home. Bigger than her mom and Stan's room, even – and nobody to tell her not to crank the AC. Except then Michael followed her in, closing the door behind him. Suddenly it was a dungeon cell.

He set the box down on one of the desks – not the one Destiny would choose, as the light shining on it suggested it would be brutal on her ability to see her monitor in the latter half of the day. Not that that was a concern at the moment. Michael sat down on the lower bunk and patted the space beside him.

Destiny sat in the desk chair, next to her PC. It was the closest thing she had to a refuge now.

“Come on, relax, Finger. We made it!”

“Yeah.” Another attempt at smiling.

“Oh hey, you’re not still thinking about what we talked about way back there, are you?” Destiny was, of course. She’d thought of little else since. She said nothing. “Look, don’t make a big deal out of it. I mean, we’re starting college, right? It’s exciting! I just let the moment get the best of me, that’s all.”

“Oh. OK.”

“Oh, OK.’ I said *relax*. It was a compliment. You’d think you’d be flattered.”

“I.. I was.” A lie, and a transparent one. Michael was hearing what he wanted to hear, though. Stan always got pissed off when she placated him, too, but nowhere near as pissed as when she didn’t.

“I mean, what are the odds of two people from Hayes even going to school here, much less two who are already friends, right? I don’t know, just feels like it’s... I don’t know. Fate. Or hey, maybe it’s... Destiny!” He laughed at his grand joke.

“Heh. Yeah.” Destiny hated it when people made puns about her name. It was a hooker-stripper hybrid name. She hated it. Her mom had tried to get Destiny to take Stan’s last name when she remarried, but her first name was the only one she was interested in changing. Worse, unlike her roommate, there wasn’t even a convenient shorthand. But she’d smile and laugh if it got him out of there sooner.

“But like I was saying, I mean, you and I, we’ve always had chemistry, I think. And I can’t help noticing you’re looking extra cute today. Making those first impressions with your two best traits, right?” He laughed. She couldn’t, that time. It didn’t matter. He took Destiny not laughing as a sign she was listening to his pitch, just like he’d take her laughter. Pepé Le Pew, chasing no matter how hard that cat tried to escape. “So it just made me wonder if, on some level, you were trying to get a little attention.”

She shook her head vehemently. “No! No, I, um, like I said before, I just wanted to look nice. That’s all.”

He grinned. “Look nice for who, though?”

“Nobody. Like, whoever. I swear.”

Michael chuckled at her nervousness. “Man, you are high-strung today. Too much caffeine, huh? I know how you mean. I feel like I have all this *energy*. You know?”

“Maybe we should go get the other box, then?”

“We will, babe. We will.” He scooted closed, just close enough to hook a foot in one of the legs of her chair. Skinny as he was, it wasn’t easy for him, but he dragged Destiny in to where their knees touched. She quickly adjusted so they didn’t, which made him pull her closer still. Goddamn horny skunk.

“You know – I can’t believe I’m saying this – but I actually used to have a little crush on you?”

Destiny braced. In a panic, she whipped out her phone. “Sorry! I, um, got a text.” She held it so he couldn’t see. “It’s from my roommate. One sec.”

Michael frowned. “Hey, I’m opening up to you here. A little respect would be nice.”

“No, I know. I know. I just... One sec.” She brought up Charlie in her contacts and sent off a text. It was the second entry in their conversation after one from Charlie that morning. *Can’t wait to meet you today, roomie!!!!*, she’d written.

How soon will you be here? she typed. Send.

“Done?” asked Michael, visibly annoyed. “I was trying to say, I like you. And now that we’re here, the two of us, I can’t help but wonder if we owe it to ourselves to see... what if, ya know?”

Her phone buzzed. *I’m having lunch with my dad, and then we’ll be there! Are you there already???? What’s it like? Take whichever bunk you want!*

“Um, yeah. Sorry, just, that’s my roommate again. She’s going to be here really soon, with her dad.” There. A warning shot, so he’d know it was time to run before her team showed up.

Michael seemed perplexed by the unsolicited information. Of course. He always acted like every player was a team of one, only looking out for their own health and stats. “Um, OK...? Now can we actually have a conversation, or...?”

“Sorry. I, um, it’s very nice of you to say...” Had he said anything nice? “... all that. I just, um, I wanted to come here to start fresh. Leave high school behind. I don’t think, you know, *that*, would be, um...”

“Don’t think what? I haven’t suggested anything. I’m just talking is all.” He leaned in, smiling wolfishly. “But maybe you’re right. Maybe we should take today as an opportunity to say our goodbyes in style.” Her breath caught in her throat as he closed the remaining distance and kissed her. She could still taste the Diet Coke on his tongue as he unceremoniously, unasked, shoved it in her mouth.

Her breath was coming in gasps of raw panic. Destiny knew full well what was about to happen. Would her mom and Stan find out? The HHGC guys? Ms. Sadler?

“Well then, looks like somebody’s already pretty excited,” said Michael, standing and undoing the button on his cargo shorts. “Tell you what, I’ll let you go first. If you do a good job, maybe I’ll see if Mittlefinger doesn’t get to earn her nick?”

A few minutes later, there was a firm knock at the door. “Destiny, you in there?” A male voice.

She spat out Michael’s cock, craning her neck and yelled, much too loudly she thought, “Yes! I’m in here!”

“We’re kinda in the middle of something!” Michael yelled, irked, then softly, “Aren’t we babe?” His cock twitched in her face.

“Oh. Can I talk at you for a sec? Won’t take long, I promise.”

“Sure, just... one second!” She squirmed around Michael, who was trying to pull up and fasten his shorts like he was swapping resistance trinkets in the Four Fiends of the Elements raid boss fight. He folded his hands in front of his crotch as she opened the door.

It was that boy from the parking lot with the inscrutable acronym. Spencer. “Hey. Sorry to bug you, but they let me take a break from the brick oven out there. I’m going around in case anybody needs anything, but mostly making sure everybody knows we have a floor meeting tonight at 7 in our lounge – just down the hall that way. I’ll round everybody up, but we’re gonna do introductions, meet your neighbors, talk about Welcome Week orientation stuff, all that jazz.”

“Sounds great.”

“Awesome. And if you wouldn’t mind, pass word along to...” He stopped, looked at the nametags on the door. “Charlie.” That made him frown for some reason.

“Will do.”

“All right. I’ll let you two get on with your goodbyes. My apologies, madam and sir.” He did a dorky little genuflection.

“No!” Destiny caught herself and dialed it back. “Sorry, he was just leaving actually. Perfect timing.”

“I was? I’m, uh, still kind of...” Michael was frowning. Did he think they were really hooking up? Did he think Spencer was disrupting something Destiny actually *wanted* to do? Could anyone be that delusional?

“I figured you wanted to get to your dorm, right?” Destiny pressed. If she actually came out and said no, this became something very different, but surely he had to recognize what she was trying to say. Right?

And there were going to be half a floor of these things living with her? Maybe she could call her mom and tell her she made a mistake. Go back home, back to Forky’s, back to her room. Ms. Sadler would be so disappointed in her when she found out.

“Oh. Well then.” Something in Spencer’s countenance changed, then, though Destiny was too distraught to notice. He hovered a moment, seeming to gather his thoughts, “Hey, you probably want to get on with unpacking and settling in. Why don’t I escort your friend out? One of those rules we have around here, no guests unescorted.”

“I can find the way,” said Michael.

“Of course you can – the rule’s not for in case a guest gets lost. It’s for everybody else.” His smile returned, but not so warm this time. It was focused entirely on Michael. “Gotta start doing my job sometime, you know?” He stood back, waiting for the two to say goodbye, but neither closed the door nor looked away.

“Oh, I still have a box in his – in *your*, I mean – car. I’ll run down and–”

“I’ll bring it up for you,” Michael said, eyeing this RA fellow peevishly.

“Oh. OK. I, um, have to go to the bathroom, so you can just... yeah. Set it down.”

“Wanna gimme your ID so I can–”

Destiny darted into the hall. She was pretty sure she’d seen a bathroom on the way in. The prospect of a boy doing twosies suddenly didn’t seem like such a big problem. “Hallway’s fine!”

Destiny didn’t leave her stall until she heard Spencer calling everybody to the floor meeting. She wasn’t sure she heard a word that was said.

“Hey, I’m sorry to bug you, but... are you OK?”

Destiny didn’t roll over. She stayed right where she was, curled up in a ball on the mattress of the top bunk, facing the wall. “Yeah.”

Her roommate’s voice was pure tenderness, though her mind was far, far away. “Because you don’t seem OK.”

“I’m *fine*,” she said more firmly. Still pretty feebly, though.

Charlie rested her arms on the mattress, planting her cheek on them. “Are you homesick? Because I know I am. If you wanted to talk about it, or just complain, or cry, I would listen.”

Destiny didn’t answer. Not sure what else to do, Charlie once more left, no doubt off to make more friends while her disappointment of a roommate sobbed into her blanket. She felt like such an idiot whenever she crawled out from under her self-pity long enough to think about anything more than the taste of dick in her mouth that just wouldn’t seem to go away. Like he’d stained it. She’d thought her dorm would be like a hotel, with sheets and pillows and stuff waiting for her. She hadn’t packed any.

Some hours later, the hubbub on the floor died down and Charlie returned. She said Destiny’s name softly, but when she got no answer, the girl changed into her pajamas, switched off the light, and went to bed on her own bunk. The next morning she did the reverse, then left. Probably to meet all the friends she and everybody else had probably already made for breakfast or whatever. Destiny’s stomach was growling. She still had some Combos in her purse, purchased at the rest stop right before Michael pulled his first volley.

“*Why haven’t we ever... You know...*”

She tried to calm her tummy, but the Combos just tasted like sweaty dick. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t stop thinking about that taste. How it had felt in her mouth. How strong his grip had been on her skull.

Charlie returned. Destiny tried to stay as still as possible. The preposterously pretty blonde hadn't given up yet, though. Of all the girls in that profile pic, why did she have to be *that* one? She'd prayed it wouldn't be that one. She was like an angel, but hotter. "Hey, Destiny. Are you awake?"

"Mm."

"I only ask because we're all going on this campus tour soon. Spencer's leading it. Are you, um, gonna come with? Everybody's really nice; I bet they'd really like to meet you. I think you still have time to get a shower and grab a bite to—"

"I want to go home!" Destiny shrieked. To herself, really, but the girl was pressing her and inner thoughts became outer wails. Her tears resumed. Tenderness in bitter moments was, as ever, her trigger.

Before she knew it, someone else was in bed with her. Charlie curled up beside her, leaning against the wall so she could see Destiny's face. "Oh, hey, it's OK. It's so OK."

"It's definitely NOT OK!" Destiny whimpered. "Just go on your stupid tour and leave me alone!"

"No. No way. If you're staying, I'm staying."

"Would you just go? God, we're not even friends! You don't know anything about me!"

Charlie shook her head, then slid down and, of all things, made Destiny her little spoon. She couldn't have said whether she accepted it because she was too emotionally exhausted to fight back, or because this full body hug was the sweetest touch she'd ever experienced in her life. She was so... warm. So soft. Was this... Why did she suddenly feel...

"I want to be your friend, if you'll let me," the girl said quietly. "I'm not a mind reader or anything, but I can tell you're in a bad place. Is it really homesickness? Somebody said Dana – she's super nice, you'll love her, she's in the marching band – but I guess she moved in early for band stuff, and she said she was *miserable* after her mom dropped her off." Charlie's chin tapped Destiny's shoulder. "But, um, I noticed your phone has been sitting in the same place on the windowsill since I got here."

"Point being?" grumbled Destiny.

"If you were homesick, I just would've thought you'd try to call home is all. But you didn't, and you seem so sad, so, um... Did something happen?"

She stiffened. "Why would you think something happened?"

"Dana only admitted she was riding the struggle bus because a bunch of the girls here are homesick, too. Except they still got out of bed this morning. Last night, too. They even ate, and changed clothes."

Destiny sniffled. "Do I smell bad?"

Charlie draped an arm over her. That was her only answer. She lay there, squeezing Destiny's hand, waiting. Spencer came around in the middle of the rambling, sobbing, barely coherent tale, calling for people to meet up for the tour. Charlie said nothing, and soon the floor was silent again.

"There was this boy," Destiny said at last.

Charlie listened, listened until her roommate had finished. She wasn't crying any more, but only because she was out of tears.

"Did he even bring back your stuff? The rest of it, I mean. I, um, saw you didn't have, like, a lot of stuff." Not the most insightful observation, side by side on a mattress with no sheets or blankets or pillow.

Destiny, who had somewhere along the telling rolled over to face Charlie, shook her head. "No. But I don't care. I don't ever want to see him again."

"We should go to Spencer. He'll—"

"NO! Oh my god, no. No. I don't ever want anyone else to know what happened."

Charlie pressed her forehead to Destiny's. "We don't have to tell him everything. We can just say he swiped your stuff. If this boy goes here, maybe there's something they can do? He is an RA, after all. Maybe he can do something."

"What the heck does that mean anyway? RA."

"Didn't he say last night? I thought he did. But I think it's residential advisor? Or assistant. Something like that. But it sounded like maybe he can do something about this, or at least find you whoever can."

"No. I just want to be done with it."

Charlie's lips pursed, but she nodded. "If that's what you want. But please, please, please don't go home because of this. OK?"

"I don't even have sheets, or a pillow."

"He took your pillow?!" Destiny felt too foolish about it to correct her. "OK. So hey, let's you and me go shopping, yeah?"

"I don't have any money, really." She'd spent the last of her PUBG tourney money on those Combos. There was a meal plan here, or something? Destiny remembered reading something that said she'd get food here. She'd figured she'd get a job, or maybe double down on her gaming, once she got here.

"Then let me." A self-conscious look stole over Charlie's face. "I mean, you're gonna find out soon enough that my mom and dad do purty good. Well, my dad does, but my mom just married smart." Charlie giggled. "So trust me, I won't miss it."

"Oh my gosh, no way! I couldn't—"

"You can. Come on, please? Puh-lease. I'll beg if I have to. My heart is breaking in half for you right now, so do me a favor and let me feel better by doing something nice for this sweet, beautiful girl who is going to stay here at Lakeview and maybe become my new best friend?"

Things got better. On the drive to Target, Charlie filled her in on the scuttlebutt about the mostly missing boys on their nominally coed floor. He'd apparently told some people they'd be moving him to a guy's floor and finding a girl RA for Higgins 3, but Destiny wished they wouldn't. He'd made her feel safe, and welcome. She wished she knew who to contact at Lakeview to ask them to let him stay, but her experience navigating bureaucracy mostly consisted of filling out the leger at Forky's after she counted out the cash drawer.

Charlie bought her new sheets, and not one, not two, but *three* pillows. This effervescent creature explained how she liked to sleep with one between her legs, and swore Destiny had to give it a try. One of the other customers overheard her; having already noticed Charlie's legs by virtue of being a male with eyes and line of sight to them, he tripped over his own shopping cart wheel and bumped into a shelf of linens, scattering them everywhere. Destiny had never heard of such a thing – each bed in her home had exactly one pillow per occupant – but her roommate insisted, and by the end of Welcome Week, Destiny couldn't imagine sleeping without one again.

Especially after one of the girls a couple doors down shared a video of that fight everybody was talking about, the one where their naked RA fought off some crazy naked girl from another naked girl. Destiny's libido was in a sensitive place after Michael, but that helped. A lot.

Plus, Charlie had baked this batch of brownies, and it was really hard not to cheer up with fresh, warm brownies.

Bit by bit, Destiny began to suspect that she'd really lucked out with her roommate. Charlie was a lot to handle at times, though. Nobody had ever found Destiny so freaking *interesting* before her. It was like she was living in a slow-rolling interview that continued heedless of the day or the time.

“Lerwick, huh? That's a weird name. Does it mean anything? What's it like? What is there to do there?”

Destiny paused her game and spun her clunky desk chair. “I don't know what it means. It's small, though. Like a thousand or so people, I think. People don't really do anything. Aside from meth, I guess.”

“Ha! Or... are you serious? You're serious. Are you? I haven't learned to read you yet. You're joking. Meth!”

“Do you already have a major in mind? Are you going to minor in anything, do you think?”

Destiny waited until Charlie looked away before dropping her towel, hastily dressing her damp body and hoping the girl didn't look. She was 90% sure this girl was gay for her. It bothered her less than she'd worried. “Computer science. I don't really know for what, but they say you can always get a job somewhere with it. I don't think I'll minor. College is, um, kind of expensive.”

“Yeah, so expensive.”

“How about you?”

“Hm? Oh. I'm, ah, planning on majoring in actuarial science.” A pause. “And business admin. And probably finance.” A longer pause, and then the dam broke. “And I'm going to minor in Spanish and communications. And poli sci. And maybe international affairs.”

Destiny almost tripped putting on her underwear as the list kept growing. “Uh... So let's see, you're going to cook the books for the shell companies for a Colombian cocaine kingpin, and help him get elected to parliament?”

“Help *her* get elected to parliament.”

“Expensive, yeah, but sounds worth it.”

“Maybe this is too personal, but I *love* your hair. Is that your real color? Does your mom have red hair? What's your mom like? Do you miss her?”

She rolled over, pillow held tight between her thighs, and addressed Charlie from the top bunk to her place on the bottom. Glancing quickly at her phone, she saw it was almost midnight. “Yep. Yours is really pretty, too.” Never before in her life had she complimented someone's hair, that she could recall. “And yeah, my mom's a redhead, too. She's... fine.”

“Sorry, I know it's late. I just miss my family a lot. I'll shut up and let you sleep.”

Destiny took a few slow breaths, her eyes drooping. From down below, she heard a little snuffle.

“So, um, I guess you and your mom are close...? What's she do?”

“Do you have any pets? I have a dog. I miss her so much. But you said your house was built on all this open space, so you probably had like five, right? I bet it was so gorgeous there.”

Destiny ignored the question for just a moment, making sure her book order list was correct before clicking purchase. Her loans didn't cover them, but at least she'd budgeted accordingly. This one was going to hurt. “I had a goat when I was a kid. Then my dad left and my mom couldn't find a job for a while, so...” She shrugged. Charlie's smile faded by increments “I didn't like it much anyway.”

“Oh my gosh, you had to rehome your...” Charlie trailed off as Destiny clicked the Purchase button, her stomach roiling. She'd built her computer piecemeal, making those digital books more money than she'd ever spent at one time on anything in her whole life. Her mom never let her forget how much her braces had cost, but Medicaid had covered most of that, so she didn't think it counted.

Destiny closed the tab, removing the offending figure from her field of vision, and turned to face Charlie. She looked like she might be sick. “What?”

“Hey! Sorry to interrupt, but I was putting in a grocery order and wondered what I could get for you. Like do you like Coke, Diet Coke, Coke Zero, Cherry Coke, Cherry Coke Zero... I guess I'm just sort of doing my favs, big ol' sweet tooth. But I can do whatever you want. Half the fridge is yours as far as I'm con- WOW was that *violent!*”

Destiny was already sprinting for fresh cover from her victim's teammates, the smoke graphic still rising from the barrel of her sniper rifle. That smoke was her after-sex cigarette. “They let you *order* your groceries at Lakeview? No wonder this place is so expensive,” she grumbled, sliding into cover in a little copse.

“At...? No, I mean... from the grocery store...? Yeah, you can, you know, put in an order, and they have it ready when you get there.” She said it like she was suddenly wondering if Destiny knew what grocery stores were. Her family got most of their food from Casey's, whatever they couldn't get from the garden or the chicken coop.

“No yeah, I know. Um, whatever you like is fine.” She couldn't admit it (especially not to this affable angel who still seemed to be trying so hard to get into Destiny's pants that maybe she actually wasn't), but Destiny dreamed of having a fridge stocked with the cuttingest edgiest energy drinks. She knew they were trash nutrition and didn't work, but they were inextricably linked to her gaming fantasies. One of those refrigerators like she'd seen on TV with its own water thingy and ice thingy, except hers would pump out Rockstar Tangerine Mango Guava Strawberry.

“Would you mind if we switch the door so it doesn’t auto-lock?”

Destiny was studying her campus map, alt+tabbing between it and google maps to try to get a feel for her walk to classes. A third tab had the street view from in front of Michael’s dorm, Roland, so she could cross-reference it with routes he might be taking to his classes. Her gamers skills helped, though this was more RTS thinking than FPS, so not quite her forte.

Without pausing, she answered by reflex, honestly, “Oh yeah, definitely not.”

“Wait, did you mean yeah you, definitely don’t mind, or yeah, we should definitely not do that?”

Destiny saw a couple possible entanglements, but she thought if she veered wide by Salmins Hall, it was really unlikely he’d have any reason to be that far west. “No, I mean leave it locked, obviously,” came her distracted response. Not testy, just... why would they ever want the door unlocked?

“Oh. Yeah, sure. You know,” Charlie said, looking over her shoulder, “I know we missed the tour, but I bet we could get someone to give us one. Would you be down for that? I’d kind of like to see the campus.”

Destiny minimized the window. Her roommate obviously wouldn’t understand what she was trying to do, but it still felt shameful. “Are they just... doing tours?”

“I dunno, probably.” Charlie grinned, took her hand and dragged her into the hallway. She had to let go so Destiny could turn back for her shoes, but out they went.

Charlie walked up to a guy on the sidewalk leaving the food court. Without preamble, she said the two of them were new here and asked if he wouldn’t mind showing them around. The guy stared, hastily chucked his food in the trash, took a hard slurp from his drink and tossed it, too, and devoted the next two hours of his life to satisfying every itch of Charlie and Destiny’s curiosity.

“So how did you know that guy?” Destiny asked, hours later, as they left him at the Higgins circle drive.

“Hm? No, he just looked like he knew where he was going. I thought he might be able to help.”

“But... the way you talked to him, you sounded like you were friends.”

Charlie shrugged, grinned, eyes sparkling. “And now we are.”

Destiny had seldom had close female friends. In elementary school, sure. That’s what her mom had felt was “appropriate.” As she’d gotten older, though, her hobbies became less traditionally feminine, as did her competitive edge. Her girl friends started getting excited to practice putting on makeup and attempting to create and sustain

cleavage, their budding breasts little more than two freakishly large nipples with a dream. Destiny got excited about climbing the ladder rankings and 180 no-scoping people in the face. Ironically, it was around the same time that her body began to change from what had widely, if not charitably, been referred to as “sickly” into something more... healthy. The ability to boast cleavage yet somehow not opting to had not endeared her to her kind.

The policy had softened, some, over the years. Not that she had any particular desire to advertise her excess, and in fact rather preferred not to, but factors coincided to give the world its taste of Destiny and her waifu award-winning boobs. Lack of AC, insufficient budget to replace old clothing, a desire for tips to upgrade her processor, and once – just once – giving in to bad advice that she could persuade the HHGC to play the games and missions she preferred if she joined the team video chat in a sports bra.

(“Sorry guys, I didn’t have time to change after taking a run – just be glad you’re not here to smell how sweaty I am.” Such cringe. She did not run, ever. It had only been a phase for a couple months junior year, but she doubted those horny dorks had forgotten it to this day. Little turds probably screenshotted it and stashed it away for a lonely day. That four-letter bitch Michael didn’t need his any more, she supposed. The prick was probably jerking himself off sniffing the palm sweat residue on her PS5 controller.)

Not one for fashion, most of Destiny’s wardrobe choices were habit. She’d learned to wear whatever was on top of her drawers as long as it didn’t clash too hideously. If it was hot, maybe a hasty ponytail. She had one fall jacket (temperatures 45-65 degrees) and one winter coat (44 and below). A pair of dress shoes, for the rare fancy occasion, and a pair of sturdy sneakers she could slip on and off without slowing to bother with laces.

“I don’t think you need to bother with the turtleneck in August,” laughed Charlie as she inspected her own outfit in the mirror hanging on one of her closets. (Destiny’s meager wardrobe fit fine on her shelves, folded in piles, so she’d donated hers to Charlie, whose side had been ready to burst.) The mirror confirmed that although Charlie looked every bit as casual as Destiny, there had been a lot of calculation that had gone into it. Mussing her hair just so. No, not *those* sneakers, *these*. Whatever that had been she’d done to her eyelashes, Destiny had to hand it to her, the gleam in her eyes was probably visible from Neptune.

Destiny looked at her hoodie. It was much thinner than it looked, having been that way when she’d ordered it and then seeing years of intense usage since. Putting it on when she left her room was another habit, one she’d not even realized. “Oh. No, I know. I just... I dunno.”

Charlie craned her neck to make eye contact in the mirror. “So... why did you put it on? It’s like ninety out there. In case the salon is chilly or something?” She’d put

together an outing, makeovers and massages in advance of tomorrow's first day of classes with some of the other girls on their floor. Destiny had wished her well, but Charlie had begged her roommate to come with. It was important to her for some reason that she start meeting their neighbors.

"I don't know. Just... always what I put on when I leave my room." Destiny shrugged. "Didn't even think about it. See?" Her muscle memory unzipped and rolled it off her shoulders in an instant, and then back on.

"Even in the summer? Is Lerwick really cold or something? Oh my god, have I been melting you in here with the temperature?"

Destiny shook her head. She'd felt *hot* for the past few days since moving here, but... not like that. Certainly not because of anything Charlie had been doing. Ew. She'd actually been thinking a lot about their RA, how he'd stepped in with Michael. That shower video thing had been, like, porn hot, but Destiny would take a protector over a porn star any day.

"No, no, you're good. I dunno, just something I always wear – wore – around the house. You know, like in case Stan – my stepdad – or my stepbrothers are hanging around, ya know?"

She was contemplating whether or not she wanted to leave it behind – it *was* hot out today – and didn't notice the way her roommate slowly stiffened. "In case... what?"

Destiny glanced back. "You know, dudes in the house."

"I... don't think I follow." Charlie turned, halting her preparations. Her eyes looked bigger than ever. She must know what she was doing with that makeup.

"Where did I lose you?" What had she said to make her new sorta friend look at her like that? "I guess it's more for my mom than them, honestly. She's always freaking out I'm gonna like ooh la la her husband." She made herself laugh.

"Oh." Charlie didn't, at all. There was strain evident in her voice, oozing out from behind an attempted veneer of casualness. "You, um... You probably don't want all that on around us girls though, right?"

Destiny examined herself for a moment. She supposed there really wasn't a need. She hung it by the hood back on her bedpost, so it would be handy. It felt a little odd leaving her room, walking around her new home with bare shoulders and the sun shining on her boobs, but nothing bad came of it. They bumped into Spencer on his way back from the gym on their way out to the parking lot, and was glad she'd ditched it. Not that she was going to do anything about him, but her fledgling crush was a welcome distraction from where her boy-related thoughts had wanted to go this whole past week.

She went out and did girly things, with girls, and tried not to feel too put off by it. They all seemed so at home over it. Maybe they all came from rich families like Charlie's, and having people fawn and fuss over them was something they were used to. The results weren't altogether horrible, she conceded. By the time they strayed back home in

time for the big floor meeting, she felt... attractive. She knew she was pretty. She actually sort of wished she wasn't sometimes but there was no sense pretending. Still, attractive was rare, especially when it wasn't just for a special occasion like a cousin's wedding or a school dance or opening night at the county fair.

She didn't think she'd made any friends, but it *was* fun to be "hot" for a day, watching boys try not to look like they were rushing to sit by her in her classes, gauging how close they could get before it was creepy, seeing how long they'd keep trying to chat her up when she paid them no heed. Her mom would be furious, seeing her skip all this homework for her MRS. That made her smile even more than these boys. And she'd thought the guys at Hayes were horndogs! She got invited to *three* parties her first day of classes. Figuring it never hurt to have some future study buddies filed away, she doubled her social media friend count on social media by Monday afternoon, and tripled it by breakfast Wednesday.

At home, it seemed like everybody had added everybody on everything, though Destiny didn't think she fit in there very well. It was like the whole floor was the hot clique at Hayes, legs and hair and skin and boobs all cultivated as personality traits. Her roommate seemed nice enough, but...

No, credit where it was due. Charlie was nice. She was very nice. Like, eerily, almost fatiguingly nice. As Destiny listened to her gushing on with the others about how dreamy their RA was – astute – she began to accept that it was no gay ruse to trick her out of her underwear. She was just nice.

That said, the girl was also so at home around the rest of the Higgins lot that Destiny maintained her vigil. Charlie seemed to have become overnight friends with the whole floor, and the more she dragged Destiny out with her, the more stark the contrast became. Leigh, the girl from the fight, who was basically just Barbie but with bigger boobs. Only two doors down there was a girl who actually styled herself as an instagram model! Jean, who looked to her like she might have killed someone in real life, espoused no interest in joining Destiny in killing them online. This Korean girl, Kyu-Ri, whom Destiny had hoped would be a kindred spirit but apparently even in Korea girls that hot just didn't game. Kyu-Ri's roommate,

Dawn was the only one who responded to her open invite for a quickmatch or two, but she said she just wanted to sit there and watch Destiny, not actually play. Lurking over her shoulder, leaning on her, brushing Destiny's hair aside "so she could see" but really as near as she could tell just to breathe on her neck... Destiny laughed at herself when the door locked behind her exit at the thought that maybe somebody on the floor really *was* gay. There were those two exercise freaks next door always grunting and moaning in there who everybody *said* were gay, though Destiny thought it was rude to say it in front of them. Peyton and Sydney didn't seem to mind, though.

And then... there was Spencer.

Destiny had noticed him even on move-in day, although she'd had much more pressing things on her mind than a cute RA. She'd been apprehensive about living with a bunch of boys, but having only the one? She knew some of the girls didn't like it, but in Destiny's book, having Spencer around was pure win. She'd never liked having a female boss, for one. Beth-Anne at Forky's had always been four freaking lettered about every little thing. Plus, after the way he'd sussed out Michael and forced him out, he just made her feel safe. He had a gentle way about him in a way she'd never known a boy to have.

She didn't know the first thing about flirting with a boy, but every time she passed him in the hall she found herself grinning ear to ear like she really was waifu of the year.

By the time her first week of classes was over, she was in a much better place. Higgins 3 already felt like home. She might not fit in like Charlie, the right-sized peg for every hole, but that meant she often had the room to herself to study and game in peace. The girls were so nice – most of them – and the food court was really cool and the weather was gorgeous and the wind in the trees and Charlie and unbelievable bandwidth. (11 ms ping? Thank you, daddy.) All those doubts and anxieties she'd harbored were melting away.

All except one, anyway.

Charlie had gone out and brought a brand new ultra-widescreen that barely fit in the room; Destiny helped her assemble the IKEA entertainment center and configure the sound bar and surround speakers and adjust the picture setting just right. Charlie shamelessly crooned down the hall about how lucky she was to have the smartest nerdiest awesomest roommate on the floor. Destiny tried and failed not to blush. Charlie had something kind to say about everybody, it seemed, but it sure hadn't gotten old yet.

"And hey, now you finally have somewhere to hook up your consoles!" Charlie said as they nestled in together on the futon. She'd forced a confession out of Destiny of her favorite movie; they were going to give the TV a test run with the blonde's first ever viewing of *Rocky*. "I've never seen someone so hardcore about gaming before. I bet for you not having your Xbox is like having a phantom limb or something."

"Yeah. I mean, sometime, maybe. I'm really more into my PC. But hey, let's..." Destiny turned up the volume as the movie began, trying not to think about the box. Michael had driven away from Higgins with a lot that day. An Xbox Series X she'd won in a Halo tourney; an ancient N-64 that somehow still worked, which her dad had left her when he'd skipped town; a PS5 she'd waited over a year to play after preordering; thousands of hours of waitressing worth of games.

And her safety. And her dignity.

But nothing to be done about that. She watched Spider Rico and Rocky artlessly slug all four letters out of each other, imagining they were both Michael, and that they were both her.

Unfortunately, girls were still girls. After her failure to get some serious gaming, in which all she netted was an awkward encounter with Dawn, Destiny posted to the discord server – the “Hottie Haven,” which always made her smile – to see if anybody else wanted to do some gaming. Even just casual stuff like Minecraft. No traction.

DamnDanielle: you got mariokart? I'm tits af at mariokart

SexiLexy: Mario Kart! Mario Kart! Mario Kart!

KC: ngl some mk sounds chill

SexiLexy: MARIOKARRRRRRRRRRRT

Mittlefinger: Frick sorry you guys! I have it, but somebody ran off with my consoles

DamnDanielle: u gotta red shell that bitch

Minutes later, Destiny received a DM. It was hard respecting someone who couldn't even come up with a decent handle, but at least in a place where she was still learning everybody's real names, it made it easy to tell who it was.

Tori: Somebody on this floor?

Mittlefinger: no, just some guy.

Tori: Here at Lakeview, or like last year, or what?

Mittlefinger: here

Mittlefinger: move-in day

Mittlefinger: he was supposed to help me move in but we sort of had a fight and he ran off with it.

Tori: Did you tell Spencer?

Mittlefinger: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Snitches_Get_Stitches

Tori: This isn't a guy copying your homework. This is a thief. Just because you had an argument doesn't mean this dick can rob you.

Mittlefinger: seriously don't tell him. It was more than a fight and it was horrible and I just want to drop it, ok?

Tori: No, it's not OK. What happened??? I will help you, but you have to open up to me.

Mittlefinger: psl, Tori. I know you mean well but I really really REALLY don't want to talk or think about what happened ok? It sucked. Please

Thirty seconds later, there was a click and a thud as someone tried to open the door to her room. Tori demanded entry, and since she'd already disregarded Destiny's first request to let it drop, there seemed to be little to do but humor her. She opened the door to find Tori standing there, arms folded sternly. Charlie swiveled her chair. (The desk chairs that came with the room were kinda shitty; Destiny expressed a stray moment of admiration for one of the gamer chairs during their Target shopping spree, and they'd come home with *two*. Destiny had a folding lawn chair at her desk at home.)

Charlie waved. "Oh, heya Tori! Oooh, I *love* that top."

Tori entered unasked and shut the door firmly behind her. "Tell me what's going on, Destiny."

Charlie looked between the two. "What's up? Did something happen?"

Destiny shook her head. "I told you I *don't* want to talk about it. I meant it."

But Tori only marched over and crouched in front of her. "Does he go here?"

"Yes, not that it's your business. God, I'm sorry I even brought it up."

Charlie joined them, maneuvering behind her roommate and placing two gentle hands on her shoulders. "It's OK, Destiny. You can trust her. She won't do anything with your permission. Right, Tori?"

Tori eyed Destiny a moment before grudgingly acknowledging the question.

"Sure. Yes, that is. Destiny, I just want you to get what's yours, OK? Like Spencer said – we're not just a floor; we're a community. If you won't tell him, then try me. Who is he."

Charlie nodded softly, encouragingly.

"H-his name is Michael," Destiny said. Nice and vague still. Nothing committed.

"Michael. OK. Did he just steal from you, or was there more?"

To that, Destiny had no response. Saying it once, to Charlie, had been hard. Saying it again was more than she was ready for.

Tori's eyes narrowed as if she'd said it all, though. "He hurt you."

Numbly, Destiny nodded.

"OK. Do you want me to hurt him back? Spencer can't do that for you. He has to play by the rules. But I don't."

"No! Oh god, no. That would only make it worse. I just want to forget about it, OK? He went to my high school and he drove me here and he got the wrong idea about us and... I just want to forget it ever happened."

There was no missing that Tori didn't like that answer, neither what it implied or how Destiny was reacting to it. Nevertheless she again nodded her obedience to Destiny's wishes and Charlie's command. "All right, then. So why don't you tell me Michael's full name, and I'll go get your things back. Nothing mean," she said before Destiny could beg her not to. "No squabbles. Just 'hi, I think you got my friend's stuff, I'd like you to return it.' I get your stuff, you play some Mario Kart, fin."

"I don't want to have to talk to him again. You can't–"

“No I know. And I can make sure he knows, too. Just give me a name, and I’ll find him. I have my ways.”

Charlie smiled softly. “Meaning you haven’t deleted the email Spencer sent out with a link to the Lakeview campus directory.”

“That’s one of my ways.” But Tori smiled.

Charlie put a soft hand on her roommate’s arm. “Would you feel better if I went, too? You’re such a hardcore badass gamer chick I bet you got so much gaming stuff we’ll need both of us to carry it home to you anyway.”

It was Charlie’s volunteerism that won her over.

Destiny was too distraught to hold her mouse steady while her friends were away. A thousand what-if’s played out in her head. If Michael got mad, he could tell everybody in the HHGC what happened. Make up a lie, like she’d asked for it, so nobody would believe her. It was a small town; her mom could hear about it from somebody. Ms. Sadler – would she believe Michael if he put it out there that Destiny had been some kind of slut-tease? What had she even been thinking, leaving the house without her hoodie?

Two hours later, Charlie and Tori returned, the latter carrying a familiar box, filled to the brim with consoles, controllers, wires and accessories. Her headset! Her beloved D.Va headset! She’d been playing on 1% volume with subtitles for days, but... her headset!

Tori set the box down gently on the bed like it was no big deal.

“You got it!” Destiny leapt to her feet and hugged the girl. She’d never had a friend who wasn’t white before! Stan would hate it. Destiny didn’t care. “You’re amazing! How on earth did you do it?!”

Charlie nudged Tori with an elbow, grinning proudly. “Amazing doesn’t begin to cover it. We just walked up to the building, waited for someone to walk in—”

“They just let you in...? He lives in Roland. That’s all boys. Wouldn’t they realize you don’t live there?”

Tori glanced at Charlie just as Charlie looked over Tori. Both looked quite pleased with themselves. Charlie didn’t quite roll her eyes. “Um, ya. He let us in. Anyway, yeah, we walked up to his room and Tori knocks, like *BOOM, BOOM.*” She replicated it, pounding on their door with the bottom of her fist.

“Wanted to make sure the little diaper sniffer heard us.” Tori shrugged.

“So he comes to the door, and he sees us, and gets this, *ugh*, the sleaziest grin I’ve ever seen, like he doordashed a couple of prostitutes or something. But the creep let us walk right in there. It was just him – he has a roommate, looked like, but not there.”

Tori sat back, content to let Charlie tell it. “So he’s like, ‘hey, ladies.’ You ever notice how creeps always use the word ‘ladies,’ like it’s suave or something? ‘Nice booties, *ladies.*’ Ew.”

Destiny had never made such an observation. Guys harassing women online were hardly ever that subtle. She nodded in complete agreement anyway. “Ugh, totally. Ew.”

“So he figures we’re there to see his roommate, tells us he’s out but we’re welcome to stay. Duh, like the toad was gonna kick *us* out. But Tori, she just folds her arms...” She looked at Tori. “Fold your arms. Go on, show her.”

With a dryly amused look, Tori obliged. Destiny was impressed. The chick had guns on her. “And she’s like, ‘you have a box of our friend’s stuff. We’re here to take it to her.’ Like, that’s it. She doesn’t tell him to hand it over, doesn’t do that *nyeh* thing, where like you poke them in the chest with a finger and *ow, nyeh*. Just ‘You got it, we’re taking it.’ And it’s super obvious immediately that he knows exactly what we’re talking about. He’s all shifty, looking around, licking his guilty little jerk-boy lips, but he goes ‘I dunno what you’re talking about, but you can frisk me if you want.’”

“He did *not* say that!” Destiny scowled, though she could hear him say it. That was why she’d dropped out of HHTTRPGC freshman year, because Michael – and really, half the guys there – were always spouting sexist sludge like that. She just wanted to rage and let her greatclub oof many bonks on the gobby noggins, but no, they wanted to pretend to get drunk and harass bar maids for no XP or loot.

So Tori, she just opens up the closet, and then the other side, and there it is right on top. He’s squawking and telling her she can’t go through his stuff, but she just grabs it and when he gets close, plants a hand on him and *shoves*, like *back off*, like she’s a full-on cop! It was *incredible*.”

Tori shrugged. “Little worm’s not worth any more breath than he’s already wasting on himself.”

“He makes like he’s going to stop her, but I’m like nuh uh, you don’t put your nasty little claws on a girl, buddy!”

Tori grinned. “I believe what she actually said was, ‘hey, no! Come on...!’”

Charlie blushed. “I’m a lover, not a fighter.”

“Nothing wrong with that. But yeah, I wasn’t looking to have a dialogue with him. You said don’t start anything. So I just looked him in the eye and told him that the only reason I wasn’t knocking him right on his ass was because you told me not to. Only...”

Tori looked conflicted. Charlie finished the thought. “Only then he called you... a bad word.”

Destiny frowned. “What did he call me?”

“Oh, he was putting on a show, trying to act like he wasn’t being pushed around by two girls. Just being a jerk is all.”

“What did he call me.”

Charlie looked to Tori, who nodded permission to repeat it. In a small voice, she did. “He said something like ‘you tell that slut...’”

Slut. Four letters.

“That was as much as he got to say, though, because... You want to tell him, Tori?”

“Eh, you can finish.”

“Tori just set your box down, grabbed him by the shoulders and just *POW*, pushed him up against the wall, like the one with the window, and told him if she ever caught him so much as looking your direction again, she’d test how strong the *glass* was! It was *insane*. He looked like he was gonna pee himself. Maybe he did.”

Destiny’s eyes widened. “You said that?!”

Tori nodded. “I know you said not to start anything, but he had to know not to follow us back over here. I know you don’t want to tell the RA about it all, but we might want to at least make sure he’s got his eyes open in case little Mr. Thievy-Dick tries to stop in. He seemed pretty scared, but put a few beers in a guy and watch that temporary courage shine.”

Charlie squatted in front of her and squeezed both of Destiny’s hands. “And even if he does, you’ll have me with you the whole time. But yeah, maybe telling Spencer would be—”

Suddenly the door, which had never quite shut behind them, swung up a few more inches. The boy on the other side had a clipboard in hand; he carried it so if anybody had a problem he could jot it down and fix it. Always fixing things. “Did I hear my name? Anything I can do for you ladies?”

Ladies. The girls shared a look, and burst into a spontaneous fit of mass giggles. Destiny ignored him, though, hopping to her feet and pulled both of her new friends into a hug. “You guys are the best,” she murmured into the huddle. “Thank you. Thank you thank you thank you!”

Spencer waited until they separated, not disrupting the sweet moment. “Well. No idea what’s going on, but... I see kindness, and I’m digging it.”

Charlie beamed at him. “Somebody took some of Destiny’s stuff. Tori went and got it back! She was amazing.”

There was a flicker of something that passed over his face, not bitterness at being cut out of the loop, Destiny thought, but anger that someone had preyed on one of his residents. One of his “Hotties.” (What a ridiculous term to apply to her. She didn’t even own makeup or hairspray or have her ears pierced or anything like that!)

Then Spencer was all smiles. “Yeah? Tori, that’s awesome. Great work. I hope it doesn’t sound patronizing or anything, but I’m proud of you.”

That smile made Destiny wish she’d gone herself. Still, Tori more than deserved it. Charlie, too. “She helped,” Destiny added. “I think they’re due a little pat on the butt for a good job,” she said. In a jokey way. Kind of.

“Destiny!” Charlie said, aghast, eyes twinkling. Was it crass of her to suggest it? Maybe. Still, her roommate didn’t do a very good job of hiding her crush on the guy. She

brought him up a dozen times a day, always gushing with positivity. More than usual. Destiny didn't know anything about being a wingman, but surely it couldn't hurt Charlie's odds to plant an idea or two in his head.

Only, then Tori turned, cocking her ass out toward him. It was *rocking* those jeans. "Pat me." She flashed him a lopsided grin.

Spencer's cheeks flushed, but to be cool, he gave Tori's behind a few pats – with his clipboard. Still, the other side of her lips perked up. Suddenly Charlie was turning too, and giggled excitedly as she too received the clip-pat.

"You all are a trip. But I'm proud of you. You know, Tori, we're doing floor government elections this weekend, to decide how we spend our floor funds, programs, all that. You should really think about putting your name in for governor." He poked her with the clipboard, in the tummy this time. "If you don't, I will."

"You totally should! I mean, who else? Governor Tori – *love* the sound of it."

"Pff, I was gonna put in for *his* job," Tori laughed. "But yeah, I'll think about it."

"And hey, I don't know what you're up to tonight, but half the floor is down in the lounge playing Mario Kart. You should check it out. I'm heading there once I finish rounds. I don't wanna brag, but I'm pretty decent at video games."

Destiny destroyed him repeatedly, for hours. He kept trying so *hard*. So hot, the way he mashed those buttons, clenched his chiseled jaw. When he started getting salty, she let him win a few – which he noticed, and thanked her for showing mercy. That was hotter yet.

That night, the memory of those pats sat heavy in Destiny's gut. Or, well, not her gut, but... deeper.

Maybe it was weird, but she'd never really seen porn before coming to Lakeview. Stan was a dunce about technology, at least digital technology, but he'd known enough to buy software to monitor everybody's browsing habits with a particular eye toward his internet-addicted stepdaughter. That never stopped his sons, but Destiny would be mortified if he caught her. Sure, she could have input a work-around like everybody did for the school's network, but what happened when the software released a patch and she didn't catch it in time? Small chance maybe, but considering the fallout...! Her mother would practically disown her if she got Stan thinking about her like that.

Her imagination had stepped in to fill the gap. Fantasies ran the gamut from the mundane, making out with her favorite streamers or a few of the hot boys she saw at school, to the perverse, meeting total strangers in a VR environment to fuck each other's avatars. Weird hentai type encounters sometimes. One of her favorites was the one where the Cockatronic Pentadictator forced himself inside her and tried to pleasure her

as a means to break her will and induct her into his loyal army of cybersluts. Sometimes it succeeded, usually if she was so worked up she needed a second round.

Her dreams that night were a nonsensical but nevertheless extremely intense combination of her mainstay masturbatory fantasies and the day's events. Spencer co-opted a lot of the tropes, and things got weird and confusing and hot. His face was in place of Hayes High quarterback Max Lightner's when he turned around to ask for help with the homework, which was somehow Mario Kart, and she tutored him in his lap and showed him how to aim green shells, and he told her how smart she was and told her he'd gladly pay for more tutoring with his cock. He was Kratos from *God of War*, joining her in slaughtering waves of enemies in his sweaty loincloth on their way back to his cabin, and if he called her "boy" instead of "girl," he did it in that insanely hot Kratos voice and then had ultra-violent cabin-smashing sex with her while they sometimes also killed more minions.

Then their cabin was the Higgins 3 shower, or sometimes her shower back home in Lerwick, and he was standing between Destiny and Charlie. Only this Charlie was frantically aggressive, desperate to get at her. Except unlike that girl in the video, Charlie didn't want to hurt her, but to get gay with her. But Spencer was always between them, sandwiched between their wet bodies as they slipped and slithered on him and around him until it was basically just an excuse to grind their bodies on him.

Then he was in her room to award butt pats to all the good girls, but he kept patting Charlie's, and sometimes Tori's, and Destiny tried to get him to notice her too but he was so focused on Charlie's he couldn't hear her. At times she was dying with envy, flashing her boobs and inviting him to pat those because surely the others couldn't compete with her there, except of course they did, which was somehow hotter when he made them fight for attention. Others she watched him maul her new friends' bodies with satisfaction, her heart swelling with pride for helping bestow this honor on them. Sometimes she joined in the patting, which she didn't even know how to feel about, but Spencer patted her for helping him pat, so dream Destiny decided it must be OK.

Then she saw Charlie was watching her get some pats in kind with jealousy of her own, and Tori sometimes too though that didn't seem to go anywhere, and she saw the lust in her roommate's eyes, and suddenly Spencer was the Cockatronic Pentadictator and he was already so close to breaking her will, and he promised he would relent, spare her cyberfuckslavement if she would become his recruiter instead, except in the dream it was still Spencer enough that she wanted to be nice to him, and it was still Charlie enough that Destiny knew she'd be glad for it, so she stealthed up behind Charlie and put the nanofuckstasy rod inside her and joined Spencer in evil laughing as the trembling blonde fell to her knees in instant and total submission, and then...

Then things got really weird – weirder – and Destiny wanted a reward, and the Spencer Pentadictator loved her and wanted to reward her, and the new

cyberCharlieslut wanted to service him, and to thank Destiny, and there was some really messed up stuff where they were like fighting – but sexy fighting, like with their tongues and stuff – to be the first one to make the Pentadicktator cumsplode, because that was the surest way to get him to reward his cyberslut minions with cumsplosions of their own, but pretty soon it was just Destiny and Charlie on their knees competing to see who could provide the most pleasure to Spencer in a tandem blowjob, and she was sort of kissing another girl around a cock, and then suddenly her stupid asshole brain flashed over to Michael Soo and she woke up choking down vomit, but nevertheless moist and sweaty and panting.

She beat down the stray thought in a flash, then took stock of herself in the dark room. Destiny was certain, instantly, that she'd never been this horny before. Could she...? With her roommate right down...?

The constant whir of the fans in her PC assisted the soft hum of the air conditioning. She could be quiet.

How slowly she had to move to ease her panties down past her hips without giving the bed springs an excuse to groan only exacerbated the delirium of this decidedly naughty activity. Was the door locked? No, right, of course it was. It always was here. It was unnerving that she didn't have to lock it herself. Even more so that there was another person locked in here with her. That was naughtier still, way naughtier.

She grinned in the dark as her hand tip-fingered down her bare stomach to the space between her legs. It was a real life stealth run, sneaking into the dungeon to liberate Princess Leigha Orgasma from her cell. Mmm, yes your majesty, I *am* a little short for a stormtrooper. She split her attention between ghost-light teasing at her clit and trying to keep her breathing slow and even. If the guard circled by for an inspection, she'd be no more than a horny shadow.

The HHGC guys talked about jerking off or raiding the boss or 5 v 1 all-ins all the time, a dozen different gross and frankly baffling metaphors. So did her stepbrothers. So did Stan sometimes (albeit to the indignant squawks of Destiny's mother). She was pretty sure guys masturbated twice a day and three times Sunday. Destiny, she didn't really understand the anatomy of it all especially well; sex ed at Hayes High was STDs and abstinence, full stop. Still, some things felt good, and if it was a rather messy affair, once in a while a girl needed to solo the boss.

Destiny's eyes slid closed. Her ears filled with even breathing and air circulation, but her mind was back at those dream fantasies. No more chaos to them now. She brought Spencer back in. Shower fight Spencer – off went his clothes, and on went a sheen of heroic water and manly sweat. "I've come to pat your butt, Destiny," he said in a deep, sexy voice.

"You can pat anything you like," she promised him, raising her real and imaginary shirts over real and imaginary tits. Spencer couldn't help himself. Destiny

could feel the conflict in him, how much he wanted her ass but was overwhelmed by the generous offer of big soft freckled boobs. Dream her switched into a pair of Charlie's skimpy little shorts to reward him for seeing her as more than just her big rack.

"Well? See anything you want to pat?" she asked, twisting this way and that for him, her clit swelling against her finger needfully.

Oh shit. She was panting. If she wasn't careful... She sighed happily, hoping this added level of challenge could stretch this out all night. No classes until 10:15, all night to explore this fantasy. She removed her shirt entirely and gave her nipples a few little pinches. Destiny wasn't sure how much she liked the feeling of it, but it was sort of hot, a teensy bit painful, a little transgressive.

Now, where was I...

"Pat me, Spencer."

She froze. That hadn't been her. Not dream her, and not her her. That had come from the bottom bunk.

"Pat me... mmm... thank you..." muttered Charlie.

There were the softest sounds of movement. Sheets rustling, friction against fabric. No way. Charlie couldn't be...! While Destiny was in the room...! While Destiny was also...!!!

"No... go 'head... use hands, if you want..." she murmured after a minute.

Was she awake? Surely she wouldn't just narrate her fantasies aloud if she were. As Destiny held back, only barely, so very barely diddling her pussy, she deduced that her roommate was masturbating in her sleep. One little bump on the behind with a clipboard, and she was so turned on she was playing with herself in her sleep.

Destiny should stop. This was... weird. Charlie would be mortified if she woke up and found her roommate taking a scenic drive down the roundabout with her. Destiny would be, too, but she was much more concerned about Charlie. All that this girl had done for her, all the kindness she'd shown...

She deserved Spencer.

Destiny's eyes slid closed, and there her fantasy was waiting.

"Squeeze harder..." whimpered Charlie down on the bottom bunk.

Like that, her roommate sauntered into the fantasy, bending down with her hands on her mattress, showcasing that ridonkulous butt of hers. Spencer forgot Destiny was there. Destiny forgot Destiny was there. He peeled Charlie's shorts down, then took her panties off with his teeth.

"Pat me," pleaded Charlie – real, imagined, who knew. Spencer obliged, seizing one cheek in each hand.

He hesitated. "I shouldn't. I came for Destiny..." But he sounded like he regretted it. Charlie shivered at the implication, that he wanted to fuck her so much that he was actually considering passing up on the the golden opportunity Destiny had offered.

Charlie whined. “Please? Please. Please. Please.”

(That was out loud. Holy shit. This was nuts.)

Spencer continued to balk, caught between Destiny’s desire to have him touch her, and her desire to see Charlie collect her earned reward. But Destiny wanted to come, too. Her horny, sleepy, gamery mind sought, and soon discovered, a solution. Was this... weird? Like, gay weird? Could she really...? Would it even be hot if she...

Destiny stepped into the piloting station and activated the mech overrides, and became... Mechsterny.

The controls were so intuitive. Moving his limbs was pretty much the same way she moved her own. As Charlie squirmed down below, Destiny maneuvered his limbs, touched his lean muscles, gave a playful stroke of the cock. (She was careful not to trigger its special psionic attack, searing its image into the minds of any woman looking at it for weeks at a time.)

“Pat me...”

Mechsterny pivoted itself to face the only other occupant of the room. As her mind supplied an Iron-Man-esque feat of zooming in on tight blonde booty while displaying an array of gibberish in her HUD, Destiny fought down a giggle in her fantasy control pod. (Because whatever this was would end fast and horrible if she woke up Charlie.) She maneuvered up behind her, and, after less of a pause than she would have anticipated needing, commanded the man-mech to give that thing a pat. The ass was soft, the way asses were, but there was firm muscle only barely beneath the surface. For the first time in her life, Destiny wondered what another girl’s butt would feel like. Not that she wanted to – she really didn’t – but

“Deeper...” whispered Charlie. Was that her? Or... Whatever.

Her mech body was a man’s body, so Destiny ordered it to do what men did. She slapped Spencer’s cock down in the cleft of Charlie’s ass. Fuck yes. Spencer was so fucking hard. Charlie was so fucking wet. So was Destiny. She mouse-wheeled to zoom, honing in on that waiting, aching hole. Charlie would be so tight, she just knew. A body that tight had a pussy that tight. Destiny didn’t even really know what tight pussies felt like, or if hers was, or what, but surely Charlie. Spencer deserved it. Charlie deserved it.

She lined up her primary weapon, and pressed the attack.

Her laugh was out loud this time. She froze, but Charlie was simply whimpering, muttering something into a pillow now that Destiny could no longer understand. Damn right she was. Establishing a rhythm was so easy. Forward, back. Forward, back. W, S. W, S. Every now and then she gave it a little A or D, just to keep Charlie moaning.

Pats. This woman shouldn’t be settling for pats. She should be fucking whoever she wanted whenever she wanted however she wanted. And she wanted Spencer, same as Destiny wanted Spencer. She did to Charlie with Spencer what she knew Charlie –

perfect, generous, loving Charlie – would do to her if she were piloting him. What he would do to both of them if life were fair.

Charlie was a giver, though, not a taker. She spun the blonde around and compelled her to her knees. His mechromight made it effortless, or maybe that was just how ready Charlie was to service him. “Suck it,” she ordered into her mic, Spencer’s voice commanding it in her ear.

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll suck it,” mewled Charlie. “Give it to me. I’ll be so good at it.”

“I know you will,” answered Destiny. They were talking, she sort of realized. Charlie didn’t seem to care, though, so why should she? “Nobody sucks cock like you do.” *Sucks cock*. What a gross phrase. But hearing it from Spencer, it was fucking *hot*. He wasn’t that kind of guy, but he could be when Destiny made him. For Charlie. Because Charlie was Charlie, and if she wanted to be a cocksucking little pleasure girl, then the Pentatdictator had done its–

No. Stay focused on this one. This is good. Ride it out.

“More,” cried Charlie. She wasn’t quiet now. If Destiny had been asleep, it would have woken her up. “More. Don’t stop. Don’t stop. I can do it. I can take it. Let me...”

“You’re unbelievable. You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to my cock.”

“I want to be. Fuck, fuck, fuck, I want to be, Spencer *please...*”

“You’re perfect. Fucking perfect. I’m yours. I’m yours, whenever you need me.”

“I need you! I need you. Please, let me. Please, so close, so close...”

“You can come. Come for me. I’ll pat you, pat that hot little ass, fucking pat, fucking, fucking, fuckiiiiing...!”

“Pat me!”

The roommates came in thunderous unison, for Spencer, for each other.

“So, were you roleplaying Spencer, or...? I was sort of, um, not totally there. Like half-asleep and half...” Charlie adjusted her jacket. Even in August it was chilly at three in the morning.

“Me too. Half... yeah, I mean.” Destiny was glad the darkness covered her blushing. People were generally unable to say the same three stupid cliché things when they saw a redhead blush, and she didn’t want Charlie to annoy her the way most people did.

They walked to Charlie’s car in silence. Higgins looked different at night, light shining in only one window, and that light so dim it was probably a candle, or maybe some freak who was using a device in light mode at this hour. Not their floor, so it could be anybody.

A lot of emotions were swirling around in her right then, but thanks to Charlie, none of them were too bad. An apology had spilled out before she even considered other options, but Charlie quickly beat that back. *I'm not sorry*, she'd said when Destiny had finally summoned the courage to peer down to her bunk. *But we should probably talk about it, don't you think?* Waffle House had been Destiny's idea. Talking about in their room, Ground Zero of where she'd just collaboratively jilled off with her roommate, had been too daunting. Distance might help.

As Charlie pulled out of her parking space, though, the one feeling that seemed to keep rising to the top was gratitude, somehow. She could have been put anywhere at Lakeview, but she'd been put on Higgins 3. Somebody had put her with Charlie. Somebody had put her with Spencer. If Charlie wasn't mad or creeped out, then neither was she. It had felt good. Beyond good. Like taking down a hacker toe to toe good.

She'd heard, not from anyone specifically but just from being a person alive in her culture, that college was a place where weird horny sex stuff happened. Gay stuff, one-night-only stuff, group stuff, random incidents of nudity stuff. So in an intellectual sense, tonight had been what she'd been warned about. Or promised? Yeah, "promised" was more like it. Destiny had known that before she graduated, something strange and sexual would happen, and had spent the past couple weeks worrying it would be that horrible thing with Michael. Instead, she'd coaxed what had sounded like an S Tier orgasm out of her roommate, who she was pretty sure by now was every bit as straight as Destiny herself.

Stranger still, she wasn't sorry, and from the little smile Charlie directed her way every time she caught her passenger looking at her, she was pretty sure Charlie wasn't either.

Destiny turned on the radio. They didn't have to talk yet. They could just be happy. This was a gust of wind away from a dream anyway, so why not just sit back and listen to Delilah narrate their way into this saccharine love song or that. Charlie grinned at an arched eyebrow at her default station, but reached out a hand and received a little squeeze.

Waffle House was pretty dead at that hour, one grandmotherly waitress inviting them to take any table they wanted, and one grad student rubbing her eyes awake as she tapped away at her laptop. Charlie ordered a stack of chocolate chip pancakes for the two of them, and a Coke Zero for herself. Destiny got a coffee. If their waitress had anything to say about the oxymoronic request, she'd gotten it out of her system years ago, and left the girls to their little station by the window.

"I'm not gay," Destiny said when the silence got too heavy.

"Yeah, me either," said Charlie.

"But I'm not mad or anything. I, um... Well I guess you already said you're not either, so..."

“Yeah.” Charlie dumped out the jelly tray. Destiny watched, and finally had to ask. It felt hilariously beside the point of their visit here, but what in the actual hell.

“I like to reorganize them. So apple goes here, top left partition, then blackberry, then grape, then the marmalade over here, then strawberry.” She grinned without a shred of self-consciousness. “Strawberry is my favorite, though, so sometimes, I’ll do it by best to worst flavor so that it gets its due.”

“Sure, wouldn’t want to hurt the jelly packets’ feelings.” Destiny laughed. “You know, I worked in a diner back home, Forky’s, off and on since I was thirteen, and I—”

“I didn’t think it was legal to have a job at thirteen.”

“It’s probably not, but I wanted to. Built one hell of a Steam library off of it.”

Charlie smiled fondly. “I have absolutely no idea what that means but it sounds like it made you happy.”

“And yeah, I never once saw anybody arrange the jellies by which ones need a pick-me-up. A few, um, particular sorts who did the alphabet thing.”

“Aw, you called me particular instead of freakin’ goofy.”

“Oh I think we’re both pretty goofy, considering...” She made a face. Mechsterny? What in the four-letter world had she been thinking?

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you I talk in my sleep sometimes.”

“It’s OK. Just talk, right? You’re not going to, like, climb up next to me and...”

“No way. You want all this in your bed, you gotta pay up front.” Charlie laughed, dipping a finger in her drink and flicking it at her roommate playfully. “But tonight was... so weird, but... sort of... good?”

“Yeah. Weird, but... good weird.”

Under the table, Charlie tapped Destiny’s ankle with a foot. “Good. So then... we’re good.”

“We’re good.” Destiny nodded. “Actually, you’re maybe, um, the nicest person I’ve ever met.”

There was no dismissal, no attempt at humility. Only that smile. “Thank you.”

“So... are you for real into Spencer? Or just sort of, like, attracted to him? You know, like how everybody’s always being on discord. Like flirty, but just joking around.”

“I don’t think they’re joking around,” said Charlie.

“Me either.”

After a moment’s hesitation, she answered the question. “And I mean, I guess I like him? I know he’s told some girls he can’t date girls on his floor, so it’s not like anything *can* happen. But I just... like him.” She shrugged.

Destiny sipped her coffee. “He is very pretty. Did not dump-stat his Cha, can confirm.”

Her roommate laughed. “Again, lost. But I love that you’re so hardcore about what you’re hardcore about. Most of the girls on the floor, they’re... I dunno. Like me, I

guess. I can see how they'd fit in with my friends from high school, where the cliques would fall within the clique. But you're your own thing, and it's just... awesome. It's hard to be different sometimes. Nobody who met you would think you were just another random hot popular chick at the cool kids table, even if you let me make you sit with us."

"I always thought being different was easier than being the same. To be the same, you have to know what everybody else is doing so you can do it, too. To be different, you just have to do whatever you feel like doing."

"And not care that you're doing it alone." The waitress returned, slapped down a hot plate of chocolatey-chippy pancakes, and left without a word. "I'm bad at alone."

Destiny felt quietly relieved to hear this paragon reveal something she was bad at, but squelched the ugly little thought. Only hours ago, this girl had confronted a sexual assaulter and retrieved her stolen property. The girl was a superhero, as far as she was concerned. Tori, too, but Tori struck her as someone who liked to pick fights because she liked to win them. She and Destiny were alike in that way, though for Destiny it was purely by proxy via her video game avatar.

"I think you're really good at being exactly who you are," said Destiny, smirking as she stole one of the bites Charlie cut off for herself. "And you're not alone. Like it or not, you're stuck with me."

Charlie booped Destiny's nose with her fork, then squeaked an apology and wiped off the dab of chocolate she'd deposited there with a freshly licked thumb. "I like it."

The two went to work on those pancakes. There was a brief debate about whether or not chocolate chip pancakes merited the addition of syrup, which Charlie won by simply stating "in for a penny, in for a pound," and flooding the plate. Destiny had to admit, it was an improvement.

"So have you always talked in your sleep like that?" Destiny asked. Then the unintended implication of those final two words struck her, and she rushed to amend. "Not like *that*, I didn't mean about, um..."

Charlie raised her fork, threatening another boop. "I know what you meant. My dad says when I was a baby, I started talking in my sleep more than I did when I was awake. I think he might be kidding, but it's hard to tell with him sometimes. But yeah, since forever I guess. What, um, was I saying, before...?"

"Pat me.' It was pretty innocent."

"Oh god. I'd say it's the most embarrassing moment of my life, but then..."
Destiny agreed – right up until Charlie swallowed her bite and finished. "Then it actually turned out... I dunno. Not. I guess. Like, weird, but not bad weird. Unless you thought it was bad."

"No," said Destiny after allowing herself a moment to consider. "Weird, but not bad weird."

“I have this mouthpiece. I almost didn’t bring it. But I can put it in at night, and it doesn’t stop the sleep talking, but it sort of garbles it so it’s hard to understand, just like...” Charlie put a finger between her teeth sideways and tried to say something, utterly unintelligible. “My mom got it for me for sleepovers because I was really self-conscious about it. It, um, sort of makes me drool a lot, but—”

“You’re fine,” said Destiny firmly. “Really. I was already awake when you started. I don’t think it would wake me up, and if it does, I can just sleep with my earbuds in. I’m used to it.”

“Isn’t that bad for your ears?”

It was better than listening to her mom and Stan going at it through the shared wall, she thought. “If it gets to be too much, I can just pretend to be him again and talk you down.”

Charlie’s sharp laugh earned a glare from the waitress, hunched over her phone at a table by the entrance, for disrupting the quiet environs of the Waffle House. “I’m not sure you understand what direction ‘down’ is.”

“Wait, so you’re saying my attempted deescalation didn’t work?”

A few more bites were taken before Charlie responded. “I was so nervous to meet you, you know? I’ve never had a roommate. No brother, no sister, nothing. I started thinking about living here with some random person, and psyching myself up and freaking myself out. None of my close friends were coming here, and none of my not-so-close friends would I have wanted to live with. So that meant a stranger. Living in an area roughly 225 square feet with someone I’d never met. I used a calculator at the time, but for easy illustration, call the room 10 feet high, so 2250 cubic feet, 1125 apiece, some of that lost to dead space by the ceiling.

“The space didn’t matter in the grander scheme of things, but it made me realize how small and close it would be. So I ran some extrapolations, figured conservatively spending 10-12 hours a day in that space with that person. Potentially a lot more depending on... well.

“So times 7 days times thirty-six weeks – I actually looked at the whole school calendar and estimated departures for breaks and weekends – and I realized, I’m going to spend more time with this person, this random stranger, in that one school year than I ever have with any friend I’ve ever had.”

Destiny was good at math, but not at this hour or without preamble. She scrunched her nose. “Really? I’m sure you and your best friends spent tons of time together.”

“Think about it. Yeah, your high school friends have four years, but maybe a class or two a day at best, a few hours some evenings, the occasional burst of taking a weekend trip together or... well.” She knew Destiny well enough by then to appreciate

that her spontaneous vacation budget was a solid \$0. “But you spend maybe twenty hours a week together? Thirty tops if you’re inseparable.”

Destiny grinned, seizing one of the final few bites with relish. “No wonder you want to be an actuary, Charlie, geez.”

“I know, right? Maths! But yeah. I knew I was going to be close to this person, and I dunno, I guess I sort of told myself that I was trading what I had then for what we have now, and I guess I was afraid we wouldn’t hit it off. So I said, you’re going to *make* this person love you and want to be your best friend, even if they’re awful and you can’t stand them.”

Destiny shook softly with laughter. “That’s pretty twisted. Paranoid, even. But hey, at least it worked, right? I’ve definitely never had a night like this with any of my high school friends.”

Charlie tapped her nearly empty Coke Zero glass with her fork and raised it. “To many more nights like this with my new friend!”

Destiny blushed, but took it as a call for more pancakes rather than that other part of the evening’s activities. She raised her mug and clinked it to Charlie’s glass. “To new friends.”

By dribs and drabs, the norms eroded. One day Charlie simply walked back from the shower, swiped the lock open, and dropped her towel without fanfare, taking her time picking out the day’s outfit and chatting up her roommate as if it were all perfectly natural. Destiny followed suit. It was weirdly not all that weird. Less weird than it had felt being creeped out by her own nudity in her own home, for sure.

Another afternoon it was especially hot, well into the 90’s, the sun using their windows as a magnifying glass, and Destiny had decided to simply strip down to her underwear to keep cool. Charlie came home from class, studied her for a moment, the sheen of sweat dripping down into her bra, then nodded and did the same.

On a Saturday they were doing laundry together. Charlie had never done hers; her parents used a service. She considered it might be a skill worth learning and requested a lesson. In the process, Destiny grumped about her pet peeve of always having the clothes she was wearing left dirty, so the hamper was already refilling before she’d even finished folding. With a flourish, Charlie removed her shirt and jeans and did the rest of her laundry in boxers and a sports bra. They binged the rest of their show in their underwear together, and from then on, comfy undies were fair game for attire in the room.

Charlie turned out to be quite a prolific dreamer, or else maybe Spencer turned out to be quite the inspiration for lurid dreams. It became fairly typical to wake up to the

sound of her babbling incoherent fantasies. College life had awakened Destiny's sex drive to the extent that she was as horny awake as Charlie was asleep, and so it also became fairly typical for her to close her eyes and join in. There was no need to be bashful about it. Charlie was a sound sleeper. And when she wasn't, she didn't care. It was their weird little secret thing, blowing off steam indulging in intertwining mutual sex fantasies about their RA.

Neither of them could agree which one of them started the post-masturbatory high-five between bunks. Not technically a high five, just touching one dripping index finger to the other's. It signaled they were done, and they could stop spurring each other on. *That* was probably a bit much, but the nonverbal queue was easier than having to say, "Done coming my brains out, how about you?" every time they finished.

Getting herself off went from something she'd done once a month at home to almost every day at Lakeview. (OK, every day.) (OK, sometimes more than once.) How had she wasted so many years neglecting herself? Though the things Destiny conjured to get herself off were novel, too. Spencer, always. Always always. As often as not, though, Charlie was in them too.

Charlie wasn't the point. Destiny hadn't turned gay or anything. It was just that for some reason, seeing Charlie get what Charlie wanted, even just inside her own head, felt so good. Destiny would take hers, whatever hot little scenario she dreamed up, and then she'd make sure Spencer took care of her roommate, too. Sometimes he did Charlie only and Destiny just watched and waited her turn. Sometimes he never got to Destiny, and that too somehow felt very, very good. She couldn't say why. It just did.

One day Destiny was sitting at her desk doing homework in her panties – she was hornier than usual, and a bra would only excite her damnably excitable nipples – and she simply closed her eyes, spread her legs, and commenced. The fantasy du jour was nothing special, just one of the ones where she was masturbating at her desk and Spencer heard her moaning his name and couldn't help but be curious, knocking on the door and watching her, mesmerized by her big tits, by her wet pussy, by how badly she wanted him. So he did like he did and generously removed his pants, put his shaft in front of her and let him suck it until it was good and wet, then bent her over her desk and fucked her within an inch of her life while Charlie caressed him from behind.

She'd completely forgotten Charlie was in the room, reading some schoolwork on the futon. Her roommate kept quiet, let her finish, and finally cleared her throat right as Destiny was standing up to retrieve fresh panties. (She went through panties so fast these days.)

"Dang, Destiny, you just *go* for it."

"Oh! Oh my god. Oh my god, I'm so sorry, I didn't..." Only then she saw Charlie's hand sinking into her own shorts. (Charlie seldom wore panties any more.) "You don't even care. God, how messed up is this?"

“We can hear Peyton and Sydney going at it ten times a day next door. I don’t think we’re the biggest freaks on the floor by a long shot. Besides,” she said, wriggling her shorts down over her hips, “it’s kind of nice to know I’m not the only one losing her mind over that guy. Like, it’s not just in my head, you know? He really is... so... mmm...”

For the first time, Destiny watched Charlie pleasure herself. Somewhere in the midst of it she shrugged and sat back down and joined in.

“His eyes...”

“His lips...”

“His chest...”

“His ass...”

“His *cock*...”

“Oh, god, his cock...”

“The size of it...”

“The feel...”

“The *taste*...”

“You can go first.”

“You’re sure?”

“So sure. Go on. Suck that big dick.”

“Oh fuck. Oh god. Oh fucking god.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Thank you.”

Destiny fell to her knees as she came to increasingly detailed descriptions of exactly how they would pleasure their RA, and exactly how badly they wished to be permitted to try. Or maybe she’d been on her knees for a while, her mouth open and tongue out, panting, lost in thoughts of taking turns between sucking his shaft and his balls, then swapping places and tasting each other’s mouths on him. (Kind of a skanky fantasy, but she’d been playing a ton of adult games lately – pretty much anything with one guy and a bunch of girls, which was most of them – and such scenes were featured prominently.)

Then Charlie was hugging her, also on her knees, and if she cared that her breasts were pressed against Destiny’s, she didn’t show it. “How lucky are we to have found each other?” she asked, brushing aside Destiny’s hair.

It was perfect. Perfect, perfect love and sisterhood. As gay as it all sounded, it wasn’t. It really wasn’t. Eighteen years of hardcore solo, and she’d finally found her perfect co-op teammate, everything she wasn’t and everything she needed and somehow room in her heart to love Destiny back.

She couldn’t exactly say that, though, or it would definitely get super gay in a big damn hurry. “Not as lucky as Spencer will be if he ever actually comes down here,” she said instead. The girls giggled, still catching their breath, still embracing.

“Promise me, though, you won’t let him come between us? Like say he gives you a shot, like with Andi. I promise I’ll only be supportive and happy for you. No matter what.”

Destiny caught herself before she made a crass pun about “coming between them,” and nodded. She knew she had about as much of a shot with Spencer as she did with Pewdiepie the way these gorgeous women were competing for his attention, but even as she promised to do the same, she knew it was a lie.

She would make sure Charlie got her Spencer. Someday she would find him lonely, or horny, or looking for some perfect love of his own, and she would put Charlie in his arms.

Lawrence Svenster’s inconsolably enraged red oakwood timber rod emerged from my pussy dripping with cum. My cum. His cum. So much cum. It pumped with the passion pounding through both of our hearts. My thighs spread, because I welcomed him to return, because I could deny him nothing he desired, because I ached to be driven mad with another ravaging at his powerful but gentle hands.

“I can’t,” he said, his eyes unable to resist the impulse to feast on the glistening femininity of my insatiable cunt. “If I put this where I want to, Scarlotte, I’m not sure I’ll ever have the strength to leave.”

“Would that be so bad?” I asked. “I could make you breakfast if you stay.”

“You have children to raise. I want nothing more than to stay, to put this beast of lust inside your perfect body and have my way with you, to finish ruining you for other men. But I can’t do that to a hard-working mother of three. I won’t.”

My legs were too weak from the way he’d split me in half like Paul Bunyan’s axe through a flimsy pine tree, so I couldn’t follow in time as he grabbed his clothes and fled. The door to my upscale and very fashionable yet not too ostentatious penthouse apartment swung shut behind him before I could even explain that the children were staying with their grandparents for the weekend and they could have had all the sex they wanted for days and days and days.

But I knew I would never forget him, and the fervor for lust and pleasure he had awakened inside me.

Destiny sat back, grinning ear to ear. Charlie was sitting cross-legged on her bunk, her anxiousness on her face. “It’s stupid, isn’t it.”

“Charlie, this is so good. I loved this.”

“You’re just being nice.”

“If you don’t share this with everybody, I will. And then I’ll get all the credit. At least until they find out I suck at writing anything but code and couldn’t possibly have come up with anything this hot.”

“You’re just saying that.” A smile threatened at the corners of her roommate’s lips, though.

Destiny stood up, and without fanfare or hesitation, shimmied her shorts and panties down past her hips. “I’m not just saying it. Read it again. And use that voice you were using for Scarlotte to narrate. I swear, if purging the third world of land mines doesn’t work out, you can still make it huge in erotica ebook narration.”

“That’s a thing?”

Destiny shot her underwear at her roommate, using the elastic the same way she would have to fire a rubber band at a substitute teacher when she was eight. “Read!”

Charlie flushed, but not in embarrassment. With pleasure. Destiny had had to practically beat it out of her what she kept grunting and groaning and giggling and moaning over at her laptop. She’d been genuinely delighted. Not only because the story was so much fun, but because she was happy to hear Charlie had finally found an outlet for that raging volcano of lust bubbling just beneath her oh-so-bubbly surface.

It was cathartic, too. Fall break was only a few weeks away. Between then and now were midterms, and for all Charlie swore Destiny was some kind of genius who could never be challenged by mere academia, she’d always had test anxiety. She’d been doing pretty well, though, thanks in no small part to the tutoring program Tori and Katrina had helped organize, and wasn’t *too* worried.

After that, though, she had to go back home to Lerwick. She didn’t have a ride this time. Nobody on the floor lived anywhere close enough to bum a ride with, and after what happened with Michael, she wasn’t in a mood to play the lottery with the campus’s rideshare connection program. She’d called her mom for only the third time since coming to Lakeview – and there had been no incoming calls – to ask if she could get Stan to come pick her up. She’d laughed and said Stan had to work that day. Destiny asked which day, because he could come pick her up any time between Thursday and Saturday morning. Her mom said she’d let her know what he said, and that had been the end of it. She’d found a girl in her comp class who lived in the same general direction who’d said she could drop off Destiny at a gas station by the interstate that was only like forty-five minutes from home. The request had clearly weirded the girl out, but she said she’d do it. Destiny could probably bug somebody to give her a lift the rest of the way from there, if she pleaded. Or walk.

Then a week back home. With her mom and her stepfamily. For over a week.

Charlie finished scrolling back to the top of the document, cleared her throat, and brought Destiny’s mind back home. “I had no way of knowing when I woke up that morning to prepare a nutritious and tasty breakfast for my three adoring children, my

whole world, that it would be the day that rocked my body, my soul, and my pussy to their foundations. For that day would be the day I would meet the one who would set my heart on fire...”

Destiny stumbled back into the room. She’d forgotten her key card, but Charlie was in. She’d already locked herself out twice this semester, and though it had been inconvenient, it had made for an excuse to go talk to Spencer. Some of the girls took advantage of his open door policy, but Destiny was garbage at small talk.

“Hey. You know, we could always set the lock so you have to manually...” Charlie frowned. “You look... different.”

Destiny nodded, shuffling into the room and dropping onto the futon like a sack of bricks. Standing was hard. “Yeah.”

Her roommate decided to ignore it for the moment and shifted to lighter fare. Gesturing to Destiny’s monitor, she arched an amused eyebrow. “So, can I ask why you have a picture of Colonel Sanders flipping you off...?”

Destiny gasped. She’d forgotten to alt+tab or shut her monitor off when she’d fled the room. “Don’t look at it!” she shrieked.

Stupefied, Charlie first squinted, pondering what on earth Destiny was so freaked out about, then caught herself and looked away. “What? Oh god, I’m sorry, what? What!”

Destiny was sprinting for her desk, though, except she was high as a kite – a kite that had also been doing bong hits on and off for the past three hours with Casey and Sammi. She tripped over Charlie’s foot and skidded to a stop on her knees, banging her hand into a drawer handle and adding pain to the emotions behind her cries of anguish.

Charlie calmed her down. Charlie always calmed her down. Finally, when she could see and thin straight, Destiny showed her what was wrong.

It had come in an email from a throwaway account that could only be Michael Soo’s. *By and from the HHGC Alumni*, read the subject. There was an attachment. A big one. She’d scanned it before opening, just to be sure, but it was only evil, not viral.

She didn’t know how he’d done it – AI, probably, or maybe he was taking another section of the same graphic design class she was and had access to the same photoshop software, along with a lot of patience for this kind of thing. As Charlie now saw after Destiny zoomed back out, it was a pixelated picture of Colonel Sanders with one hand in a bucket of chicken and the other flipping her the bird. *Mittlefinger lickin’ good!* read the caption.

“Creepy...” Charlie shook her head, frowning disgustedly.

Then Destiny zoomed in. The image quality looked like shit, unless you scrolled in enough to see it was actually a mosaic of tinier pictures, each of which features a likeness of Destiny – each, or at least most, distinct – sucking someone’s dick. In some it was slapping her in the cheek, others she was lunging for it and seemingly being denied, but they were all around the same theme. Many of the cocks were rather unimpressive, which had made her wonder, aghast, if these weren’t just random porn cocks but rather actual images of the guys from HHGC. As she’d studied it, trembling in shame and rage and impotence, she’d thought there were an appreciable overabundance of the same familiar poorly manscaped Asian penis.

Charlie zoomed out for her, the cocks shrinking away as evil little cocks should. Then held her. Held her and murmured all the right things, even though nothing made it right. When Destiny finally, grudgingly extricated herself, she brought up the email. *Can’t wait to see you over break mf!* That was the whole body message.

“I... I can get Tori,” Charlie offered quietly. They both knew Destiny wouldn’t want her to, but it was her way of reminding Destiny that she’d kill for her if asked. Destiny said nothing, just let her roommate guide her back to the futon and do a little fussing.

“I wish the people waiting for you back home didn’t suck so much,” Charlie said a while later, thrusting a bowl of soup into her lap and settling in beside her. She’d never seen Destiny drink before, much less run off and get stoned with the bad kids. Not that it was something Destiny did often, but if she drew hard lines against such behaviors, she wouldn’t have even had what friends she’d had back at Hayes.

Destiny didn’t touch the spoon, even though it smelled really good and she was really hungry. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“What? No, just... Those boys are horrible. Beyond horrible. I just hate that you have to go back to that.”

“You said ‘the people waiting for me.’ You mean my family?”

“No! Well, sort of?” Charlie frowned, and there was something Destiny didn’t like in it. Not empathy, the mainstay of the usual Charlie frown. Condemnation. Disgust.

“Yeah, well, not everybody got to grow up in Orange County, fuckin’, paradise, or whatever! Not everybody’s dad stuck around, and takes them paragliding for their birthday, and buys them a car and jewelry and, and, fuckin’, sixty dollar skin cream, and prescription shoes, and–”

“Not everybody had scoliosis when they were a kid either,” Charlie snapped. “And at least I don’t have to worry about whether I’m going to give my dad a boner! And nobody in my house is trying to trick me into seeing their penis! And my mom wouldn’t just sit back and let them treat me like that! Take *their* side, even! Until I was so goddamn miserable I had nowhere to run but into some stupid video game!”

Destiny meant to throw the soup bowl at Charlie, but her thumb got caught on her sweatpants and she wound up just dumping it all over her lap, and a bit on the futon. With an animalistic growl, she stormed out of the room, doubling back for a change of clothes. She ignored Charlie's instantly offered apology as she fled, pausing in the bathroom to change before continuing on out of the building. It was worse that she knew Charlie was right, that Destiny's home sucked and her family didn't love her, not even her mom, not the way moms were supposed to. And she knew her outburst was pure, ugly jealousy and nothing more. She didn't resent Charlie's upbringing. Growing up like that was the only fantasy Destiny had that she never told her about.

She wasn't sure what to do. Going back to Higgins, no way. Every time she thought back to what she'd said to Charlie, and how much Charlie must be hurting to have said those things back, she wanted to throw up. She'd have to go back at some point, but not now. With no firm ideas, she wandered around campus until she blundered into the student union from a direction she'd never approached before. Destiny shook her head. She'd been nuts trying to keep up with Casey, out here getting snuck up on by a five-story building.

She was still in the computer lab, trying to find anything worth playing, when suddenly there was Charlie. Destiny gaped as the slender girl approached, a firmness in her face. It was the face Scarlotte Andersen's three healthy, well-adjusted children would see when they explored the boundaries of their mother's lovingly enforced rules.

"How the heck did you find me?"

"Your Snapchat privacy settings are crap. It led me right to you."

Shit. She'd only installed it to be nice to Toni and Terri. Sexy pictures were definitely not her scene, but they'd pleaded and pleaded until she'd agreed to join them for a few pics. From a distance, and the right angle, she and Toni looked enough alike that they could do this sort of mirror thing. It hadn't turned out great, but Terri said being able to produce authentic pics of back-to-back redhead shortstacks was like printing their own money. They *had* gotten a lot of views, she supposed, and one of the likes was Spencer, so it had been worth the afternoon.

"I'm sorry," she said immediately. "I'm so, so sorry."

"*I'm* sorry," Charlie countered.

This precipitated a debate over who had the right to be sorriest, culminating in Destiny making a lengthy confession about that seed of envy she'd let fester. At last Charlie relented and agreed that Destiny had won at being the worst. Her victory prize was another hug and a softly whispered utterance of forgiveness.

"Are you sure you won't let me go talk to that guy?" Charlie asked once the hugging and blubbing had subsided. "Maybe I could, I don't know, help him see what he's doing to you. Or just slap the little jerk upside the head."

“And risk you succumbing to the lure of the Dark Side? Never.” Destiny raised Charlie’s knuckle to her lips and planted a little kiss, in a very not-gay way. “But actually, I’ve been thinking, and... maybe I could let you talk to him.”

“Seriously?”

“C’mon. I’ll let you buy me a cinnamon roll at Scents of Humor, and while you eat two thirds of it, I’ll tell you what I want you to say to him...”

“Hey everybody! Is my voicey thingy working OK?”

“Hi, Carebear!”

“Dude. You didn’t say she was a she, Updawg.”

“Mic sounds great, by the way. What mic are you using? I might have to get one.”

“Welcome aboard, Carebear.”

Destiny had to fight not to laugh as the squad fell all over themselves to greet their newest team member and her dulcet voice. Once upon a time when she’d first joined the HHGC that had been her, the cute freshmen with her junior level boobs, the boys lining up to kiss her ass and flirt with the grace and poise of a toddler trying on his dad’s shoes. Charlie didn’t bother restraining herself, tapping the push to talk key on Destiny’s backup keyboard and giggling for all to hear. The PC wasn’t loving having two keyboards installed, but most of the hiccups didn’t seem to affect the game.

“Yeah, great. Are we done freaking out over the new chick? Congrats on being a chick, new chick. Let’s lock and load. I want me some chicken dinner tonight.”

“That’s him,” said Destiny, sans mic. “And you look way too adorable in my headset, by the way. Do I look that adorable?”

“You wish.”

“I was actually trying to be ironic with those, but maybe you’re onto something.”

The team hit their ready buttons at Michael’s command, and the game began seeking a match. The HHGC was officially a club for Hayes High students, but there was an alumni group that had been created some years back and was open to former members. Over time, it had blended with the high-school-only group, a backup roster of teammates for when the core HHGC group didn’t have enough members. The older members were a notoriously bad influence, but naturally that only made it cooler to be invited to hang with them.

“So Carebear, you a newb or are you here to teach us a few things?”

Charlie whispered to Destiny. “What’s a noove?” The whispering wasn’t necessary, but they’d agreed that once the game started and Destiny was focusing on the match, it would help make it clearer whether Charlie was speaking to her or to the team.

“New-*buh*. A new player. Someone who sucks.”

“Aw, they don’t suck. They’re just learning,” whispered Charlie, who was of course instinctively defending people who weren’t there to be offended. With push-to-talk pressed, she answered, “Oh, I’m OK. I’m not great. I learned a lot from playing with Updawg. That’s a *really* funny name, by the way. I totally fell for it!”

“That’s the oldest freaking joke. How could you not have heard that?”

“What joke? I want to hear it.”

“You’ve heard me do it, dumbfuck. I just go, ‘Hey, is it just me or does it smell like updawg in here?’ and they go ‘what’s updawg?’ Works better IRL where there’s smell.”

“Smells like your mom’s pussy to me, but I guess I forgot to open the window after I kicked her out earlier.”

“DUDE. There’s a new girl. Have some fuckin’ class, shitdick.”

“Oh I don’t mind. I like guys who are like regular guys, you know? You guys definitely don’t need to watch your mouths around me,” said Charlie, rolling her eyes in time with Destiny.

Aaron “Updawg” Dodgeson had been their in. The sophomore HHGC member played pretty much every waking hour. His freshman year his nickname amongst the upperclassmen in the club had been “Diaper” Dodgeson, because he’d play for six hours and never even pause to go to the bathroom. Apparently he’d been permitted to rebrand this year. He was friends with Destiny on discord still, even if they didn’t talk, so all she had to do was wait for his discord status to show he was logged in and LFG and time it right, then suicide when he died. Finally they wound up in the same lobby and she’d DMed him the setup to his nickname’s dumb joke and tried to type as girly as possible when asking if she could join his team.

Spellbinding him with Charlie’s voice had taken less than a minute; getting him to let her join some of his buddies for a match only a few more.

Michael retorted, “You shouldn’t encourage them. Fuckin’ sailors, these jagoffs.”

“I heard you like fucking sailors, Slabrock.” Beef_Slabrock, Michael’s gaming handle. He weighed four pounds less than Destiny. God forbid strangers on the internet suspect this about him, though.

“Ahoy, matey, be there sailors afoot? Slabrock be thirsty for ye!”

“Oh my god, would you two fuckwits shut the fuck up. C’mon, it’s loading. Let’s drop at the old folks home, gear up and push east.” Destiny grinned to herself. She’d known he’d go for it. He was one of the most predictable guys she’d ever gamed with.

“Wait, do you like sailors or grandmas, dude?”

“Or grandpas, let’s not be homophobic.”

“Oh my gosh, you guys are so funny!” Charlie giggled. It was the girliest sound Destiny had ever heard her roommate make, and she’d heard the girl ride her Spencetronic dildo to orgasm once already today.

The group jumped from the plane and glided down towards the target zone. Destiny kept it simple, no fancy tricks, no taking point. The banter continued as they geared up – rare sniper rifle, nice – splitting between chatting up Charlie and trying to impress her with dimwitted jocularity. Destiny hadn't realized how much they'd mellowed out around her over the years until she heard how awful they were with a fresh female audience.

“Stay behind us, Carebear. Are you a decent shot with that?”

“Um, I think so,” answered Charlie. “Should I use a different gun, do you think?”

“Just try not to suck,” chided Michael as he peered over the half wall, shotgun in hand. “Come on, storm zone's closing soon. Stay behind us and try not to get yourself killed because I'm not dying to rescue you.”

Destiny kept in the back, which she'd been planning on doing anyway. She kept her eye on the tower up the hill where she'd seen somebody with an offensively red skin cross a window moments before. As the guys debated whether it was worth taking the truck parked out front, she alt+tabbed and DMed STEMFemme, her newest discord friend. *It begins.*

gl hf, answered Ms. Sadler.

“Is there somebody up in that building,” whispered Destiny. Her whispering was their signal for Charlie to repeat it to the team, which she promptly did. She was so goddamn good with that vapid tone, you could *hear* the blonde in her voice.

The guys dove for cover. Michael with his short range setup rushed ahead, hiding behind a tree a ways up the slope. He always liked to be up close and personal, Destiny knew, so he could blame the team when they didn't back him up. Soon enough they saw their quarry, who didn't look to have seen them yet. “Time to find out if new chick can shoot,” said Michael, voice thick with skepticism.

“You got this, Carebear.”

“Just lead the target, keep your scope ahead of where he's going. At this range you probably wanna–”

Destiny aimed, and fired, and blasted Michael's head off. Charlie squeaked in alarm despite the lack of gory results, then pushed-to-talk to repeat Destiny's message. “I got him! You guys, I got him!”

“That was me, asswipe!” yelled Michael.

“Yeah, shit, that was one of our guys, Carebear.”

“No, no, that was definitely me. I watched the little bullet thingy go PLOOF and everything. Don't go trying to take credit for my kills, you guys!”

“No, we meant he was on our team, not...”

“You can team up with other teams? Oh man, that's so cool!”

“What? No, I meant, that's Slabrock, he's one of–”

“Would one of you goddamn idiots get up here and revive me already?”

“Dude, they definitely heard that shot, we can’t just walk up there in the open.”

Charlie grinned at her playmate as she feigned ignorance even more profound than her actual ignorance. “So that’s *not* a friendly team? You guys, he’s still crawling around. I think I can...” Destiny took another shot. “I got him! I got him, I got him! This is so much fun, you guys!”

Michael raged. The other guys tried to console him, promising they’d reboot him. Meanwhile Destiny was using the half wall as cover to flank the hilltop; as the other team surged down to respond to the sounds of her betrayal of Michael, she picked them off one by one, waiting until they were just close enough to cover to make a tempting target for revivals. In less than a minute, she downed the entire squad.

“Jesus fuck, Carebear, that was some shooting.”

“Was it? Aw, thanks!” Not *thanks*, but *thinks*, the way hot girls said it when they were acknowledging a familiar compliment. Planned and rehearsed. They’d taken inspiration from this hot chick at the Penderdast food court the other day who’d been deflecting praises for her eyes, which was indubitably code for her big tits.

With Michael still fuming, the team made for a reboot van. Destiny acted like she was following the boys, staying so far behind that she’d stay out of frame when they were spotted, using them to draw out attackers. She had nine kills and had revived their fourth party member, Barney, twice by the time they found one, and picked up three more defending Aaron while he activated it.

Charlie wrinkled her nose, studying the keyboard like it was a foreign instrument. In Destiny’s hands, it pretty much was. Charlie had taken piano lessons growing up, but there was being able to reliably strike a chord and there was watching Rachmaninoff strike nine in a second.

“About fucking time. Somebody give me a weapon so I can actually finally play the damn game.”

Destiny nodded, and Charlie said her line. “I feel so bad. Here, take one of mine.” Destiny aimed and hit G. The grenade rolled right up to Michael’s feet and blasted him straight back to hell.

“*WHAT THE FUCK IS WRONG WITH YOU, YOU STUPID FUCKING CUNT!*” roared Michael, blasting everybody’s ear drums. Charlie looked horribly offended by his language, though Destiny conceded it was about what she might have said if someone had pulled that shit on her.

“I tried to give you my gun! I just hit G, that’s it!”

“Yeah dude, it was an accident.”

“She obviously didn’t mean to—”

“G is for GRENADE! That’s literally why they keybound it to G, you cum-drunk mother fuckers!”

“What? No, I figured it was G for Give. Like Give you my Gun.” Charlie barely cut the mic off before she joined Destiny in peals of laughter.

“Get the fuck off of my fucking team, you fucking bimbo fucking parasite!” raged Michael. “Come on guys, let’s find a *competent* fourth and play a real match.”

“I’m so sorry!”

“She didn’t mean it, dude. Don’t be a dick.”

“And we’re actually still doing kinda good. Top 50.”

Destiny no-scoped the leading member of the team responding to the grenade blast, and with Aaron and Barney quickly mopped up the other three as the morons funneled themselves through a choke point. Another revive on Barney, too. Those were icing on the cake, Destiny thought as she switched to DMs. Never a smart idea to be typing when you could be attacked at any minute, but she couldn’t just keep rebooting and murdering Michael. Once was an accident. Twice was incompetence. Three times was a conspiracy.

C.A.Rebear → Updawg: Oh my gosh he’s so mad. I feel SOOOOOO bad!!!!

C.A.Rebear → 420StonedCold: Should I quit? I don’t want you boys to fight because of me. I swear I didn’t mean to. Is he gonna stay mad???

The boys responded. She heard a jeep in the distance, vaulted up the broken stairwell and spotted them cresting a hill in the distance. The hang-time as their buggy caught air was as ever their undoing. Not an easy shot unless you practiced it, but if you practiced it, the driver had no chance at dodging. Destiny had practiced. A lot. She got two more members as the vehicle drifted down the near side of the hill, players crawling out of the derelict jeep defenseless and with no cover but their vehicle, already drifting ahead of them.

Updawg → C.A.Rebear: He’s just a hothead. I know you didn’t mean it.

420StonedCold → C.A.Rebear: ya he’a always sa duck

420StonedCold → C.A.Rebear: ya hes always a duck

420StonedCold → C.A.Rebear: dick lol

Destiny was already combing for upgrades as Charlie took over the keyboard, Michael still insisting they quit and form a new team without the newcomer. The boys were splitting attention between typing to them and trying to placate Michael so they could keep hearing the girl with the hot voice talk to them. They had no idea where she even was, so no worries they’d wonder how she could type and plunder simultaneously.

C.A.Rebear → 420StonedCold: duck duck dick? I thought it was duck duck goose but your game sounds totes more fun lol

“You are so gross, I swear,” said Destiny.

“But you love me.”

She bashed through a wall and whooped as she scored a legendary in the chest. “I worship you.”

The boys stuck with her, and even convinced Michael to hang around for their next match. Once he'd agreed, Destiny dragged it out as long as she could, stealthing and fortifying and taking only the most shrewdly calculated risks. Charlie flirted with the boys – but not Michael, never Michael – and asked Destiny questions off-mic to try to get a handle on pretty much anything that was going on.

Victory Royale. Destiny hadn't figured she'd actually be able to win like this, and to be fair it was more luck than skill (but plenty of that, too). She barked a yawn of victory so intense it brought her to her feet, fist raised in triumph; the sudden display startled Charlie, bringing only a minor delay to her asking the team, "Oh wow, so like, did we win, or...?"

Their second match, Michael was being every bit the dickhead she'd provoked him into being, to increasingly protective results from Aaron and Barney. They were smitten. They couldn't have been more enamored of Charlie if they actually knew how hot she was. This time he went down "by accident" during a firefight; Destiny made sure she didn't get the killshot so it wasn't credited to her in the feed, then denied having ever targeted him to the rest of the team. Michael rage quit.

"Why is he so mad at me? I just wanted to find some nice boys to help me figure out how to get better at the game..."

Charlie sighed at her own heavy-handedness. The boys didn't notice. By the end of their next match they'd invited her into their clan and the HHGC Alumni discord. From there, she could watch Michael's status at her leisure. He betrayed his activities in realtime. Whatever game he played, she played. Whenever he queued up, she queued up. After four years of gaming with him, she knew his tactics and tricks like she knew the proper ways to play.

Destiny hunted him relentlessly, meandering between smurf accounts to keep him perpetually ignorant that his misfortune was at one woman's hands. Charlie started sleeping wearing a mask to keep Destiny's monitor from keeping her up. If he was awake and gaming, she was doing everything in her power to ruin him. His favorite starting points became killing fields. She spawn-camped him. Every little sniper roost he frequented, every corner he thought he'd set a trap around, every one of his favorite vehicles became a fresh graveyard.

He did manage to defeat her, sometimes, but that played into her hands, too. She'd read about intermittent reinforcement in her Intro to Psychology class, and boy howdy those occasional victories kept him at the keyboard. When he got too demoralized, he switched games, only to find his streak of bad luck had followed him there, too. Watching him frothing at the mouth venting about it on discord made her laugh until she nearly peed herself. (Her obsession had pushed her into being a bit of a Diaper Destiny herself, but Charlie made sure she still occasionally slept, and groomed herself, and ate something at least a little bit nutritious and always a lot comforting, and

studied for midterms, and took good care of her beloved roommate when she had needs.) More and more the rest of the members got tired of Michael's crap, alternately either ignoring, mocking, or outright blocking him.

The salty little bitch didn't last two weeks.

One morning, Destiny woke up and was surprised to find it was early evening. She'd really lost track of any semblance of day and night, making sure Michael didn't sneak in any cathartic matches while she rested. The HHGC Alumni server was abuzz with the recent departure of Michael Soo. He'd posted a manifesto about the state of modern gaming – how low the skill ceiling was, that even great players could be bullied by random scrubs; how gaming clans were unsupportive jokes; how there was no honor any more, just a bunch of teabagging and taunt dances; and of course how women were largely to blame for existing in what were clearly advertised male spaces. The remaining members had a good old laugh about it all, but none as hard as Destiny. She closed her eyes and imagined him throwing his mouse around and rampaging around his dorm room raising hell until his roommate had to go get their RA to chew him out and write him up.

There was no way to tell him it was her, but that was all right. That dish was best left as cold as the liquid cooling system on Michael's powered down PC.

"Hey, Destiny? You ready?"

Her eyes opened and turned toward the door. There was Charlie. Tori and Ellie walked past her, waving as they passed. "Ready?"

"Yeah. It's massage night. Remember? I told you this morning before you fell asleep. Everybody's going. Or do you need to..." She nodded to the PC, trying not to frown. Destiny had not been very accessible of late.

Destiny shut it down and darted over, grabbing Charlie in the tightest hug her little arms could manage. "Of course I didn't forget."

When Spencer green lit the Hotties to do it in their bras and panties, she picked out the hottest, sluttiest underwear she owned – so Charlie wouldn't feel too skanky in hers. Whenever she felt his eyes on them, Destiny made sure he got a show his cock wouldn't soon forget. At some point it wasn't even a show any more. It was just drinking in and doling out the only pleasure that could compete with the joy in her heart.

She felt bad when she made Charlie come. It had embarrassed her pretty bad, she saw, but when she saw the way Spencer's jaw slowly dropped as he stared at the blooming wet spot in Charlie's panties, she resolved to do it as often as she needed to until he saw how fucking stupid he was for not making a move.

When it came time for licks, Destiny gave Charlie (in her fresh panties) her turn; when the girls started sneaking seconds, she made sure Charlie got thirds. When Charlie apologized for accepting Destiny's generosity back outside the door to their room, Destiny kissed her.

“Yeah. I guess he does taste pretty good.”

Charlie gasped, but there was a smile. Peyton and Sydney’s room was already spilling lesbian noises into the hall, and from what she’d just seen, Destiny would bet her motherboard there was about to be a lot more of it. “Destiny...! You kissed me!”

“And I’m gonna do a lot more in a minute. Better be ready to change those panties again.”

Charlie’s eyes widened as her smile shrank. Then it broadened. Then it took over the entirety of her face. “Promises, promises.”

Destiny took Charlie’s hips in her hands as she fumbled with fishing her key card out of her panties and tried to swipe it through the slot, her perfect ass warm and sleek against Destiny’s bare tummy. Charlie’s hand was shaking so hard she was struggling to get it open.

“This is why I keep telling you we really need to set the door to manual locking,” Destiny murmured into Charlie’s bra strap. Her hands found their way around to the front, teasing at the waistband her roommate’s panties, soft blonde pubic hair peeking out to greet her.

“You did *not* just...!” But she was laughing, and trying to maneuver her hips to urge Destiny’s fingers into her underwear, and still sort of trying to get the door open before the whole floor got a chance to see her come a second time that evening.

The door finally opened, and she tackled Charlie to the bed. Underwear flew off in every direction. It wasn’t gay. She was just doing Spencer’s job for him until he wised up and did it himself.

Her tongue was his tongue, exploring Charlie’s mouth, what she thought might be the lingering taste of his skin. Fitting. Charlie was a giver. When she fucked Spencer, Destiny knew she would insist on seeing to his pleasure first. He would taste himself on her tongue after Charlie finished giving him the blowjob of his life.

Her lips were his lips. Those puds Aaron and Barney had no idea what they’d really been flirting with, a lithe blonde angel, every inch of her pure radiance. And they had no right. These perky little tits were Spencer’s to suck on. Those soft strawberry lips were Spencer’s to kiss. That glistening wet clit was Spencer’s to pleasure. His, and no one else.

Her hands were Spencer’s hands, appreciating every supple inch of Charlie’s flawless body. Her fingers were his cock, exploring the tightness and wetness of a pussy that was always, always wet and ready for his arrival. Her pleasure was Spencer’s pleasure, eyes blown wide open as Charlie reciprocated with equal or better vigor, the lust with which he’d filled this woman’s entire being gushing over the top and splashing all the fuck over everywhere.

The point, Destiny thought as she draped herself over Charlie's naked, sweaty, sleeping body, their tits fitting around each other like lock and key, was that she wasn't gay. She just had a really, really good roommate.

Charlie hadn't even set down her backpack yet before Destiny rolled right up to her, her gamer chair bumping into the girl's knees. Destiny held them together with two handfuls of Charlie's butt. "I want to play a game with you."

The girl beamed down at her. "I'll say you do. Do I get to at least take my shoes off first?"

She laughed. "No, not a game like that."

"Boooo!"

Destiny slapped her butt. "It's a video game."

"It's... Oh." Charlie hid her disappointment, but Destiny had braced herself for it. Almost two months cohabitating, and she'd never managed to gain any traction at putting a controller in the girl's hands. Her help bringing down Michael had been the sole exception to her otherwise total lack of interest. "Um, OK, just let me set my stuff down and maybe take a quick shower, and then... yeah, why not."

Destiny shook her head, adopting a sly grin. "No. This is a now thing. C'mere." Awkwardly, but she hoped a little cutely, she wiggled her chair back to her desk, pulling Charlie along behind her. At her desk, she pulled until Charlie settled into her lap.

"Wow. You must be really excited to see me pew-pew the aliens or whatever." Charlie peered over her shoulder. "You're not really going to make me shoot anything, are you? I'm not really comfortable—"

Destiny was already tapping keys, however, and after a moment, her screen went dark. A moment later, with a little swirl of flames, the title screen appeared. The fire graphic spun to the middle of the screen, then exploded into a heart with angel wings, all of it wreathed in flame. It looked like the fire was moving, but really it was just a trick she'd learned in her intro to graphic design class using a water filter effect to simulate rippling. It didn't look *good*, but it looked OK.

HEARTS – the word blossomed on the screen, and then fading in a moment later, *Of FIRE*. A fiery sound effect fwooshed from her speakers.

Charlie stared. "Destiny? What is..."

In small script at the bottom of the screen it flashed, *Written by Charlotte Andrews*, and then after a moment, *Designed by Destiny Holbrook*.

"I can take your name off if you want, but I wanted you to get top credit."

"What is this?" Charlie asked, staring.

Destiny took Charlie's hand and put it on the mouse, fingers aligned. She clicked on Charlie's index finger, triggering the left mouse button. The menu appeared, with options like *START NEW GAME*, *CONTINUE*, *LOAD*, *SETTINGS* and so on.

"Did you do this?" Charlie asked, her voice strangely quiet.

"Um, yeah. Here, just..." She clicked to start a new game, and the fire burned the screen flickering red and orange, and then an image popped up, slightly cartoony but realistic enough to convey its subject matter. It was a woman in a business suit and a fancy hat, standing on the sidewalk in front of what seemed to be a clothing boutique, bags in hand.

It was a bright and sunny day for Scarlotte Andersen, the wealthy CEO of What's Mine Is Yours charitable foundation. The sort of day where she couldn't possibly know that her life was about to change forever...

Destiny clicked by proxy again, and the image zoomed in. The woman's immaculately arranged hair was golden blonde, and she wore a face that was unmistakably Charlie's.

"Is that me...?"

Destiny nodded. "Uh, huh. I hope you don't mind, but I fed this program we use for class every picture I could find of you. I'm getting better at posing the model, but there's still a lot to learn before it gets perfect. Still, I think it got pretty good at spitting out stuff that looks pretty OK."

"OK? Destiny, I look unbelievable. Is... is that *your* body?"

Her roommate blushed. "Um, yeah. I guess. I figured, if we're going to make an adult video game, we're gonna need huge tits. And that way, it's both of us. It's not a burn or anything, just appealing to the mass market. You're not mad are you?"

Charlie clicked on her own this time. The text turned cyan, the font bigger. *You have your own driver, of course, but today you feel like walking.* The image showed Scarlotte stepping off the curb, her ankle bracelet doing a little sparkle animation.

Click. A series of still shots progressed rapidly – Destiny hoped cinematically. A car rounding the corner. A zoom to another shot of the driver fiddling with his radio. Back to Scarlotte, now a few feet into the crosswalk, likewise distracted by a text. Zoom to that – *NEW LAND MINES FOUND IN SOUTHEAST ASIA – WE NEED YOU NOW*, it read – then back out where the car was nearly on top of her. Scarlotte turned, facing the impending catastrophe with horror in her eyes. A thought bubble blossomed, the two adjoining dots first and then the big one with a thought of three adorable children. (One of them only had six fingers and there was a random foot that didn't belong to any of them, but she'd iron that out.) One last shot of Scarlotte, clasping her hands in prayer.

Click. Three rapid-fire stills. A man in the crosswalk, only a silhouette but an impressive one. Him leaping into the air, colliding with Scarlotte, and finally the two of them landing safely back on the sidewalk, his solid black profile hovering atop Charlie's

shocked but grateful face. It had taken a *lot* of editing to get the facial expression right on that one.

Click. The same shot, but it faded out the silhouette image and replaced it with the visage of Lawrence Svenster, whose face the girls both knew well. She'd aged it a little, given him a crease or two and a bit of stubble – Spencer often had stubble in their fantasies – but there was no missing who it was meant to be.

The image held through the next handful of clicks through dialogue. Solid red for Scarlotte's voice, royal blue for Lawrence's, cyan for narration.

You saved my life!

I suppose I did. Think nothing of it. Maybe someday you'll save mine?

I can feel those muscles of yours – hard to imagine you'll need any help from my soft, fragile, womanly body, stranger.

The name's Lawrence Svenster. Are you all right? And forgive my saying so, but you're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen.

Scarlotte felt the same way, but she was too shy to say it back. What would her children think of her if they could see her panting with lust over this total stranger? Thank goodness none of the passerbyers could see how unbelievably wet he was making her pussy.

Click. A shot up the skirt. The woman wasn't wearing underwear, and the folds of her pussy were glistening thanks to a little graphic overlay.

"Destiny, this is..."

Destiny braced herself. When Charlie didn't finish the sentence, she tried. "I know, it's really dumb, but I–"

"Did you turn my story into a video game?"

"Yeah, but it's nowhere near done yet. I was only messing around, like maybe... I don't know. It's only about three quarters through chapter one, but I–"

Charlie threw her lips at Destiny so hard the chair sprawled over backwards. She squealed in surprise, made sure Destiny was OK, then resumed kissing.

"You like it?"

"I love it. I love it, I love it, I *love* it! I love *you*."

"Well there's more to it. Here, let me..."

Destiny sat her chair back upright. She'd figured Charlie would fetch hers, but instead she settled back into Destiny's lap. The svelte blonde laughed and clapped and purred through scene after scene. Chapter one was mostly just Spencer – Svenster – rescuing her, then her pretending to "thank him" with some extremely graphic sex, when it was clear it was really a case of Scarlett being simply too horny not to beg for fuck after fuck after fuck. Charlie giggled delightedly at seeing her own dialogue, lifted nearly verbatim, and positively gushed with excitement over the attention to detail on

the models in the sex scene. Destiny could feel that jungle humidity emanating from the lap on her lap.

“Oh my god, it even got that little mole by your pussy. How did it even...?!”

“I had to edit it in myself. You, um, mentioned it enough times I thought you’d want it included. Though I guess it’s *our* mole there, your face, my bod. Though the butt’s more yours than—”

Charlie tackled her again, though this time not to the floor. “Is this why you put up that privacy screen? So you could surprise me?”

Destiny nodded, blushing. “Yeah.”

“Please tell me there isn’t really a game called Children of Hell.”

She laughed. “Definitely not.” She’d made up a title that she felt sure would keep Charlie from popping around unasked, describing the fictional game as a cartoony romp through the fires of hell, vanquishing all the bad kids who’d been sent there. She’d been prepared to describe the Gore Galore mod she was testing for it, but the title alone had been enough to deter her softie of a roomie.

“You are so talented. You’re going to make so many people so happy. How did you even learn to do this? We’ve been at college for not even half a semester. I feel like I’ve barely learned anything, and you’re over here churning out something as amazing as *this!*”

“Hey, you’re the one who wrote it. I just made a program paint what you described. You did the hard part.”

“Pretty sure Lawrence Svenster is the ‘hard part.’” The girls fell to hysterical giggling.

A few hours later the girls were nearly asleep after Charlie had played through the available content another half a dozen times, gushing over fresh minutiae each replay. She’d already gotten invested enough to start making suggestions for how they could make it even better, from little stuff like more font styles to distinguish narration from dialogue from thoughts, to longer term considerations like whether they would release it to the floor or even try to sell it out in the world. (Charlie acknowledged that they’d best remove her and Spencer’s digital likenesses from it before doing so, though it saddened her.) Then it was discussion of which *Hearts of Fire* scenes to include, and how to improve them for the visual medium, which segued into the girls collapsing in sweaty heaps in their respective bunks masturbating themselves silly as they blurted out pieces of freshly inspired fantasies back and forth between them.

Not an uncommon occurrence, but there was fresh vigor to it that night.

“A chapter where Scarlotte convinces Spencer to fuck her and her secretary at the same time.”

“One where they go to a land mine sight, somewhere tropical and gorgeous, and he saves her by charming this huge snake, and he fucks her while it slithers around his big fucking buff shoulders.”

“I’m feeling a line where Scarlotte’s like, ‘Titfucking? Mr. Svenster, I’ve never heard a term so vulgar. But... what is it? Do you think I would like it?’”

“I wonder if we release it to the Haven if we could get other girls to volunteer to let me use their images. I want to make him fuck Tori, too.”

“She’d love that. Mmm, I’d love that. Oh! Or one where three anonymous blonde triplets who don’t quite look like the you-know-who’s, and they try to seduce him but he just blows them off to come fuck us while they watch and play with their pussies and ask if they can join in but we’re like *no. Bad.*”

“A scene where Spencer sneaks into our bedroom in the night and wakes us up with his cock buried all the way inside his Scarlotte.”

“Mm, god yes. Svenster couldn’t help himself. He needed you.”

“He needed us.”

And so on, until they got tired of coming. Or, more precisely, until they got too tired to come. Destiny’s eyes were closed, though the smile of true and well-earned self-satisfaction lingered on her lips.

“Destiny?”

Destiny didn’t answer. Her name was the only one Charlie said in her sleep anywhere close to how often she said Spencer’s.

“Destiny? Are you still awake?”

Ah, so it was for real. “Yeah.”

“Did Stan ever... do anything? To you?”

Destiny’s entire body tensed. “Why?”

“Because I care about you. Because it’s three days until fall break.”

Destiny frowned into the darkness. “No. I mean, not like, sexual stuff. Just little things.”

“Things like what.”

“I dunno. Like, he’d make me sit on his lap sometimes. Like when I was little, like middle school or whatever. Or like he’d say stuff about how ‘big’ I was getting and look at my chest. Lots of looking. But he never actually tried anything.”

“But you still lock the door.”

“That’s more for my stepbrothers. Mostly. Like there was this one time I woke up and I heard someone in the room, like breathing. I didn’t open my eyes or anything. I asked at dinner the next night if anybody had been in there, but nobody copped to it. Then like days later my mom said Blaine told her he’d been looking for mice? Like he’d found one in his room and was checking mine.”

“In the dark. Unmasked.”

Destiny nodded. “But whatever. I dealt with it for years. What’s another week, right?”

“Is there anything you’re excited for over fall break? People you missed, friends? Your teacher who helped us with Michael?”

“Eh, not really.”

“Do you want to come home with me?” Charlie shook her head, apparently dissatisfied with the way she’d asked it. “No. I mean, I want you to come home with me. I want you to meet my family, and my friends.”

Destiny frowned. “Uh, why?”

Charlie was quiet a moment. “Because, um, I know your family’s house isn’t very happy for you. And because you’re my best friend.”

Destiny still didn’t have a way home. Buses didn’t go where she lived. Highways either. It was a place the world avoided, and having now seen a different part of the world, Destiny understood why. “You don’t have to rescue me or anything. I can handle it for one week. And I can deal with Stan and his brood.”

Suddenly Charlie’s face was hovering to the side of her bed. “I know you can. But you don’t have to.”

“Charlie...”

“Please? Just this once. If you don’t like it, you don’t have to come with me for winter break. I mean, spring, you’re mine, but...”

Destiny giggled. “Why, what happens on spring break?”

Charlie waggled her eyebrows playfully. “It stays on spring break, that’s what.”

“Devil incarnate, you.”

“So come home with me and make me behave.”

“I don’t think there’s a person on this earth who could make *you* behave.” She pursed her lips. “Besides the one.”

“I’d be so good for him,” Charlie concurred. “But please? Please please please please please?”

“It wouldn’t be too weird? I’m not used to... people. And you have a *lot* of friends.” Charlie had eventually given up trying to make Destiny bestest buds with all the Hotties. She was happy being bestest buds with just the one.

Charlie knew how to sway her, though, crooning, “We have really good internet...!”

Destiny frowned. “It’s my home. I can’t just... not go back.”

Charlie leaned forward, but stopped short of responding. Deciding that leaning wasn’t enough, she climbed up into Destiny’s bunk and maneuvered to share the pillow. One of these days if Destiny wasn’t careful, this girl really was going to gay the shit out of her.

Charlie kissed her forehead. A lingering, adoring kiss. “It’s your mom’s home. To you, it’s just a house. A house where you have to lock yourself in to feel safe. Your home is here. With me. Or wherever you decide you want it to be.”

Destiny’s eyes slowly closed. She tried to think of any single thing she’d miss if she didn’t go back. If she never went back. Her things were here, her life was here. Ms. Sadler, maybe, but she’d already told Destiny she hoped she made it out. Now, even better than before, she got why. That home was just another four-letter word.

Destiny opened her eyes to find Charlie’s soft brown orbs waiting for her. She leaned in and kissed her roommate’s forehead in her best imitation of how Charlie had done for her. “OK. I’ll go.”

Charlie beamed, and without a word, rolled over and assumed her preferred place as the littler spoon. That they were naked bothered them not at all. They’d each learned that they preferred to have nothing between them.

Two days later, Charlie’s dad picked them up in front of the Higgins center building. He was his daughter’s father, sweet and handsome and funny and she didn’t have to worry what she wore around him. He made bad jokes that Charlie apologized for, and he asked earnest questions about her and listened to her answers. He’d brought a cold Mountain Dew for her, stating that he knew it was a gamer staple, and went on about how he was a bit of a gamer himself back in the day, an OG Dhalsim main in SNES *Street Fighter II*.

“Oh my gosh, Dad, she has no idea what that even is. Destiny, tell him you have no idea what that is.”

“No, I know. My dad, um, gave me his SNES back when.” Meaning he’d left in such a hurry he’d forgotten to pack it. This was a nice man, though, a man who’d done right by his kid. She focused on the present and didn’t sour the mood. “My stepbrothers always tried to make me play Chun Li, but Blanka ride or die for me.”

“Blanka! Charlie, you know we don’t let animals in the car.”

“You two are such nerds. Let me out. I’m hitch hiking.”

“Sweet! More Dew for us gamers, eh Destiny?”

“Dad!”

Destiny adored him. And his eyes never strayed.

Destiny’s mom had never called to ask why she hadn’t come back for break. Would she be upset if Destiny didn’t come for Thanksgiving either? Would she notice? No matter. It wasn’t home any more. Destiny would spend Thanksgiving with someone she was thankful for.

In fact, on their ride back to school a week later, Mr. Andrews told her unprompted he hoped she’d consider coming back to stay with them for winter break.

“I don’t want to impose,” she said, praying he’d tell her she wasn’t.

“Are you kidding? Charlie’s been bugging me for a sister since she was three.”

The girls locked eyes. Charlie nodded seriously.
“Um, then sure. I’d like that.”

“HAPPY HALLOWEEN!” the Hotties cried out in unison.

Spencer arrived. Their floor shirts, believed to be long gone, were returned. Charlie scored one for each of them, S for Destiny and XS for Charlie. Their eyes met in silent remembrance of the old joke. Destiny’s boobs were too big for her shirt, constantly creeping out the bottom, but a size bigger and it would be loose everywhere else. She’d figured, if you were gonna wear a slutty hot shirt, then wear it hot and slutty. Charlie had gotten hers too small as well precisely so she’d have the same problem. She acted like she was just an adorable little pixie in her pixie-sized top, but they’d helped one another come in those things way too many times to feign innocence with one another.

In fact, they were wearing their own custom-designed shirts that night. Destiny didn’t ask how much they’d cost; Charlie had said she’d foot the bill and not to worry about it. Destiny had learned to accept it. It was uncomfortable sometimes being a charity case, but Charlie always insisted, and was always happier when she was allowed to do some pampering. That was what families did for each other.

Besides, now that the *Hearts of Fire* game was getting into a better place and she had free time for normal games again, Destiny had hopes her new clan of dippy undateable boys would at least be useful to get her back into some tournament winnings. Vengeance had been satisfying, but she wasn’t a bully by temperament. She just didn’t like to lose.

It was interesting seeing everybody’s reactions. It was a printing of the logo she’d designed for the game, but with the heart cut out, the hole framed by a shiny metal heart shape that really showcased their tits. Some of the girls, the less literary ones, took them as just roommates who’d splurged on cute matching tops, tight and revealing per Hottie norms. The ones who followed Charlie’s narrative, however, oohed and aahed and squealed delightedly, gushing about their favorite scenes.

Nobody knew about the game. They’d decided that was just for her and Charlie. And maybe Spencer, if they could ever find a way to show it to him that didn’t make them look like psychos. He was notoriously chill about the Hotties’ flirtations, so maybe someday. She and Charlie liked to roleplay the blowjob scene in chapter five on their Spencetronic dildos, masturbating (themselves or each other, depending on how horny they were that afternoon) while they jointly fellated the RA-inspired cock. Huge, menacing almost, but cast in a very friendly seeming orange-yellow plastic. It suited him, which suited them.

They made it a point to show them to Tori. She was a silent fan of Charlie's work, DMing her accolades rather than expressing it in #ra-writes on the Hottie Haven. Tori pried her eyes off of Spencer after a moment, grinning in immediate recognition.

"Hearts of Fire! You two look amazing!"

"Right? Destiny did the logo herself! Doesn't it look incredible?"

"But did you bring enough for everyone?" Tori joked. Then her eyes drifted past them to Spencer, then back to them. Then Spencer again, and back.

For a moment Destiny wondered if she was trying to make some nonverbal point about the girls' decision not to take a side during the coup. Destiny wholeheartedly opposed any measure that would take Spencer from them. More than that, though, she'd figured it could be Charlie's big shot. Spencer had been vulnerable and in desperate need of an ally. She'd pushed Charlie hard to make her move. Charlie being Charlie, though, she'd balked at taking advantage; only when Destiny had convinced her that it wasn't taking advantage to be the friend he needed.

Charlie had spared no details about what had happened in the formal lounge between them. They'd fucked each other ragged the rest of the night, not giving a single solitary shit whether they were into girls or not. They were horny, and Spencer, and mmm.

Destiny realized after second consideration that Tori was simply as preoccupied by the guy as they were. They couldn't blame her. Last night, the pre-Halloween party had started something incredible. The choker movement, with girls throwing themselves at him to earn a place in the resistance or whatever, had given them hope. Sure, most of those stories the girls told, secret meetings in the bathtub and sucking him off in the shower, was probably bullshit anyway. Still, if even some of them were true, there was hope that maybe Spencer's boss was finally getting off his back. By now, most of the girls believed Andi's story about that insanely hot pity fuck she'd landed after her douche nozzle boyfriend from home dumped her. (They believed it enough to buy that same pussy-destroying Spencetronic 3000 dildo the rest of them had, at least.)

If he was whipping it out as a community development tool, then there was hope for any of them. Very exciting times. Charlie could round those last couple bases any day now, maybe.

"We only made the two," Charlie said to Tori's rhetorical question.

"Says the girl who took everybody's shirts in the first place!" Destiny chided jokingly.

Before Tori gave another rote apology – seemed like anybody who was still annoyed with her only had to look her way to get one – Destiny reached around and pulled the string on her sex-toy costume.

“Wanna come on my titties?!” chirped Tori, then laughed. “I can’t believe I’m wearing this. Been so pissed off at him, and now it’s like I can’t remember why. We really did get lucky with him, didn’t we.”

Destiny and Charlie didn’t comment that Tori seemed to be unconsciously rubbing her pussy through her skimpy costume. “I think we got really lucky with our governor, too.”

“This is such a fun party, by the way, Tori.” Charlie bounced giddily. “I don’t know how you put this together on such short notice! Did Katrina and Spencer help?”

“Nah, just me. I figured after last night, and really after everything we’ve been through, I could just tap a few girls who...” Her eyes slowly drifted around the room until settling on that same predictable point. “Who... blowjob...”

Charlie snapped her fingers. “I bet a few girls who blowjob would make a fun party, too, Little Miss One-Track-Mind. Rub it on our faces, why don’t you.”

“Mm, I’ll ask him. Maybe he would rub...” Tori’s head lolled to the side.

Destiny laughed. “You guys are so bad. But seriously, cool party. Hot enough to be like a for real party, but Hottie enough to not have to feel self-conscious about all the... yeah.” She shook her head at where yet another girl was entering the lounge in some kind of sheer harem slave costume.

Yeesh. It was definitely a new era on Higgins 3.

Tori smiled. “Well tell your friends; I’m up for re-election next August. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m gonna make sure he doesn’t need anything.” She licked her lips and started weaving through the crowd, but they both heard her mutter a sultry repetition. “Anything.”

The roommates smiled after her. It felt so good to see the two not just pretending to get along, but actually bonding again. And his dick must have tasted amazing to see how Tori was so preoccupied with it. Cum-drunk, as Michael might have put it, if he were here instead of off filling the hole she’d shot through his social life. The asshole was probably seeing if his existing skillset would stretch to allowing him to ruin board games for the dudes on his floor.

As Tori helped herself to a slack-jawed stroke of Spencer’s crotch, Destiny wondered if Charlie had acted like she was mad at him, would he have fucked her until her brains dribbled out her cunt, too.

Nah, not Charlie. She couldn’t even pretend to be mean.

Before long, the two made it a point to drift over to the guy when he wasn’t distracted by one of the games. Or “games,” some of them. Exhibits was more like it. Casey was reapplying that whip cream bikini of hers every ten minutes. She was going to wind up diabetic if she kept sucking that stuff down. Dawn meandered by to help her clean herself off, and nobody even batted an eye. Just Hotties sucking each other’s tits. This floor was insane. It was home.

Spencer smiled as he turned their way. There was no pretending his cock wasn't trying to burst through his pants. Destiny remembered trick-or-treating as a little kid, when her dad would drive her to town in her costume and chauffeur her to the good neighborhoods with the big candy bars. She'd score enough to last her weeks. Tonight was even better. Instead of candy, they'd have pics and videos of this boy to leave them creaming for days.

"Look at you two – matching outfits. Very nice, both of you. I feel bad for the guys at whatever party you'd been planning to wear those to."

"There's nowhere we'd rather be," said Destiny.

Spencer nodded, but it was slow, somber for a party. He spoke softly, for their ears alone. "You know, I'm not supposed to have favorites, but..." He pulled the girls into a gentle hug. They each melted into his arms, embracing him back fiercely. He went on in a whisper, their ears side by side as they were each raining kisses on his cheek. (He hadn't said not to, and after what some of the girls had gotten away with, what were a few (dozen) kisses?)

"I don't think they know how lucky they are to have you two."

Destiny stopped sucking on her side of his neck long enough to ask, "Why?" Then she went right back to sucking. Trying her best to get him ready for Charlie.

He lifted his chin, granting them better access. Her hand found his cock, where Charlie's hand already was. "Because. While everybody was looking out for themselves and what they wanted, here you were, looking out for each other."

"What do you mean?" purred Charlie as she sucked on his ear. Fuck he tasted good, Destiny thought. Better than in the hundred times she'd pleased herself just imagining him in her mouth. Or better yet in Charlie's.

"I, um, know about your, you know, crush. Crushes," he murmured awkwardly.

"I have no idea what you mean," laughed Destiny. It was pure sarcasm. Only a few hours earlier he'd staged having sex with her to mess with her new clan. Charlie had joined in when she walked in on them. They hadn't been subtle with him.

"And I know you were there last night, saw me and Tori, and Casey..."

"And Katrina," added Charlie, licking up his cheek. "I'm so proud of you for making everything right with them, by the way. You did good."

"Right. But you two, you kept your heads down. Supported your friends, showed kindness and empathy. Especially to one another. You should know, Charlie, when I was making the rounds today, catching up with all the stuff I let slip through the cracks, Destiny and I, we..."

He didn't resist as Destiny pulled down his zipper, nor as Charlie undid the button. "And, um, I would have, you know," he said, directed this time at the redhead and her big tits. *Pat them*, she thought, barely suppressed a giggle as she wondered how that old thought had resurfaced out of nowhere. If he tried, though, she'd redirect that

hand straight to her roommate's pretty titties. The girl deserved it. She deserved nothing short of her wildest fantasies.

Destiny freed that pulsing beast from his boxers. God, the Spencetronic didn't do him justice. "I know. But like I said..."

Charlie looked up from the cock pulsing in Destiny's hand. "What? What did you say?"

Spencer fuzzed Charlie's head. "She said not without you, Charlie."

The roommate's eyes met around his chiseled jawline. "He... offered? And you...?"

Destiny shrugged. Then kissed him – but only on her side of his mouth. His cock they shared evenly, stroking the length of him with their fingertips. "Yeah. I mean, I wouldn't even want to without you."

Charlie's big soft eyes were suddenly watery, and before they knew it all three mouths met in the middle, one big vortex of lips and tongues, kissing and licking with manic adoration.

Destiny caught sight of Toni, off to the side, recording it all. She'd have to thank her later.

"Whatever happens, you two promise me you'll keep taking care of each other, OK?" His lips were free to talk. They'd fallen into one another's arms, Destiny teasing Charlie's hair as the girl fondled her tits in return.

"Always," murmured Charlie.

"Always," echoed Destiny.

He observed their feverish makeout from only inches away; so was everybody else, getting their first taste of the roommates' true feelings for one another. Who cared. Ms. Sadler had been right. No more worrying about anybody who didn't love her and support her and lift her up.

"You two have fun," he said, but before he could slip away Destiny caught him with a handful of cock.

"Um, Spencer?"

"What can I do for you, Destiny?" He held his position, uninterested in escape.

"You're a boy, right?"

"Unless that's somebody else's penis in your hand, I'm gonna go with yes."

Charlie already saw where she was going, eyes sparkling. She closed her hand over Destiny's. "And boys like video games, right?"

"Sure. I mean, sometimes, yeah. I'm not really good at them or anything, but—"

"Would you like to play one with us later?"

Charlie nodded. "Play with us, Spencer. You'll like it. I promise."

"How about I stop by tomorrow and you show me," he said. "Is it a shooter?"

Destiny's roommate threw her head back and laughed. "Oh, you'll shoot something all right!"

“If you’re good, it even has multiple endings,” cackled Destiny.

Spencer rolled his eyes at their transparent double meanings. “I’ll stop by. But go easy on me.”

“Oh don’t worry – I’ve been getting more into co-op games these days. We’re all on the same team.”

Charlie and Destiny were laughing their way back into each other’s mouths as he extricated himself with a chuckle. “GG WP, roomie.”

Charlie held her face softly in two hands. She knew the acronym. She wasn’t just the hot gamer girl’s roommate, after all. She was the hot gamer girl’s BFF for life. “What can I say? I’ve been watching the MVP in action.”