



# ♥ SEAFOAM & EMERALD ♥

A short story collection written by Elizabeth Denfeld



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## DATE NIGHT TURNED FIGHT



\*Dododip\* 🦎 I am soo sorry Julia!

\*Dododip\* 🦎 I swear I'm coming!

\*Dododip\* 🦎 I miscalculated my route and ended my patrol on the other side of the park!

\*Dododip\* 🦎 Running over

\*Dododip\* 🦎 Cya soon!

*Stop texting then you goober.*

She broke into a stupid half grin at herself, typing back Cu2 even though she knew she shouldn't, it'd just make Flynn even later since he cannot—for some reason—move and read his phone at the same time. Waiting ain't a problem though, park's only a half mile at widest, she's confident it'll be less than five minutes before he showed up.

\*Dodo\* 🦋 Hey guurl, why ain't you out with us?!

I told you a hundred times

Im

On

A

Date


\*Dodo\* Wait, was that footsteps? She listens, but there's nothing, at least nothing strange. Sure, she hears footsteps now, \*Dodo\* but they were in the right direction to just be regular foot traffic.

🦋 Awwwww yeah gurl!!


🦋 Plz tell me its that lanky police guy or I will be heartbroken. He is nuts for you!!

My love life isn't your soap opera, back off

*\*Dododip\** There's the footsteps again! *\*Dodo\** Now she actively looked around. She's off the sidewalk, just a few steps in the little transitional area between the city and whatever lies within the alley. *\*Dodo\** The alley ain't that big, and there's almost nowhere to hide, but she sees nothing. *\*Dodo\**

 Missed the light on 120<sup>th</sup>, gotta wait for it to turn over.

 Fiiine Juya

 You'd better tell me about this tmr though.


 TTYL!!!! <3

*I'm just... I'm just nervous. Just a case of the jitters and it's making me hear things.*

Wouldn't it be faster to go to one of the edges and cross there?

She shivers, even though the breeze is warm. *\*Dododip\** Why o why did Flynn have to screw up on his location? *\*Dododip\**

 No.... I've timed it.

 Differs by seconds

*\*Dododip\** Julia looked for his message, but the screen didn't have a third bubble.

"Sorry, that was mine."

Gruff voice. Unexpected, smells like something, right beside Julia and she didn't even notice. She pushed off the wall, startled, but her arm was grabbed before she could even turn.

"Whoa, whoa whoa, what's the rush? Seems you like talking well enough, how's about you talk to me for a while?"

She finishes the turn and wished she hadn't. Something's off about the dude. You can see it from a mile away and smell it from double, but she can't figure exactly what since stupid cinnamon and sugary smells from the bakery she was propped up against a moment ago are messing with her nose. Julia quickly pulled her arm out of his—luckily he wasn't super coherent—and slowly backed away.

"No thank you, my date's gonna be here any minute and we're already late for our reservation."

Small smile, small wave, pivot and walk away. Doesn't work. The Dude's more lucid than he appeared, and fast. He caught up and cut Julia off before she can find her momentum, plants himself in the way.

"You can't be that late, you've been waiting here a while, you're plenty happy to talk with whoever's been texting you, how come I'm so different?"

*Because I don't know you, and you're creeping me out.*

"Because the last message was to go meet him."

She slides sideways, aiming to bolt past The Dude but ends up caught again—this time around the chest. Now this was bad. She caught a full face full of stank and it screamed one thing: alcohol. So much she gagged and couldn't help but marvel at the fact this guy was able to stand, let alone catch her.

But once that moment was gone, all she could feel was fear. She screamed, she hollered. The Dude tried to silence her, she bit his hand and while he reacted, bolted again

\*THAP\*

Right into something. It wasn't a wall but definitely solid, and as she recoiled it caught her.

"hehehey, what's goin' on? You okay?"

Her head was still spinning slightly and her eyes wouldn't focus, but she definitely recognized the voice, quiet but comforting, putting her at ease.

"You look amazin', by the way. Forgive my idiocy, but is this a new sundress?"

"WhAt the HELL are you dOING!"

"Quit gawking at me and do your job Flynn."

"Roger that."

He lifted her gently from her tilting, making sure she had her feet underneath her before he let go. He turned to face The Dude, but not before another whispered comment:

"I think I even managed to choose an outfit that matches yours this time."

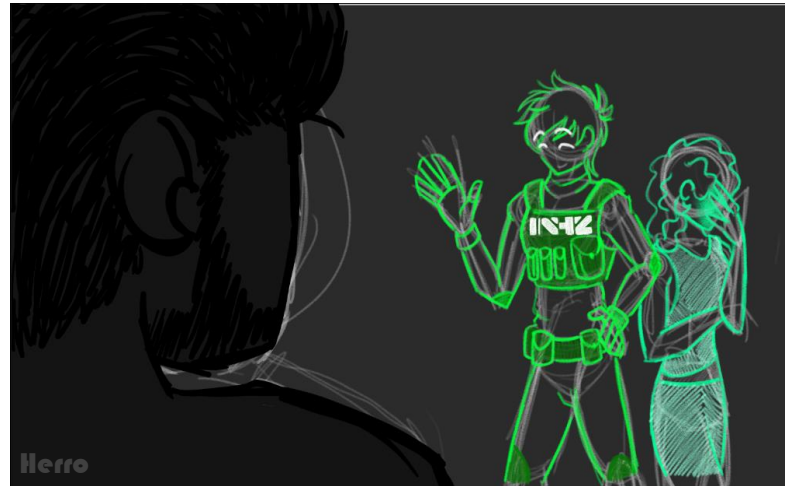
Julia really didn't care whether they matched, but if he really wanted too he could really just stay in uniform. She definitely wouldn't mind. She loves how he looks in his new patrol gear, navy blue

everything that hugs just right, black accents from his armor and pads, big 'ol pearlescent "police" across his vest, but the best part was that he was here, with her, ready to face down The Dude.

"Hello there, sir! I already have a guess as to what jus' went on, but could you tell me in your own words?"

*Oh, No. Not this again...*

Why'd he have to put the stupid voice on? The happy-go-lucky, I'm-not-taking-sides-yet persona was tolerable in small doses, but the voice... They both know it's an act, that he would just as easily be his normal "warm, but I'll give what I get" self, taking charge with whatever level of commando was needed if things went south; but *no*, he'd gotten it into his head that this was how he'd diffuse tense situations.



Alright, it worked more often than not, but that doesn't mean Julia had to like it.

"None. Of. Your. Business."

"Ooo, I'm afraid it is, though. "To serve and protect the people of my city," right from the oath I took when I swore in—"

"Butt. Out."

The Dude was posturing, trying to look as big as possible and not teeter from one step to the next. Flynn was relaxed, waving his arms while he talked, taking small steps with The Dude to keep himself between him and Julia.

"Again, I cannot. I heard a scream and screams are generally an indication of something being wrong. Now, if you can just tell me what happened I'm happy—"

The Dude decided to move and he moved like a truck, full speed towards Flynn with intent to maim—if not kill.

Reach, cradle, step, swing, Flynn pulled Julia out of the line of fire while being just out of range himself, Mr. happy-go-lucky fading quickly away.

“Sir, I’m going to have to ask you to calm down-”

“SQUARE UP STICK! I’m gonna break you!”

The Dude roared, catching what little of the street’s attention he hadn’t already. Six foot some, heavysset, slow, he pulled his arms up to knock Flynn’s block off. Five-ten, lean and lithe but not twiggy, Flynn raised his arm and quickly clicked three buttons on his wristband. From the back of his vest out buzzed a small drone, which immediately made its way up and out to a space where it could capture the whole scene.

*Can’t be accused of what you didn’t do if you’ve got video of what happened,*

Julia thought with a smirk.

*Fiiiinally took Sky’s advice eh? Good record ain’t gonna save you from some persuasive buffoon you end up slighting. He’s just trying to protect his big brother, ain’t no comment on your character.*

A soft chime signaled the drone was set, an encouraging four-beat jingle.

Flynn stepped forward with a sigh, arms crossed and ready to talk.

“It doesn’t have to go like this, we-”

The crowd roared, but not in approval. The world spun around Flynn and his ears split. He was seeing blurry double of everything, and it felt like the ground was twisting underneath him. Later, Julia would tell him that when he blinked, The Dude wound and released a full swing to the side of his face and had tripped over his own feet while Flynn reeled.

Flynn slowly blinked and breathed in deeply. Knocks to the head where nothing new, but the sensory overload debilitated him no less than the first time. He could foggily hear Julia, but only the cadence and tone, and that she was worried. Breath by breath his body rebooted, now he could taste blood and feel the throbbing of his skull. Nothing new—well, new during his brief time on the force—familiar in a sad way.

Gently grabbing Julia’s arm for support, he stood up, swiped his tongue across his mouth, and spat the slimy rose mixture beside him. The Dude had lurched his way to standing, and Flynn growled at him:

“There, you’ve had your moment of power. Now *stand down*.”

The Dude didn't respond, Flynn doubted he was even lucid enough to understand the sounds reaching his ears. Julia watched with a grin as The Dude roared and leapt at Flynn, aiming for another headshot. But Flynn wasn't there when he landed.

"Alright then."

Thus began the dance. Well, dance in the way that the scrap between this sloppy mess of a man and a highly trained, high tour count soldier could be called a "purposefully selected sequence of movements." The Dude swung and bellered, floundered and flailed. Flynn ducked and dodged with fluidity and grace, always just beyond or beside the blows. Then, The Dude switched it up and kicked at Flynn. Full shin to shin contact that should have sounded like a dull knocking but rang out with a low chime.

Whatever The Dude said after was unintelligible. There were curses, screams of pain and plenty of hopping around while cradling the kicking leg. Eventually his brain put enough sounds together:

"What the hell are you made of?!"

"Flesh, bones, heart, soul. Years of training, connections and heartbreak. An innate desire to help and protect. But it doesn't hurt to have Mili-dustrial♥ prosthetics in place of two-thirds of my legs."

Two taps above each knee aurally♥ confirmed this, and as Flynn walked over to The Dude Julia could just barely pick out the faint whispering of hydraulics.

"Now it's time we got you on over to the station, mate. I hereby charge you—"

Flynn was maybe seven feet from The Dude, front and center, and still slid out of the charging path. Briefly his face showed nothing but annoyance, and this time *he* moved in for the kill.

One jab. Not even a jab really, just a pinch halfway up the thigh—and The Dude fell like a tree. Everyone waited, expecting him to come up again baying for blood, but all they heard was the howling whispers of wind, the buzz of the drone—still diligently recording—and the low growl of snoring.

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♥ **Mili-dustrial:** a quality rank that lies between military and industrial grade due to durable construction, high quality and relatively low cost.

♥ Related to oral and verbal, **aural** refers to the ear or hearing. <https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/aural>

Once the cheers had died down and the man had been carted off to the station—drone footage in tow as inadmissible testament to both debacle and felony—Julia and Flynn found themselves as alone as they could be in the city. A low chime from the clocktower pulled them from their contemplation,

“6:30... I can’t guarantee they’ve kept our table, but I’m willin’ to check if you are.”

“O what the hell, let’s go.”

And off they went, arm around the other as the sky turned from blue to red

“Would it be tacky if I asked for a bag of ice?”



The city hustles and bustles around Julia, cars and pets and people. Happy people, busy people, there's a fight breaking out behind her. Families, friends, couples, but she stands alone. Technically not alone, but it feels like she is. She's still not sure she wants to do this.

*Well, you got pros and cons, just got to weigh them against one another.*

*Cons. Process is still new -not new, but new for our world. What was it... only 300 performed since re-discovery? So there's the risk I'll be the freak case, or that something's so drastically weird with me they can't operate. Pros... I can veer off my current course, and not have to put myself through it. Or them*

*Or them.*

...

*Come on, you know you could do it.*

*Yeah... but I don't want to on my own.*

She's "made" up her mind, and she strides forwards to go through with it- "Julia?"

Dead in her tracks. It can't be. She whips around, but...

"In the chair."

Half a tilt down and there he is. Big green eyes, mop of brown hair, still covered head to toe in navy blue, but there aren't any toes. Or knees. Or legs besides about half his thighs.

"F-flyNn!? What, w-where?! Why?!!"

"Legs?"

"yEs."

"At home. I forgot to charge them. Sooo... I'm stuck in the chair today. H-how you been?"

You'd need a sword to cut the tension between them. Julia can't quite identify what it is that she's feeling. Angry, happy, sick, calm? Hell if she knows, she's been outta whack for weeks and only recently learned why. Stupid biology.

Nothing happens for a minute. Flynn's frozen with his hand half extended and Julia's scared she'll fall over from nausea should she try to move, but she'll still try to talk.

"I... I've been okay... How's the pack?"

That pulls a smile to his face. He happily responds to every inquiry, relaying major developments in their lives without a shred of bitterness.

*And meanwhile I've gone nowhere just to end up here.*

...

*No, dammit, you're fine don't start crying!*

But her body doesn't want to listen, and it's taking far more effort than it should to not blink. The two fall again into an awkward lull of noise, a pause in their motion that makes even the city around them seem muted.

He moves first, and everything he does screams shy. Hand behind head, other wrapped around himself, can't look her in the eye.

"C-can I- I mean I – I want to, I I I I – AAA!"

Thrown up in aggravation, the rapid shift of weight from throwing his arms led the chair to pitch backwards, hurtling Flynn's noggin to kiss the concrete. Julia made to dart forward and grab him, but Flynn's hands caught the wheels first and she quickly withdrew. Once he bounced back to four wheels his face whispers fear. A shake of his head and now he turns to her:

"I'm sorry, le-lemme try that again. C-can I buy you a drink? Coffee, tea, whatever, all I want is the chance to explain myself, to... to-

there's this little café a stone's throw away and I, I just wanna tell you why everything happened the way it did."

Shyness had stormed its way back and now it had convinced anxiety to come along.

The Flynn Julia knew didn't stutter. He never lost his composure, and he never lost his voice unless his brain was moving way too fast for him to keep up. He meant this. He wanted to explain, though it was killing him to offer. Those feelings she could define clearly, even though hers were still a mess.



More sugar than drink swirly Frappuccino thing for him, peppermint tea for her. The café is small but not crowded; it feels like they're alone, tucked away in this corner booth that didn't look like a normal space, but Flynn rolled right up to it so it must be. Time keeps ticking as they wait for the other to start, stealing glances when the other isn't.

He can't take it any more.

Flynn tears off the domed lid, takes half the coffee-flavored sugar sludge down in one chug and begins, smearing the mess of whipped cream and sugar off his face

"XX of XX, XXXX. Inter-Transit Assignment. We didn't have a clue where we were going, but what we knew was that it was an In-Out mission."

*Tell you on the way. Get in, retrieve the target(s), get out.*

"Those generally take a month, two tops. I – I relayed as much when they told me when we were leaving... if you... remember."

Remember? How could she forget?? She had read that conversation and far too many before it over a hundred thousand times, hunting for whatever she missed between the lines.



"I boarded the 'copter feeling on top of the world. At that point it'd been nearly a year without even a whisper of a potential mission, and I was going a little stir crazy. *Joys of being Light Reserve.*"

*Not a full time soldier, but can routinely count on time both home and on tour.*

"Don't get me wrong, I did and still do love my gig as an officer, but it can just be *monotonous* there... You have the same ten types of people that you're encountering, and there just isn't enough of the bizarre cases to keep me thinking. I needed a puzzle, a-a **quest** and they promised a hell of one with this mission."

"Just what everyone's thinking when they're heading to a battlefield."

Neither of them could help but snicker at that, and for a moment nothing had changed. This was warm and familiar, a type of cozy closeness that she'd been longing for.

Nothing like the cold she'd felt after Flynn went silent, and the antithesis of how she'd felt with ~~him~~. That time was filled with an oily stickiness, a slippery slope she hadn't dared to climb back out of because she had promised herself ~~he'd~~ warm her up again, just a little farther down.

And then That Night ~~he'd~~ taken all her warmth for himself and replaced it.

*Eaughhhh...*

Just the thought was enough to sicken her—she knew that well—but then she went a step beyond. She didn't mean to and Flynn shouldn't have had to deal with it, definitely not the poor server, but by the time she was able to relay that it was over and done. Flynn wouldn't hear a word of her apologies, taking the blame on himself:

"Sorry, I'm rambling, you're not 100% and I know I'm keeping you... so I'll be fast"

*I haven't told you about... Did I ever mention... .. no... How the hell!?* She plans to ask as much, but now he's started his tale again, staring down his napkin.



"Long made short, I was raring to go. Small commitments—day jobs, mostly—we had taken care of the week before, and while everyone else was calling families, I had been talking to you. The whole pack was joking and teasing before and while we boarded, bouncing through our list of who we need to tell we're going on a tour and came up empty."

That wasn't news, Julia knew all of them were great about keeping their families in the loop about missions.

*Then why did you go silent?*

"We went restricted silent as soon as the copter was airborne."

*Anything that doesn't relate to the mission goes neither in nor out.*

“Standard procedure, nothing to wonder about. We were already moving into bunks when they radioed the details. In-Out, but not simple. Halfway across the world, smack dab in the middle of the dead world. Unknown territory -obviously- trail is ten plus years cold. Then they gave us the timeframe...”

Hunched up, pulled tightly into himself, it takes much gasping before he can finally spit out:

“Six months bare minimum.”

... ..

“They gave us 30 minutes to get all our affairs in order, and then we’d be unreachable for the six plus months until we returned. Thirty minutes for nine people on one outgoing line,”

He’s just a little bit mad at the memory. Higher pitch, growly undertone, eyes narrowed, arms swinging. This still boiled blood, even though it was months past at this point

“*SURE*, that’s only three homes, but that’s three landlords to try and tell what the hell is going on, not to mention five families you’ve got to update, and we had to try and get in contact with most, if not all of them within however many thousands of seconds. Needless to say, we panicked. Our angels must’ve worked some serious overtime, since it worked out mostly, but...”

There went another quarter of his drink, and the motion broke eye contact long enough that Julia could spot the water pooling beside his nose.

“But, one thing we... *I* never considered is that you weren’t there with us.”

*Wait, me??*

“I... I don’t get that. I’ve never even *considered* military anything.”

“Becca didn’t either ‘till she got caught up with the rest of us. Sure, you never went on a mission, but you were as much a part of the team—of the pack—as much as anyone back then. While everyone else had the luxury of their partner being on the copter with them, I didn’t. I had just talked to you, and since you were the only connection to outside that I didn’t share with someone else, I forwent any time on the phone since my brain said “You’ve already told her how long you’re gone.” It also never registered while calling around to get someone to update you where we were.”

Oh no, now she’s tearing up too. She wants to hear what happens next but also terrified of it, ‘cuz she knows the fallout’s lurking just ahead.

“30 minutes came and went, and we were pretty damn proud of ourselves. Homes and family were taken care of and we started to settle in for those six months, resigning ourselves to the nonsense since we were already long over the ocean with the wind at our tail. We whined with each other for a good while, then split up to finish our unpacking and lock up what was now useless. I pulled my phone out to shut it down and there was a text. From you. Two short phrases.”

He won’t look at her. He’s hiding behind his hands like somehow that would spare them both the heartache. She can hear the crack as droplets hit the table

"See you when you get back, Love you."

Red eyes, red face. Leaks coming from everywhere they can and now his voice is stuck somewhere in his chest. All he can summon is a pained whisper.

"I *lost* it. For the life of me I can't tell you what happened afterwards, or the rest of the day for that matter.

I'm told there was a howling shriek and then the horrible ripping and tearing of metal."

Silence.

*No, please, please don't tell me you hurt yourself... Please, just say anything... Stupid pregnant. Stupid expecta-* ... *STUPID PAUSE!*

"I think.. I think I was trying to hurt myself so they had to take me back. Well... really, hurt my prosthetics. If I could I would force them to head home for repairs so I could tell you what was happening. I wasn't successful. It slipped my crazed mind that if my military grade gear would break so easily it wouldn't BE military grade."

He wheezes out a laugh's structure and continues with a heavy sigh, having found his voice again.

"I went along with the mission and we found and returned our targets, but it ate at me every single day of those six months that for all intents and purposes it looked like I just up and ghosted you. The trip home I nearly killed my battery waiting for bars, and the moment I had enough I dialed you.

...

"A different voice answered, told me I had the wrong number,"

*You tried? You really tried to get back to me?*

"And that's when the magnitude of how badly I had screwed up hit me."

*No that wasn't your fault!*

But she can't speak. She can feel she's gonna bawl should she do anything but breathe, and it actually makes sense for her to do it now.

"I wanted so badly to hunt you down- *er*, hunt's not the right word, but, yaknow... figures of speech and how they're wired into the brain- *eh*, sorry, rambling. *\*khmm\** I wanted to find you, but since we'd built so much face-to-face and I don't use social medias all I had back then was your number... and suddenly I didn't even have that..."

He doesn't make a sound but she can watch the sigh and release it gives him, like the world's been lifted off his shoulders.

"I never followed up or tracked you down because I believed you'd moved on a long time before we touched down, throwing any chance of me getting back in contact out the window. I wanted to—I'm sure I could have—but I didn't want to put you through any more pain than I already had."



Bittersweet coursed through Flynn, not just from the dregs of sugary whatever-you-call-this coffee concoction he threw back to delay a little longer. He explained himself, and the now the question was if she believed him. He glanced up and immediately was concerned; he hadn't meant to make Julia cry.

He scuttled over that table in a heartbeat, half an arm's distance so she knew he wanted to comfort but wouldn't intrude. He didn't get a choice, she drug him over and buried her face in his shoulder. Muscle memory had him pulling her closer before he could process it.

He'd barely held it together while he told his half of the story, but he couldn't once Julia started hers. The world didn't matter in the moment, what did they were already clinging to.

"I couldn't figure out what happened to you.

I tried and tried to find you but the people I went to wouldn't or couldn't tell me anything, and I didn't know those who could.

My stupid phone went and died, and then they changed my number and I tried to tell you but I guess they won't resend messages forever.

I kept hoping you'd just show up but weeks and weeks later I convinced myself otherwise.

I was fine for a while... I was cracked, but I still had my life together, and I thought I was starting to heal.

...and then I met ~~him~~.

~~He~~ was so much like you, and yet so different, that I was wrapped around his finger by the time he said hello.

~~He~~ walked so many dark paths and I followed blindly. I made so many choices I now loathe.

I didn't have much to begin with, but I threw it all away when I was with ~~him~~, and now its all gone, and now I...

...and now I'm stuck between a rock and a hard place, because - because... because..."

Flynn's got his guess as to what "because" is, but he doesn't want to say it; almost as if the phrase itself will summon it. If he never mentions it, maybe it never happened?

"H-how'd it end between you and... ~~him~~? Or, has it even ended?"

"... ~~he~~ disappeared months ago. I don't want to see ~~him~~ ever again."



They exit the café together, but Julia really doesn't want to end this. She'd love to live in this bubble forever, but it's gotta pop eventually.

Pop it does, but neither of them held the needle. Just a small nudge did it, a halfhearted kick from her gut. That makes her freeze, and she falls to sitting before she has the chance to faint.

*I can't do it, I just can't do it! How the hell did I ever think I could?! I can't get rid of them...*

Julia's gonna break, or at least she looks the part. Holding her head, curled up on the curb, whistling ever so slightly with each breath.

Without a second thought Flynn slid out of his chair and maneuvered towards Julia, planting himself beside her. He kicked his nubs idly and tried to act nonchalant, but not even a minute later that's been chucked out the window:

"I'll just cut to the chase. You felt a kick, didn't you?"

Somehow, Julia's eyes bugged out even farther.

*I said nothing, how the hell did he figure it out??*

"H-h-h.. h-how?"

"I solve puzzles. Mechanical, strategical, those which I don't necessarily want to. The pieces just kept falling into place.

Getting sick for no discernable reason, alternation between verge of tears and completely fine, kept grabbing anything you could to keep your hands away from your stomach..."

And so the silence falls again, the handful of second somehow longer than the 10 months she hadn't seen him for.

*Dammit just say SOMETHING! Yell, berate, tell me you're disappointed, just **SOMETHING!!***

He turns to face her, parallel to the curb and looking *at* her this time. She slowly turns to meet, dread reaching its peak when he opens his mouth.

"You need a place to stay? I gotta spare room with locks on the door and food in the kitchen."

That was so far outta left field that though she stopped to process it, it still wouldn't compute.

"W-wait.. what?"

"Do you need a place to stay? I'm guessing that "losing everything" included a job and home."

"I, I had a couple months rent paid forwards, but that runs out next week and I lost my job the week I met... him. Never showing up is an easy way to get fired."

Somehow, she's calm. It is in no way, shape or form what she knows should be going through her head at the minute, but she doesn't mind.

"But no, I can't let you do this I-I'll- ... ...we'll just be a burden on you a-"

"Shut. The hell. Up."

*O shit.*

He growled at her. Flynn just growled at her, and now he was staring her down. It was damn scary, but he wasn't mad, per say. Not mad *at* her, anyways; and Julia couldn't quite figure out how she knew that.

"Not everyone can help with every problem but offer what you can when you can. That's what I live by because that's what I needed when the world turned its back on me. Come on, you know the crap I've had to live through."

*Crap?* She would've used hell, and that was holding back.

He hadn't told her every detail, but the overview was bad enough. Lost his legs and parents in the same attack. Horrible foster homes and had to *fight* to stay with his little brother. He finally ages out with a job that gave him legs and the pack—a new family—only to then have little brother kidnapped so Flynn enlists to get him back.

Flynn's seen and lived through so much hate and horrors and ugliness, but it's never tarnished him.

"I **refuse** to sit back and watch if I see someone going through or poised to go through anything similar. You. Are. **NOT**. A. Burden. It'll be my **privilege** to help you."

"Sta- *\*sniff\** stop it"

But she really doesn't want him to. She can't help but smile at the thought as she tries to wipe her face.

There's no way Julia can refuse his help now, he's just not gonna let her. Flynn's always going to share the load or take the bullet, because *he can*. Helping is coded into his being just as deeply as the glittering green of his eyes, and it kills him when he has to be selfish to survive. Of course he knows that helping is a thing you should do regardless, but the fact that he has the means to turn lives around? That is his pride and joy.

He stretched his hand towards her, a couple notches less intense but even more sincere:

"I will admit, at the moment it's not the most lavish of living situations—"

"I'll take it."

She took his hand without a second thought.

Now he was left processing, delighted shock splitting to a grin:

"Well, what're we waiting for?"

He bounds back into his chair and helps her off the curb, still beaming as color slowly creeps back to the world around her. Sure, the sun had come out from the clouds, but for them, the fact that the other was back in their life would have done it regardless.

"Sorry about the mess—"

"You haven't even given me a chance to be offended by it yet!"

"Exactly."



"Who's the father?"

"The *sire* was a worthless scumbag who I hardly dare to call human."



Julia took a leaf out of the ancient Grecian book and disowned ~~his~~ part in making her kid. Everything about them would come from her; forever and always ~~he~~ would be forfeit of any claim of parentage, as ~~he~~ provided nothing but the catalyst.

Her kid may not have the happiest of origins, but there's no way in hell Julia will let it continue like that.

*If you could hear everyone's heartbeats, it'd be amazing to hear a flickering pulse strengthen, or a double beat separate into two, but you'd hear just as many that slowly fade or just stop without warning.*

*Shut up me, this isn't the time to be philisopho-something or other. Time to sleeeeeep.*

But it's too late. She's awake. As much as Julia may try, she's never been able to fall back to sleep, so she did what she always has and got up, "ready" to face the day.

Bare walls, simple furniture, little glass animals from ages past lined up along a shelf.

*This ain't my place. Where the hell am I?*

Panic, worry, o... wait, yesterday...

*Flynn. Drinks. You decided to keep the kid. He offered you a place to stay and you took it.*

*You're not a third grader! Quit blushing!*

But she can't. He hadn't meant to leave her hanging, he wanted to help her through having her kiddo. He still wanted to be in her life, whatever role that meant he had to take. He said as much last night.

*Yeah, well, he's your landlord now, gotta remember that.*

That killed the pinkness. They had never discussed how Julia was ever going to repay him. No job, living in his guest room, it seemed like she never was going to be able to.

*Maybe a shower'll help figure out how to solve that. Where'd he say it was again?*

She got off the bed with a screech—the springs, not her—and went to exit but paused midway. There was a flower on the desk, a single stem of seafoam citrus blossoms.

Leaving single flowers had always been her thing. Back when she and Flynn were together she loved giving and getting flowers when they weren't expected and especially when they weren't type usually given. Flynn'd always loved it too, sticking the stem behind his ear no matter the day's plan.

*Uuuuuhhhh..... uh huh huuuh...*

Her heart had kicked into high gear, pinkness returning with a vengeance. She was lost, not a clue how to feel about this. Does she thank him? Does she ignore it? Does she-

*Wait, what's that noise?*

It wasn't obtrusive, had an underlying rhythm and kinda sounded like music, but it wasn't there a minute ago so she went to track it down. It shouldn't be too hard. Flynn's apartment wasn't huge, so long as you only counted the rooms that he had the only claim to; if you counted the suite complex's communal areas—never mind the other five suites belonging the other eight pack members—the place was massive.

But Flynn's section wasn't. A small living area that also functioned as kitchen and dining space, two bedrooms, another room that functioned as Flynn's "office," one half and one full bath. The low beating

was definitely not from the open doored bedroom or bath, so by superior powers of deduction Julia knew it had to be the office.

Once she turned the corner she could clearly tell it was music, but now it had gotten calmer and slower. The door was ajar, so Julia poked her head in, rewarded with Flynn -back to her- holding a guitar and wearing some sort of visor -which he currently was holding off his face- bouncing back and forth with the slightest hiss of hydraulics. He looked to be reading the papers scattered across the desk beside him, quietly sing-muttering to himself.♥

“ ♪ When all you gotta keep is strong move along move along like I know you do. ♪ ”

He dropped the visor back on his face, turned away from Julia n grabbed the guitar-

“ ♪ And even when your hope is gone move along move along JUST TO MAKE IT THROUGH! ♪ ”

-the beat kicked up and so did he, singing at full volume-

“ ♪ When all you gotta keep is strong move along move along like I know you do ♪ ”

-purposefully tearing at the strings like nothing else matters-

“ ♪ And even when your hope is gone move along move along just to make it *-just to make it through* ♪ ”

-bouncing around in such a purposeful mania that Julia can't help but get swept up in his enthusiasm-

“ ♪ When all you gotta keep is strong move along move along like I know you *-know you do* ♪ ”

She doesn't know what this is or where it's from, but who cares?

“ ♪ And even when your hope is gone move along move along just to make it through. Move along ♪ ”

Three loud knocks from the door behind her threw Julia out of the groove, and a light turned on -a bright, glaring blue- hidden in the corner. Flynn stopped bouncing and so too stopped the music, but he kept humming anyways, the same tune he had synchronized her heartbeat too.

He set both guitar and visor down, turned around and freaked out. Flapping arms, lost his legs, went down with several papers flying from the disruption. He sat there, half propped against the desk, panting slightly.

“Was the flailing and falling really necessary?”

“I wa- I wasn't expecting anyone to be behind me. \*hhh\* You, you can be real quiet when you wanna be, ya know that?”

“No, you were just oblivious.”

That pulls a laugh from him and a snicker from her, but as Flynn starts to roll himself up off the floor it hits Julia:

*Wait, no I'm his tenant, I should be more respectful, I-*

"Was there a knock?"

"Huh?"

Flynn had somehow teleported from the floor to leaning in the doorway, completely relaxed and—dare she notice it?—softly smiling **at** her.

"Knock? On the door? Otherwise my light's broken and I gotta go bribe Skyler to rewire it."

"Y-yeah, there was."

"Loud, soft, one tap, many?"

"Three, loud n solid—"

"BREAKFAST!!"

And there he goes. Out the door at full tilt, letting it slam against the outside wall and slowly return; allowing the sounds of cookware and comradery to float through, followed by sugary sweet scents and a fuzzy four-legged friend.

"Sol! How ya been pup?"

Took him a second to realize who she was, but within the minute Sol was melting against her, tail wagging at full speed and chuffing in delight, rubbing his furry, scaly face against hers.

"I'm gonna guess you missed me?"

"RrrAA ra A A ah AP!"

Pupper can't help but tell her how much she's been missed, and he can't help but tell Flynn once he comes back to the landing,

"RAA-rrrr Ra-A rrrr!"

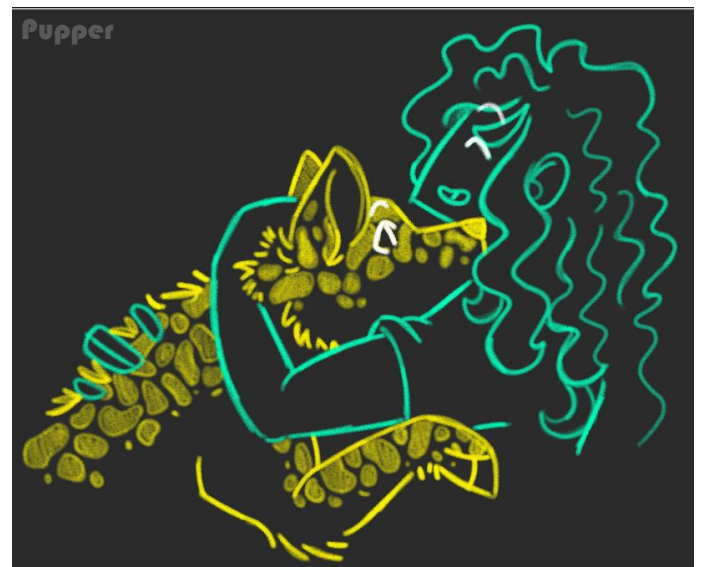
"Yeah, she's back buddy! Ain't it great?"

Pinky pinky pink, Julia can't stop the fuzzy flush no matter how hard she tries. She's saved from addressing it since Sol bowled Flynn over in excitement, concern quickly taking control of her though it too faded since Flynn was laughing and grinning, catching Sol and leaning on him:

"Waffle bar, bacon, sausage, eggs, fresh fruit, got some potato shredded thingys too and usual breakfast drinks. What can I getcha?"

"No, I-I can get it myself—"

Her heart's trying to escape its rib cage at the thought of going down and facing the pack, but it's better to get it over with—



“Nope. Not gonna happen. You just got here and need a chance to settle in. Somehow we all got crazier since you last saw us and I’m not gonna subject my *guest* to that quite yet.”



“heyHeyHEYHEY Hair pullin’s Illegal! I’ve got you pinned you’ve double lost!”

“This aint no match cuz we in no ring, I can pull whatever I want!”

“Ohoho you think so? Ya think SO!”

“naoNaoNAO! Put me DOWN Flynn!”

And up goes Skyler, thrown over his brother’s shoulder like a sack of flour; though he just as quickly switched the roles and sent Flynn sprawling. Julia can’t help but shake her head at the pair, though she’s enjoying the show. She’s so entranced she hardly noticed another body joining her, though she took the glass offered without question.

“Enjoying the brothers being stupid?”

“Yeah, just having a hard time believing *how* stupid they’re being.”

“Really? You’ve been back for a month I would’ve thought the strangeness would’ve gotten familiar by now.”

At that, Julia can’t help but turn toward her seatmate. Rebecca—Becca, she preferred—kept her composure for maybe a minute, but then she lost it mid-sip at the screech Skyler made in the midst of being pinned to the floor, belly down and one metallic arm up behind his back.

“Okay, I concede. I still don’t get how I fell for robo-arms.”

“HEY! *You* chose *me*, remember?”

Skyler flailed around just enough to throw his left hand out front, presumably to display his ring: a metallic black band against the silver of his arms, split by a stripe of cobalt blue; identical to Becca’s—though her stripe was electric. Symbol of a promise they’d made nearly a year ago, that no matter what they’d face the world together.

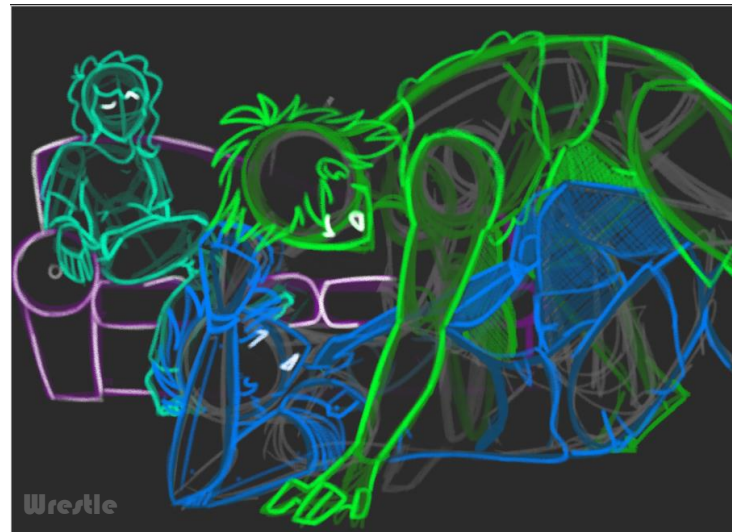
But t’was a ruse!

Once Skyler had the arm under him hydraulics did the rest, throwing the older brother off onto his back, leaving him wide open for a counterattack! But Julia hardly even noticed, transfixed by the rings, and—if she dared to be honest with herself—the idea behind them.

“How’d the doctor visit go? You ‘n kiddo doing great I presume?”

That snapped her out of daydreaming, an abrupt but not unwelcome change,

“So says Doc, but we’ve still got about four, four n a half months of waiting.”



“Oooo, sounds like you’ve gotta fun summer head a you. Anything else you watching for? really just stealing all this for future reference.”

“No problem, happy to share, but nothing weird going on—thankfully—and no red flags.”

“That so? Cheers mate!”

The glasses made a clear and sharp chime, completely unlike the grating crash that came after. With a shared “What now?” and a sigh, Julia and Becca turned back towards the brothers, seeing that the pair had managed—by some feat of stupidity—to stick themselves together, right leg to right arm.

Words were lost on Julia and Becca for a minute, a minute spent watching the boys try to pry themselves apart. Don’t ask how those two did it, as far as the girls knew there are no magnets in the prosthetics and the alloy they’re made of is impossible to magnetize.



“Wish I coulda got ya something stronger than water, tempted to go up my drink a notch.”

“I’m almost willing to join you.”

But neither moved, preoccupied by the other pair trying to sort themselves out, since they were now sitting on the floor having stuck both sets of limbs in a tangled mass. They kept bouncing ideas back and forth as Flynn undid their harnessing, ending up with a pile of

metal limbs between their nub-hips and nub-shoulders selves. The brothers surrendered shortly after, scuttling and shakily running off to troubleshoot with the designer himself, who lived about a stone’s throw away from their current position.

“Of all the people in the world, how’d we fall for those cyberkinetic idiots?”

That made Julia spray her drink, the backsplash causing water down the wrong pipe and breaking up her response,

“N-n-no I’m not- *\*kuff\** We’re- *\*kah kaff\**”

“Really, Julia? You’re trying to tell me you don’t love Flynn? Sweetheart, you’ve turned bright pink and threw yourself into telling me off, I can read it off your face like a billboard.”

“I’m pink because I’m having a hell of a time breathing! *\*kouff\**”

A partial truth.

“I’m here because Flynn can’t and won’t stop himself from helping people and I was about as hopeless as it gets.”

An honest statement.

“Whatever we had died when we fell outta contact.”

A bold-faced lie, one she desperately tried to believe. Becca said nothing for a minute, the mix of confusion and disbelief across her face worse than a knife to the gut.

“You really don’t think you love him anymore?”

“I don’t.”

A sour sting on the tongue, but it’s what Julia keeps telling herself.

Becca went to continue but found herself cut off by the brothers’ return, filled as it was with back and forth of how stupid each other and the both of them are. It took about ten seconds to disentangle the limbs, a moment filled with cheering and ending in an armless tackle on the legless brother, which went about as well as you would expect: Skyler flat on his back with Flynn flopped across his chest.

The room was quiet for a minute, the brothers having descended into soft giggling fits and Julia unwilling to continue conversation, but it ended as quick as it began with a pointed look from Becca, who bounced off the couch and towards the pair,

“Come on Sky, The Hit List starts in just a few. I’ll help you put your arms back on, I need more practice anyways.”

“Hit List! Les go!”

He tried to swing his legs and roll to standing once, twice and once more, but found himself unable.

“GET OFF of me you big lummo!”

“No, I’m quite comfortable right where I am.”

“Enough.”

Becca half half-kicked at Flynn, really just a nudge.

“You two have been stupid enough for the night.”

“Fiiiiine.”

Off the brother Flynn crawled, but not before sharing a light loving headbutt. Skyler rolled to sitting and offered as much of a hug as he currently could before scrambling off after Becca, leaving Flynn and Julia alone.

Besides the thump from Skyler hitting a doorframe—and then another shortly after, presumably him hitting the floor—It once again descended into quiet, barely disturbed by Flynn’s hard breathing.

“Are siblings always like this?”

“Only the *best* kind”

She rolled her eyes and he couldn’t help but laugh, sliding his legs across the floor and scuttling after to lean against the couch while he reassembled himself. This was calm, this was comforting and warm an-

*No, no nonono No NO. I am not doing this, I just told Becca I don’t like Flynn anymore!*

“How’s that new job going? I meant to ask you when ya got back, but I was aa... busy.”

“O yeah, real busy.”

Neither could help the snicker, and though Julia could feel the pink rising she swiftly killed the sensation by complaining; about co-workers mostly but it quickly shifted to aches and the weirdness that was cravings. Flynn had long since hopped onto the couch with her, invested,

“Dragonfruit? Really? I’d get wanting the flavor, but the actual fruit is just a bland mush!”

“Exactly! But no, *that’s* what I’ve dying to have all day. That and something fried, which is the weirdest combination.”

“No, no I completely agree.”

He paused, bouncing between a couple expressions before the hand went up behind the head and he looked slightly away,

“There *is* this new place, uh... Tsur... Tsurai♥, I think, down by the station. There’s also one of those exotic food stores right near it, soo... weee could go there and kill two birds with one stone?”

Now he had the confidence to look at her, still kinda hiding behind his arm but far more sure of himself now that he’s asked. If Julia’s eyes didn’t lie he too was stained light pink.

She froze. Complete mental shutdown.

*Shit. Shitshit shit shiiiiit.*

*Wait a second, maybe he’s not asking for a date? Just ask him that!*

“What’d’ya mean?”

“You. Me. Go to Tsurai. Have dinner, hopefully have fun?”

Arm was down, now he’d gotten confident and looked over hopefully, half smile on his face and glint in those big green eyes. Julia knew she’d long since gone pink in the face but now the bubbly feeling was spreading everywhere,

*That didn’t clear things up at all, be sly about it...*

“What, we gonna talk over the terms of my tenure? This a sneaky ploy to have a business chat?”

Julia turned away and forced a laugh, trying so hard to just act normal, but now her stomach was knotting up and it seemed like she might hurl. Flynn was stuck in his processing face; you could read the error messages scrolling behind his eyes. He stayed there a second, then turned forwards:

“Okay, there’s something not working between my head and mouth, cuz I’m not getting this across very well-”

---

♥ Tsurai: Japanese, 辛い – Spicy (Google Translate)



*I really hope so...*

“-I wanna take you out on a date. Will you go on a date with me?”

O that her heart would stop so she could drop dead and not deal with this.

He hadn't turned back to look at her but she couldn't look away, trying so hard to get her head and heart to quit fighting so she could give a response—any kind would do at this point.

But Flynn beat her to it, running both hands across his head and turning slightly away as he continued,

“I, I get if you don't want to, I screwed up pretty spectacularly and then just stuck myself back in your life without warning. But I gotta, I -I just had to give *us* another try. If I'm honest I can't keep my mind off you, and if you'd let me I just want to start over.”

He snuck a glance over at her, eyes bugging and face noticeably flushing when he accidentally met Julia's gaze, curling in on himself as he quickly turned away,

“Well, as, as over as we can, anyways.”

Head buried in between his head and knees, a ball of nervousness and terror. He hadn't been this skittish around Julia since he ran her over between classes, scrawny thing he was back then turning bright pink and trying not to look at her as they collected her papers. The memory brought a calming warmth, unsolicited but appreciated since Julia could now hear herself,

*O, just say yes, what's the worst that can happen? It's an easy cut off point if you're right, that you do indeed no longer love him, but also a great jumping off point when you prove yourself wrong.*

That little bit of control was really all the convincing Julia needed, responding with a rekindled enthusiasm:

“Okay, let's go!”

“hUH?!”

Flynn did not expect that, uncurling in an instant and sliding off the couch with a thud, turning to look at her, mouth agape.

“Let's go on this date of yours, let's give us a second chance.”

He was a kid in the candy store, given a million dollars and told to go wild. Flynn jumped up off the floor, pulling Julia up into a twirling embrace in a second motion, his delighted giggling resonating through her, intoxicating with how quickly it convinced Julia this wouldn't be the last date.

“Just one request?”

“Name it, you'll have it.”

He meant it, she could read it in his eyes and check it against his past, should she ask for a mountain to be moved, he'd move two. The room slowly tinged to pink, the sun finally behind the sea enough to start a sunset,

“Tsurai is an Andhra♥ place?”

“I think so. Never been.”

“Anywhere else we could go? Spicy has not been agreeing with me lately.”

“Nova’s? Burger, fries n shake?”

“Perfect.”

---

♥ **Telugu cuisine** is a cuisine of South India native to the Telugu people from the states of **Andhra Pradesh** and **Telangana**. Generally known for its tangy, hot and spicy taste.  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_cuisines](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_cuisines)

Four and a half months flew by, and for all intents and purposes no one could tell that Julia and Flynn ever had a break in their relationship. Flowers still show up behind each other's ear, Sol still runs tacky notes between them, and should one be missing, your best bet to find them is to check beside the other.

For Flynn, anything is better so long as he's close to Julia, the level of better completely connected to how close is close. He wants to be by her side forever, but it's the asking if he could that's killing him. It's been his goal for months and nags at him now, fiddling as he is with his leg in a frantic attempt to think out how he's gonna do it.

*Come on dude, you're running outta time on your deadline!*

*I knooow that, but I can't seem to ask her. It's not like I haven't tried!*

Seven or eight times by now. But his voice keeps getting stuck in his throat and his heart won't rest enough for him to think. Fancy dinner? Played it off as choking on his drink and dropped the subject. Evening in the park? Flynn fell flat on his face and still has road rash scars. Nothing he does seems to be right, so he drops it midplan.

*Gotta do it soon, otherwise you're gonna be too busy helping with the baby to ask!*

*But HOW!?*

He's opened up, tweaked settings within and reinstalled nearly every panel on both of his legs, making adjustments that really don't help him but won't hurt either.

*Gotta figure that out! Got the ring, but I don't wanna just show her it and hope something goes from there!*

He's stalling, using these menial tasks to block out dead time where he can think, mostly without interruption.

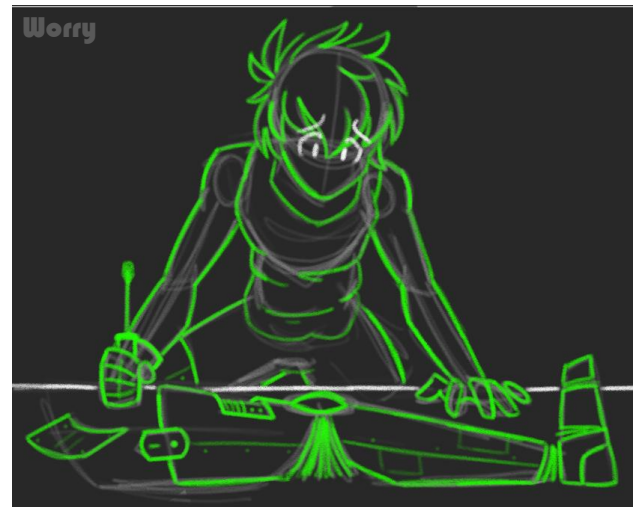
*I'm not screwing up again!*

He thumped the table in frustration, startling as the metal panel flew off the edge and under the couch in a moment of physics nonsense. Flynn set his leg aside and slowly flopped to the floor, having to crawl up to his waist to even touch the slice of metal.

*What about that last name conversation thingy? That's at least a script.*

*How am I gonna bring up "I don't like your last name, you should change it" in a normal conversation?*

*That's the point, it's something you say to throw her for a loop!*



Flynn laid there for a minute, debating with himself amongst the dust and clutter, trying so hard to find the path to solve this problem. He kept turning the panel over and over, watching the light bounce off it and blind him momentarily.

*Maybe... maybe just... ask?*

"Flynn?"

She surprised him. Julia's voice full out spooked Flynn, and though he tried to bound up to face her there was about a foot of stuffing, metal, fabric and whatever you call that junk what gets stuck in amongst the cushions between him and the open air. He quickly backed his way out, covered in fluff and with a substantial throb in his head.

"What's up? You need me to run 'n get something?"

"We gotta- we gotta go."

"... go?"

Try as he might, even sitting back on his foot so he can redirect that brainpower, Flynn cannot come up with where they'd need to go. He hadn't planned anything for today-

*Or did I?*

"Go where?"

*Please don't tell me I planned a date or outing and completely spaced it, I am so not ready for-*

"The hospital."

"Hospital?"

She was clearly concerned, shifting back and forth uncomfortably:

*O, nao, don't get so worried over me-*

"All I did was smack my head, nothing new, not even worth a bag of ic-"

You could see the room brighten as it hit Flynn. The reason for his self-imposed deadline was now just hours away, maybe not even that.

He bounded up and started around the couch towards Julia, but gravity is hard to ignore without two legs to support you. Flynn hit the floor with quite the thud, quickly moving to a crawl as he called to Julia:

"Go ahead, I'll grab everything and meet you outside!"

Off she went, slow and careful with a bad case of the giggles. Flynn couldn't help but snicker in response, locating and attaching his leg in a single fluid twist. Now he could bound as he pleased, first to the closet where a backpack of overnight essentials had been stashed, then to the door for keys and coats and finally out with a hop and a skip.

The door was closed for maybe a minute, but then the lock clicked and Flynn was back, racing past Sol in his hurry to get the box. Unassuming, worthless looking, it functioned as a ruse to deter minds from

wondering what was inside. A quick flip confirmed that Flynn indeed hadn't misplaced the simple shiny circlet, and a cold boop to his hand reminded him of one last responsibility.

He herded Sol to and out the inner suite door, calling for anyone there to please watch the pup as Flynn once again ran out the door. This time he made it around the corner and down the hall to the elevator, sliding between the doors with inches to spare. He panted and momentarily panicked as the elevator started descending, shoving the little box into his pocket while he started conversation to distract Julia:

"I am so lucky you love me 'cuz I am an idiot."



Flynn wouldn't say he hated hospitals, but they certainly weren't one of his favorite places to be. Too many unpleasant or just plain bad memories mixed in with the few exceptional ones.

*Hopefully tonight is another in that good column.*

He wistfully admitted, already strung like wire as he powered down the hallway, hand currently held hostage by Julia as they were whisked across the hospital—aiming for the elevator. There were a million things he could have been thinking of, but one dominated:

*Gotta ask her, gotta ask her, gotta ask her, gotta ask her..*

Doctors and nurses and other techs smiled as they flew past, little more than blurs to Flynn in his panic,

*But I still don't know **how***

*What about the brilliant conclusion of just asking thought up not twenty minutes ago?*

Somehow—teleportation, surely—they were at the elevator. In a matter of moments he'd be asked to stay here, and he'd lose all hope of ever gaining the courage to ask.

*Then just ask her you coward! You've survived wars, fought demons, and overcome the impossible time and time again, just spit the words out since you can't be eloquent!*

For some reason, berating himself was just the push he needed, and with a deep breath turned to Julia and gently squeezed her hand. She startled at the contact and immediately looked up at him, words sliding together

"Am I hurting you? I don't want to hurt you. You can always pull your hand away I won't mind it's just a comfort thing 'cuz I'm a bit scared and nervous, mostly nervous but a good part scared too and I don't wanna hurt you—"

"You're not, you're not, I promise. I arm wrestle Sky and he's got mechanical fingers; I can handle regular hands just fine. I know you'd never try to hurt me unless I really deserved it."

Her smile was contagious, a warm glint that reminded him of fireplaces and nights spent curled up in front of them. Unfortunately it was short lived, the monster called contractions attacking her once again.

*That's closer together than the last one, tick tick!*

"I uh, I wanted to a-ask you something, i-if that's okay"

“Yeah, why wouldn’t it? You might have to repeat yourself, but what’s eating at ya?”

“Well, y-you see, I was, I was wondering-”

He hastily pulled the box out from his pocket, trying to be discreet but in his haste opening the lid just enough for the ring to slip. Flynn flailed and waved, the tricky little thing bouncing off his hands before he could grab it a handful of times before he finally secured it, slumping against the head side of the bed with a new hole carved in his ribs and several new species of butterflies fluttering around his guts.

He desperately tried to calm himself but couldn’t find the time to gasp, let alone breathe.

“nn... ylnn. Flynn, FYLNN! Look at me you goober!”

Look he did, able to follow orders if nothing else, and peaked through the rails to a face that radiated nothing but understanding.

“Quit the fancy, it’s never been a strength of yours. Can you do that for me?”

Words escaped him, nodding intensely was what he could manage and nod he did.

“Just ask me in as little words as you can.”

With a shudder and a sudden inability to meet her eyes Flynn held the ring out, cautiously squeaking:

“W-would you m-m-marry me?”

He got a pain-filled grunt in return, and for a moment all he could feel was dread. Did he really read her that wrong?

“Wipe that pain off your face idiot, of course I’ll marry you!”

“HEH?!?”

Buggy eyes, a couple tears hiding away in the corners, he looked over the bars on a wide grin with a couple sneaky tears herself.

“I’m ugh-ing at biology, these stupid contractions that can go and kick the bucket for all I care. Yes, yes, a thousand times yes you dork.”

Words still failed him, so all Flynn could do was hum happily, making to offer Julia the ring the same time she reached for it. It slipped off his sweaty hand and bounced away, aiming for a ventilation vent; but with a painful slap Flynn caught it—having belly-flopped on the hard tile to do so.

The elevator dinged in the midst of his painful moans, and he fully expected to hear it rattle away before he found the will to move so he croaked out:

“I seeee you in a little, I gonna stay heeeere.”

Much to Julia’s delight, if the restrained giggles were anything to go by. He simply listened as the med tech rolled her bed into the elevator, and waited for the door to rumble closed. It didn’t. What did happen is that Flynn was unexpectedly being helped up off the floor,

“No, I’m fine I promise-”

"Sure you are, I'll check you out when we get upstairs, come on."

Flynn looked up in confusion, right at the med tech with a foot in the elevator door.

"No, I think you're mistaken, I'm not allowed upstairs."

"Well, I'm sorry to say somebody lied to you. Mom can have a plus one—whomever she pleases—and it's usually her partner, bud."

He gestured back to Julia with a wave of his head.

"What I just saw was the best proposal ever. You're going with her."



"Here we go, all wrapped up. Just hold him like this—"

"Wait, no why's he coming to me isn't he supposed to go to mom!?"

"Mom's got other problems at the moment, this little guy wants to be bundled up and hear a heartbeat and he can't tell if it's mom or dad's."

While Flynn.exe wasn't responding the nurse arranged his arms just so and gently placed the squirmy babe in his arms, and thank heaven instinct worked without brainpower otherwise the poor lil' guy would've fallen to the floor.

*What'd she say? Dad? DAD!?! AHHHHH!!*

A quiet cry brought Flynn out of the tangled mess of frayed wires his thoughts had rapidly become, leading him to become aware of the slight weight and fuzzy texture he was now holding delicately, though he was painfully aware he didn't remember how it got there. He looked down to find a wriggly little guy tangled up in the blanket, clearly not too happy with this predicament.

*"Make sure he's wrapped up tight 'n held up close to you, squirt."*

*"No, Dad you gonna squish him!! I don wanna hurt my new bruder!"*

*"Oh, no, no bud it's all good, don't worry. He's been wrapped up real tight n warm his whole life so far, so he's not used to having space to wiggle. It's also much, much colder here, and unlike you or me his body doesn't quite know how to keep him warm yet."*

*"O, so this's helpin him acl.. aclmina—get used to out here, right?"*

*"Bingo! And he's also had Mom's heart right near him that whole time, so it's very calming for him to hear one."*

*"Even mine?"*

*"Especially yours."*

*He looked down at the little guy, almost too big for his toddler arms to handle, and pulled him closer:*

*"Hiya Skyler, my name's Flynn and Ima be the best big bruder to you there's evah been!"*

Without hesitation and a degree of practice, Flynn quickly and carefully re-wrapped the baby, keeping him comfortably cuddled while allowing room to squirm should he please. He gently pulled him closer, getting a small coo in return.

"Hiya buddy. I don't know your name yet but I think I got lucky enough to be your dad."

At that he got a couple of confused blinks, the unfocused stare towards the new noise bringing to light the baby's vividly purple eyes. Wait, purple? Sure, there were a couple crazy eye colors that could happen from time to time, but purple's pure fiction! Flynn blinked a couple times in confusion, and on further inspection found only the light grey eyes that he had been expecting.



*How hard did I hit my head? Maybe I should follow through on that check-up offer.*

"You can come on over."

"Heah?"

He looked up to find himself in a deceptively normal hospital room, with no indication of the organized mess it had been only a few minutes ago. Julia was looking understandably drained, little more than a mess of hair amongst a mountain of pillows. The nurse gently waved her hand at Flynn, catching his eye and focus,

"We're all done here and while you've done fantastically with him so far, there's a couple things he needs that you simply aren't built for."

"O, right! Sorry, I got distracted-"

"No worries dear, it's the best part of my job. We'll give you three a minute to settle in."

She turned to walk away and Flynn started towards Julia, pausing for a moment when the little treasure in his arms coughed. He looked down to see a line of black drool dripping down his face.

"H-hang on, is that-"

*\*click\**

"-normal?"

"Ge... get over here. Flyyyynnnnn I wanna seeee him."

"Oop. Sorry!"



And so he hurried, absent-mindedly wiping away the drool as he made a note for later, gently passing him off to Julia who was beaming, though utterly exhausted. They sat there for a good while, happy as can be to just enjoy the moment. Julia broke the silence first:

“Wha-ter... what’re we gonna caaaaall himmm?”

“No, no, please, please just trust me on this: don’t have me name him.”

“Heh?”

“I suck at naming things. I have never had the aptitude for it. The only reason Sol isn’t Doggo is because he’s yellow and Sklyer has Luna, therefore all the thinking was done for me. You choose the little guy’s name, you’ve done all the work.”

“You’ve... you’ve helped more thannnn... than you realize.”

That made Flynn flush, a pink tickle that he could feel from ear to ear. He ducked his head to try and hide it, which only caused Julia to giggle and yawn widely.

“I’ve al.. I’ve always liked Jason...”

“Okay, now you’ve got one idea. You can think up more later, you’ve had a heck of a day and you need to sleep.”

“Weeeee....”

“Heh?”

“Wee gotta think up a name fiii.. fii-awn-ce.”

Her smile was wide and bright, and for a moment Julia didn’t look tired at all. But then she slumped, eyes flickering as she desperately fought off weariness. Flynn rolled his eyes for a second, once again ensnared by her endearing stubbornness.

“Okay, okay we. But not until you’ve had a nap. You gotta take care of yourself too.”

He gently reached out to move the loose hair from her face, sneaking in a quick kiss on her nose,

“Do you want me to hold the little guy for a while or do you think y-”

She was long gone, deep in dreamland if the faint snores could be trusted. Her grip didn’t falter, though, and so Flynn left the two to bond in their mutual exhaustion.



The night was cool and crisp, with the promise of a storm rolling through within minutes. Flynn would have loved to spend longer out there, daring the lightning to choose him as its conduit, but he had two very special people waiting for him back inside. Besides, he’d already cleared his head and calmed his pulse, which was all he had been aiming for when he set out on a run.

He barely held himself back from hopping and skipping through the hospital, settling for a half-jog as he winded his way up stairs and down halls, only stopping to place a light knock on the door before

opening. As quiet as he could, he made his way into the room, the silence bothered only by a high-pitched ringing.

*Dangit I never got my head checked. Really must've done a number on it, hope I don't got a concussion. That'd reeeeeeealy suck.*

Flynn shook his head and soldiered on, making for his bag but getting happily distracted by the bassinet that had appeared in his absence. He didn't dare disturb the sleeper, knowing he had to treasure these rare moments. At least that's what he'd been told.

He went about unpacking his things for the night, aiming for a little rest himself so he'd be fresh for the morning, however early it would arrive. The flash off his new ring only made him smile, and shot a glance towards its partner, bright and shiny and coated in dark ooze. Julia's whole arm, chest and mouth was covered in the stuff, there was even a little splattered under her dull, unfocused eyes.

The world cracked like glass; everything was muted except for a sharp whine—the screech of a heart monitor that he had written off as Tinnitus. Flynn panicked, slamming the nurse call button as he rushed to her side. He tried to resuscitate her, but every push only caused more of the ooze to gush forth.

“JUYA! JULIA!!!”



Sleep apnea. Respiratory infection. Aneurism. Lung cancer. Hypertension. Toxic shock syndrome.

All plausible causes of death, but none of them would have set in so quickly, at least not without prior symptoms. At worst they were wild theories; at best, guesses. None could explain the black ooze. Nobody could tell why it had killed Julia but left the baby unscathed. No-one could determine what it was, though it had been through every test the hospital could think of, and Flynn had snagged a few vials himself to run through tests civilians wouldn't have access to. That had been his last moment of clarity, adrenaline washed out by misery, pain and disbelief.

He felt hollow.

Biology kept his heart beating, but a small part of him hoped whatever took Julia would find him a tempting target as well. But far more fought the rebel, citing the bundle in his arms as foremost among the long list of reasons to stay alive.

As he looked down at the boy, gaze glazed over and immobile, it slowly started to hit Flynn just how similar to Julia he was. Thin curls of dark hair with red iridescence, almond skin, eyes that looked grey now but would surely turn an amber gold in a few months' time. He could've been Julia's clone, but biology and common sense whispered that surely there were qualities and quirks utterly foreign to Flynn that would come up as he got older.

At the moment, Flynn didn't care. In fact, he couldn't remember ever caring about the fact the kid would never be blood in the most literal sense of the word. Skyler was his only brother, but he had seven extra siblings back home, and a dozen or so more scattered across the world. His parents had been sent to an early grave, but should he need them there were five sets of adults ready to claim him as their own.

He signed his name as "Father" on the little guy's birth certificate, there was no way he'd back out now. "Stubbornly loyal," as Julia would've said.

Flynn blinked slowly, finally letting the pooling tears soothe his aching eyes. With the clarity it brought him, he could clumsily realize there was someone sitting next to him, and had been for an indeterminable length of time. He made a sound in greeting, not sure what his vocal cords decided to produce but blindly trusting as he wiped his eyes with a hand.

"Hey man, good to see you moving. I was getting real worried for a minute there. I know this's probably low on your priorities... but does the little guy have a name?"

"Flynn."

"Wait, isn't your name Flynn, you're gonna name him the same as you?"

"...huh?"

Flynn looked over, recognizing the technician from the start of this whole adventure, the young man looking significantly worse for wear than their last meeting, however. Disheveled hair, coat in a rumpled mess, Flynn had seen cadets go through boot camp looking less for wear. He blinked, unthinking, before common sense came rushing back:

"I, I'm af-afraid I didn't hear every.. everything you said. Weren't you asking for my name?"

"Not exactly but I'm glad to learn it Flynn. What I was asking about is the little one there. Does he have a name yet? It's the last thing we need before the thre- The two of you can go home together."

The slip-up, well intended but stinging, almost made Flynn lose it again.

*Not now. At home. AT. HOME. At home where Sky and Becca and all the others can help both of us. He needs you... he...*

*What do I even call him?*

With the grey of the storm finally chased away, it dawned on both him and the city:

*"You choose the little guy's name"*

*"I've al.. I've always liked Jason..."*

*"Jason. He's my little hero, Jason."*

*Jason Jade Vesir. Vesir-Cymite, if he'll have me.*