

Unmanned
By Kjorteo Kalante

Keith had the ball and the chance to redeem himself. He needed only to reach the other end of the court. That should have been easy for the red-tailed hawk. His thick, powerful legs carried him to the halfway mark in seconds. The opposing net was in sight. *Could this be the day?*

Before he could answer that, a gray blur was upon him.

Kody. The mouse was easy to overlook, even as he tried to grab the ball and missed. If it were anyone else, that would have been Keith's opportunity to advance. Against Kody, though, the opening itself was a trap. Even when the mouse fell for a feint, he was always quick enough to recover and strike again.

The hawk took off laterally instead, faking right before running left. He was at least sixty pounds heavier than his opponent, all of it muscle. With it, he exploded across the court. He only had a second before Kody was on him again, but a second was all he needed.

He leapt straight up, arms over his head, and shot.

Kody tipped the ball.

Keith gaped. He was over a foot taller with arm length to match, and had taken a high jump shot while wide open. How in the world had the mouse even caught up with him, let alone leapt high enough to block anything?

The ball wobbled through the air like an unsteady bird; wounded, yet still determined to reach its destination. It might have gone through had the trajectory been more stable and just a little longer. Instead, it hit the front rim and bounced away.

Half buried on the nearby bench amongst keys, water bottles, and discarded shirts, a cell phone went off. Its timer signified the end of the game.

Keith let out a screech. Kody had found a way to outlast him *again*, though it had come at a cost. The mouse leaned forward, doubling over and panting hard enough to hyperventilate. Soon, he was on his hands and knees.

"You all right, squeak?" Keith had wanted to beat his rival, not kill him.

"Kody," the mouse corrected sharply, then coughed. "You can call me any name you want when you beat me, but not until then."

"Kody, sorry." Keith raised his hands as if he were under arrest. *Touchy*. Bad enough he had to deal with impossible customers all day. Were his weekends on the court destined to end in impotent frustration, too? Probably, so long as Kody kept playing every little pickup game as if it were a world championship. Theirs was supposed to be a *friendly* rivalry. The mouse still remembered that, right?

"Come on, let's go home." Keith knelt and reached to help his fallen opponent up.

"You're good at this." Kody wouldn't take Keith's hand, but he did take the bird's forearm, and was soon on his feet again. Standing next to each other, the mouse only came up to Keith's collarbone after one counted his big, round ears.

"You're better," the hawk mumbled. He waited for Kody to let go, but it appeared the mouse had become a permanent attachment. That was all right. Kody wobbled with every step, so the need for support was understandable.

“Aw, don’t be like that,” Kody consoled as though *Keith* were the one taking the game too seriously. “I needed to give it everything I had just to keep up. No one makes me work for it like you do. You’ll get me one of these times for sure.”

“Maybe next time?” Keith suggested, though he somehow wasn’t hopeful.

“Maybe.” Kody grinned proudly, as if he *weren’t* also gasping and dying between words. “I won’t make it easy for you, though.”

Keith couldn’t help but laugh. “You never do, squeak. Kody. Sorry.”

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Kody’s apartment was already small, but with all he had apparently done to keep Keith away, it seemed even smaller. They had showered separately, changed separately, even eaten separately before retreating to their respective rooms. There had been a time when Kody had only kept one dresser drawer locked and hidden from the hawk. Now, it was the entire bedroom. Keith had to make do with a bedroll on the living room floor.

It wasn’t as though Keith had expected to get any action. They hadn’t been a couple in years, after all. He wasn’t trying to spoon naked in Kody’s bed anymore. Still, something bothered him about the mouse’s coldly professional treatment, as if the two were nothing more than roommates... or even coworkers. As if their entire relationship had never happened.

Keith rolled onto his side and sighed. He should consider himself lucky that their relationship had ended as well as it had, he supposed. Many exes never so much as spoke to one another, but Kody still invited him over on weekends so both of them could get away from their respective day jobs. That was at least something... or was it? Kody had fought on the court as if it were an actual battle and shown distant courtesy the rest of the evening. Keith worked retail in a clothing store; he knew the feigned customer service platitudes when he heard them. Was Kody punishing him? That seemed needlessly petty, but why else would the mouse bother to have him over only to act like this?

Or was Keith the one being petty? He wouldn’t admit it, but the loss still stung. If only he could come out on top *somewhere*. Retail work meant subservience despite his size and strength. The hawk could have tossed half his customers like pizza dough, an especially tempting fantasy whenever they were being rude or difficult. Instead, he had to serve them with the least menacing beak-smile he could manage. He flew remote-control helicopters and drones as a hobby in his leisure time, but *true* flight was something only his feral ancestors could attain. They still had wings, after all. Venting his aggression on the court might have helped, but there he couldn’t even beat a hot-blooded mouse half his size. Was there no recourse for him?

A noise interrupted him from his musing. Several noises, actually, though all were coming from Kody’s room.

Moans.

Oh, was *that* why Kody had kept his door closed? Was the mouse pleasuring himself to the thought of his latest victory? Rubbing it in by rubbing one out? *Well, good for him, the smug little show-off*. He rolled onto his side and folded his pillow over his ear holes.

The mouse had always acted as if he had something to prove, which explained his refusal to lose. That was what had drawn Keith to him long ago, but it was also what had doomed their young relationship. Kody had been defensive, stubborn, and prone to lashing out, as if the entire world—even his boyfriend—were his enemy. *Some things never change*.

Still, try as he might, the hawk couldn't quite tune Kody out. Something about those noises bothered him. Something about them felt wrong, somehow....

Those aren't pleased moans.

The sounds were fearful. Distressed. Pleading for help.

Well, that changed things. Keith cursed, wriggling out of the bedroll and grabbing his boxers. Kody had been a pain in his tail since high school but, damn him, the hawk still *cared*.

Keith entered Kody's bedroom and found the mouse in the midst of a fitful sleep. Sheets and blankets lay strewn everywhere except the bed, all casualties of Kody's tossing and turning. The mouse himself, now exposed, had clearly been keeping himself in shape. His gray-furred body was too small even for a swimmer's build, yet what little he had was toned and athletic. Kody whined and shifted, apparently still trying to run from the monsters in his dream. His narrow yet solid legs twitched and moved through a slow striding motion, as if attempting to jog underwater.

"Kody," Keith called. "Hey, Ko—"

The mouse rolled onto his back, his legs spread, chest rising and falling in ragged gasps. The sight shouldn't have been anything shocking to Keith, but it was. *Well, that's new.*