

“Rewards”

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It was the strangest thing, Jacob thought, when he looked up and saw the rabbit’s face. He’d heard of these kinds of things in dime romances and day-time soap operas, those odd little chances presenting themselves at the oddest of times, but never had he ever expected something so ... so fairy tale, he supposed, to happen to him. It just didn’t fit into the pattern his life had followed thus far. Yet, here he was, six years since he’d last seen him, and the rabbit hadn’t changed one bit. There was no doubt it was Alex that had walked up to his station with a huff as he set his basket of assorted food stuffs on the conveyer belt while he fished around in his pocket for his credit card. He still had his strikingly brown eyes framed by his quirky, thin rimmed glasses – not the same glasses Jacob remembered, but damn close – and that splotch of brown against the right side of his face that made him look like he was attacked by a disgruntled art student. No, no doubt in Jacob’s mind Alex had suddenly walked back into his life by some cruel chance.

And, also, to Jacob’s painful disappointment, no doubt that Alex didn’t recognize him.

“I don’t have my card thing,” Alex said with a sigh. “Your rewards card. Can you type in my number and make that work? I think some of the items here qualify for a discount.”

“Sure,” Jacob said, swallowing the lump that had formed in the back of his throat. He remembered back to those awkward college days, what had to be almost seven, maybe eight years ago, when he first saw the rabbit nose-deep in one of his text books. He remembered walking up to him nervously, and making some inane comment about Alex’s class that earned the timid stag a pity laugh. It was enough, though, to break the ice. They sat together for over an hour sharing complaints back and forth about their professors and fellow classmates that later turned to talks of hobbies and favorite time wasters when not buried neck-deep in assignments. When Alex looked down at his watch and said that he had to get going for class, Jacob remembered asking the question that had been burning in the back of his mind the whole time he sat there – “What’s your number?”

Alex rattled a few numbers off, and Jacob dutifully punched them into the computer. When the system confirmed the match to one Alex Volsange, Jacob looked up at the rabbit and said, “All set.”

“Good, good,” Alex said. He’d pulled out his phone and started to tap away at the screen. Some smart phone, Jacob noted idly as he started to ring the rabbit’s perches up. The rabbit was always about the latest tech, but the last time Jacob had seen him slim flip phones were what was hot. Now, the same phones Alex used to drool over were all Jacob could afford.

“Do you know any good restaurants around here?” Alex said, looking up from his phone briefly. “Just moved down here after I lost my last job up north, and I’ve not had much time to do anything but look for a new job.”

“There’s a pretty good Chinese place just down the street,” Jacob said. Alex liked Chinese. At least, he did in college. “And a decent Italian place not far from there. Just a few blocks east from the Chinese place.”

“Chinese is good,” Alex said, still glancing between his phone and what Jacob figured was the total displayed on the screen behind him, “But Italian’s only good for first dates. I eat enough cheap pasta and sauce at home.”

“I can tell,” Jacob said. He held up the box of store-brand penne with a grin, then scanned it and passed it along to his bagging assistant.

“Hey!” Alex said. “Food’s food, and cheap food means more food.” He stuffed his phone into his back pocket and looked at Jacob with what the stag knew was a playful glare. “I’m not gonna’ be too picky when living off savings.”

“Fair enough,” Jacob said, and he wanted to leave it at that. But curiosity gnawed at him. Without giving himself the time to reconsider the question, Jacob drew in a short breath and asked quickly, “So, what was your job? The one you, uh, lost, that is.”

A tight grin crept over the rabbit’s muzzle. “A rather cushy programming job with one of the bigger tech corps. It paid well. Really well.” His ears twitched back against his skull, but he forced them back up with a show of effort. “I gave up a lot back home to take the job, and for the longest time I thought the job was well worth it.”

“What happened?” Jacob passed the final item over the scanner and set the basket on the floor next to him.

“It finally hit me what I lost,” Alex said. Jacob opened his mouth to say something else, but Alex quickly cut in, “Ready for me to swipe?”

It took Jacob a moment to figure out what he meant by that. “Oh, right. Yeah.” He motioned towards the card machine with a wave, “Credit or debit?”

Alex eyed the total with a weary look Jacob had never seen, even after weeks of arduous study. “I have to do credit, this time.”

“Alright,” Jacob said. “It’s ready when you are.”

Alex swiped his card with a soft sigh then put it back into his wallet. He scribbled out a quick signature when the box showed up and side-stepped towards the bagger when the receipt started to print. “You saved six dollars and thirteen cents,” Jacob said. He gave Alex an

understanding smile as he held the receipt out to him. The rabbit took the receipt graciously, flipping it over to look at the coupons printed on the back.

“Sweet,” Alex said. “And ten cents off a loaf of bread.” He folded the receipt and stuffed it into his pocket with a gentle snort. “Never expected to say that.” He took his bags from the bagger – only three of five of them, so he was able to manage them alone – with a slight nod and a brief “thank you” and started towards the door.

Jacob watched him walk away. It was just enough like the last time he saw the rabbit’s back to him, six years ago, just before he boarded his plane to try and make his way in some far off land that promised him affluence and happiness. He thought about that moment for the past six years of his life, though less frequently as time went on. Now, though, he felt as though he were reliving the moment for a second time. His throat closed, his stomach clenched, and his face burned, but he managed to push it all aside enough to bark out a hoarse “Have a good day!” before turning to the next customer in line.

He was about to greet her with as much forced cheer as he could muster when Alex turned back towards the stag, shifting all his bags onto one arm so he could fish through his back pocket. “Oh, and Cob!” Jacob snapped his head towards the rabbit. He held up something between his fingers that Jacob, at first, thought was a credit card. It slowly dawned on him that it was their chain’s rewards card. “Call me,” Alex said. With that, he flashed a wide, toothy grin at the stunned stag and turned on his heels, walking out of the store with the kind of spring in his step that Jacob had always remembered him for.