

Teri's Lament

A story by Terinas Tiger

Teri awoke to a pillow smacking against his face. He hissed and turned his head to one side, pulling his bedsheets up over his head. "Raah! What's-"

There was a floomphing sound as he was smacked in the head with the pillow again. He opened his eyes and thrust his hands up in front of him, trying to defend himself.

His dorm roommate, Xavier, was holding a tube pillow from his own bed and standing next to Teri's lofted bunk. Xavier was a skunk, and had a sour expression on his face, lips curled into a wide frown and his eyes narrowed. The clock next to Teri's bed read "2 pm", and the tiger sat up and scowled. "What the heck! It's saturday, Oreo Cookie! Let me sleep in-"

Xavier smacked him with a pillow again. "Nope! You're lucky I'm a merciful god and not a wrathful one. Otherwise I'd have used a bucket filled with ice water." He growled. "We covered for you. The RA on our floor is ignorant. The trash is disposed. You're not in any trouble." He swung his pillow again. Teri was still too groggy to defend himself properly. "At least not from the SCHOOL." He twitched his tail rapidly. "But you are going to tell me why the hell you spent a night drinking yourself to a point of excess. I've never even seen you express interest in alcohol before!"

Teri groaned. His head wasn't throbbing that badly. The hangover wasn't as bad as he'd have expected.. He vaguely remembered being made to drink water the night before. "It's not my favorite thing in the world, but you get a taste for it. I've.... I've had it a few times before. Just not at school. You know, you can make all sorts of tasty things by mixing it with-"

"NO." Xavier snarled, provoking Teri to scrabble towards the other side of his bed. He frowned. He wasn't comfortable with how unexpectedly aggressive his passive roommate was being. "No changing the subject. No stalling. What happened, Teri. Why did you do what you did?"

Teri just stared at him. Then, he lifted a paw up to rub at his right eye, yawning. "Can it wait until my head isn't-"

Xavier raised both his right eyebrow and his blue-striped tube pillow.

Teri threw his hands up, ears flat against his head. "Ok! Ok!" He folded his arms and huffed. "You've got a stick jammed up your butt this morning."

“Unexpected surprises like alcoholism make me cranky.” Xavier grumbled. “So, you were about to spill the beans?”

Teri closed his eyes. “If... if I have to. But if I’m spilling beans, this is gonna be the whole can. You’re hearing the long version. This isn’t just about last night. You’re getting everything.”

“Duly noted. I want to hear everything.” Xavier lowered his pillow, and then tossed it back onto his bed next to another one, exactly like it. “Go ahead.”

And so Teri gave him everything.

My name is Teri.

Last night I was a drunken ass to people who didn’t deserve it. I may have also tried to kill myself. I don’t remember a whole lot of it, but it’s the sort of thing I might have done.

I guess I should explain myself...

To begin with, my family’s Old Money. Great Grandpa wasn’t the first in our family to emigrate here, but he was the most ambitious of our family at the line. He started a Company and managed it well, and the Company looked after his family, just as he intended it would. The family grew along with the Company, and even though it ended up a publicly-traded organization, upper management remained very much a family affair.

Great Grandpa passed the business to Grandma, passing over her many sisters and brothers because he found her the most worthy. It was a hard-won victory and one not without dispute. Grandma only ever had one child because she was tired of bickering with her siblings, and she groomed her only son, my father, to be her heir so that there would be no illusions about who would be taking over for her once she had retired. Daddy dearest flourished in the strict environment he was raised in. He was a golden child, and made her proud at every possible juncture, save for one.

You can probably guess how I figure into the story now, huh?

Daddy met mom when they were both on the cusp of adulthood. He was nineteen, she was twenty. They met each other at a rock concert. He was there because friends twisted his arm into coming along. She was there as a groupie who thought daddy would look cute if he had a torn shirt. They got along about as

well as a candle dipped in gasoline and a lit match. The only picture I've seen of them both is from that concert. He keeps it on his desk in his office. He's never kept one there of me.

I don't know much else about my mother other than that she was already out of the picture in my earliest memories. Daddy won't talk about her. She might be dead, or she might have just left. I don't know her name or even if they were married at some point. My aunts and uncles never tired of implying I was a bastard, at least. I guess I've always hoped she was dead. Not because I hate her, but because... well, it would mean there probably wasn't anything personal about her not being around. That she was just dead, and not that she didn't want me in her life.

With mom out of the picture, it was just me, Daddy, and Daddy's inherited multimillion dollar company growing up. Daddy tried to raise me just like Grandma raised him. But while pressure made him into a diamond, the end product with me would end up being crushed bits of stone.

Because I was a wild child.

“-Oh no! The pampered puss was a wildcat!” Xavier rolled his eyes. “You’re being a bit dramatic, aren’t you?”

Teri hissed at him. “Hey! If I’m sorting through my dirty laundry for you, I’m going to do it fabulously! If you want a dry, boring tale, ask a historian!”

Xavier leaned on one of the metal supports of Teri’s lifted bunk bed. “Fine. Go on.”

It didn't help that he was always busy, but I doubt I'd have been much better had he been the most attentive father in the universe. Daddy wanted a son who spent his time studying. Someone who would follow orders and color within the lines. He got the kid who snuck out after bedtime to chase fireflies in the cool night air instead. The one who would test exactly what lines could be crossed without too severe a punishment.

As I said, Daddy wasn't around much. He hired a nanny for me when I was little, a lop woman. She looked after me for the first five years of my life, and I don't even remember her face. I hate that I don't. She was the closest thing I had to a mom. I do remember her name was Biyu. She was nice, and give me lots of hugs, and smelled like cinnamon. I remember liking her cooking. But the thing I remember most about her

was her children. Nanna Biyu had lots of daughters. Seven of them, though some of them may have been adopted. I don't know. They were all chinese, and bunnies with big ears, and I was too little to ask many questions. Some of my earliest memories are of playing with them when I was four and five. She'd bring some of her daughters over to play with me. Even her youngest were a year or two older than me. We had tea parties, and they had fun dressing me up in dresses and outfits. I don't know where they got the clothing. It doesn't matter... they were the closest things to siblings I ever had. I think I even called them sisters.

Dad came home from work early once to find two lop girls putting me into a pink frilly dress. He didn't take it well. The strongest memory of my big sisters was of them running in panic as he bellowed at them.

“So, like your regular Tuesday night thing, then?” Xavier smirked.

Teri folded his arms and turned up his nose. “If you're not going to take me seriously, I could just stop here and let you wonder, you know.”

“Oh no. We're doing this.” Xavier looked up at Teri. “But you do come home a lot of Tuesday nights in dresses. That's all I'm saying.”

“My friend Emma needs someone to try her seamstress creations on.” Teri pointed at himself. “Would you have her waste her talents on some boring stuffed doll?” He lowered his paw. “But I'm getting sidetracked. Anyway-”

Nanna Biyu didn't come around anymore after that. I spent my days at a fancy private kindergarten. Then a private grade school for the gifted and the rich. I'll give you two guesses which one I was, and the first one doesn't count. I think Daddy tried to compensate for being away and busy so often by planning out every detail of my life when I was younger. After grade school I had piano lessons. After piano lessons I did exercises with a personal trainer. Then tennis practice while we still had sunlight. And then meeting with tutors in the evening to help me with my homework. Then bedtime at 8:00 pm every night, with no exceptions. On weekends I went to golf practice too, for most of the morning saturday and sunday. I can't say I embraced daddy's schedule like a good little boy. I snuck away with friends sometimes. I skipped classes and tutoring sessions on occasion. But I tried to carry all the expectations hefted onto my shoulders, I really did. And as life went on and I grew up, I sort of settled into the idea of following in Daddy dearest's footsteps. The idea didn't bring me joy to consider. But it was my future, laid out before me and set in absolute stone. And I could imagine far worse fates, looking back at it. A lot of people go their entire

lives looking for purpose and never finding it...

By now you have a good idea of the sort of inevitable inertia that I grew up with. And while I may have rebelled and snuck off and probably caused my father more than a small sum of headaches, I was resigned to being his heir. By the time I entered high school I had gotten the notion in my head that if I was going to be a businessman, I might as well be the best at it. I studied hard. I worked at keeping my grades in the top tier. I went to the company events and business mixers that daddy wanted me to go to. So I could "meet the right people." I wore the mask of the Dutiful Heir so often it may as well have been my face. It was at one of those events the trouble started, in fact.

Puberty is a confusing time for everyone. I can't claim it was any better or worse for me. The first time I ever felt the pangs of physical attraction was just after a tug of war at a company event daddy as making an appearance at. My side had lost, and I was sprawled in a mud pit at the center of the field with the rest of my team. A friend of mine at the time named Danny pulled himself out of the mire and offered to help me up.

Xavier held a hand up to his muzzle and coughed. "Y-yeah. Can we not get into this?"

"I thought you wanted to hear everything, Ebony and Ivory." Teri chuckled. "Disinterested in my sexual awakening all of a sudden?"

Xavier bit his lip. "Well, it does make me feel a bit uncomfortable. Is this really relevant?"

Teri was silent for a moment. "...yes. Now if you don't mind, I'm continuing on."

The sight of that cute shirtless dalmatian, smile on his face, his shirtless white chest speckled with black dots and brown mud, holding out a paw for me... well, it kinda did it for me. My heart skipped a beat and other parts of me started throbbing to pick up the slack. I carried a torch for that boy and his pecs for nearly a year before Sally, his first girlfriend, stole him away from me. But I'm getting sidetracked.

Danny and the tingling feelings he triggered became a problem because I didn't understand what puberty was trying to tell me. I had gone through Sex Ed, but our school's version of that course only covered the mechanics. No one was there to fill in the blanks of attraction, of arousal or desire. The very idea of homosexuality wasn't in the lesson plan. So I expected to find a girl that made me all tingly inside and

never felt it. The closest thing I found to what I was expecting was from being around Danny. His smile. His laugh. His sweat-drenched bare chest after he was done working out in Gym Class. I had lady friends, but none of them made me feel like he did.

So being the curious sheltered kitty that I was, I tried to research what was happening to me. In secret, since I was confused and nervous about there being something wrong with me. There were too many books on sexuality for me to read at the library, so I turned to the internet. I discovered pornography. There are people who struggle heavily with their sexual orientation. People who try to deny being gay, or reject it and try to "fix" themselves in one of many insane ways.

For me, it felt like the most natural thing in the world.

Pornography and the internet helped me identify my own tastes far faster than months of following Danny in the throes of puppy love had. But once I figured out what I wanted, I started to notice it all around me. Before, I'd only had eyes for one person. Now I found myself scoping out other guys in the gym showers. Its a testament to exactly how sheltered and naive I was back then that when a big mountain lion jock stormed up to me asking what the hell I was staring at, I replied, quite honestly that I was looking at his butt.

I went home with a black eye and a better idea of what constituted polite social behavior that day.

"Wait, so Devon punched you in the eye for staring at his butt?" Xavier tilted his head. "That, actually seems a little extreme." He scowled. "I'd heard he got suspended for hitting another student, but I didn't know it was you."

"Well, it wasn't like I bragged about it." Teri let out a low huff of air. "Besides, while I'm not saying that I liked the violence, I wasn't exactly subtle about it. We both crossed a line. He just went farther than I did. Anyways..."

After that, I was "out" at my private high school, whether I liked it or not. People treated me differently. A lot of guys wouldn't use the gym showers if I was around. My detractors often spoke with a lisp around me, as if it were something I did that they were mocking. I got called fag and queer and a whole rainbow of more colorful slurs by anyone who had a problem with me. I never had any more physical abuse, but I got my share of weird looks. Girls seemed to either want to mine me for gossip on the other guys, or invite me on shopping trips for my opinions on things.

Ok, that last bit turned out pretty fun. But still, dark time for me in general.

I think the only reason Daddy didn't find out at this point was because of how busy he was. Most of my trainers and teachers either seemed supportive, or just didn't care. It was only my peers at school that seemed bothered by it. At least as far as I ever saw. But it seemed like it became something always present in any interactions I had with other people my own age. Even the guys I considered friends treated me with a curious sort of amiable distance, keeping me at arm's length from them. Sometimes literally. I got to a point where I found I couldn't stand it.

I wouldn't describe it as a melt down. That implies a dramatic, sudden breakdown of my sensibilities. My change was more gradual. But there was a line, and at some point I crossed it. I decided that if I was going to be treated like some kind of flaming stereotype, I was going to embrace it, and more importantly have fun with it. I let go of any embarrassment and hesitation holding me back. I started being more open about my attractions. Complimenting guys on how hot they looked. Dying my fur different colors and fussing over every minute detail of my appearance. Learning the dos and don'ts of fashion. Wearing lacy underthings and even crossdressing on occasion. Flirting with anyone who caught my fancy. It started out as a mask I wore out of spite: I acted campy and melodramatic and bubbly and cute just to give everyone what I thought they had come to expect of me. I said the things I had formerly just thought. I bought and wore women's clothes at times, just to turn heads. I cultivated a specific walk to show off my magnificent ass. Heck, a few times I used physical contact as a weapon to make the more insecure guys around me uncomfortable: Gentle caresses along the arms or shoulders. "Accidental" goosing of the bottom. And of course big friendly hugs. I won't deny I enjoyed teasing the more homophobic. I'm not always a good person. Wearing that mask allowed me an unexpected sort of freedom. I got to say the things I wanted to say and do things I never thought I could have gotten away with before. It was oddly exhilarating. Enticing. It transcended from a mere mask to a very real part of who I was, and I never even noticed.

*It was pretty much inevitable that Daddy was going to find out. But the more I let my rainbow flag fly, the less I cared about my private tutoring sessions or my weekend golf practice. When he discovered I was skipping my obligations, he actually spent some time and discovered why. I would have expected his reaction to be nothing short of meteoric: A cataclysmic collision of his wrath into the surface of my world. My confrontation with him over my sexuality would have been more interesting that way, certainly. Instead, my father called me into his private chambers, just the two of us. I'll remember that day always. I had the disquieting experience of walking across the room up towards his desk. The shades were drawn, the only source of light from rows of lit candles. Daddy always had an atrocious sense of interior design. He told me quite frankly that he did not approve of my **activities**. However, he also made it clear that he did not consider it his responsibility to **fix me**. If you are picking up on the disdain in my voice, then you're imagining the exact tone I heard from him. My daddy told me that he did not choose to curtail what I did behind closed doors, however if I did anything that could harm his reputation, or the reputation of the business, then I would be denied any support from him or his household. It was at that moment specifically*

that any doubt was extinguished in my mind: I had strayed from walking his path, and my father saw me as an obligation, nothing more.

“Um.” Xavier coughed.

Teri turned to face him, blue eyes locking with green. “...Do you have something to say, Xavier?”

“What, no nickname this time?” Xavier gave a weak smile.

“Not feeling it.” Teri tightened his grip on his blankets.

“You... you know there’s nothing that needs to be... fixed... about you, right?” Xavier looked away. “Your dad was full of it.”

“...thank you, Xavier. That’s a really kind thing to say.” Teri reached over and patted the skunk’s shoulder.

“Look, just keep going, ok?” Xavier bit his lip. “I’ll be quiet until the end. I promise.”

As you may have expected, I didn’t take it well. The two of us had a discussion. The sort of discussion that contains numbers of exclamation marks, growling, and baring of fangs. But I did change my ways. I lived in his house and ate his food. At the time, I could not fathom an existence without Daddy’s support, and thus I had to go along with his rules. There was no way I could believably hide my orientation at school. But... I downplayed it somewhat.. I could not, at the time, consider a life without Daddy’s financial support. The rest of my Junior Year passed fairly quietly. I laid low, tried to avoid incurring Daddy’s displeasure, and even got a cushy summer job working at a country club that daddy was a member of. That’s where I met him.

Samson was a grey squirrel in the same grade I was at the private high school I attended. To my knowledge, he was the only other gay boy in my class. He played chess on a national level. In his spare time liked these really nerdy strategy games I still don’t understand. He rarely smiled, but when he did, I remember it making the room brighter. He liked to dance. We had that in common. He’d never really blipped on my radar, since he kept to himself. It wasn’t until we began working alongside each other at the country club I did that I ever really started to get to know him. He was a very reserved individual, more inclined to listen than to talk, more inclined to look before he lept. But that doesn’t mean he was shy. He made the first move, slipping an invitation to a date into my coat pocket one day while we were working,

printed on rainbow-pattern cardstock, with his number on it. I thought it was creative at the time, so I texted him back an agreement. I didn't know him very well, but the gesture roused my curiosity enough to want to learn.

Looking back on our courtship, he and I didn't really have a lot in common. Had I not spent my whole life growing up in enclosed social bubbles, shielded from the masses of people I didn't yet know were just like me, we may never have dated as long as we did. But that's the thing. At the time, he was the only person like me that I had a chance to really get to know. Maybe there was a sort of fatalistic sort of romantic inertia that pushed us together. Or maybe I was just desperate for some romantic companionship, and he was the person who could easiest provide it for me. Regardless of why, we did manage to hit it off. We weren't always a perfect couple, but we were quite DEFINITELY a cute one. I was out, and he wasn't. So at school, we tended to get into some silly situations, and garner some awkward looks. I think his sexuality became the worst-kept secret at the school while we were together.

I could sugarcoat it and say he was my "first". But that's not entirely true. I'd lost my virginity a few months after I'd discovered I was gay. I wish there was some sweet story to it, but there isn't. I was young, adventurous, and stupid, so I set up a "one night stand" with some guy I met over a classified advertisement website who wanted to top a guy. We never contacted each other or spoke again, and I'm not sure if he was even really into it, much as my ego would want him to have been. I mean, I am a choice piece of ass, by most standards! But I never heard from him again. At the time, that was how I wanted it. And then there were some guys in my school who questioned their own sexuality enough to ask the token gay guy in the class to suck their cock for them. I also had a few dates with older guys who I met on a dating website, but- Ok, the point is I wasn't a virgin when I started dating Samson. If I get distracted talking about my wild sexual escapades back during my high school years we'll be here all day. I was a bit of a slut, I won't deny it. The important thing is I was safe about it and didn't get any diseases or anything from it.

But he was still my "first" in the sense of a legitimate relationship with someone. Before Samson, most of my friskier activities felt almost shameful. Degrading. Things you did behind closed doors and never talked about around others. Samson was my first real "partner" in a romantic or even a literal sense. He was sweet, although I always had a feeling there was a part of himself he kept walled away from everyone. Even me. But I didn't care. When I held his hand, it felt right. When he held me in his arms, I felt warm and peaceful and happy. And he knew tricks that surprised and aroused me. Things I had to learn. Things which make me more awesome now. We were friends and lovers. But... you know how the first time you experience something, it can feel very intense? For a while, an entire school year, Samson was my everything. I don't say that lightly. When we were getting along, we were lovey-dovey and affectionate. When we were fighting, I was morose and grouchy and anxious. We had to keep a lid on things to keep my father's wrath away and because he was still in the closet, but even the densest person at school saw us as really close friends. I'll even confess there was a time when I was planning out a life with him. We were going to go to the same University, get majors that complimented each other, and then face the world

together. I daydreamed about taking over my father's corporation someday, with him at my side. I'm not sure how serious he was about me, but he certainly seemed willing to share that dream with me.

When graduation came around, we both planned on telling our families about each other. He was going to come out to his parents, and tell them about me. I was going to tell my father about him, and do my best to make it clear how serious we were about each other. It was a good plan, but it didn't happen. Because, two weeks before graduation, a police officer caught us making love in the backseat of Samson's car in the woods at night. We spent an awkward night waiting for our parents to show up at the police station, but I never saw a courtroom. Money was thrown around and that was the last I heard of it. I think it helped that neither of us were old enough to be tried as adults yet. I'm still not actually sure if there's any crimes on my record or if somehow Daddy and Samson's parents just made the problem go away. But it didn't go away. Not for me. The legal issues never made themselves present, but I had to deal with the fury of a parent who was both disappointed and angry at a son who had caused him nothing but headaches. My father had made it clear before what would happen if I dishonored our name. And, you know, he's never been the type to make idle threats. I was told, quite clearly, that he was cutting me off. No money to go to University. No further support. After graduation, I was being kicked out to the street on my ass.

That is, to say, unless I promised to cease my "deviant behavior" and apologized for causing the problems I had caused.

I can't say I took it well. I can't say he took it well either. Maybe if heads had been more level. Maybe if I had been a bit less reckless. Maybe Daddy just saw my mom in me and hated me on instinct for it. I can't say I ever understood the old man. I'll spare you the details of the fight. He gave me until the day I got my High School Diploma to make arrangements for myself and then I was no longer his concern. Looking back, I can't help but wonder if he was giving me a chance to get on my knees and beg for forgiveness... not that it would have mattered. I was angry and distraught. But I knew who I could turn to. That was when I made my second biggest mistake and called Samson to tell him what was wrong. I thought I could depend on him. We had plans, we were going to make something of ourselves together. I didn't know how I could afford to go to the same elite university as him now, but that just meant we were going to work something else out, right? Samson seemed to take it as well as he could. His parents seemed to take it better than Daddy did. But though he acted like he wasn't bothered by the news that I wasn't following him to the same school, it must have bothered him more than I knew. I don't think I would have seen it even if he had let me, though. I needed him to be my rock. I was scrambling to find some sort of future for myself, even just to keep a roof over my head for a few days after school ended. I needed him to be strong with me. For the next few weeks, I thought I'd still come to live in the same town as him as he went to University...

The day we graduated, he broke up with me. He said I needed to figure out what I was doing with my life, and he didn't want to do a long distance relationship. He didn't want me to follow him. He didn't want me depending on him. I'm not afraid to admit that I cried. Long and hard. The last night I spent under Daddy's roof was the worst night of my life. That evening, Daddy came to my door. He asked me if I had

reconsidered at all. Especially considering what had just happened. He asked me to simply agree to his terms. But I'm his son, with his temper and his damnable pride. I don't break easily. Even when, you know, it might have been wiser to. I left home the next morning with as much of my stuff as I could comfortably carry. I didn't know where I was going.

I'll skip over the next part, if you don't mind. My last summer before college wasn't that interesting anyway. I sponged off friends and distant family. I did a few things I don't like thinking about. Gained a few stories I don't want to tell to any hypothetical grandkids. As I said, Daddy's boy was a wild child. But while it wasn't quite me at my most fabulous, I didn't just make a sloppy mess of my life, either. I found the time to apply for student loans. To apply for state University. I tried to pull myself together as much as I could. And that's when I came to campus, found out that I was rooming with an old acquaintance from my school (The universe has a sense of humor, I suppose) and met that hunky husky, Kristoph. I was making my own life. And it wasn't perfect, but you know, it was mine. I was happy. I started to feel a bit more like my old self again.

Kristoph was so determined to come out to his family over Family Day. It left a sour taste in my mouth. I was worried about what they might do. But how could I tell him that? He only recently accepted he was gay in the first place, and he's a worrier. How could I fill his heart with more doubts than he already had? So I held my tongue. If things went badly, I was going to be there for him. I wasn't going to be like Samson. But I was worried too. And I kept my distance, because I didn't want his family to think he went gay just because of someone who seduced him or something silly like that. I was content to spend Family Day wishing him luck from afar, studying and hanging out at my dorm room. It wasn't like I was expecting anyone to come visit me.

Daddy knocked on my door during the early evening. I didn't even know he knew where I lived. He wasn't smiling. I guess there wasn't any reason for him to. He wanted to know if I was doing anything for dinner. I should have just said no. Shut the door on his face. Told him to fuck off, at the very least. But after nearly a year, I had so many conflicting feelings. I said yes. I knew I was going to regret it, but I said yes. He picked a fancy restaurant, and I had absolutely NO time to prepare for it. I wish I had a chance to at least have shopped for a fancy dress. At least it could have given me a bit more confidence. But instead I had to wear the one formal outfit I'd taken with me from his house. The formal suit that Daddy had custom tailored for me on my seventeenth birthday. I hated keeping it, but you know... never know when you may need a suit. I can't bear to throw away sexy clothes.

The meal itself was awkward. We made small talk over drinks and pretended we could stand each other. Then, once we had placed orders and the waiter had meandered away, I asked him why he had come. Was this some attempt at reconciliation? Or was he simply curious as to how I possibly lived without him?

His response was quite candid. He was remarrying, and his future wife was already with child.

I waited for some explanation. Some clarification. There was none. That was it. No acknowledgement of our prior issues. No attempt at reconciliation. He certainly wasn't inviting me back home. Just a simple statement of fact that he could have delivered by mail, or from a call over a frigging phone. I'll admit I didn't ask him why he was telling me this. I wasn't really in a mood to try and understand anything. Seeing Daddy already stirred up memories and feelings I thought I had put behind me. And he went to all the trouble to find me, just to ignore those old wounds we'd inflicted on each other once he did? At the time, the message seemed clear: "You are no longer needed. Goodbye."

So I told him off. I forced the issue and we got into a huge fight. Over his being there, over his treatment of me, over all the differences of opinion we had had over the years. Looking back, maybe it was the wrong thing to do. Maybe he had thought that me having a little sibling would be something I'd be happy about. Maybe it was an attempt to find some sort of neutral ground, a foundation where an understanding could be built off of. But I'm his son, with his temper and his damnable pride. I had too much of a negative history with him to just forget it all right there. Whatever his intentions, good or bad, it turned into a big fight. I didn't even stay for the main course. I was angry and frustrated and I felt horrible about the whole visit. In just a few hours Daddy had made me feel broken again, just because I wasn't the son he wanted.

I just wanted to stop thinking about my life. To forget all about everything, even for a little while.

I shouldn't have gone to the grocery store. I don't drink often, but I have had more experience with booze than I'll ever willingly admit. I just wanted all the things that made me feel like shit to go away. At the time, I figured being buzzed would be the next best thing. It was a bad reason to go buy alcohol. I'm not stupid. And I actually lost my nerve when I got to the aisle. I wasn't going to buy beer. I wasn't going to buy rum. I wasn't going to buy vodka or whisky or whatever I saw on sale that I could waste my loan dollars on. But I still felt horrible. I left the cart with alcohol where I had filled it. I couldn't do it. Instead, I went to a closed bathroom to cry my eyes out and get it out of my system.

I never expected Kristoph to knock on the door. Of all the people to show concern. Of all the worst possible times! How could I tell him what had happened? If he had any idea of what had happened to me, he'd chicken out about coming out. He'd back out of it and he'd regret it immediately after. I was certain about that. Kristoph was a worrier, after all. I couldn't let my bad experience poison his own experience. At the time, I didn't know he'd already gone and told his family.

So I pulled myself together, as best as I could. I'd worn masks for my whole high school life. What was the harm in wearing one more? I worked the Teri charm and set his mind at ease. I was the self-assured, affectionate, friendly best friend. With benefits. I mean, I kinda needed to blow off some stress, and he was a wonderful outlet for an orgasm. One quickie in a bathroom later, and I almost felt ok. When Kristoph told me his good news I tried to be happy for him. I really, truly did. But I'd just had a new reminder of old

wounds. His experience, his family, was practically a best case scenario. Compared to my own issues with my family, anyway. I wanted what he had. It didn't feel fair! And it turned my stomach that part of me even felt like that. That part of me was that petty, that ugly, that horrible to someone so kind and gentle. I didn't want Kristoph to see me being anything less than a good, dear friend. I just wanted to stop feeling broken, and ugly, and horrible. So I invented an excuse to get away.

I went back to my shopping cart of alcohol. By fake id and loaned money, I bought myself a night where I could just stop feeling. It was what I needed, right?

So I cried and drank until I couldn't cry or drink anymore. For a few fleeting moments I forgot why I felt so wrong in the first place. And then I said some horrible, terrible things to someone who didn't deserve it. And I got a bruise on my face for it, and lost a friend who might have become something more. Almost ruined my life again, save for the mercies of two guys who owed me nothing.

"The end." Teri said, his eyes closed, his expression dejected.

Xavier's face was blank. "Wow." He folded his arms and flopped back against his chair, letting his tail curl around the top of it. "That story really does explain a bit." He looked over at Teri's bunk, letting his gaze rest on Teri's eyes. "So, what are you going to do now? About, you know, Kristoph and your dad and stuff."

Teri turned his head down and bit his lip. "I don't know what I'm gonna do."

A moment of silence passed between the two of them. "Now if you'll excuse me." Teri turned his head towards the door and sniffed at his fur. "I stink of vomit and cheap rum and it is simply NOT a fabulous scent for me." He moved for the door to the room. "I am simply overdue for a shower."

"Hey." Xavier's voice was low and quiet, and provoked Teri to turn around and look at him. His head was dipped and his paws were quietly folded into each other. "Look, whatever happens between you and Kristoph... you shouldn't have to handle all your problems alone, you know?" He walked forward and put his right paw on Teri's shoulder. "I didn't know what was going on before. But I don't want you to hurt yourself like that, ok? If you ever feel that shitty... well, just talk to me, ok? I can at least listen."

Teri felt his face getting a bit hot. "Um... Xavier... t-thanks."

"Oh no, don't thank me." Xavier glared at him. "Because if I see you doing something stupid like drinking yourself into a coward's grave again, I'm going to be the one to kick your ass and make you clean up your act. Got it? I'm keeping you away from that stuff until I can trust you."

"You're gonna kick my ass?" Teri stuck his tongue out. "Why Mister Barcode! But you're as scrawny as I am!" He smiled. "I think if we fought, it'd be some kind of sissy slap fight."

"Yeah yeah... stick with the nicknames. Let's call that healthy for you." Xavier turned and trudged back to his desk. "Go shower, ok? You're right, you stink."

The skunk sat down and opened a text book as Teri left. He waited several minutes before announcing. "Ok, you can come out now."

A closet door opened and Kristoph, his snowy fur and black t-shirt caked in dust, stepped out of it. He sneezed, then wiped dustbunnies off his shoulders. "Geeze, you could try cleaning your closet once in a while, man."

"That's not important right now." Xavier waved a paw at him. "So what do you think?"

Kristoph rubbed his chin. "About Teri? It's... wow. I had no idea. He would never talk about his family around me. I still feel like I need time to think about it, you know?"

Xavier nodded. "I went to school with him, and all I really remember was him getting kind of depressed towards the end of senior year. I knew he and Samson were a thing for a while, but I just thought they lost interest in each other. I mean, high school romances come and go, you know?"

"Wouldn't know." Kristoph folded his arms. "Never had one."

"Ah. That's probably for the best. They're usually nasty, awkward, and short." Xavier turned a page. "Kinda surprised you thought of this. Pretty sneaky. Didn't think you had it in you."

Kristoph grinned and wagged his tail. "I have a little sister. We used to spy on each other all the time." He chuckled. "And, well, I don't really feel comfortable about it, but I wasn't sure that Teri would be willing to say all that if I was here. But I really needed to hear him say how he really felt. Thanks, Xavier."

"Hey, I owed you one anyway." Xavier nodded at Kristoph. "And, after last night, we're friends, right?"

"Right." Kristoph nodded.

The skunk closed his chemistry textbook and sighed. "So what are you gonna do now about the Teri thing?"

Kristoph folded his arms and stared out the window. "I don't know what I'm gonna do." He felt his ears drooping. "I just felt like I needed to know. What was going on with Teri, I mean." Kristoph rubbed under his