

Part 13: A Night to Remember: Xavier

I had just settled in for a night of studying when I heard a firm knock on the front door.

And by “settled in”, I meant I’d gotten COMFORTABLE. I was burrowed under a pile of blankets on the couch, with a footrest pulled up next to it to read my accounting textbook on. I had a fresh mug of steaming hot cocoa on a coaster on the floor. My head was sunken enough into a pillow that I was making a deep impression in it. My long, black, striped tail had nestled between two back cushions on the couch. My two flatmates were out for the night, having finally worked up the courage to go on a date together after months of this ridiculously sophomoric “will we or won’t we?” mating dance. For once, there was no chance of distractions to keep me from the task at hand. No interruptions to muscle through and try to ignore. I had become an object at rest, and I intended to stay at rest.

Which, given how my life goes, meant it was more or less inevitable that someone was going to knock on the front door. I don’t know why I even bothered getting comfortable. I gave them a moment or two to lose interest. Conclude that no one was there and move on. Teri or Kristoph, my erstwhile roommates, would have just unlocked the door. If they lacked the key, they’d have just called my cell phone. Anyone else I knew would have also called my cell phone (which was idle on the floor next to the footrest). There was, logically speaking, almost a zero percent chance anyone I’d care to interact was was rapping on my door. Best to let them tire themselves out and leave.

But they kept pounding away. There was almost a desperation to the sound. This was not a light, gentle tapping. It was the frantic beating of someone fleeing something terrifying right behind them. And it just. Wouldn’t. Stop!

With a heavy sigh, I pushed the blankets off of my body, my fuzzy pajama pants chilling at the cool air of the apartment. “There’d better be a damn good reason for this...” My voice was a low, distinct rumble. Footpaws shoved into slippers, I trudged towards the front door. Anyone waiting outside had better not care that I wasn’t properly dressed. I already barely cared about this at all. I certainly didn’t care enough to make myself presentable for it.

There was a loud thud on the front door as I drew near. I watched it shake on its hinges. The knocking stopped. My eyes were wide. “U-um... ok...” my gruff demeanor was fading as I began to feel the situation growing dangerously close to a horror movie premise. All of a sudden I missed having roommates around. With a quivering paw, I reached out to grip the knob of the door. For a moment, I hesitated. Debated going back to my couch and my books. Then, I found my courage, twisting the handle and yanking the door inward. There was nothing surprising behind that door. I had to keep telling myself that.

My eyes went wide when a gray, fuzzy body leaning up in front of the door fell inward, sprawling along the entryway, practically limp.

“Sampson?!?” My old high school classmate was prone on my floor. “Oh holy geeze!” I couldn’t tell if he was moving. Couldn’t tell if he was BREATHING. At least I didn’t see any blood on his clothes. “What the actual F-“

To my immediate relief, he stirred, turning one head to the side. “I-is Teri around...?” There was a slur to his mumbled speech. There was mud clinging to his face fur. His tail looked bedraggled. It wasn’t raining outside, so how’d he get so wet? He stank of rum and probably body odor, not that I was trying to keep track. “Gotta talk t’him.” Putting his paws on the carpet, he pushed himself up off the ground.

“The heck... you’ve seen better days, huh man?” I helped him up to a standing position. “Well, at least you’re alive.” That news didn’t make me feel much better. Throwing my arms up in frustration, I turned to walk back down the hall. “I’m getting you a glass of water before we talk about anything. Why the heck do I keep having to take care of drunk, depressed gay guys?!? I swear, am I cursed or something? Is there some PHEROMONE I’m putting out or something !?!”

Samson followed me, staggering a little. Whatever was eating at him, he wasn’t entirely lucid. “C’mon man. Where’s Teri...?”

Whirling around, I glared daggers at my unwanted houseguest. “He’s OUT, Queenstone. On a date. With Kristoph.” I watched the gray squirrel deflate a bit with every tidbit I added to that statement. Yanking the handle on the sink a bit more forcefully than I would have liked, I started filling up a glass of water. “And unless you think you can barge in and seduce him with how drunk and pathetic you are right now, I doubt your presence would be something he’d appreciate.”

The squirrel collapsed into one of the chairs around the kitchen table. “Fuck.” He buried his head in his front paws, slumping over against the table. “This was such a terrible idea. Fuck. I don’t know what I was even trying to accomplish here. I just- I-” He groaned.

Taking a seat down next to him, I bit my lower lip. “Samson.” I wanted to throw him out and continue studying. I was angry. Why was he even here. Why hadn’t he called and just found out Teri was busy. Why did I have to deal with this. There was a lot of reasons why I could be grouchy. Giving him a forced grin, I tried my best not to follow my instinct to snarl. “Do. You. Want. To. Talk. About. It?” I was, admittedly, talking through gritted teeth. I wanted to kick him out, sure. But that didn’t mean I wasn’t concerned. The two urges battled through my mind. But eventually, concern won out.

The squirrel paused. He ran a paw through his hair, pushing bangs back out of his eyes. “Y-yeah.” He coughed. “Yeah, I do.”

I sighed. “Well, Samson... It looks like we’re going to play pool.”

“What?” He looked over at me, raising an eyebrow. “Huh? Why pool?”

I fidgeted in my chair. “We play pool. That’s a manly, bonding thing that two guys who are both men but ‘just friends’ do when they need an excuse to talk, right?”

Samson scoffed at me, lifting his arms to either side in a shrug. He groaned. “I don’t know? Maybe?” His voice seemed tense with confusion.

I winced, as a revelation hit me. “Samson.” I let a pause fill the air between us. “Have either of us ever had to do anything remotely resembling ‘male bonding’ with someone we haven’t wanted to have sexual congress with?” My fingers were kneading my temples as I felt a headache coming on.

As if we’d rehearsed the moment, both Samson and I looked away from each other. I wasn’t able to look him in the eye. Another awkward silence later, he turned back to me. “You-y’live with that Kristoph guy, haven’t you ever?”

The inquiry made me think back to a certain hot oil massage. “You’d, uh, have every reason to think that, wouldn’t you.”

He raised an eyebrow at me. “Wait, you’re saying you’ve wanted to bone hi-”

“What I’m SAYING is that we’re going to play pool now and get some PLATONIC bonding time in!” I shot up from my chair, raising a hand and doing my best imitation of my stripey roommate. “To the pool hall! Without any further elaboration on anything I may or may not have said!” I led him out the door, towards a car ride of awkward silence.

Eight Ball Bar and Tables was a bar with delusions of being a restaurant, and a hall with somewhere between ten and twenty open coin-operated billiards tables. The atmosphere was smokey, the lighting dim and hazy, and the interior of the place depended on the color brown just a bit too much for my tastes. We took seats at a small bar table near a pool table, and a smiling waitress offered to bring us drinks and food while we shot a round.

“Beer.” Samson raised a fake ID up, pressing it between two fingers.

My paw pressed that ID down to the table. “He’ll have a cola.” I narrowed his eyes and glared at him. “As will I.” I waited until the waitress waddled off, before I looked over at him. “Is there a reason you’re so intent on being soused tonight? Because I drove us here. I can leave you here if you’re going to be so insistent on breaking the law.”

The gray squirrel scowled. "Need t'keep my courage up 'til Teri comes back t'night. If I puss out on this tonight and lose my nerve, I may never-"

I was rolling my eyes midway through the sounds coming out of his mouth. "Oh my god Samson, what secret are you so intent on spilling to Teri? You know whatever it is, it's Teri. Of the three of us, he's the one who rolls with the punches best. He and I fight all the time. He'll snark at you and it'll be water under the bridge."

Samson just hung his head, shaking it slowly. "It's private."

"Come on." I put a hand forward along the table, reaching out to him. "Whatever it is, it's eating away at you." I heaved a sigh, my tail curling around the table. "I've known you both for a few years now, if tangentially. Maybe my perspective can help."

He was quiet. "Y'really wanna know?"

"Yes." I nodded my head, with a stoic expression. "Do your worst, Queenstone."

And then he told me.

And I immediately regretted it.

"Ooooh-kay." I stood up, my spine rigid. "Let's-let's play some pool." I went over to the billiards table, putting some coins into the slot to release the table. I will admit that I needed a distraction all of a sudden.

The inebriated gray bastard just smirked at me from the small table. "Told you that you didn't want to know."

I shot him a withering glare. "Ok! You were absolutely right! So let's do something to take our minds off of that." He got up, slowly, wobbling, and sauntered over to the table. With a shaky hand, he tried to grab a poolstick and missed, getting it on the second try. As I racked up the balls, he leaned on the felt of the table. I watched him for a moment, rubbing my temples to try and styme a headache.

He started aiming for the white ball, scratching on his first try and missing the ball entirely. On his second try, however, he sent the white ball flying straight into the triangle of balls.

"How are you so calm about this?!?" I finally let myself vent, throwing my hands up in the air as the balls bounced kinetically around on the table.

He just watched as the four ball went into the corner pocket, sinking away into darkness right in front of him. "B'cause for me it's old news. I already had time t'make my peace about it." His

speech was slurred and he wobbled as he stood up to his full height. Leaning against a wooden pillar, he waved a hand to me. "Your turn, Xav."

I took a moment to wonder what was up with the gay men in my life and nicknames. "Yeah, but..." I bent over and started aiming at a striped ball. "This isn't exactly a LITTLE thing, Samson!" My pool cue smacked into the striped ball, the ball hitting another ball and causing more collisions, plunging the board into chaos. "There's levels of transgressions. This is so far past 'insulted your wardrobe' that the light from 'insulted your wardrobe' would take a month to reach it."

Samson watched the balls bouncing. "Y-yeah." He aimed his pool cue towards a solid color ball. "Fuck, I shouldn't be doing this drunk."

"No, you shouldn't." I sighed, watching several balls plunging into holes. "Really, I don't know why you thought a drunken confession was a good idea in the first place." The waitress brought our colas as we continued played.

A few minutes later, Samson stumbled over to our table and slumped over, burying his head in his hands. "... I can't do this tonight. I'd fuck it up. I-I'd fuck it up sooo badly." He was breathing heavily as I approached. "A-again."

Watching this man gradually collapse into self hate, his arms trembling, tugged on my heart strings a little bit. I put a paw on his shoulder. "Go home, Samson. I'll pay for a cab. Get a good night's sleep and think about how to do this properly."

He looked up at me, his eyes bloodshot. "Are-are you going to tell Teri about this night?"

I would have brought up that question if he hadn't. It was the responsible thing to do. "That's up to you, Samson." I gazed down at him. "If you haven't told him about what's going on, I'll tell him, and then you have a confrontation to NOT look forward to." I pointed at him. "And you can bet that if I'm the one telling him this, I won't be delicate about it. You said you were worrying about having the nerve to tell him about this stuff. I'm denying you that option. You either armor up your balls, be a man, and tell him or I do it for you." There was a slightly vindictive streak to my ultimatum. It was the right thing to do, but it was also his price for interrupting my nice, leisurely night.

"That's fair." I heard him slur.

Nodding, I walked over and took my seat. "Good. Now finish your soda, and we'll finish up our game. There's only one more ball on the table after I sunk the white one."

Samson made loud slurping noises. "Hey Xav."

“Yes?” I tilted my head as I stared at him.

He gestured over to the pool table. “Do you actually know how t’play pool? ‘Cause I don’t.”

I began to bite my lower lip. “I was sort of assuming you’d tell me if I broke any rules.”

Samson heaved a sigh. “Tonight’d be a pretty shitty first date.”

“Yeah, it would.” I smirked and rolled my eyes. “Good thing you’re drunk and I’m not interested.” I wasn’t leaving any ambiguity there.

He chuckled as he finished his soda. “Memorable as fuck, though.” Standing up, he wobbled.

“Yeah, it would be.” I stood up, bending down a bit. “Come on. I can spare a shoulder. Let’s get you home.” I helped him outside, making sure he got in the taxi cab and that it was charged to my credit card. And, after watching them drive away, I stopped to stare up at the stars in the night sky. Heaving a sigh, I patted my chest. “Ah, what fools we mortals be.”

I was not looking forward to the fallout from this Night To Remember...