

Hooves of Clay

By Lupine

Any resemblance to real-life or other fictional characters is coincidental. This was written on the basis of almost no research whatsoever- in the case of inaccuracies or misrepresentation the author apologises to Scandinavians, Basketball Fans, South Africans and those of an Equine or Giraffic persuasion (in no particular order), and then everyone else just in case. Especially unicorns.

The figure slowly ascended the escalator in the mall's central atrium, rising into full view of the mezzanine level. It took quite some time. Stepping off the escalator he hesitated and looked around, obviously unsure of his next move.

"Hey, buddy, quit blocking the view!"

People had started to pile up behind him. He abruptly sidestepped with the curious grace of the long-legged, and gave a wordless part-bow of apology. Bowing, it turns out, is something that giraffes do especially eloquently. It earned him a derisive snort from the complainer but no more, and a couple of second glances from others right behind, but people for the most part were utterly happy to dismiss him from their minds, even though a giraffe wasn't someone you saw every day. Now safely out of everyone's way, the figure minutely adjusted the wrap-around sunglasses on his long nose and from behind them swept the mezzanine with his gaze. You might have expected him to be looking for a designer outfitter to match the obviously classy visionware he sported, or even possibly the local Big n' Tall outlet (next floor up on the right, can't miss it), but after a few moments he rather surprisingly made for an obscure little bakery set off to one side. He'd passed several more popular establishments on the ground floor, some having expanded to occupy several units they were so prosperous. There was even a central café franchise on this floor he could have patronised. But the giraffe seemed set in his decision, foolish as it might be.

Well, almost. He hesitated en route, as though examining his choice of destination more critically before finally committing himself. He saw a business that took up a single glass-fronded commercial unit. The exceptionally grand double doors that comprised much of it stood open, flanked by a couple of dwarf pines in tubs. Incongruously, the large wooden sign

hanging above the entrance was an irregular, weathered piece of timber half-way between driftwood and a splintered part of the hull of a wrecked longboat. Burned across it in plain-if-uneven (and somewhat sooty) lettering was the bald statement:

‘VALHALLA’

The only involvement any professional sign-writer might have had in its preparation would be if the original wooden object had been broken over his head during a Viking raid. In far more conventional lettering, stencilled neatly across the surrounding windows, was the added legend ‘Artisan Nordic Bakers’. (Beneath *that* was the addition: ‘Big Eaters Welcome’.) It was hard to know which of these signs to trust- the Baker or the Berserker. Wood reigned over the shop’s interior, which was Scandinavian chic to the point of being vaguely menacing- all spotlights and planed ash floorboards. It smelled of beeswax, warm bread and coffee. A few small tables sat around the floor like scatter-cushions, a couple of them occupied. Across the middle of the bakery lay an enormous slate-topped counter piled high with wares for sale, savoury on the left, sweet on the right. It was remarkably high, almost like a wall in itself. To the right a chiller unit stocked unusual-looking food products, clearly Scandinavian in origin. More slates hung on the walls as rudimentary blackboards, prices chalked in a decidedly runic script. A radio was playing distantly in the kitchen, well-disguised behind a discreet partition with saloon doors. Surprisingly, it was tuned to a local station that seemed cheerfully up-beat, with no sagas, sea-shanties or death-metal in evidence. Not even Abba.

Behind the counter stood a polar bear wearing the *de rigueur* artisanal monogrammed black T-shirt and striped apron, a neatly-bound forked beard and an eye-patch. He was forcibly separating a set of freshly-baked buns with could only be described as a hatchet, because everyone knows you don’t use a war-axe in a bakery. His dense, solidly muscular frame flexed with each blow, and he was handling the utensil (definitely not a weapon) with obvious competence. He looked like a Viking who had smartened himself up and entered the Great Scandinavian Bake-Off. One who played to win. The glittering implement paused as the bear’s one eye caught sight of the newcomer hesitating in the doorway. He gave a small snort of amusement, obviously finding comedy value in a giraffe in dark glasses trying to sneak into a polar-bear’s bakery. Even with the higher-than-average entrance to the shop, he

had to duck his head low under the lintel, and nearly concussed himself on the basketball hoop he found unexpectedly fixed to the inside wall it above.

“Hallo.” The bear’s tone was gruff and not entirely enthusiastic, but polite enough. “Can I be getting you something, or you want to browse, ok?” The words were clear, but the accent and diction thick enough to place it firmly as his second language.

“Actually, I’m looking for someone,” the giraffe replied with a hopeful smile as he stepped up to the counter, his own accent cultured, but tinted with a remaining trace of Afrikaans. He dropped the zip-up sports bag he was carrying at his feet. His voice often took people by surprise- not as low as you might expect from such a deep larynx, but with a husking, musical hollow quality like some large woodwind instrument. “Is Caart here?”

“Is me,” the bear replied shortly, returning his attention to the board as he resumed chopping, the blade whacking expertly down again, *thunk-thunk*, “Kürt.”

“Uhh, no. Sorry.” The giraffe demurred, looking mildly fazed at this development. “Ca-art,” he repeated, stressing the vowel. The bear’s hatchet paused, and he placed it neatly on the counter before giving this customer his undivided attention. At eight feet two inches tall, he found himself in the highly unusual position of having to actually look *up* to address someone. As the silence lengthened uncomfortably, the giraffe leaned his neck forward and his glasses slipped down slightly, letting the world glimpse unexpectedly blue eyes behind his blonde lashes. “He’s, uhh... an old friend of mine,” he explained as he distractedly re-seated his shades.

“You know him, huh?” the bear replied evenly. Rather surprisingly, he then folded his arms and cocked his head sceptically.

“Look, is he here or not?” the giraffe eventually asked somewhat testily, non-plussed by the bear’s studiously unhelpful response. He jerked his thumb at the hoop he’d almost collided with. “I know he co-owns this place. Please, can you kindly tell him I’m here, or at least give him a message when he gets back?”

The bear regarded him thoughtfully, taking in the expensive glasses, the well-fitting short-sleeved shirt (obviously custom tailored to fit such a profoundly non-standard neck), the jeans cinched around the trim waist by a plain belt, the blazing-white sports-shoes beneath them, the well-developed musculature of the arms, the broad shoulders (sitting up at around the 7’5 mark), the Adam’s apple and the yard of neck above that, the horns with the baseball cap jammed incongruously between them, and the glossy white-blonde hair sticking out from

under it. Down his neck the blonde hair continued in a neatly-cropped mane, left just long enough to curl at the edge, like a wave starting to break.

“Name?” He asked, finally.

“Huh?” the giraffe, wrong-footed, just blinked at him.

“You give me your name?” the bear explained, patiently, his experience with customer service coming to the fore.

“Uh...” this prospect didn’t appear to have occurred to the visitor, and it seemed to trouble him. He glanced briefly behind him at the customers, then leaned closer and strove to lower his voice without it being blatantly obvious. “Look, I’d, umm... rather not say.” The bear raised a deadpan eyebrow.

“Is *embarrassing* name?” The giraffe, who was learning the rules of this little game fast, just looked at him, and waited. The bear eventually shrugged, turned and opened a hatch.

“Caart?!” he bellowed, “Is crazy-weird tall guy with no name who wants to talk to you!” The giraffe’s expression suggested that he objected to this unfair summary of their conversation so far. The bear shot him a cold, one-eyed glance, and pointed a claw-tipped finger. He had picked up the hatchet again. “*You* wait.”

The giraffe waited.

A half-dozen heartbeats later the saloon doors swung open and a horse backed out, bent over a wide tray of freshly-baked delicacies, followed by an intensely sugary aroma that immediately filled the bakery. The giraffe could see how the saloon doors might be a trial for some, with one door swinging shut on them as they struggled to push back the other. He could imagine himself frequently kicking them open to aid access. This guy wasn’t having any such trouble. Most horses are naturally well-endowed in the derriere department. In *this* case, he wasn’t so much well-endowed as over-loaded. Clad in a faded grey pair of sweatpants that were definitely not part of the corporate uniform, that tremendous tush was large enough to swing both doors wide as he came through, and so extremely well-padded he probably wouldn’t even notice if they were to slam shut on it.

The horse straightened up and, turning with exaggerated care, placed the tray on the slate counter, then pulled the oven gloves off and dusted down his hands. He looked extremely pleased with himself. The polar bear glanced at him, looking unimpressed with this

dexterity. The giraffe was trying not to goggle at the horse's stomach, which had made this feat much more challenging than it would have been otherwise.

There was almost nothing to choose between the bruin and the equine, height-wise, and that made him a BIG horse. With both of them behind the counter it now looked decidedly cramped. The horse wore a black t-shirt similar to the bear's, except for the word 'TRAINEE' stencilled across the chest. The lettering was stretched and wrinkled where the material now pulled against the bulk of his chest. It was safe to say that the horse had almost outgrown his uniform- in fact it almost looked fit to pop off of him. He could no longer get away with calling himself just 'sturdy' or 'husky'- assuming he'd ever wanted to. Whereas the bear's black t-shirt was moderately figure-hugging all over because of his burly physique, the equine's XXL version was figure-hugging because of that great big gut of his, a good, wide handful of which bulged out beneath the tautly-stretched hem, just below the dent where the navel could be deduced. It looked like monstrous water-balloon, but thanks to his great height it was slightly stretched upwards, not quite spherical. Not yet. Each step made that stupendous stomach jiggle slightly, and the t-shirt was slowly wrinkling as it rode further up. Absent-mindedly the horse tugged it back down, in the casual manner that suggested this had to be done every few minutes. The apron tied on over it looked more like an ornament than a serious attempt at covering that swollen expanse, and where the apron vanished behind him, the apron strings were sinking into doughy flesh that bulged out over them. The exposed material was patterned in places with floury hand-prints. Similarly tight around his capacious chest, the t-shirt seemed to be taking the place of a bra, which he certainly merited on size, whilst his neck- already quite short and thick thanks to his North Swedish/Shire-horse heritage, now even thicker thanks to a generous padding of excess horseflesh- had long since stretched the neck-line into shapelessness.

In short: he looked a complete hayball, the kind of overfed, pie-munching chunk you'd probably *expect* to find cluttering up a bakery, unlike his atavistic colleague. But then you had to mentally scale him up to his full height, and then you got a real impression of how... outsized he truly was. The giraffe knew that black was supposed to be slimming, but it was fighting an uphill battle here, much like the t-shirt itself. Besides, the horse's entire pelt was shades of black, shadow-black across his body, whilst his mane and tail were a glossy, pitch darkness-black. It was longer than the giraffe remembered, still thick but no longer as

rigorously coiffed, instead bordering on downright *shaggy*, tied back from his face in a make-shift pony-tail of loosely coiling tresses.

Baked goods successfully deposited, the hugely hefty horse finally turned towards him, expression polite but neutral. The face was plumper, *much* plumper but, the giraffe realised with a strange jolt in his sternum, still immediately recognisable. Especially those thunderstorm-grey eyes.

“Ok, where’s this crazy-wei...” the horse tailed off as he registered the giraffe standing a little self-consciously in front of the counter, and then he really *stared*, his amiable smile falling as his jaw hung slack in prize-winning astonishment. Both of them seemed stunned by the encounter.

“...Zane?” Caart finally asked, in disbelief. Then a wide, pumpkin-like grin of glee slowly split his face in two, creasing the chubby cheeks either side of his broad snout. “ZANE!!” Roaring in delight, the horse grabbed the edge of the counter and, for a dangerous moment, appeared to be about to try to vault over it, then changed his mind and squeezed around instead. His stomach dragged along the slate whilst his bulging behind squashed and scraped against the wall. Behind the oversized counter the stallion could have been mistaken for a more average height- in front of it he looked positively super-sized. He launched himself at the giraffe and flung his arms around him in a wildly enthusiastic bear-hug. “Zane Alekai!” he exclaimed again, laughing. Wheezing, the giraffe flinched at the volume- a couple of customers had looked up rather sharply- but couldn’t help the infectious grin he felt stretching his cheek muscles. Suddenly he didn’t care about spectators. Caart pulled back and held him at arms’ length, still apparently unable to believe his eyes. “Damnit, man, it’s... it’s great to see you! But what... what are you *doing*-?”

“Hey, you did say to look you up if I was ever in the neighbourhood,” Zane said, finding himself laughing too.

“Yeah but... you could have *warned* me, or something!” Zane shrugged- another impressive gesture on a giraffe- and held his hands out from his sides laconically.

“Surpriiiiise...”

Caart snorted back another whinnying laugh, then subjected Zane to another inspection.

“Damnit, you’ve not changed a bit!”

“Heh, well, it’s only been... what...”

“Two years, eight months,” Caart calculated, in a tone of wonderment. “Whoa, *now* I feel old.”

“And you, man, you’re looking...” Zane faltered as he looked the horse up and down.

“Fat?” Caart said archly, stepping back and holding out his arms a little.

“No! Uhh, w-well...” Zane spluttered, acutely aware that his face was going red- the markings on his cheeks glowed mortifyingly whenever he blushed. He shrugged and, scratching beneath his cap, said weakly, “So uhh... wow, you really stuck with it, huh?”

“Uh-huh,” Caart nodded, grinning evilly, then caught the polar bear’s eye and turned towards him. “Man, I’ve got to introduce you to my partner in crime. Zane, this is Kürt Isbjørn. Kürt, this is-”

“I hear,” Kürt interrupted, not noticeably any more enthusiastic now that the giraffe’s *bona fides* had been established. Zane tentatively reached out a hand and it was shaken in a large, slightly floury predatory paw, although without any noticeable warmth on either side.

“That’s an... interesting name. You’re from... uhh...” Zane hesitated uncertainly, running up against the limits of his geography, which tended to get lost somewhere in Southern Europe. ‘Scandinavia-land’ probably wasn’t acceptable in present company. “...Norway?” he guessed.

“Svalbard.” Kürt’s finger stabbed towards the door, and following it Zane saw, in place of the ubiquitous Giants poster, an unfamiliar flag affixed next to the basketball hoop.

“Everyone get that wrong,” the bear commented evenly, apparently without rancour.

Still grinning buoyantly, Caart threw an enthusiastic, if plump, arm over Zane’s shoulder, making the giraffe stumble and list over as he took some of the stallion’s considerable weight.

“Zane and me crossed paths a lot back in the day, we’re old... well...”

“Friends?” Zane interjected, rubbing his sore neck.

“Yeah, of course *that*,” Caart snorted, “and... comrades...” He seemed to be groping for the precisely correct term for their relationship. “...Rivals.”

“Friends, just on different sides,” Zane corrected, more gently. Caart whickered with laughter and shook his mane briefly.

“Filthy pacifist.” He thumped Zane proprietorially on the back. “I haven’t seen this guy since-”

“I hear that too.”

“Yeah, well, I guess we kind of lost touch, but, wow man, here you *are*!” Caart’s grin widened. “I can’t get my head round it, seeing you again. Are you in town for long?”
“Well, only a couple of d-oof!”

Zane didn’t get any further than that, as he was unexpectedly elbowed in his lower ribcage. He stumbled aside, and someone else suddenly materialised in front of the horse.

“Clay! *Finally*! Great to see you again! Or, at least, it would be if there weren’t so *much* of you these days!” The stranger was a rangy lion, dressed-down in a shirt and slacks and wearing a vehemently patterned tie. At a little over six foot, he probably thought he stood out in a crowd but, sadly, in this company he looked downright puny. “Now listen, you have *got* to hear the deal I’ve worked out for you! The Quakes are *definitely* still interested in you, now that Emmanuel Tauro is bucking for a move to the Minoans...”

Zane blinked as a bewildering flood of sports gossip was unleashed, a vast torrent of possible transfer deals, benefits packages and grand alliances that threatened to reshape the face of the All-Species Basketball Confederation as the world knew it. It went on for *minutes*. Kürt’s good eye began to narrow impatiently. Caart, meanwhile, leaned back comfortably against the counter-front, a look of serene indifference on his rotund face. His height meant that the leading edge of the counter wedged in just beneath his side, supporting it where it bulged over the waistband of his sweatpants, whilst beneath it his backside pressed and spread widely against the supporting wood. As the onslaught continued, without looking he reached back, picked something from one of the piles of baked goods behind him, and began munching with the stolid indifference that only a horse can muster. His jaw worked rhythmically in a circular motion, heavy, plump cheeks jiggling a little with each slow chew, whilst the tyre of excess jowl-flesh that formed his second chin bunched and cushioned against the thicker folds of his throat.

“...And the Quakes will sign the contract *immediately* as a show of good faith!” The lion finally seemed to run out of steam. He took a deep breath. “All you’ve got to do-”
“D’you see this?” Caart interrupted, pressing a hand against his stomach.
“Geeze, do I ever.” To Zane’s shock and embarrassment, the lion smacked a hand against Caart’s stomach and wobbled it. “I swear, you’ve blown up more every time I set eyes on

you. You've really, really got to cut down on that muck before you *burst*—”

“*Muck?*” Kürt growled ominously. The lion did a double-take.

“I was talking to the Champ, not you.”

“I meant the apron,” Caart said, with a kind of weary patience. “I’m a *baker* now, Phil. I quit the game, and I’m not ever going back. I’m out to grass, and boy, do I *love* the grazing.”

He took another sticky bite to emphasise his point, then said indistinctly through his mouthful. “I. Quit. Why can’t you get that?” He swallowed. “I’m a big, *fat* quitter.”

“Is not ‘muck’, is authentic cloudberry *bakverk*! You not find better *anywhere*!”

“Oh, come on,” the lion said dismissively. He jabbed a finger at the hoop over the doorway.

“*That* tells me that that’s just not true.” The horse shrugged his plump shoulders.

“It was going spare, and it’s more fun than a waste-paper basket. *And* it’s great for dunking time-wasters.”

“Ha, good one! Seriously, this is an amazing deal, your big chance for the comeback of the *century*! But it’s not gonna last forever! The Quakes are only prepared to wait six months.

But that’s probably enough time to sweat that oversized butt of yours back down to some kind of size, if we start right away and you *really* push it—”

“Are you going to buy anything?” Caart asked the lion suddenly.

“Huh?”

“Buy. Anything.” Caart repeated slowly, an edge developing to his voice. “Only you’ve been in here about thirteen times now and you’ve never bought a single thing. Not even a coffee. This is a business. *My* business. And time is money.”

“Of course I’m not buying anything! I’m offering *yo*—”

“Out.” Caart said.

“He never buy anything ever,” Kürt agreed, cracking his knuckles and smiling (or at least baring his teeth) in a deeply unsettling manner. Sarcasm dripped acidly off his next comment. “He not want *muck*.”

“Huh?”

“I want you to leave. Now. And don’t come back. I don’t want your offer, and I don’t want to ever see you ever again, *short-arse*.” Caart took a step forward. He seemed to grow slightly as he did so. His nostrils flared. “*Nobody* tells *me* to go on a *diet*!”

“*That’s* the spirit! See, I knew you still had it buried under there somewhere! All you need is to show a little of that old Hørssten Hellfire on court and in no time *fat* you’ll be back in the major-*URK*!”

This last wasn't some arcane circle of basketball lore, but rather because a hand had descended onto the lion's shirt collar from above and hoisted him off the floor. He was slowly twisted round until he was left staring up into the giraffe's mirrored sunglasses. The big guy had been standing with his neck canted forward, but was now drawn up to his full height. The tips of his horns brushed the ceiling. The lion suddenly discovered how intimidating a giraffe can be, up-close and personal.

"I don't think you heard him," he told the dangling lion quietly. "He said 'no'."

"Who... who the hell do you think you are?" the lion spluttered as his tie threatened to asphyxiate him. Then he froze, and his eyes widened in shocked recognition. "No... no way," he gasped out, staring wide-eyed from horse to giraffe and back. "*You?!?*" The giraffe's ears twitched, but his expression remained unreadable behind those glasses. "B-but the Cougars and the All-Stars *hate* each other! Seriously? Th-they wouldn't want to si-eeeeeeengh..." He was cut off in a strangled gargle as the giraffe lifted him even higher without apparent effort, to look at him face-to-face.

"Caart's not playing any more. And you must be mistaking me for somebody else." He glanced at Valhalla's owners, who were both watching the show with amusement.

"The hoop's open." Caart commented off-handedly. The giraffe turned and walked the few steps down the bakery, dangling the lion as he would a particularly noxious bag of rubbish he was taking to the bin. He hesitated at the hoop, obviously tempted...

"Not regulation height," he grunted. Instead he leaned outside and simply dropped the lion to the marble.

From about five and a half feet up.

"OOF!"

The lion stood up shakily, dusting himself off and frantically trying to un-knot his throat-constricting tie. The giraffe stood across the entrance, arms folded across his broad chest, scowling down at the lion. He glowered impotently, then looked past him.

"This was your last chance, Fatso!" he spat spitefully. "You just blew it, *bigtime!* Try getting back into the game without this deal! You think anyone else is gonna want to sign a sad, *fat* loser like you? Well, think again!" He sighed theatrically to the world at large. "What a *waste!*"

He made to storm off, but a large, dappled arm blocked his way. Suddenly the giraffe was looming right over him. The lion near-cowered in his shadow.

“Let me tell you something,” the giraffe said in a low voice. “You know *jack all* about top-flight basketball. Manny’s not going *anywhere* until he sorts out his score average and quits panicking whenever things get tough. And the Quakes *suck!*” he called after the feline as he scarpered like a scalded cat, still limping.

Zane turned, and blushed as he found himself under intense scrutiny from everyone in the bakery, owners and customers alike.

“Uh, sorry about that, folks,” he said, gesturing vaguely in apology. He paced back to the counter, trying to act as though nothing had just happened.

“My hero,” Caart smirked laconically, still leaning back on the counter. Kürt had already returned to stoically chopping bread.

The giraffe grinned weakly, and rubbed the spot where he’d been elbowed.

“I hate being fouled.” Caart snorted in amusement, his thick lips pursing. “Does that, uhh... happen a lot?” Zane asked, scratching the back of his head.

“Not so much, nowadays.”

“Who was that? A wannabe agent or something?” This time, Caart didn’t quite meet his eye.

“...An ex.” The horse admitted, eventually. He shrugged.

“...Oh.”

A rather awkward silence fell for a couple of moments, during which Caart reached for a second pastry.

“Y’know, we really ought to celebra-oww!” Almost without looking Kürt reached over with a large wooden implement of uncertain functionality- possibly a primitive meat tenderiser- and whacked it down hard on Caart’s weighty hand.

“We have deal. You eat, but it come from *your* profits. And only five percent max!” The stout stallion drew his smarting hand back, but was still clutching his prize. Grinning triumphantly, he stuffed the end of it in his snout and tore it off with gusto.

“Glmph... ha, gonna have to hit harder than *that*, tough-guy,” Caart smirked around his mouthful.

“I hit much harder and I break *bones*.” The polar bear sighed, then produced a piece of slate from under the counter and chalked an extra tally mark onto it. He turned the slate over.

“Humph. Average already up to seven point five this month. You eat too much.” He brandished the slate. Caart just grinned at him, and finished his stolen snack.

“Hey, c’mon, think of it as good advertising. We make such great stuff I just can’t keep my hands off of it.”

His culinary contraband inhaled, the black-furred horse sucked buttery pastry flakes and dark, oozing jam off his chubby fingers, obviously savouring each and every morsel he encountered. He caught Zane watching him do this and his ears wilted a little sheepishly, but it didn’t stop him. The giraffe smiled, a little uncertainly.

“Whoa, no wonder you’re so, umm...” he looked lost for an adequate description, “...shapely.”

“I’m *fat*, man.” Caart corrected him with a knowing grin. “It’s an easy word to say, y’know.”

“He not ‘fat’,” Kürt interrupted suddenly, still chopping, “Was ‘fat’ one year ago. He *huge*. He look overdue, with *twins*.” Zane looked uncomfortable, and the big-bellied horse let loose a whinny of laughter.

“And that makes you their other pappa, huh?” Kürt just scowled at him, then tapped the slate and pointed at a glass bottle behind him labelled ‘Shrinkage’.

“You owe for last pastry. In greed-jar.” The giraffe stifled a cough- the bear’s attitude to names seemed refreshingly direct.

“Yeah, yeah, in a minute.” A sudden thought apparently struck the horse, and he gave Zane a sideways glance, his broad forehead furrowing. “*You* haven’t come to try to talk me back into the game, have you?”

“What? No!” The giraffe backed away a step. He raised his hands in mock-surrender. “I’m just here to see my friend.” He smiled.

The horse deflated slightly, and gave him a relieved grin.

“Damn, it *is* good to see you. How long did you say you were here?”

“Eh, I fly back tomorrow.” Zane shrugged ruefully and spread his hands out. “Sorry man, it was all the time-out I could get. You know how it is.”

“Yeah. Ok,” To Zane’s surprise, the heavyweight horse began to struggle out of his apron.

“So we’d better make the most of it. Kürt? Do me a favour and hold the fort this afternoon? *Please?*” he added, seeing the bear’s expression. He gestured meaningfully at Zane.

“Fort-holding I do,” Kürt grunted eventually, after a long, unhelpful pause. Then he pointed at the horse with his hatchet, possibly for emphasis, possibly as a threat. “But need you here tomorrow by 9am at *latest*, ok? Busy day, much work to do, no time for *chit-chat*.” He

pronounced the term as if it were a particularly repugnant abomination from one of the weirder religious sects.

“Slave-driver,” Caart commented amiably. He grinned at the startled giraffe. “Meet you outside in a second, and I’ll give you the tour. But first, let’s get lunch!”

* * *

When Caart reappeared outside Valhalla he’d changed out of his work togs. These new clothes were good quality, but for all that they didn’t fit all that much better- this T-shirt covered more of his stomach, but a small black slice still peeked out from under it when he moved or gestured too exuberantly. The T-shirt was electric orange in colour. It wasn’t exactly inconspicuous- it *hurt* if you looked at it too long. Even in the wide open space of the mezzanine, it made the stupendous stallion look somehow bigger than his almost 8 feet of height. Zane found himself having trouble reconciling this bulging beast with the honed, driven athlete he’d once competed against. Every time he clapped eyes on him he got a shock, still half-expecting to see the ‘old’ Caart. The hugely hefty horse caught him staring, and grinned unrepentantly.

“Like the duds? I had to trade up a size recently.” The giraffe blinked in a way that might have indicated approval. “C’mon, there’s a good place to eat down in the mall- and they do decent portions.” As they walked Caart glanced up at and caught Zane surreptitiously pulling his cap lower on his head and making sure his sunglasses were in place. He snorted in amusement and a few steps later he commented, “Y’know, you are really, really *bad* at this.” “Huh?” the giraffe replied guilty, “At what?” The horse snorted again.

“Disguise, big guy.”

“Hey!” Zane protested, flushing at the thought of his motives being so transparent. He glanced around and leaned his head down closer. “I don’t want *everyone* around here knowing who I am.”

“Well then, you shouldn’t be such a star basketball player then, should you, Poster-Boy?” his friend commented unsympathetically. The giraffe flushed modestly.

“Nah. That’s Leon’s job. Point Guard takes the limelight up front, Center hangs back. You know the drill.”

“Guess you still manage to stand out,” Caart replied with a smile that dimpled his plump cheeks.

“And just what did I get wrong, anyway?”

“For starters? The cap.” Caart grinned up at him.

“What’s wrong with that? I don’t normally wear one.” To Zane’s surprise and annoyance, the horse snorted and bit his lip in suppressed laughter, his shoulders shaking. “*What?*” Caart lowered his voice, trying not to giggle.

“It’s an All-Stars cap, man. Just take a look around.” Zane’s hand flew to his head and he glanced around surreptitiously. His eyes tracked from shopper to shopper, hopping across those with bare heads. Ok, but the All-Stars didn’t have a monopoly on white with blue trim, and he’d definitely picked one that didn’t have the logo on it. You saw caps like this being worn... everywhere...

“Oh, *crud*,” he commented quietly, but vehemently. Caart snorted and had to stuff a fist in his mouth to stop the laughter as he tried to break the news gently.

“This is the Giants’ hometown, man.” And true enough, everywhere he looked, the giraffe spotted green, green, green. Caps, shirts, even replica tops in the Giants’ team colours were *everywhere*, relieved only by an occasional blue supporter of the Orcas, their decidedly poor relations.

Zane stood for a moment, rubbing the back of his neck in embarrassment, then grinned weakly down at his friend.

“You’re right, man. I really suck at this kind of thing.” The horse took some pity on him.

“Don’t worry- at least you aren’t wearing a name-badge reading ‘I’m an All-Star’. Besides, no-one’s going to be expecting to see you *here*, right?” Caart grinned back at the giraffe as he took the lead into the crowd. “Hate to break it to you, buddy, but off-court we’re not as easy to recognise as you think.”

“Speak for yourself,” Zane muttered as he strove to catch up. The press of bodies suddenly thickened as he turned the corner, but he found it extremely easy to keep track of the horse as he forged ahead confidently. Not just from his bulk- the giraffe did spot a few animals almost his equal in width- but from his *height*, which left him usually head and shoulders above the surrounding crowd, if not more. Luckily most people got out of Zane’s way automatically, but he was slowed up some by having to keep an eye on where he was putting his hooves, in case he stepped on anything fragile, like another pedestrian.

“What’re you grinning at?” Caart asked good-naturedly when the giraffe had caught him up. Together they cleared a path easily through the surrounding shoppers. They must almost

look like they were from another planet- giants, even. Ha ha. A few people did double-takes as they passed, but Zane had got very good at ignoring stares over the years. So had Caart apparently, even from the ones who blatantly regarded his swollen frame with appalled disgust. Then they often glanced incredulously at Zane, as if wondering what the hell they were doing together.

“I don’t do crowds too often these days,” the giraffe murmured against the background hubbub, “I forget just how *short* most people are.”

“Speak for yourself: I’m standing next to *you*, remember, big guy? I’d forgotten what it’s like to have to keep looking *up*.” The horse grinned and nudged him in the chest. “You were the only person on the court who ever made me feel *small*.” Zane smiled a little.

“I wonder what they’d say if they realised who we were?”

“I’d be fine,” Caart stated mildly. “I’m a has-been these days.” He snickered. “*You* could be stuck for three hours signing autographs and being asked whether this means you’re signing for the Giants.”

“Uh... right. Look, can we stop? I really, *really* need to buy a new hat.”

A few minutes later they were sitting down to lunch at one of the local food franchises, Zane feeling much more relaxed in his camouflage as a Giants fan. Caart was sitting across the table. He grinned.

“Oh, man, if anyone posts a photo of you wearing *that*, you’ll be thrown off the squad.”

Zane’s legs were stretched out under the table, mingling with his friend’s- it was that or have his knees knocking into his elbows as he ate. One of the drawbacks of being at the top-end of the zoological height spectrum was that most furniture was designed for people at least three feet shorter than he was- not counting his neck. The pre-formed wood-laminate seat he was sitting in almost felt it was designed for a child. Caart was in a similar boat (or chair), although he seemingly sat even lower, quite possibly because the chair-legs were buckling beneath the load. It had let out such a creak when the horse sat down that Zane had seriously expected it to collapse with a SNAP of wood and rending aluminium. It had survived impact but still barely looked sufficient to support him, his shorts-straining backside bulging generously over the seat on both sides as he sat with a beer bottle in front of him. Light beer, with a slice of lime in the top. Zane kept being assailed by conflicting impressions. It was the same voice- deeper and brassier than his own, that whickering rumble when he started speaking- the same lightning-quick grin, but he just couldn’t picture the Caart ‘Clay-Hoofed’

Hørssten of his memory lounging there so comfortably, so... relaxed. He'd always seemed on edge, ready to strike at a moment's notice.

For that matter, he couldn't imagine him ordering the eye-popping quantity of food he just had.

The giraffe sipped his sparkling mineral water, and shrugged.

"Nah. I'd be fine."

"Really?" Caart snorted in surprise. "I'd have thought your press manager would go ape."

"So?" The giraffe gave him a small smile. "The worst they'd probably do is bench me for a while the next couple of games. Not when my sub is 'Butterfins' Selachii, and we're eight points behind..." Zane stopped suddenly, and coughed. "Ahem. Sorry, man." He shrugged, and gave the horse a rueful grin. "I guess you really don't want to be bored with that old stuff. Been there, done that, right?"

"Yup. Team politics. More vicious than the game itself." They clinked bottles in salute, and drank. Caart's chair gave another doleful creeeeeak as he leaned back, taking a big swig. Zane winced at the sound, then blushed when he caught the horse staring at him over his bottle, cheeks swollen out with a mouthful of beer. He swallowed it, and smirked.

"They're tougher than they look, don't worry. I've not had one break under me yet. But I guess there's always a first time." He winked. "If my butt gets much bigger I'll probably need to sit on *two* chairs, huh?"

"It's not *that* big, man," Zane found himself saying, then looked uncomfortable when Caart whinnied in laughter.

"Oh, man." He leaned forward with another protesting squeak of furniture, his expression teasing. That was something else Zane couldn't really imagine the old Caart doing. "I'm going to get you to call me fat by the end of the day, even if I have to break the furniture to prove it. I mean, I *am* fat, right?" To illustrate his point, he put a hand to either side of his stomach and set it jiggling up and down through the stretched fabric of the t-shirt. It bounced against his plump knees. Zane hadn't really thought that knees *could* look plump, before now. He realised he was staring, and looked away hurriedly. The horse whickered in amusement. "C'mon, aren't I big enough to count as a fat guy?"

"Well, uh... you're certainly looking pretty famine-resistant." The giraffe grinned weakly. The horse sat back again, chuckling.

“Always the gentleman. Even out on court. Sorry man. It’s just... good to see you again. And to talk. Really talk.”

Zane found himself blurting out something he’d been determined not to mention, or at least not just yet.

“So, uhh... you know I read that interview you gave, just after you left.” His throat suddenly felt dry and scratchy, and he took a gulp of fizzy water. “That was... really brave of you to open up like that.”

“Mmm.” Caart shrugged noncommittally, taking another swig of beer.

“Seriously. I think you made some people stop and take a long, hard look at themselves.”

The horse shrugged again, then smiled at the giraffe with one half of his mouth, making that cheek crease and bulge.

“Yeah, I guess. Thanks, I appreciate that. It just... feels like a long time ago for me, now. A lot of stuff’s happened to me since.” He snorted with laughter. “A lot of *me*’s happened since.” He grinned and patted one side of his paunch. Zane chuckled along.

“Yeah, I guess....”

At that moment the food arrived, and they tucked in. Zane had ordered the summer salad. Caart, well... what *hadn’t* he ordered?

“You uh... can sure pack it away these days, huh?” the giraffe joked. It had almost been an educational experience watching Caart eat... well, like a horse. Zane still had some of his salad left after 20 minutes. Meanwhile five plates sat empty in front of Caart- starter, large main course, a smaller main course and a couple of sides- and now he was on dessert, which Zane had skipped. There hadn’t been any conversation as such, because there hadn’t been an instant where the horse wasn’t in the act of chewing, swallowing or putting more food in his mouth. Zane was amazed- You couldn’t even say he was pigging out, it was too methodical and efficient for that, too *focussed*. He even noticed that a couple of people at surrounding tables kept glancing their way. But maybe that was just his imagination. The big, black, bloated stallion grinned, unabashed when he caught Zane watching him. He wiped his lips clean whilst his thick double chin jiggled. It was this that had prompted the giraffe to comment, to spare his own blushes.

“Heh, yeah, I loooove my food these days, big guy.” He paused to down another large spoonful of chocolate mousse. He rolled his eyes as he swallowed, a small shiver rippling

through him. “*Especially* dessert. If I’d really known what I was missing out on all those years, I’d have kissed goodbye to the Game a lot earlier. And my waist.”

“Are you going to have seconds of that, too?” Zane teased impulsively- it seemed only fair he got *some* retaliation in. Caart paused and looked up at him, mid-chew, then swallowed and smiled, eyes sparkling behind those plump cheeks in a way that Zane recognised from the old days as *game on*.

“I can if you want.”

“Sooo, uh... how’s business been?” Zane took a hurried swig of water, and nearly squirted it out of his nose by accident when he then choked on it. To be fair, Caart did his best not to snigger too openly as Zane wiped his running, stinging nose with a paper napkin.

“It’s going great, thanks.”

“So you’re not always assaulted by obnoxious loud-mouths?” Caart laughed briefly.

“On a good day, no.”

“Do you get much hassle?”

“Nah,” Dessert finished, the horse neatly clinked the cutlery down into his bowl. “To start with we got local reporters turning up wanting to write about me a lot. I guess I could have said no, but hey, it was free advertising. They made quite a thing about my weight back then.” He patted his stomach absent-mindedly. “Not so much now.”

“Really?” Zane asked, intrigued despite his reticence.

“I think they thought it was a joke at first, or a publicity stunt. Then, well... I guess I got too big for it to be funny anymore.” He snorted in amusement and drained the last of his beer.

“Well, the joke’s on them. Besides, I’m not even yesterday’s news nowadays. I don’t bump up circulation.” He smiled, slightly evilly. “They’ve got *you* for that.”

“Yeah, thanks.” Zane shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “And... Kürt?”

“What about him?”

“Do you guys... get on ok?”

“Sure! Kürt’s great.” He whickered in amusement at Zane’s expression. “He’s a little... gruff, yeah. He finds my whole ‘past’ thing annoying, and he’s been trying to teach me to bake professionally, which I can tell you has *not* been easy for him. Plus there’s... well,” he patted his stomach again, which was starting to hang out from under his t-shirt. “This whole issue. He just doesn’t get it.” Caart let out another snort of mirth. “Hell, he probably thinks I’m completely nuts. But like he said, we have a deal. We’re both getting what we want out of it.”

Zane nodded, and sipped his water thoughtfully.

“I don’t think he liked me.”

“Hey, c’mon, that was nothing personal. It’s just...” the horse shrugged apologetically, “I’ve had a few bad experiences with people who just turn up unexpectedly saying they want to talk to me. Kürt gets... prickly about it. Like I said, he doesn’t like me having a Past. Bad for business, he says. I can’t really blame him - I guess having me as a partner has put a lot of unwanted stuff on his plate. You two’ll be fine now.”

The giraffe nodded again, gazing off into the middle distance.

“Good. For a moment, I thought I was going to have to prove I knew you by describing that basketball tattoo on your right butt-cheek.”

Diners looked round as the horse nearly exploded with laughter. In the end he had to wipe his eyes with a napkin, shaking his head and still giggling.

“Hah! Hee hee hee... Aw, man. When did I ever show you *that*?” Despite himself, Zane blushed again.

“Uh... I think you were more of an exhibitionist in the changing-rooms than you realise.”

Caart snorted again, and tried to keep a straight face, although it was obviously not easy.

“Ehe... I think I must have been compensating for my deep-seated insecurities, or something.

I hope it didn’t put you off your food.” Caart then blinked, returning to the here and now.

He stared at Zane’s plate as if seeing it for the first time. “Is that *all* you’re having?

Seriously?”

“Uh, sorry man.” Zane inexplicably felt the need to apologise for not having eaten two people’s worth of food. “Dinner’s more my thing, and I had breakfast on the trip over.”

“They haven’t got you on a diet or anything, have they?” Caart asked, glancing pointedly at the giraffe’s taut torso. “Seriously, you really don’t need it.” His eyes unfocused slightly.

“Oh man, memories: training during the Championships really *bit*.” Zane shook his head, his expression surprisingly grim.

“I don’t let them tell me what to eat any more.” In fact, the dressing on this salad would probably have had the All-Star’s dietician tearing her pigtails out. Tough.

He realised his old friend was watching him closely. Caart held his gaze for an uncomfortably long moment, then shrugged and said simply.

“So, you seen anything of the town yet?” Zane shook his head, glad of the change of topic.

“Nope, not really.”

“Then we’d better get going- you want to see more of this place than just a shopping mall!

Oof...” His chair squealed deafeningly along the marble as he pushed it back from the table, his considerable weight still pressing down on it. Absolutely nobody missed their exit, unless they were stone deaf. And blind. Zane pulled his cap down even lower and hurriedly picked up his bag.

“Lead the way.”

* * *

Outside of the mall’s air conditioning the sunshine was hot and sticky. Zane stretched his neck and arms comfortably, basking in the pleasant warmth.

“Will you stop looking so happy, you... *African*? It’s baking out here,” the horse complained. He was keeping to the cooler midday shadows along the side of the street whilst Zane stood in full daylight, but the giraffe could see that his plump neck was already beading with sweat around his thick mane. “What?” he said suspiciously as Zane stifled a grin.

“*Baking*.”

“Oh, har har.”

“It always this warm around here?” Zane asked as he followed Caart’s lead. The giraffe’s long legs made his gait almost languid. In contrast, the stallion’s weight-gain had given his swaggering stride a solid, lumbering quality. Definitely not a waddle, but not too far off, either. Together with his long spine, this conspired to make his rotund rear look low-slung, despite the length of his legs. It didn’t help that with each hoof-fall his bulging backside wobbled noticeably.

“It gets cooler in the winter,” Caart replied, huffing slightly. “It *can* snow, but you don’t depend on it.”

“Where exactly are we heading?”

“The Metro station,” Caart replied, even as it came into view. “If you think I’m slogging all over town on hoof in this heat you’re nuts.” From his station behind, Zane looked down at the horse, then looked away, smiling.

“Fair enough.”

Fortunately the first train that came along wasn't too full, and they managed to squeeze in alongside the other passengers- squeeze being the operative word in Caart's case.

"Scuse me. Sorry, don't mind me. Mmph, pardon..." He seemed to have a set routine for working his way in past the doors, moving slowly and unhurriedly but with a kind of unstoppable momentum, sliding past people like an iceberg nudging ocean-going liners out of its way. Zane slipped in after him, his own issue mostly being the lack of height. Caart's ears were jammed flat against the ceiling- the giraffe was wedged in alongside him, neck practically folded back along itself.

"C'mon doofus, don't be a masochist. Sit down." The heavyweight horse gestured to a free seat across from where he was standing. A quick scan of the seats showed that none of them stood a chance of comfortably containing Caart's bulging bottom. When Zane tentatively pointed at a pair of unoccupied seats further along, the horse grimaced, shook his head and mouthed what looked like 'wedgie'. Zane didn't enquire further, but sank gratefully into his seat before the crick in his neck got too bad, his bag across his knees.

Caart stood with his back to the carriage wall, chubby legs akimbo, staring absently into space whilst casually gripping one of the ceiling straps that most shorter folk had to dislocate their shoulders to reach. Sitting across from him, Zane was pretty much left staring right at the horse's massive midriff. As the carriage picked up speed it bobbed and bounced a heartbeat behind the movements of the train, a motion which the giraffe started to find almost hypnotic. It was dawning on him that he'd spent as long as he could remember nearly exclusively in the company of athletes, and he really didn't have any experience of interacting with anyone... well... this overweight. Along with his sizeable stomach and backside, Zane was surprised at just how thick and round the horse's limbs had grown. Damn, those thighs! They were bobbing and jiggling with the movement of the train too. He looked like he had water-balloons stuffed into the legs of his cargo shorts. His once immaculately-groomed ankles now sprouted copious hoof-fluff, too. It made his soup-plate sized hooves look even larger, and his legs even stockier.

But- from this viewing angle- his overfed belly was his most eye-catching aspect, sticking out into the compartment and creasing slightly up the middle with each bounce and jug the trundling train inflicted on it. It had the elastic consistency of dough, but with more resilience, somehow retaining its mostly round shape as it jiggled around. Caart's t-shirt- now somewhat sweaty in patches- gradually rode up as the trip progressed, a bigger and

bigger slice of bulging, shadow-black fuzz jutting out over the waistband of his shorts. The horse seemed oblivious to the show he was inadvertently putting on, or just so used to it that he couldn't be bothered to pull his top back down. Zane found himself watching its progress with fascination as it grew closer and closer to exposing the horse's navel, until he mentally slapped himself and took a determined interest in the carriage's advertising instead. He could do with offers for new phones, horn-bleaching products, premature fur-loss treatment or hoof-trimmers about now...

He blinked as an apparently endless wall of green-on-green swum into focus, along with the symbol of a huge figure looming over a landscape of far punier ones. He glanced further along the carriage, then to either side, only to find exactly the same pattern repeated. Whoa. Almost every single advertisement slot was taken up in one form or another by the Giants. Ok, good PR was one thing, but this was *ridiculous*. Tugging his sunglasses down furtively for a better view, Zane glanced up over them and found himself meeting Caart's eye. The horse nodded surreptitiously around the carriage. And, once again, now Zane looked, a lot of the passengers were wearing something that identified them as fans of the local Big Team: caps, T-shirts, shoes, bags... some had even dyed their hair green. And here *they* were, a Cougar and an All-Star, giants incognito amongst a horde of Giants. If only they knew...

Caart stifled a snort, and began to smile. Zane felt himself grin sheepishly in reply. Almost before they realised it they were both holding in guffaws of helpless laughter, like naughty school-kids on a field trip. A bunch of their fellow-passengers gave them disapproving glares, which only made it worse.

When the train slowed up and a particular station sign appeared, they looked at each other and rose to get off without having to exchange a word. It read grandly:

'The Cave': Home of the Giants

Beneath this in smaller font, another waggish sign cheerfully scrawled:

Basement swimming pool sub-let to the Orcas!

They stood in front of the stepped entrance to the stadium's training centre, looking up at it.

“Kind of small.” Caart commented eventually. “It’s not a patch on the Cat’s Lair.” Zane had been thinking similar thoughts about Sunken City, the All-Stars’ home stadium.

“Hey, it’s... got charm. We’re just spoiled.” He looked up at the entrance, then glanced at the horse, and couldn’t resist a grin. “Shall we sneak in and take a look? For Old Times’ sake?” Caart shrugged good-humouredly.

“Sure.” They began the ascent.

“You, uh, keep up with the game at all, these days?”

“Nah,” Caart replied, body wobbling as his hooves thumped heavily on mock-marble. He shrugged labouredly, “I used to watch a couple of games on TV, but... I guess I didn’t see any point- nothing for *me* there, now.” Zane paused as they reached the top of the stairs, and gave him a thoughtful look. He glanced around and lowered his voice.

“You sure you’re really ok about this, Caart? I don’t want to push you into anyth-.”

“Aw, c’mon man, lighten up! You’re making me sound like some kind of mental case.” The vastly overweight equine thumped the giraffe playfully on the shoulder blade. “It’s no big deal, honestly. I’ve been inside before. The pool’s not bad.” He snorted in amusement at Zane’s expression, and explained, “It doubles as the local sports centre. You don’t seriously think the Giants would share space with a Little League joke like the Orcas otherwise, do you?”

When they approached the grandiloquent entrance portal, they saw a neon-bright marker attached prominently to the door-frame. Green, naturally. Next to it a sign proclaimed ‘*You have to be this tall to play for the Giants!*’ As they passed through, it came up to Caart’s shoulder, and only half-way up Zane’s upper arm.

“Looks like they’re letting anyone join, these days,” the horse muttered subversively as they stepped inside.

George- or ‘Geo’ as he would have infinitely preferred- Giants acolyte and teenager so painfully adolescent it was actually hard to say what species he was- was today’s sales assistant tasked with manning The Cave’s entrance hall, which also doubled as the gift shop. He found the job extremely boring. Mostly it involved keeping an eye on the visiting fans to make sure they didn’t touch any of the sacred Giants memorabilia placed around the walls or- worse still- take any merchandise without paying for it. Out of habit, his eyes tracked the two new guys who’d come in as they wandered around. Geeze, get a diet, fatso. The tall one was

wearing a Giant's cap though, so was probably an ok guy. They didn't seem all that interested, though... George repaid the compliment by losing interest in them as more visitors came in, showing more of the proper reverence for such a great team as this. So when a large shadow fell over the counter he was caught out. He looked up in surprise, then further up as the horse who'd come in earlier smiled down at him. Whoa... he hadn't realised quite how freaking *tall* the guy was. But what a blimp. If only he'd taken up basketball at school, or something...

"Hey there," the lard-tub said cheerfully, "I'd like to get a Giant's top. What's the biggest size you've got left for the one slot?" George suppressed a wince at the thought of *this* soiling his team's colours with his sweaty, overflowing bulk.

"I'll check... sir." He ducked down and scanned the stock shelves surrounding the pay-point.

"We only have up to double X-L, I'm afraid." Which you're probably too fat for, even though they're like *tents*, he added in the privacy of his own mind.

"That'll do fine, thanks." George stared dumbly at him for a second, then ducked down again, reluctantly.

"Point guard, huh?" he heard a different voice overhead. It sounded like it had thought of something funny. George stood up with the sealed packet to find the giraffe with the cap now standing alongside the humungous horse.

"Hey, we can't *both* be the pivot," the fat-ass replied. "Who is the Giant's PG at the moment, anyway?" Geeze, how could these guys not know *that*?

"Kenny Sorbo," the giraffe replied offhandedly, before George could open his mouth to enlighten them.

"Whoof!" the horse pulled a major face. "Actually," he said to the sales assistant, "I'll take the five instead, if you've got it in the same size."

"Thought so," the giraffe murmured with a smile.

"Very well, *sir*."

"Thanks."

Bristling, George got back on his hands and knees to swap packages. Who did these guys think they were to make *that* kind of comment about a member of the Giants? He didn't quite get it, whatever it was, but he could tell they were having some kind of joke at the PG's expense. When he returned to desk-height the humungous horse had dumped a voluminous pair of kit shorts on the counter, too. The giraffe was also buying a uniform- number five.

But *this* one was blue. George goggled openly at him- and he'd thought *this* was an ok guy! Even his fat slob of a friend- obviously no sports fan- seemed properly non-plussed.

"The *Orcas*?" The giraffe just shrugged, apparently unmoved by their subtle- or, in George's case, not so subtle- criticism.

"Eh, this is more my colour." *That* was no way to pick a team! The horse looked again at the shameful outfit in the giraffe's grip, then commented with a knowing smile:

"I always thought they played in wetsuits and flippers."

"They might as well do," George grinned. The Giants might have to share room with their charity-case cousins, but they didn't have to *like* it- in here the Orcas were firmly relegated to where they belonged- one single shelf of merchandise near the back. Most people didn't even spot it. He tried to tactfully alert the frowning giraffe to his laughable mistake in wanting to associate himself with a team *that* second-rate, and return him to the Giants' fold.

"The Orcas *suck*. They're playing in the *second* tier. And they've never even won *that*."

Not that it mattered- at that level they'd be lucky to win a tin of beans. In fact they weren't even in *contention* for the tin of beans.

"Hey, winning isn't everything," was the giraffe's only response. "It's just a stupid game, when all's said and done."

George stared at him incredulously. This was *basketball* they were talking about! From his stunned expression, even his blimp of a buddy seemed to understand that, at least. Saying something like *that* in here counted as blasphemy or something, right? It must do. And backing a losing team... Well, if this guy really *wanted* to waste his money...

"Are you paying for these together?" George asked, as coldly as he dared. Both of them looked at him, then at each other, then for some reason they started grinning stupidly. The horse made to prize his wallet from a pocket of his way-too-tight shorts but the giraffe held up his hand.

"C'mon, let me, man. You got lunch." He took a card out of his wallet and handed it to George.

"Y'know, it's funny," the horse said to the giraffe, leaning casually against the counter, his rotund rear end invading way more of George's personal space than he was comfortable with, "I couldn't spot too much recent silverware in the Giants' trophy cabinet, either."

George nearly choked.

“Well, be fair,” the giraffe commented amiably, “The Cougars were just untouchable for such a long time-”

“The Cougars!” George erupted bitterly, then found himself overshadowed as they both looked down at him curiously. Well, good. The fat no-nothing and this... this *weirdo* obviously needed setting straight on a few things- George might still be pretty young, but he’d learned a lot from the fans who came in here. Experience counted. “The Cougars all play doped to the eyeballs-”

“Does caffeine count?” the horse asked the giraffe, grinning inexplicably.

“-so it’s no wonder they keep winning! *And* they fight dirty! I mean, they used to set a *war horse* on their opposition!”

“War horse?” the fat-ass echoed, faintly. He must have swallowed a fly or something- he started coughing. Mr. ‘Winning Isn’t Everything’ was frowning again.

“Hey, that’s not fair! The guy got sin-binned a few times, sure, but-”

“He regularly put players out of action for a whole *season*! Clay-Hoofed Hørssten was a total psych-case, ask anyone. The Cougars made out like he quit, but *I* think he got dragged away to the funny-farm.” It didn’t make sense, otherwise. George was well into his stride now, impregnable in his second-hand basketball wisdom. He lowered his voice and confided, “Besides, it turns out he was a... you know.” He hesitated delicately at their blank expressions, then broke the appalling truth. “One of *them*. That’s not right, letting *his* type play with normal guys- how could they ever feel safe around him? *I’d* not wanted to have taken a pass from him, that’s for sure.”

The horse had started coughing again, and the giraffe made a little strangled noise at the back of his throat. He seemed to be about to say something, but, still spluttering, the fat oaf butted in instead.

“What about the All-Stars?” he asked innocently, “From what I hear they’re doing better than the Cougars right now-”

“The Cougars’ new Center hasn’t been looking too hot,” the giraffe murmured, inspecting the lights in the ceiling. Who wore sunglasses indoors, anyway?

“- *they’re* not all on drugs too, are they?”

“The *All-Stars*?” George said bitterly, “Oh, the shiny-white All-Stars are far too high and mighty for anything interesting like *that*. They’ve got their heads wedged so far up their own backsides it’s a wonder they can see the ball!” The giraffe rocked back on his hooves slightly.

“The only reason *they* keep winning is because they’ve got a complete *freak* at Center to

shore them up.”

“... Freak?” the dude with sunglasses said, weakly.

“A giraffe! That’s cheating in anyone’s book, having a *giraffe* playing on your team!”

“Well, that long neck must come in handy when he’s sticking his head up his backside,” the horse commented. For some reason his friend shot him a long, hard look.

“They shouldn’t be allowed to play against us *normal* animals, I think.” George concluded decisively. He then looked up as the red mist clouding his vision- not to mention the steam on his spectacles- began to clear away. “Uhh... no offence.”

“None taken,” the giraffe in front of him said, with a mild-mannered smile.

“Is there anything else I can help you with on your visit today?” George asked, still eclipsed by the giraffe’s shadow. He was just starting to regret his outburst a little. He’d already been reprimanded once this week for ‘lecturing the customers’.

The horse and giraffe looked at each other for a long moment over George’s head.

“Yes,” the giraffe said, still facing the horse. “We’ll take some court-time, too.” George’s eyes bulged. The giraffe twisted his neck and looked down at him from a very great height.

“That’d be ok, right?”

“Umm... we’re often very booked up. Wh-when were you thinking of?” George checked his computer screen.

“How about now?” the giraffe asked pleasantly, leaning gently on the counter with his knuckles. His chin was still about four feet above George’s head.

“Well...” he gulped, “the main court is out of bounds today, I’m afraid...” most people insisted on playing on the Holy Boards of the Giants themselves, and got very upset when they were told they couldn’t. But the giraffe just shrugged and said:

“We’re not fussy.” He looked down at him patiently, and waited. Finding himself sweating under the silent scrutiny, George tapped a few more keys.

“One of our practice courts *does* happen to be free for the next hour, and I’m *sure* the Giants must have trained on it someti-”

“Thanks, that’ll be fine.”

“And I’ll need some court shoes,” the horse butted in, smiling down at George. “Springbok Hoofguards with Air-track padding in the base if you’ve got them, size ten-and-a-half left, eleven right.”

“Uhh...” George backed away slightly from the counter. “W-we’ve got *this* range of sports shoes for sale over here, sir...” he pointed along the shelf. The horse glanced along them with a discerning air, and with a small whicker of resignation pulled a set out and plonked them on the counter.

“Well, I guess these’ll have to do.”

“A-and do you-?”

“I’m good, thanks,” the giraffe said simply. He held out his hand for his card, and George returned it to him, along with the receipt.

“Thank you for shopping in the Giant’s Cave! Enjoy your court time. If you go down the stairs, take a left at the bottom and through the double doors, you’ll find the changing room.” If you can fit, he added mentally.

“Thanks.”

Picking up his gear, that huge horse paused, looking thoughtful.

“I still don’t get it, though- if the Cougars are all drug-addicts, and the All-Stars are so boring, then why is it that the Giants *still* haven’t taken a Championship from them in over six years?” Behind the till George spluttered, face turning purple. Talking over his head, the gargantuan fat-ass looked enquiringly at his even-taller friend, holding up his newly-purchased top. “Who is the Giants’ Center, anyway?”

“Geo.” George started abruptly, then realised that the giraffe was pointing across at the larger-than-life picture of Georgei ‘Geo’ Altaica, the Giant’s Siberian tiger star player- and his own personal hero- caught mid-victory snarl after one of his show-stopping slam-dunks, trademark sideburns flying wildly.

“Ohhh,” the horse said, as if that explained everything. He and the giraffe exchanged a knowing glance, and then walked casually to the stairwell, talking amongst themselves.

“An alpha-predator at Center. Bad tactics.”

“Not a team player. No pack mentality. Goes for the kill himself instead of making the smart pass.”

“Gets the flashy ‘dunks but a *woeful* assist record.”

“Fourth-lowest in last year’s Top Flight rankings.”

“Looks good for the fans, but just doesn’t add enough points to the board.”

“No synergy with his team-mates.”

“*Does not play well with others,*” they concluded in unison, their hoofbeats echoing on the stairs as they descended. George the shop-assistant and several other visitors to The Cave stared after them, goggle-eyed.

“Oh man, we are so going to get busted,” Caart said under his breath as they reached the bottom of the stairs, nearly purple from the effort of not laughing. “I thought that poor kid was going to have a *seizure*.”

Zane’s head was still reeling giddily as they turned left, heading down a short stretch of thickly carpeted corridor, towards a large pair of swing doors marked ‘Team changing room’. This was nuts. Completely nuts. Without discussing it, it had somehow become an almighty game of Chicken to see how far they could get into Giant’s territory without being recognised. He was still sweating from the near-miss with his card upstairs. Thank god the kid hadn’t looked at the name on it- even *he’d* probably have worked it out. He felt a crazy grin of relief spreading on his face, buoyed up by their illicit success. None that distraction routine upstairs had been consciously planned, they’d just played off each other as naturally as, well... team-mates. And now they were actually going to play ball on one of the Giants’ courts, under their noses.

“You uh... really up for this, man?” Zane asked quietly as they approached the changing room doors. He covertly cast a concerned look at Caart’s bulging physique. The horse snorted.

“After what that scrawny runt up there said about the Cats and the All-Stars? We’re showing them a thing or two. Game *on*.”

* * *

When Caart stepped out onto the half-court, Zane was changed and ready, meditatively bouncing a stock basketball from one hand to the other. The overhead viewing gallery was deserted. The horse had taken so long the giraffe had started to worry that he wasn’t actually able to fit into his newly-bought gear.

“The ball’s a little flat,” Zane commented, “but otherwiiii...” He trailed off as Caart approached. 2XL *really* wasn’t up to the job. The sleeveless top- bright lime-green triangles pointing down over the shoulders against a field of darker, forest green, with another wide,

flat, upward-pointing triangle at the hem front and back- was stretched tight around his stomach, a good fraction of which bulged out from underneath. His chest forced the material out into a double curve, creasing at the top of his gut. Small folds of chub under his shoulders were hanging out from the arm-holes. But it was the shorts- unadulterated, eye-wateringly bright green- that were truly skin-tight, clinging to his swollen legs and almost visibly creaking around his rump as it jostled behind him. A small gap in one side-seam suggested that a stitch had already blown in the act of donning them.

Zane was struck by a warped sense of *déjà vu*. He felt he'd lived this moment a thousand times before. Here he was, the basketball court as familiar and natural a territory to him as the spots on his own neck, with Caart 'Clay-Hoofed' Hørssten facing him across the court, but, in an almost shocking departure from reality, here was this swollen, shaggy, sumo-sized caricature of the star-stallion standing there instead! For a moment he could only view this preposterous apparition in terms of basketballs- his chest was a pair of basketballs, partly deflated and flattened by their own weight, balanced atop a black, supernaturally big basketball, the kind a *real* giant would use to shoot hoops. His *face* was a basketball, padded out to roundness by chubby cheeks and that plump second chin, broken only by the broad, blunt snout poking out stubbily between them. Even his upper arms and thighs looked basketball-esque. And- most crazily of all- he was wearing the *wrong uniform*!

For a moment, stallions past and present warred dizzily inside Zane's skull, the super-star against the super-sized. Then a familiar snort of laughter brought him back down to earth with a bump. The fighting phantoms met and merged into the single here-and-now horse, who was looking at Zane with amused derision.

"Still with the sunglasses?"

"Uh-huh," Zane replied. He'd reluctantly abandoned the cap in the changing rooms as impractical for playing in- and, for that matter, as unprofessional. In the wrong uniform like this he was reasonably sure he'd not be recognised, but he didn't want to tempt fate.

However, he'd not fared much better than Caart with his purchase, which carried a wavy, tropical-turquoise shoulder-yoke on top of cobalt blue, with further turquoise side-panels flared down the sides and a stripe slashed up his shorts. He was starting to suspect that what he was wearing was less basketball gear and more a repurposed wetsuit, even down to the material being slightly shiny and elasticated, making it practically more figure-hugging than Caart's. Where it could reach. Whilst the shorts at least fitted- even if they did grip

embarrassingly tightly- the top left about a foot of his midriff on view, the faint dents and bulges of abdominal muscles showing through the pale, short fur of his hide. The gap exposed a small, neat navel, a tuft of blonde fluff trailing down from it. Now bared, the reticulate markings accentuated the musculature across his shoulders and the back of his arms as he shifted the ball from one hand to the other. The V-neck of the top looked like it was almost throttling him, stretched taut around the hump his neck made where it joined his shoulders. Caart sniggered.

“Looking *buff*, dude.”

“Ehe,” the giraffe grinned sheepishly, “Guess I forgot how much my usual gear gets customised.” He made to shrug, then thought better of it when seams squeaked elastically. But the horse was still sniggering at him. “*What?*”

“Haha, sorry,” the horse giggled. “But... *you* in *that* uniform! Oh, man, you’re the Orcas’ wet dream!” Zane flushed uncomfortably, and bounced the ball a couple more times. The horse stifled a whinny of laughter, then, still giggling, he plucked at his own top, peering down over his chest. A stylised, snarling tiger’s face was emblazoned above the number ‘5’, the name ‘ALTAICA’ proudly written above that. The lettering was stretched out, as if spelling out the name letter by letter for a slow-learner. He snorted hysterically. “I can hear Fuzz-Face having apoplexy from here.” Zane couldn’t stop the silly grin spreading on his face at the thought.

“Heh, good job they’re playing away.” Zane glanced down at his own chest, which sported the unfamiliar name ‘KOHOLA’. “You know anything about this guy?”

“He’s an orca,” the horse replied with a smirk. Zane looked unimpressed.

“I know *that*, smart-arse!”

“No man, seriously. He’s a *whale*!” Caart grinned wickedly. “Now there’s someone who’s not let a weight problem get in the way of doing what he wants to do.”

They stood stomach-to-stomach in the centre half- circle, facing up to each other. Caart looked the giraffe up and down, then further up, and snorted, nostrils flaring.

“I don’t believe it- you *still* make me feel like a shrimp!” This impression wasn’t mutual- to Zane, the horse looked *huge*. Trying not to stare too openly at the way Caart’s gut hung out of his gear, Zane bounced the ball at his feet again.

“Man,” he smiled sheepishly. “I can’t remember the last time I played just for fun.”

“Don’t think I’ll be going easy on you just for *that*,” Caart responded with a cocky grin, pulling his mane back into a tighter knot. *That* sounded more like the old Caart - he’d *always* been too big for his hooves on court. Zane smiled at how nuts that banter now sounded coming from, well... a guy *this* out of shape.

“First to five?” he asked, gesturing with the ball.

“Bring it on,” the horse replied with an expansive smile.

“After you.” Zane stepped back and casually bounce-passed the ball.

The bouncing ball hit the horse *bamph* in the belly, plumb-centre, and ricocheted back towards Zane, dribbling to a stop at his feet.

“Whoof!” Caart staggered back, gasping a little.

“Oh man, are you alright?” Mortified, Zane scooped up the ball automatically before hurrying over.

“Mmph. Yeah...” Caart huffed meditatively, rubbing his hand slowly up and down the front of his belly a few times before looking up and giving the giraffe a rueful grin. “My fault, man- forgot I didn’t used to share the court with this thing.” He gave the side of his prodigious paunch a fond slap, setting it rippling like the dark waterballoon it resembled. Blushing, Zane carefully passed him the ball overarm and stepped back to his original spot. Caart caught it easily and assayed a set of practice moves with it, obviously testing his old skills against his current bulk. He seemed to get the hang of it quickly, although he had to seriously exaggerate some of them to fit around his gut and rear.

“S-sorry about that, uhh... big-guy.”

“Hey,” Caart secured the ball under his plump arm and grinned at him. “*You’re* the big guy- I’m the *fat-ass*.” Zane gulped a little.

“Th-think you’re, uhh... warmed up, now?”

“Warmer than you, orca-boy.” The horse grinned toothily, and began to pace to one side, bouncing the ball slowly as he went. “Hope you’ve been brushing up on your whale-song!” Smiling back, the giraffe rattled out something stuffed with sharp clicks and glottal stops. Caught out, Caart hesitated. “Huh?”

“I said ‘I guess I’ll just have to make do with Cl!ck’. It’s an African thing, *Norse-boy*,” Zane chuckled, moving obliquely to intercept Caart’s approach to the hoop.

“Oh, you want to take on a *Viking*, huh?” His grin suddenly predatory, Caart’s trot quickened to a lumbering canter. “Ok then, get ready for the Berserker!”

He tacked at right-angles sharply, but oh-so predictably. And, thanks to all the weight he was hauling around on court, so *slowly*. It was like watching in slow-motion. Grinning, Zane interposed himself between the horse and the hoop in three sideways strides.

“There’s no such *team* as the B-oof!!”

He staggered backwards as the horse spun on his hooves, keeping his back to him as he pressed his attack. Zane was suddenly faced with a problem- a big problem. He realised that reaching around *that* to snatch the ball was pretty much impossible, even with arms as long as his. And that bright-green backside was downright intimidating- for a nightmare moment he felt like he was being menaced by the biggest, bulgiest apple in existence. Caart just barged on unstopably, threatening to smack against him if the giraffe didn’t get out of his way. Geeze, the floor actually shook as the huge horse thundered along. Almost before Zane blinked he’d been backed into the lane. Getting a grip on himself, he stood his ground, then, as the horse’s stampede faltered, tried to counter-attack. Caart feinted, then dodged and spun past the giraffe. Or tried to. Instead, his plumply-padded hip thudded into Zane as he went past, sending him almost cartwheeling as the horse shot for the hoop long-distance, the ball thudding through the net with impeccable aim.

“Hah! Still got it!” Caart grinned triumphantly, thick arms raised. He wheezed as he bent to pick up the ball. Zane was still nursing the side where his opponent had ‘muscle’ his way through. “Heh, sorry man, guess I can’t squeeze through such tight spaces anymore.” His tone was anything but apologetic. He passed the ball to the giraffe. “1-0.” He commented, smugly. “Good to go?”

“Sure.” Zane paced cautiously along the perimeter with the ball, thinking frantically. Caart gave a short, braying laugh.

“I never thought I’d see the day- Zane Alekai without a game-plan. I thought you had one for *everything*.” The giraffe faltered, but carried on circling methodically, although he couldn’t help a wry grin. He was thinking hard. The voluminous equine Viking between him and the hoop snorted, and shifted his weight impatiently.

“What, you suddenly intimidated by a fat slob in badly-fitting shoes or something? We’ve only got an hour, slowcoach!”

Zane moved to an attack, pitching himself fast and low. His normal repertoire wasn’t designed with someone this... solid in mind, and anyway Caart probably still knew most of it by heart- they’d played each other often enough. But he could improvise- and he could *move*. Rather better than his opponent- the horse was lumbering to keep up, barring his way to the hoop but never threatening possession of the ball. Hah, too *slow*, Caart! Zane double-dodged and put on a burst of speed to ghost around the horse’s back, going for the suddenly unprotected shot. But geeze, getting round him took forev-*double oof!*! Caart unexpectedly spun around on one hoof, planting himself in front of the flying giraffe like a planet veering into the path of a space-shuttle. Zane practically had to throw himself backwards at the same time to get out of the commit- it was that or cannon bodily into that humungous horsey hiney. His control over the ball loosened as his legs threatened to tie themselves in a knot. Snatching it from him expertly, Caart turned and galloped for the hoop

Thud thud thud... THUD...

His thick legs compressing under him, quivering with the strain, the horse launched upwards with the grace of a hippo on springs. Despite himself the giraffe just stood and gaped. It wasn’t a patch on Caart’s old jump, stalling a good two feet lower, but seeing that much bulk in the air was a feat by itself. It was like watching a space-shuttle lift-off. By the time he was one the way down the horse’s arm was already at full stretch, pushing the ball aloft. It sailed the rest of the way and ‘thunked’ heavily through the net. 2-0.

“Hoo yeah, and that’s how it’s done!”

The horse came back to earth with a colossal, floor-creaking crash, rather like the meteor that took out the dinosaurs. Zane was sure he heard another stitch pop, but it was more likely that he’d broken a floorboard.

“Whoa.” Still standing there, he blinked and then managed a weak grin as, wiping his sweaty mane out of his eyes, the huge horse turned and regarded the giraffe. “Some jump, Champ.” The stallion practically preened. Holding the ball under one arm, he slapped his free hand against his outsized backside- a gesture that made Zane wince- and smirked.

“You wouldn’t believe how much stronger I’ve got since I started eating *properly*. Turns out my body was just longing for the fuel to develop some real muscle. And hauling all that dough around certainly helps some. *In the bakery*.” He added, seeing Zane’s expression.

Then Caart’s smile hardened, and he put his hands to his hips impatiently.

“C’mon, top-flight athlete, quit holding back.” He chest-passed the ball to Zane with a force that was only just short of hostile. “You should be wiping the court with a fat-ass like me!” Zane caught the ball and shrugged amicably, laughing.

“Hey, I’m trying! Like you said- you’ve still got it! And then some,” he added, less charitably. Inwardly, he grimaced- earlier he *had* been thinking he’d have to let his old friend win a few points, just to avoid humiliating him. Yeah, chance would be a fine thing. Caart smirked.

“Aww, what’s the matter, can’t take li’l old me throwing my weight around?” The horse winked, his grin stretching wider. “C’mon All-Star, get your head out of your butt and let’s *play!*”

“Oh...” *Right*. “Just for *that*...” Zane crouched and assumed a dramatic Kung-Fu pose, neck down, ball in one raised hand, and beckoned with the other, “No more Mr. Nice-Guy.” Caart snorted, eyes gleaming competitively.

What followed was only just short of all-out war, basketball-style. This time, Zane *really* stretched himself. Sure, his opponent was good, but seriously out of shape, something that was becoming increasingly apparent- he’d already noticed the horse starting to huff as he gave him the run-around. *His* edge was his agility, not to mention his stamina- so he gave Caart the run-around more. Zane didn’t even have to look to keep track of the horse- he could tell where he was from the thudding of his hooves on the floor. It was making the court ring like a bell. Caart still had power and determination, not to mention that intimidating bulk, but *he* had the height. And he used it. He managed a couple of slap-downs as Caart went for the hoop, despite having to negotiate that huge butt blocking him- it was like a second opponent in itself. Then, dodging under the hoop on his next attack, Zane just took off from a standing jump, drifting up higher and higher until his chest was level with the top of the hoop- he barely had to lift his arms to slam the ball home. As he returned to earth with a light thump, knees bent, he was rewarded by the sight of Caart scowling jealously, hands on

his knees as he breathed deeply, the neck of his top now darkened in a deep, sweaty ‘V’ that sank between his porky pecs.

“Cheating bloody Maasai...” Grinning, Zane passed the ball to him.

“Keep up, short-stuff.” The horse responded to *that* with a genuinely filthy look. Ah-ha...

They were both tiring now, playing at that frenetic level, but Caart was tiring faster. Well, he was hauling a heck of a lot more weight around the court. The horse’s play was growing more ragged, giving Zane more openings. They were more or less scoring evenly, but frankly neither of them was keeping count as they surged around the court. The score didn’t matter- now this was *personal*. Then Zane intercepted the ball and, when Caart lunged to reclaim it, he just stopped and held it up high, spinning it atop one finger. Vengeance was very sweet for the next thirty seconds as the horse tried impotently to regain possession. The giraffe just smiled down at him.

“Something the matter, shorty? *Whoof!*” With an enraged snort Caart suddenly THUMPED his medicine-ball belly into the giraffe’s middle, winding him. The giraffe practically folded in half, the ball going flying. “*Foul!*” he croaked, even as he tried not to laugh at the same time. “Oh man, blatant foul!”

“Tell it to the umpire!” was the horse’s unfeeling response as he slammed the ball home through the hoop.

Of course, it all ended in tears. During one titanic tussle, Caart tried to bulldoze his way through with the ball, Zane tried to block him, and somebody slipped. They collided with an almighty, blubbery *thud*, and Zane found himself toppling, propelled by the unstoppable recoil from the horse’s stomach. And, unfortunately, a flailing giraffe can take a lot out with him on the way down. Legs tangled in the melee, and suddenly Caart let out a startled whinny-

Timmmm-berrrrrrrr...

THUDDD!

Rrrrr-RIP!

Well, we did say ‘in tears’...

“Whuuurrrf...!” Zane wheezed, feelingly. He was sprawled on his front across the court, sunglasses askew, with what felt like a fully-grown hippo lying across his back. “Gnghhh!” he added, with emphasis. The weight wobbled on top of him for a moment, crushing him further against the hard wooden boards, then it subsided, sagging back into its original ponderous position. Then it began jiggling. Laughter bubbled up out of the horse’s throat. Laying there at right-angles on top of the giraffe, belly-down, he started giggling hysterically, until he was practically pounding the floor with hilarity.

“Gnghh!” Zane gasped, “Get... OFFA... ME!” That just made the horse laugh harder. “Not... haha... not until you concede the game!”

“Nghh... *what?!?*” Zane managed to crane his neck around to stare at the prone horse. He could feel his kidneys being squeezed against the floor. It felt like they were ready to fire up through his nose.

“You heard me.” The horse could barely talk around the giggles. “Give up, or get *squashed!* Oh man,” he added, “I think it’s Game Over for these shorts.” He wiggled his hips for emphasis, juicing another litre of air out of the giraffe’s lungs. “Boy, it sure got draughty in here...”

“Hnghhhhh!” Zane planted his hands down flat in front of him and heaved with all his might, spine creaking, trying to dislodge the sumo-wrestler of a stallion sprawled so seismically atop him. The beast’s doughy bulk rolled slightly towards his legs. Zane subsided with a gasping wheeze, and the equine’s elephantine weight just shifted right back to where it had been.

“Get... OFF... you... you big LUNK!” This only made Caart whinny loudly, his laughter redoubling.

“Haha! Oh man, I’m S-SITTING on you, Nice Guy, and you S-STILL won’t call me fahahahahaha...!”

Zane gave it a couple more heaves, but if anything they were even more feeble than the first- the hysterically-giggling horse barely rippled. Panting weakly for breath, Zane finally lay down limp on the floor and slapped his hand against it, wrestling-style.

“Ok, ok! Uncle! I give! I *give!*” he croaked.

“Hah!” Caart let out a whicker of triumph and got up.

Well, tried to.

“Nghh! I said... ‘I give *up*’, ok?!” Zane repeated as he remained relentlessly squashed against the court. “You win! Now... *get... OFF... OF... ME!*”

“Ooogmphhh.... g-gimme a minute here...” the still-tittering stallion had struggled onto his hands and knees, but his medicine-ball belly still pinned the giraffe firmly to the floorboards. Caart apparently gave up trying to heave himself to his hooves, and just rolled himself off of the giraffe instead. Zane let in a deep wheeze of relief as the weight was lifted from his lungs, only to grimace as his legs were steamrolled.

“Gnrrrk!” Talk about a *massage*...

The swollen stallion was still struggling to get upright, his back now beached against the cold, hard boards of the court. Wheezing with effort, he sprawled with his arms braced behind him, but visibly struggled to get any further upright thanks to the belly and backside firmly anchoring him to the floor.

“Need a hand?”

“...Thanks.” With a noncommittal grunt, the horse took the hand Zane proffered, and tried to stand. He nearly pulled the giraffe off his hooves on the first attempt. It took Zane holding both of Caart’s hands and leaning back nearly as far as he could go to *heave* him upright, arms and legs quivering from the strain. As they did so, another few stitches ripped- Zane hoped it wasn’t his arms tearing off. Then, as the horse rocked forward on his oversized behind, there came an embarrassingly audible *POP!* Fortunately, momentum carried him the rest of the way up, or they might both have collapsed again. Panting, they looked at one other. Wincing in discomfort, Caart reached behind himself and peeled something two-dimensional from his backside. He held up the burst remains of the ball.

“Ehe...” The sweaty stallion smiled sheepishly. “I guess I really *am* getting too big for the court.” His smile twisted up at one edge. “Think I’d have a decent shot at sumo wrestling?” Zane’s ears twitched, but he otherwise didn’t respond- he was standing with his hands on his knees, head down and breathing heavily. Half an hour’s hard play was nothing compared to trying to haul that humungous horse upright. He glanced at the ball’s pancaked cadaver, and summoned a rather wobbly smile for his plumped-out pal.

“I think... I’m done... for the day.”

“Yeah,” Caart huffed wryly in response, “Me too.”

“Amazing!” The pair jumped apart as enthusiastic, solo applause started up. Zane’s neck shot upright, and he swayed dizzily. A track-suited puma was approaching, still clapping

frantically. “Absolutely *in*-credible.” He marched up to the giraffe and held out his hand. “I only caught the tail-end of that, but I saw some *serious* skills there, tall guy!” He craned his neck back to smile encouragingly up at the giraffe, who was modestly adjusting his sunglasses. “I’m Larry! I’m on the Giants’ coaching team, and I really, *really* don’t say this to everyone, but have you ever considered turning Pro? You’re a Giants fan, right- of course you are!” he said, before the giraffe could respond. “You’re *here*, aren’t you? Well, I’m positive that the team would be *very* interested in having you try-out. You’d get to meet the guys, at least? I’m sure they’d sign autographs. Hell, with a little training you might even have a shot at the second squad! And *you*, uhh, hoss...” he turned his beaming gaze onto the sweating stallion, “Well, wow. I’m a believer! If we slimmed you down some, I seriously think you’d have a decent chance of making our Reserves list eventually.” He treated the pair of them to a saccharine smile. “Stop me if I’m going too fast, but why don’t we step along to my office and have a talk about it? You could even walk out of here today with contracts! C’mon, you don’t get an offer like *that* every day! Whaddya say?”

The silence lengthened uncomfortably, and then with an enigmatic snort of mirth the horse dropped the burst remains of the sat-on ball into the startled puma’s hands, then wordlessly headed towards the changing rooms.

“Sorry,” the giraffe said with a small smile as he stepped between them to cover the horse’s split-seamed modesty, “we were just having some fun. Besides,” he added over his shoulder to the flustered feline as he left the court, “I think we’d only want to join if we could play on the same team.”

* * *

Safely in the changing room, Zane took off his sunglasses and arched his stiff back, knuckles pressed against the base of his spine.

“Heh, you alright, big guy?” Caart asked. Unchanged, the horse was sitting on a slatted wooden bench across the aisle from the giraffe. Fortunately, they were designed to take about five players at a time. With some effort, he kicked his shoes and socks off and stretched out his hooves. “Whoof... sorry about, uhh... flattening you out there like that. Guess I got a little carried away.”

“Don’t worry about it,” the giraffe replied genially, rubbing his back as he stood in front of the open locker. He winced. “Gnh... it’s nothing a month in traction won’t fix.” His sports

bag sat open on a similar bench in front of him. Stooping down, he pulled a water-bottle from its depths and took a long, rehydrating suck. Now that he was off-court he was starting to perspire freely, his gear clinging to him like wet washing. Geeze, he hadn't felt this wrung out in a long time. Gingerly, Zane lowered himself to sit on the bench opposite the horse, absent-mindedly flexing and relaxing his right leg in a slow rhythm.

"Oh man," Cart said distantly, his eyes now holding a far-away look, "I'm sorry. You sure you're ok? I didn't think- I could have wrecked your whole *season* out there. Or worse.

Damn..." he gave the giraffe a chastened smile, "Just think of it. If I'd gone and broken an *All-Star*, they'd have sued my big, fat butt off the face of the Earth!"

"Hey," Zane said with a smile, "I'm fine, really!" He caught the horse looking oddly at his leg, and abruptly stopped its swing. "Honest." His guilty expression suddenly became alarmed as he inspected the sweaty stallion more closely. Caart was still wheezing, his face a rather alarming blackberry shade. He wasn't just sweating- he was *drenched*. Zane leaned forward in consternation, and could *feel* the body-heat pouring off the bulging beast. "Are *you* ok?"

"Yeah," the horse panted heavily, "just... just gimme a minute." He tugged at the sodden, translucent neckline of his top, and steam rose out from the squashed canyon between his plump pecs. "I'm not quite as... fit as I used to be." His eyes fixed on Zane's water-bottle, and his tongue practically hung out. "...You got anything left in that?" Zane passed it across, and Caart latched his lips around the nozzle and suckled like a dehydrated camel. The plastic sides had crumpled together under vacuum before he finally released the suction with a relieved gasp.

"Ooogh... *man*..."

Handing the bottle back, Caart plucked at his top again, then with a grunt of discomfort grabbed at it and hauled the whole thing up over his head in one movement. The garment sucked damply as it peeled off his bloated body, and he dropped it to the ground with a soggy *splat*. He undid the knot tying back his mane and let it flop free, then sat back slightly, eyes closed, his weight pressing plumply against the lockers behind him. "Oof... that's better." The stallion's breathing was coming back under control, but his chest still heaved and fell like a ship on an ocean swell. In the still, humid air of the locker room, you could see the

steam drifting up slowly from his topless tonnage. He looked almost unreal in this athletic atmosphere, a midnight-hued haystack of horseflesh squeezed into way-too-tight shorts.

They sat quietly for a minute or two, Caart resting with his matte-black barrel of a belly filling his lap, tubby legs stretched wide to accommodate it. Zane stared. Then that tremendous tummy let out a tectonic growl, like a cavern opening up somewhere deep underground. It rather broke the moment. Caart opened one eye, hand going to his massive middle as he flashed his friend another guilty glance.

“You, uh... wouldn’t have any snacks in that bag of tricks, would you?”

“...Seriously?” Zane asked. The horse’s gut grumbled again.

“Seriously, man.” Jiggling his stomach to try to quiet it, the sumo-sized stallion chuckled.

“Hey, horse gotta graze!” Zane gave the bulging beast a long look, then wordlessly ducked down and began rooting around in his bag. Caart suddenly pulled a face. “Actually, if you’re going for one of those low-calorie, high-energy cereal bars, no thanks.” He shuddered expressively. “I’d rather eat a pair of used socks than let one of *those* past my lips agaiiii...” he tailed off as Zane extracted his arm from the bag, holding a small packet. Caart blinked, then a disbelieving grin slowly stretched across his chubby cheeks. “*Chocolate?*” The giraffe shrugged and tossed the bar lightly to his friend.

“I’ve got taste-buds too, you know,” he commented levelly. But the overfed equine wasn’t listening- instead he was tearing the corner of the wrapper open with his teeth. Having cooled off a little, Zane stood up, legs unfolding gracefully beneath him, then started to haul his own top up over his arms and neck, trying as ever not to get it snagged on his horns. Caart inhaled the chocolate in roughly three seconds flat. Head buried in folds of material, Zane could still hear the *smack-gulp-snort* as he chowed down greedily. The bench then creeeeaked as the heavyweight horse sat back with an obvious grunt of satisfaction. Zane’s face popped free of the top’s damp, clingy fabric, and he straightened up.

“Whoa,” Caart exclaimed suddenly at the giraffe’s bare back. “Man, you *are* looking buff!” A smile bloomed across his face. “For a while I thought it was just that top, but, sheesh, you’re *built*, big guy.”

“Huh?” Zane craned his neck and examined his own rear elevation thoughtfully for a moment, something impossible for species less well-endowed than his. “You think?”

“Hell, yes!” The horse grinned. “You’re practically a *hunk*.” The giraffe gave his back and chest another critical once-over, then just shrugged.

“Guess I’m just thickening up with age.” He gave a brief smile over his shoulder. “Looks like neither of us is a skinny teenager anymore.” Caart wheezed with laughter, his belly wobbling weightily against his thick legs.

“You’ve thickened, I’ve *ballooned*.” He smacked his hand to his chubby side as irrefutable evidence. “Besides, *I* was skinny. *You* were just lean.”

“You really didn’t look so bad as you make out.” Dumping the top, Zane turned and crouched on one knee in front of the slouching horse, neck stretched forward as he examined him intently. “You *sure* you’re ok now, man?” He managed to produce a smile. “You had me worried there for a minute.”

“Damnit, I’m fine, *really*.” Caart grinned and reached up to give his friend a playful punch on the shoulder. “I just got a little lathered up out there. What?” he asked as the giraffe suddenly pulled his face a little further back, nose wrinkling.

“It’s nothing, man. Really.” Zane scratched the back of his head and then admitted, “It’s... you smell like a *Viking*.” The horse snorted with amusement, then stretched his neck forward, sniffing teasingly at Zane’s chest.

“And you stink like a safari after the fifth day.”

“Ehe...” Zane flushed slightly. “I guess we could both do with a shower,” he conceded. The sweaty stallion took an experimental snuff under his own arm, neck and chins squashing to accommodate the action, and pulled a face.

“Damn right.” Letting out a hefty snort Caart planted his hooves underneath him and, with a whicker of exertion, slowly hauled himself upright. He jerked a thumb to the end of the aisle. “Good job they’re on tap.”

Without further ado, he reached down and started to wriggle out of the shiny green sausage-skin his shorts resembled.

“Whoa!” Zane took a hurried step back, bumping against the lockers. The horse stopped, surprised.

“What?” Flustered, the giraffe waved his arms around him.

“Caart, there’s cubicles, y’know! I mean... *privacy* and all!” Shorts now low-slung on his hips, the sumo-sized stallion tilted his head and put one hand on his bulging side. His tail flicked against his rotund rear.

“Are you serious? Sheesh, *how* many guys do you share a team changing-room with after a game again? Our teams even *shared* changing rooms sometimes.”

“Yeah, but...” Zane floundered to explain himself. “This is *different*. Anyway, I thought you said you always hated getting changed in front of everyone because you were embarrassed about how you looked.”

“I *did*.” The horse snorted in amusement, then slapped both hands against the sides of his belly. Gripping his prominent lovehandles, he gave them a shake, smirking. “I’m not embarrassed any more...” He began pulling his shorts even lower, hauling on the tight material, a thick slice of his bulging backside now on view.

“And I happen to know you’re not wearing any damn underwear,” Zane muttered hotly, looking away. Caart paused, and grinned at the blushing giraffe again.

“Hey, it was the only way I could get these on!” His grin turned teasing. “These babies must be more burst than I thought.” He looked at Zane for a moment, waiting until the giraffe resumed eye-contact, then continued disrobing with a decisive downward tug. “It’s not like you’ve not seen it all before.”

Yes, but there wasn’t so *much* of it back then.

With one last haul the sumo-sized stallion nonchalantly let his shorts drop to the ground and then stood there, ample arms folded. The Law of the Changing Room was very clear on this kind of situation- you couldn’t let yourself be out-cooled. And Zane knew it. And he knew that Caart knew that he knew. Looking the horse dead in the eye, he reached down and shrugged his own shorts off, with far greater ease than the extra-large equine had managed. His underwear followed. Both were folded neatly and placed on the bench by his bag. Then, from the bag, he pulled out a bottle of shampoo and a large, fluffy towel, flicked the towel over his shoulder and stepped past the horse, heading for the sluice. He had to turn sideways to get through the narrow gap. Caart snickered with amusement, eventually leaning back against the lockers to give him more room.

“Don’t forget your sunglasses, super-star.” Zane turned his head and gave him a Look, without breaking stride. Then they both hit the showers.

Fortunately, the stalls had been designed with the tall in mind- although probably not the wide. Caart definitely found it something of a squeeze, his chin level with the top of the partition. Next to him, Zane’s shoulders and neck sailed clean above it. He had to duck his head to get under the jet of steaming water produced by the shower-head. Pretty soon the place was *full* of steam. Having handed the bottle across to the horse, the giraffe was

industriously soaping his mane. It was a sight hair-product companies would probably have paid good money for. Methodically, he worked up from the base of his neck to behind his ears.

“Whoa!” Clutching the shampoo bottle, Caart did a sudden double-take through the steamy atmosphere. Surprised, Zane stopped, arms still raised to his neck and his hair a mass of foamy, meringue-like spikes, and looked over.

“What?” The horse was still squinting, mane plastered down across his face, peering under the giraffe’s nearside arm.

“Turn around, man.” Zane complied, although the steady way he did it suggested he knew what was coming next. Slowly stepping round in a 180, he showed Caart his other underarm. He’d been right the first time, anyway. The horse looked up at the giraffe’s face, genuinely shocked.

“Your *stars!*” he said, almost accusingly. “They’re *gone.*” Turning back to face the water, Zane raised his right arm again. He absently traced a finger around the particular patch where the trail of five small, blue-outlined stars had once been.

“Eh, I had them inked over. If you look really *close* you can still just about see them, but they got the colour-matching pretty near.”

“But...” Caart spluttered, “...*why?*” After a moment’s thought, the gushing water loud in the silence, Zane shrugged.

“I just... grew out of them.” He glanced at Caart, who was eyeing him through the wet air, then with a wordless shrug ducked his neck under the shower to rinse himself down. That seemed to be that. After a couple more moments Caart commented,

“I guess some things *have* changed, after all.” He also resumed showering, vigorously working up soapy foam pretty much all over his torso. Zane waited a couple of beats, then surreptitiously leaned back in the stall and craned his neck.

“Y’know,” he said nonchalantly, “that tattoo of yours has disappeared too...” Caart blinked and stopped soaping, then after an uncertain moment chuckled in amusement.

“It’s still there, man. Just... a little buried.” Then the horse snorted in amusement. “What were you expecting to see back there anyway, a *cutie mark?*”

Their eyes met. Caart grinned. Zane stifled a smile. Then both of them began to shake with laughter.

Caart had to borrow Zane's towel, once he'd finished using it. After *Caart* had finished drying himself off, the towel was so sodden Zane had to wring it out before packing it away.

"Whew," Caart commented as he tugged his t-shirt back on. "I definitely feel fresher, now." He paused and took a sniff of his own arm, wrinkling his nose a little. "But what *is* that smell?"

"Sandalwood," Zane replied. He shrugged, in the process of buttoning his shirt. "I like it." The horse pulled a face.

"Each to their own." He checked his reflection in a wall-mirror, dragging his unruly mane into something resembling a style with his hands, "But I guess it has left my coat nice and glossy." He suddenly grinned at himself in the mirror. "Sheesh, I sound like a *commercial*." He snorted in laughter. "Imagine me doing those *now*." He glanced over at Zane, who was buttoning up methodically from the bottom of the shirt. "You never *did* go in for advertising or sponsorship deals, did you?" The giraffe made an amused sound and shook his head. "Nah, I leave show-off stuff like that to the likes of you and Leon." Then Zane flushed slightly, and looked uncomfortable. "Uh... sorry." He smiled weakly, and scratched the back of his neck in embarrassment. "I guess, uh... all that must have dried up pretty quickly, huh?" Caart emitted a short, snorting laugh.

"Hoo, try *instantaneously*, man. I had them queuing up to dump my fat ass, even before it *got fat*." Turning sideways on in the mirror, the stout stallion hauled on the waistband of his XXL shorts to pull them up over his borderline-XXXL rump- this time with underwear, thankfully. He let the fabric *ping* back against his hide, and the waistline dipped immediately as his blubbery belly rolled back over it. Fumbling with the last few buttons beneath his neck, the giraffe's blush deepened, and Caart's grin widened. He reached back and smacked a hand against his plumped-up posterior, which wobbled under the impact. "Hah, I'll bet they didn't even *make* my line of sportswear in this kind of size." Zane didn't comment, and the hefty horse chuckled. "But hey, if you've still got any bottles or stuff laying around with my face on them, hang on to them, they'll probably become collectors' items."

They left The Cave by a side exit. By the time they did, the afternoon was starting to shade towards evening.

“Guess we’re later than I thought,” Caart said. Looking a little uncomfortable, he glanced sideways at the giraffe. “You, uhh... got any plans for the evening, big guy?” Sunglasses and cap back in place, Zane smiled agreeably.

“Hey, I came to see you. My time is yours- if *you*’ve not got plans, that is.” He shrugged modestly. “I don’t want to get in your way.”

“Heck no, it’s *great* to have you here! I was just wondering...” the horse coughed and scratched the back of his plump neck, “...if you were up for going for dinner? There’s this one really great place you’ve got to try- down on the waterfront, great view, *amazing* food.”

“Sounds good,” Zane said, slinging his bag over his back.

The hefty horse looked at him suddenly, his face clouding with suspicion.

“What’re you laughing at?” Zane looked away, still smiling.

“I was just thinking- trust you to know where to find the best food in town.” Caart blinked, then grinned widely.

“Yeah, trust me: I’ve done a *lot* of research- oof,” he commented suddenly, his face twisting in disappointment. “Damnit, that’s a point.” He looked down at himself, and plucked at his eye-watering T-shirt. “I’m kind of under-dressed. *You*’ll be fine,” he gestured to the giraffe, “but they want you to at least be wearing a shirt. I could go home and get one, but,” he shrugged, “that’s a long way to go just for that.”

“Hmm,” Zane tapped his lip thoughtfully for a moment. “*Any* shirt?” he asked. Caart shrugged.

“Yeah. I mean, I know the owner pretty well, he probably wouldn’t mind anyway, it’s just that he says he can’t have one rule fo- what’re you doing?” he asked, bewildered. Zane had unzipped his bag and was rummaging. He pulled something out and tossed it to the surprised stallion.

“Try that on for size.”

“For *size*?” Caart whinnied in laughter. He held up a short-sleeved shirt similar in style to the one Zane already wore. “Man, I’ll *burst* it! No way is anything of yours going to fit me.”

“It should be ok around the neck and shoulders,” Zane disagreed. Caart snorted.

“So what?”

“So, who says you have to have a shirt *buttoned up* to be wearing it? It’s not like you’ve not got anything on under it.” He gestured to the horse’s tight T-shirt. “They can’t say you’re not decent, right?”

Caart stared at the giraffe in bemused admiration for a moment.

“That... that’s downright *sneaky*, man.” Zane shrugged, looking a little flustered at the praise. He glanced away down the street.

“I just don’t like it when people make up stupid rules.”

“Rebel.” Grinning, Caart began to haul the shirt on, then paused. “I’ll, uhh, buy you a new one if this... doesn’t work out.”

“Just try the damn shirt,” Zane replied, exasperated.

It fit. *Just*. He had to squeeze to get his upper arms through the holes, the black-furred flesh bulging out of them like chocolate truffle, and there was no hope in hell of doing up even the topmost button, but it stretched sufficiently across his back and down his sides without splitting. And it clashed appallingly with his T-shirt. Zane glanced at him, and stifled a cough of laughter.

“L-looking *buff*, big fella.”

“*Fat-ass*, man. Fat. Ass.” Caart corrected as he tugged gingerly on the two sides of the shirt, and was rewarded with a creeaak. The garment was definitely for ornamental purposes only. Around his chest there was a two-foot gap that was impossible to cover. He looked over at Zane, taking in the depth of the giraffe’s chest, then chuckled. “Geeze, I AM getting a big boy.” On cue, his stomach then let out a ravenous-sounding growl. “Ehe...” One of Caart’s ears wilted as he absent-mindedly put a hand to his belly. “Do you mind if we make dinner sooner rather than later?”

Zane shook his head and gave a little laugh.

Forty-five minutes later they made it to the restaurant. They probably could have been quicker. Zane had set off at his customary pace, but had been pulled up.

“Whoa man, wait up!” Glancing behind him, the giraffe saw that Caart was already huffing.

“Phew... take it easy, ok? Some of us are in a different-kind-of shape nowadays.” Zane realised, chagrined, that their time on the court had taken more out of his friend than he’d cared to admit.

“You sure you’re ok?” he asked, trying not to sound too anxious. Caart just smirked as the giraffe waited for him to catch up.

“Heh, part of living life in the Wide-Lane, man: you’ve got a lower top speed.” Then he winked and lightly brushed the side of his belly with one hand, making it ripple. “But boy, the ride-comfort sure improves.”

So they took it slow. Besides, the horse wanted a stop for:

“*Ice-cream?*”

“Uh-huh,” Caart confirmed, completely unabashed as he stood in the queue for the little shop. Next to him, Zane glanced round and realised he was the skinniest ‘customer’ by probably at least 100 lbs. And that was even with being head and shoulders above everyone else. “Hey, it’s your fault: I worked up a major appetite back there! Besides,” he added with a chubby grin, “it’d be a *crime* not to taste this stuff. This place does the best ice-cream in town! C’mon, at least keep me company, I don’t want to look *greedy*.” The horse glanced slyly up at him. “Or is eating ice cream too radical a rebellion for you?”

The giraffe didn’t deign to reply to that, but when it came to his turn he bought a cone with one scoop of honey-and-strawberry. Caart, meanwhile...

“Coffee?” Zane asked laconically as the stout stallion eagerly took possession. The scoops were so velvety-dark they were almost the same shade as Caart’s own hide. They bore more than a passing resemblance to his shape, too.

“Liquorice,” he replied, his tongue slurping lovingly across it.

“*Liquorice* ice cream?”

“It’s a Scandinavian thing.” Strands of caramel sauce oozed and glistened over the scoops. Caart let out a soft whicker of pleasure as he licked again, wide tongue ploughing a furrow deep in the soft, chilly surface. “Seriously man, I could eat a bucket of this stuff.” Even wearing sunglasses, Zane’s look managed to imply that he thought he *was*: the cone Caart was holding took two hands to support, and there were at least five generous scoops visible. It wasn’t an ice cream, it was an edifice.

“Uhh, how’s yours, big guy?” the horse emerged from his love-affair long enough to ask belatedly as they resumed their walk towards dinner. Zane took a delicate lick at his single scoop in the slanting sunshine, and nodded.

“It’s pretty good.”

“‘Pretty good’?” Caart looked up at Zane with something close to horror over the summit of his ‘snack’. “Only ‘pretty good’?” He glanced over his shoulder, “They’d fire whoever made it if they heard you saying *that*.”

“No, it *is* pretty good,” the giraffe repeated, taking another meditative lick. As the horse continued to stare at him, he shrugged and elaborated. “Strawberry-y.” When nothing else was forthcoming Caart looked at him in silence for a few moments more, then just snorted and shook his head in disbelief.

“It must be that blue tongue of yours.” Mid-lick, Zane coughed self-consciously, and then had to wipe ice cream from his chin whilst the stallion smirked. Ignoring this and further teasing glances, the giraffe resumed addressing his pretty-good ice cream with patient, methodical licks. By the time he was down to the cone, Caart had already finished his, and was sucking his sticky fingers clean of melted ice cream and caramel sauce.

* * *

At the restaurant door- emblazoned with the title ‘Lars’ Kitchen’- they passed muster, although the maître d’ gave Caart a look that implied she was up for a spirited debate on the fundamental nature of shirt-ness. Fortunately at the crucial moment a waiter materialised with a familiar ‘Hey there, Big C., nice to see you back’, which seemed to tip the balance.

“Hi Benny,” the big black horse grinned and addressed the waiter directly over the hubbub of the crowded dining area. “Table for three?” He winked. The waiter’s smile broadened slightly.

“I’m sure we can find room to squeeze you in.”

“‘Big C.’?” Zane muttered in tones of disbelief. The horse smirked smugly, and patted his shirt-stretching stomach.

“Hey, if the horse-shoe fits...”

As advertised, they were down on the shorefront- sticking over the shorefront, in fact, with the rear half of the building walled in glass. The kitchen was enclosed at the centre of the space, leaving it a kind of horseshoe shape. Big double doors stood open onto a raised balcony with even more tables, all occupied. The background music was nicely pitched to offer some privacy of conversation, but wasn’t loud enough to be distracting. They followed the immaculate, dapper waiter, who found then a vacant table inside, a four-seater which he

swiftly reset for two- the staff here had patently dealt with this oversized customer before. Fortunately, they seemed genuinely pleased to see him. With the evening now drawing in, the room was lit by a mixture of waning sunlight and ambient lighting. The décor was modern without being pretentious, down to the rather small, modular-looking backless stools with padded tops that sat at each table. The horse nudged the pair on the window-side together and then sank his weight comfortably onto both. His legs stuck out at right angles under the table. As Zane balanced opposite on just the one chair, folding his legs up more neatly, the waiter fanned a menu in front of him with a professional flick. A stand of breadsticks and some dark paste in a pot materialised, too.

“Chef’s specials are on the blackboard,” he nodded towards the kitchen wall. “Can I get you drinks whilst you’re deciding?”

“Beer, thanks, Benny,” Caart replied.

“Sparkling water, please,” Zane said. Benny the waiter bustled off, and the horse snorted expressively.

“Go, Mr. Adventurous.” Zane busied himself studying the menu thoroughly, then when he’d inwardly digested that he swung his head round and regarded the blackboard behind him thoughtfully. He looked down at his menu again, bringing his head down to peer more closely. Caart rolled his eyes in exasperation. “Man, are you *ever* going to take those damn sunglasses off? People are going to think you’ve got an eye-infection or something.”

With a rather sheepish expression, Zane lifted his sunglasses onto the peak of his cap, blinking once in the increased light.

“Huh,” was all he said, even though the menu *was* easier to read, now. The horse grinned at him, already noisily crunching a breadstick.

“*That’s* better- I feel like I’m actually talking with the real you now, super-star.” He pushed the breadsticks at him. “Try the black stuff, it’s olive-y.”

“Tapenade,” Zane said absently. Transferring the menu to one hand, he broke a small piece off the end of one stick with the other and dipped it. He popped it in his mouth and chewed thoughtfully, his attention still on the menu. “Mm.”

“‘Pretty good’?” Caart asked teasingly. Zane paused chewing, and gave the sarky stallion a Look. Perhaps fortunately, at that moment Benny reappeared with the drinks. Ignoring the glass that came with it, Caart picked up his beer bottle and took a gulp straight from its neck. Zane sipped through a straw.

“Alright, guys, what can I get for you?” Even standing, he was barely higher than Caart sitting down, and Zane’s head still towered over him. He grinned at the horse. “Going for the steak again tonight, Big C.?”

The horse spluttered over his beer; he heard a faint choking sound came from the other side of the table. His composure gone, the stout stallion shook his head at the waiter whilst mouthing ‘no’, along with frantic ‘stop’ and throat-cutting gestures. When he finally glanced across at his friend, the giraffe was leaning back, arms crossed, and regarding him with an unfathomable expression, though with the ghost of a smile, too.

“No?” Benny asked, apparently completely oblivious. “Shame, you’re missing out. Chef says it’s the best he’s had in a long while.”

“The spinach cannelloni, and the vegetarian lasagne,” Caart grunted coldly. “With cheesy garlic bread on the side. My, uhh, usual arrangement.”

“Double helpings all the way, *noooo* problem.” He scribbled a note on his pad, then turned with polite enquiry to the giraffe. Ignoring the flustered horse’s attempts to catch his eye, Zane smiled politely.

“Excuse me asking, but do you make the pasta from scratch?”

“Absolutely,” Benny nodded emphatically. “On the day, too. Chef wouldn’t have it any other way.” The giraffe nodded thoughtfully, then turned his head at the specials board.

“In that case I’ll have the cheese and herb tortellini on a bed of rocket salad to start, and the asparagus, mozzarella and lemon risotto for a main. Oh, and a side order of *bruschetta al pomodoro* to go with it, please.” Benny was writing industriously, whilst the horse was gawping at him, his mouth slightly open. “What?” Zane spread his hands. “I like good food too.”

“And truly excellent choices sir, if I may say so.” The waiter closed his book with a snap.

“And here I thought you’d go for the salad option,” the supersized stallion smiled weakly.

Benny took their menus with a smile.

“I’ll be back with your starters shortly. Chef’s in full swing, they should only take a few minutes.”

When he’d gone, Zane slowly leaned his neck forward over the table.

“Steak?” he enquired quietly. Herbivores eating meat certainly wasn’t illegal, but it was taboo. More or less.

“It was only once,” Caart replied rather defensively, his eyes not meeting the giraffe’s. “I figured I’d try out something new- and I was dating Phil at the time.” The giraffe flushed slightly. “You’re not about to walk out on me, are you, big guy?” the horse asked, a little nervously. Zane took another sip of his drink, and shrugged casually.

“Why should I? Half our team-mates are carnivores, after all- and you’ve seen what goes on at after-game parties. I guess that’s made me pretty liberal.” The giraffe scratched the back of his neck. “So, uh... Did you think it was any good?”

“Nah,” Caart replied. He shrugged himself, and raised his beer to his lips. “Sorry to be un-cool and everything, but I thought it was over-rated.” He winced, “And the, uhh... after-effects weren’t too fun.”

“I can imagine.” Zane raised his own glass in a kind of toast.

A few moments later the starters arrived. Service was fast around here. They tucked in- as promised, the food was very good. As for the conversation...

“Level with me, man,” Caart said suddenly after a few minutes of stolid eating. He put his cutlery down and gave the giraffe a searching look. “You don’t have some ulterior motive for coming to see me, do you?” Zane blinked, rather taken aback.

“No. Why would I?”

For once, Caart seemed discomfited. He shrugged apologetically. “Sorry. It’s just... an awful long way from Atlantis just to come and look up an old, washed-up ex-competitor, y’know?” He fixed the giraffe with large, serious eyes. “It’s not like we ever had the chance to really hang out much- we were pros on totally different teams. I mean,” he chuckled weakly, “I guess we know a lot *about* each other, but we don’t really *know* each other.”

“Hey,” Zane said gently, “I always thought of us as friends.”

“Thanks. I *do* appreciate that, really. But,” the horse threw him another uncomfortable glance, “it’s been two and a half years, man. More.” Now it was the giraffe’s turn to look uncomfortable. He thought about it for a couple of moments.

“Then I’m only sorry it took me so long.” He shrugged, a little helplessly. “You know how busy life in the Game gets. And I guess I figured you wouldn’t want people around constantly dragging up the past.”

“...Yeah,” the horse said eventually, “I guess you’re right.”

“But I came here because I wanted to see you again. Seriously, man.”

“Thanks, I... I’m really glad you did.” Caart gave him an apologetic smile, picking up his beer again. He gave a little snort and shook his head slightly. “I’m sorry, man, guess I’ve still got some pretty deep trust issues. Maybe I’m not as straightened out as I’d like to think.”

He drank the rest of his beer. The giraffe, gazing into the middle distance, said softly to himself:

“Behold thyself, noble beast, and weep well you may; a heart forged of iron, but thine hooves of clay.” He caught Caart blinking at him. “Uh... Shelley.” He shrugged, cheeks flushing self-consciously. “You aren’t the only guy in basketball with a college education, you know.”

“Oh, wow.” Wiping his lips, Caart set the empty bottle down and grinned, leaning forwards on one plump arm. “Great athlete, utter Nice Guy, *and* knows poetry. You’re perfect.” Zane snorted back a laugh, cheeks going rather pink again.

“Nobody’s perfect, that’s the point. Especially not me.”

The heavyweight horse chuckled and shook his head again as he resumed eating, cheeks and jowls wobbling as he did so.

“Y’know man, I don’t think I’ve ever told anyone this but... part of me always hoped I’d get to play for the All-Stars after college. But...” he shrugged and gestured at the surprised-looking giraffe with a deprecating smile, “there *you* were already at Center, and there was no way I could top *that*.” He smiled ruefully, “I guess the Cats were more my style, anyway-dirty tactics and all.” His smile became a grin. “The war horse fitted right in, huh?”

Taking a sip of his water, for once Zane scowled and shook his head.

“I could have throttled that kid.”

“Whoa!” Caart chuckled, downing tools again. “I take it back- first going all cave-giraffe on Phil, now *this*? Suddenly I’m seeing a whole different side of you.” The giraffe didn’t join in the laughter. “Ah, c’mon, man. You know he had a point- I hassled people plenty on court. Hell, I put a couple of them in *casts*.”

“You never hassled me,” Zane said gently as the horse gestured to Benny the waiter for another drink as he passed.

“Well, you never gave me any excuse to. You were always-”

“-Boring?” Zane asked lightly.

For the first time ever, Zane saw the great and mighty Caart Hørssten blush. He hadn't thought anyone with that dark a hide *could* blush.

"Oh, maaaaan..." the stallion gave a weak laugh, then looked at the giraffe, abashed. "I'm sorry, I got kind of carried away earlier. No man, you're not *boring*, you just..." Caart fumbled for words, Zane watching him with obvious amusement. "You play by the rules." "In other words: boring."

"You're not going to let me get away with this, are you?" the horse asked, almost writhing in discomfort. Grinning, Zane just shook his head slowly. Snorting in embarrassment, Caart tossed his mane, and flashed the giraffe a brief smile. "But hey, better boring than berserk, right? I mean, I *annihilated* some guys who riled me."

"Well, like I said: you never tried to annihilate *me*." Zane said with a smile. Caart grinned. "I'm not sure I could have even if I'd wanted to, tall-guy." He took a sip of his fresh beer. "Besides, you were one of the guys I had a crush on back then."

Zane's entire face and neck went bright pink.

"Oh, come *on*, man," Caart whinnied in laughter, "what did you expect? You guys have got a reputation, after all."

"The *All-Stars*?" Zane asked, sounding horrified.

"No, doofus- *giraffes*! The gayest animal in the zoo, and all that."

"Oh," he said uncomfortably, glancing around as Caart giggled. Fortunately, the volume of conversation surrounding them was pretty high. "Yeah. Right."

"And then there's all that neck-wrestling stuff. That looks like *fun*-" the horse broke off when he saw Zane's expression. "Oh man, sorry, I shouldn't tease." But his grin stayed in place. "After all, you're such a Regular Guy and all. Geeze, I mean, you're *married* and everything." He hiccupped, even as the giraffe gave a start. "Whoof, sorry, I think I drank that last beer too fast. How *is*, uhh... damnit" he smiled apologetically at his friend. "Sorry man, I've forgotten her name."

"Temperance," Caart unsuccessfully disguised a cough of laughter by snapping his chubby fingers.

"*That's* it. I knew it was something..." he coughed again and caught himself just in time, "... uhh, traditional, like that." The horse frowned apologetically through the faint alcohol haze, aware that he might have offended Zane- the giraffe's expression had gone kind of wooden. "She seemed nice, but I never really saw her at any games, just at parties." He snorted good-

humouredly, “and let’s face it, I wasn’t really checking out the *girls* at those things.” Zane chuckled, and gave him a rather wan smile.

“Heh, I guess not.”

A silence fell as they finished their starters, and the main courses arrived soon after. More silence reigned for a time- the food was *very* good. And the portions were generous. Even then, true to his word, the horse’s plate was heaped with a truly enormous volume of foodstuff, which he set about demolishing as though he hadn’t eaten all day. As he ate, Caart picked up his beer a couple of times, but each time hesitated and then set it back down.

“You sure you don’t want a real drink with that, man?”

“I’m fine with water, really,” Zane replied, smiling to take the sting out of the refusal. His mouth quirked up at one edge. “Sorry to be boring.”

“Hrmph.” The horse grunted, but managed not to blush. Having his mouth full helped.

A little while later Zane coughed and asked tentatively, “So, uh, how *did* everyone react to your being... well...” His cheeks turned rather pink.

“A unicorn?” Caart supplied, with a glint of mischief. The giraffe flushed again, and made a weak gesture of acquiescence. “Oh, about as well as you’d expect.”

“You, uh... sure picked a way to announce it.” The hefty horse whickered in laughter.

“Haha, uhh, yeah. I hadn’t really *intended* to do it like that. But my mouth just kind of bolted on me. I guess I could have asked them not to print that bit, but,” he shrugged, “it seemed kind of hypocritical after what I’d said about being honest and all. Besides, I figured compared to the rest of it *that* part was pretty small beer.”

“Eh, yeah, I guess so.” Zane ate a couple more mouthfuls, chewing rather distractedly. Then he swallowed and said tentatively. “So, uh... a predator, huh?”

The horse paused, loaded fork half-way to his lips. He glanced at the giraffe, and smiled.

“Uh-huh.”

It was another unwritten social taboo- a much stronger one. Again, not illegal, but that was because most would have said it would be like banning drinking petrol with a lighted cigarette in your mouth, or other patently insane acts. Wider society was, at least publically, more or less accepting of same-sex relationships these days, depending on your cultural/species heritage; you typically had to go cross-species before you raised

eyebrows/ridges/feathers/whatever. It has to be said that sports fans tended towards the more conservative end of the spectrum, as graphically demonstrated earlier in the day. ‘Cross-trophism’, on the other hand, was generally considered *weird* even by the most determinedly liberal-minded in polite society. Rather sad on one hand, and downright dangerous on the other. You did hear stories about it happening though, even if you never actually knew the animals involved directly. The stories tended to be short.

Caart didn’t say anything further, and when Zane didn’t press he pushed the forkful into his snout and chewed stolidly. Face practically aglow in the now dimming light, the giraffe eventually blurted out,

“So, uh... what was it like?” The horse stopped chewing and gave him a look. “Oh, c’mon,” Zane protested, “You *know* I had to ask.” He grinned uncertainly. “Better or worse than the steak?” As the silence lengthened uncomfortably another flush of embarrassment infused his long face. “Eh... sorry, man, I get it- it’s really none of my business.” Looking down, he busied himself with his meal.

The enormous equine chewed thoughtfully for a few moments, then he commented:

“They don’t like it when you give them love-bites *back*.”

Zane snorted, and hurriedly took a sip of his drink. Caart was trying hard not to giggle himself.

“Besides,” the horse carried on casually, “the couple I’ve been out with were pretty much all mouth and no trousers.” *Couple*. Zane spluttered and gave him a round-eyed look, but the stallion just winked teasingly. “Big egos, particularly for a bunch of short-arses.” He munched on another mouthful of vegetable lasagne, then with a grin raised his beer bottle and took a swig. The giraffe leaned back and folded his arms, trying not to smile too much. ‘Clay-Hoofed’ Hørssten’s ego had been as big as any alpha-predator’s in the sport. The irony wasn’t lost on him.

“I guess, uh, having Kürt to look up to must make something of a change.” Zane’s cheeks were still rather pink, but to his relief it felt like the glow was dying down, at least.

“Hey, I don’t- wait, *what*?” Caart blinked, coughing slightly on his beer. “What’s Kürt got to do with it?” He looked rather bewildered. Zane shrugged uncomfortably. “Well, he’s taller than you, and... you know...”

“No, I don’t. *What?*” They stared at each other in mutual incomprehension, Zane with rising embarrassment.

“Well, I mean... you and...”

“Me and-? *No!*” The horse exclaimed, for once looking thoroughly flustered. “Kürt and me, we’re not... he’s... I’m *single*, man!”

The giraffe started, and then suddenly burst out laughing. Caart goggled, awe-struck, as the notoriously quiet and self-controlled Zane Alekai completely lost it. He just *dissolved* in laughter. And it kept on, and on, and on. The giraffe tried manfully to contain the giggles a couple of times, chest heaving, but then he just collapsed again in hoots of hysteria as heads at other tables turned disapprovingly. In the end he had to put his head on his arms across the table and just lie there, neck bowed, shoulders shaking helplessly. The horse found himself fighting not to join in with the infectious hilarity.

“I’m... I’m *sorry*, ma-ha-ha-ha-haan,” Zane said as he finally managed to regain some kind of control. “Oww, my sides...” He managed to sit up a little, to find Benny the waiter hovering anxiously at his shoulder, ready to administer a slap on the back in case he was asphyxiating, or possibly just a general, all-purpose slap. “Coo-hoo-uld I have another glass of water, please?” the giraffe asked meekly. Benny nodded reluctantly and backed away, casting concerned glances back in their direction. Zane swung back to the horse, managing to lower his voice, albeit still spluttering as he spoke. “But when yoo-hoo-hoo said that you and he wer-her *partners* I...all this time... I *really* thought-”

“*Business* partners, man!” Caart found he was laughing now, even as his face turned red.

“Geeze, you must... I’m not *that* kind of a guy! I’m a stud, not... not a *bike*.”

“Ss-sorree-hee-hee-hee, man,” Zane was wiping tears of laughter out of his eyes and fumbling ineffectually for his abandoned cutlery. Benny returned with a fresh glass of water, still looking a little concerned, and the giraffe took a grateful swig, holding his breath until his hiccupping laughter subsided. “Oof...” He took a grateful, deep breath, then stabbed a piece of asparagus with his fork. Eating seemed to help calm him down. He still tittered a couple more times.

“And Kürt’s not taller than me,” Caart objected heatedly, once Benny had retreated. Zane snorted around his mouthful.

“Oh, he *is*, man. Couple of inches.”

“No, he’s *not*,” the stallion said with a muleish scowl, folding his ample arms. “The top of *his* head reaches the top of *my* ears. That makes us the same height.” The ears in question folded back with indignation. “I am *not* shorter than Kürt. Got that, Long-neck?”

“Ok, ok.” The giraffe spread his hands in a gesture of surrender. A suspicious-sounding cough escaped from his throat as he contemplated his dinner. “Size queen.” Caart snorted, still bristling, but seeing the wry grin on Zane’s face he subsided with an impotent grump. “And don’t you forget it.” He polished off the last of his laughably-large lasagne.

They both cleared their plates- something which seemed to surprise Zane’s XXL dinner companion. Benny swiftly reappeared and set about emptying the table.

“How was the food for you guys?”

“Incredible,” Zane commented warmly. “*Bellissimo*. Please pass on my compliments to the chef- that basil filling in the tortellini was inspired. And the lemon in the risotto was absolutely spot-on.”

“I’ll do that for you, sir,” the waiter replied with a smile, and bustled off. Caart was gaping at the giraffe, rather dumbstruck.

“You... you *do* like good food,” he said, almost wonderingly. Then he snorted in amusement. “Geeze, I thought *nothing* was going to impress you.”

“I did tell you,” Zane said evenly, placing his napkin neatly in front of him. “I’m not a *machine*, man.”

The stout stallion gave a sheepish little shrug. “Sorry man, I honestly had you pegged as one of those guys who just saw food as a heap of nutrients.” He snorted. “Hell, I knew enough of them back in the day. Especially after the ice cream bombed with you.”

“Hey,” Zane said quietly, “I *liked* that ice cream.”

“Damnit man, you’ve really got to try to be less... understated.” Caart shook his head, mane quivering. “But geeze, the Cats coach would have gone ballistic if you’d just eaten *that* in front of him, mid-season.”

“Mine too,” Zane shrugged and sat back, arms folded. Caart gave him a long look.

“But you still-”

“Alright, which of you boys has been saying such *wonderful* things about my cooking?”

A large paw clamped down on Zane’s shoulder. The giraffe twisted his neck sharply sideways to identify the owner of this booming voice. His eyes widened slightly as they fell upon the biggest malamute he’d ever seen, standing probably about the 7 foot mark. Clad in

whites and voluminous check trousers, it was a fairly safe bet that this was the chef. Even without that, his enormous, overfed stomach was something of a clue. Having just about got used to Caart's uh, imposing size, meeting someone weightier-still was something of a shock. The corpulent culinary canine was practically a ball. Standing between them, a plump paw on one shoulder each, he was smiling genially beneath his striped skull-cap. Those bloated cheeks squashing either side of his muzzle and the plump extra chin gave his rotund features a supremely jolly air of bonhomie, but there was still the glint of well-polished fangs if you looked closely.

"Now, I know it can't have been you, Big C.," the dog rumbled in amusement. "*You've* got absolutely no taste whatsoever, you great greedy-guts." He actually reached over and prodded the horse's balloon-like belly, much to Zane's startled surprise. He lost his finger up to the third knuckle.

"Oof... Nice to see you too, Chef," the horse said with a little smile.

"And that's a very nice shirt you're almost not-wearing, by the way. Matches your shorts."

Zane watched, just *knowing* that Caart was about to open his mouth and cheekily rehearse the argument about it still being a shirt, even if not buttoned up. But the humungous hound forestalled him. "So if it wasn't you, it must have been *this* tall, blonde stranger." He shifted to inspect the giraffe more closely. Zane's eyes tracked down and spotted the name 'Lars' embroidered floridly in one corner of the rather stretched smock's expansive chest.

"You must be the owner," he said with a smile, and stuck out his hand. "Thank you for such a nice meal, sir." Caart busily tried to stifle a grin- Zane's Sowth Efriken accent had mysteriously grown a lot more prominent. The peak of his cap had also sunk down further, casting his face in shadow from the lights above. Mind you, Lars cast his own substantial shadow over them, along with the rest of the table.

"Well now, you certainly seem to have a fine nose for food, my lad," Lars commented, leaning over him slightly more. "And I appreciate you checking on the freshness before ordering." His smile widened slightly to show a greater length of his canines- ah, obviously word of *that* had got back to the kitchen, too. "I like to know I'm cooking for people with high standards. Would you be in the trade too?"

"Oh, no, sir," the giraffe replied with a modest gesture. "I just known when I'm eating good food, is all." Caart's shoulders shook once, and he let out a high-pitched little snort. The massive malamute was looking down at Zane speculatively.

“Not many people picked up on the basil tonight. Care to take a guess at the cheese, too?”

He winked. “I’ll give you a hint, it’s not the usual.” The giraffe thought quickly.

“Normally you’d use something like pecorino I guess, but that was definitely stronger...” his tongue licked around his teeth for a moment, then he shrugged “...I don’t know. Manchego, maybe?”

“Pretty close, my boy, pretty close. You certainly must have some good cooks in your family.” The giraffe smiled, flushing slightly.

“My grandfather, actually- he loved to cook.” Lars’ smile broadened further.

“Well this was a local cheese, but pretty similar to Spanish manchego. But that wasn’t really a fair question- I’m guessing from that accent you’re not a local boy.”

“No sir,” Zane said, “Just passing through.”

“Well now, that’s a mighty shame, we need all the good taste we can get. Keeps my cooking up to the mark.” The mountainous malamute turned his attention to the smiling, sumo-sized stallion sitting opposite, “Big C. here’s one of my very favourite customers, but he wouldn’t know great cuisine if it rose off his plate and smacked him in the chops with the Michelin guide. He ate one of the finest steaks I’ve ever cooked and then promptly barfed it up in the restroom.” He reached over and playfully noogied the horse, who’s smile had vanished instantaneously. This time it was Zane’s turn to stifle a grin.

“Thanks for bringing that up. *Again.*” Caart commented acidly as the dog released him, trying to get his mussed mane back into shape.

“*You* were the one who brought it back up, if I recall, Big. C.” It may have been the lighting, but the stallion’s cheeks had turned distinctly ruddy. “Aww, he knows I’m just joshing him,” Lars said with a grin, addressing Zane.

“Say *that* next time you ask me for a trade discount,” the horse muttered hotly. The doughball of a dog just grinned down at him, then ignored the bad-tempered interruption.

“Still, his heart’s in the right place, not to mention his stomach. When he first started coming here he was more of a *Little C.* My cooking’s responsible for at least *some* of that horseflesh he’s hauling around these days.” To emphasise his point, he playfully pinched one of Caart’s chubby cheeks and jiggled it. “So, Big C., is this your latest beau?”

Cheek still caught between the dog’s sturdy fingers, the hefty horse froze. He made a kind of strangled whicker and tried to shake his head. Lars released him with a grin before commenting sideway to the rather flummoxed giraffe:

“He brings them *all* here, y’know. I sometimes think he swaps them so regularly just because he wants another excuse to fill up at my table.”

“We’re not-”

“But you seriously ought to think of hanging on to *this* guy, Big C., he’s definitely a cut above your usual standard. Maybe some of his nice manners will rub off on you, but let’s not get our hopes up too high, eh?”

“Damnit, this isn’t a *date*, Lars!” Caart said through gritted teeth, glancing frantically across the table. Zane’s face had gone red, but he was laughing quietly. “This is an *old friend* of mine who’s visiting for a couple of days.”

The dog contrived to look as though he was singularly unconvinced by this story, but would go along with it for now.

“Well he’s about to become and even better ‘friend’ of yours, Big C., because thanks to him and his silver tongue you boys are each getting dessert on the house. And I know at least one of you will still have room for them.” With a wink, the colossally chubby canine produced a couple of slips of paper from where they were tucked behind the rather straining buttons of his whites. He handed them across, and they turned out to be dessert menus. “Enjoy, boys: I’m afraid I’ve got to get back to the kitchen to feed all these other lovely folks.” As he turned away, he patted the giraffe paternally on the arm, and added in a much quieter voice. “And good luck in your next game, Big Z.”

The giraffe sat frozen for a couple of moments, neck ram-rod stiff, and then slumped, forehead clutched in one hand. Caart, meanwhile, cracked up silently, his own humiliation forgotten.

“Yeah, uhh, Lars knows who I am... *was*,” the horse admitted, still giggling, when Zane gave him a wordless glare. “I guess it didn’t take a genius to put two and two together. What? It’s not like I could have warned you. But man, you are so *bad* at this kind of thing.” He smiled winningly at his quietly fuming friend. “Do you think the accent helped? Ah, c’mon man,” he said when Zane didn’t reply and instead stonily turned his attention to the dessert menu. “He’s not going to let on to anyone, I promise. Geeze, he *likes* you! Free dessert? *Here*? I’d kill for that kind of star treatment.” Zane’s expression finally cracked into a rather wan smile.

“It does look pretty good.”

“Honest to god- you’ll like this way, way more than that ice cream.” The horse’s expression took on a slightly pleading air. “Even if you don’t actually want anything, order one anyway?” He glanced meaningfully down at his own place setting.

Zane sat back, looked up at the ceiling, and smiled.

The sun was down against the horizon now, the evening sky awash with incidental light, and they were tucking into their dessert. Apparently Caart got double helpings of *that*, too, judging by the breezeblock-sized slab of tiramisu he received. Zane had been sorely tempted by that option, but in the end had chosen the frozen lemon cheesecake on offer.

“That, uh... taste good?”

“You’re damn right,” the horse grunted, pausing briefly between industrious mouthfuls.

“Lars makes the best tiramisu I’ve ever had.” He coughed a moment, then chuckled and fanned his plump features, “with enough rum in it to sink a navy.”

Zane quietly cut the tip off the wedge of his cheesecake, brought it to his lips, sniffed it tentatively, then popped it into his mouth.

“How about yours? Pretty good?” The horse asked him with a teasing smile.

“Mff.” Zane didn’t answer immediately, savouring the first bite as the sharp lemon sorbet dissolved first, followed by the creamy cheesecake underneath. “Very good,” he finally said with a small smile, pointing to his serving with his fork. Caart whickered.

“Finally. *Anima ex machina*.” His chubby face creased into a grin at Zane’s expression.

“Hey, my time in college wasn’t *completely* wasted on basketball.” He then rather ruined the sophisticated effect by stifling a deep, reverberating belch. “Oof, sorry: bubbles,” he added with a grin.

“Was that the translation in Old Norse?” the giraffe asked with a grin.

“Aww, gimme a *break*, man!” Caart said, laughing as he leaned forward.

“They’re, uh, sure generous with their helpings,” Zane commented obliquely, nodding at the horse’s overloaded plate. He couldn’t help but notice it was now missing about a quarter of its starting content. The heavyweight horse already had thick smears of cocoa powder and chocolate curls on both sides of his mouth. Fork already half-way to his snout again, the swollen stallion gave a soft snort.

“Lars, uhh, understands the needs of a Big Eater like me,” he said with a chubby smile.

“He’s one himself.” Zane felt himself starting to blush again, and despite himself asked,

“Did, uh, you and he-?”

“No, man!” Caart said, shaking his head and grinning, apparently without rancour at the unasked question. He winked and jiggled his overindulged gut, which was threatening to press up against the table if he leaned any closer. “There’d not be *room* for the two of us, for one thing.”

“Uh, I g-guess not...”

“Lars... well... he kind of took me under his wing when I moved here. And, uh...” the humungous horse circumspectly patted the front of his bloated belly, “he acts sort of like he’s my uncle. Or my coach. But he’s *still* a nice guy,” he chuckled as Zane pulled a face and made a point of shuddering. “I guess, anyway: I never had any uncles.”

“I’ve got *five*,” the giraffe commented with a quiet grin, holding up the digits on one hand.

“Trust me, you’re lucky.”

“Whoa. And did they *all* rag you to become a pro basketball player?”

“My whole *family* did, once I got offered a contract. Well,” Zane said with a far-away smile, “all except Grandma. *She* still wanted me to run a vineyard- she thought that was a respectable career. She thought that ‘bouncing a stupid rubber ball around’ couldn’t possibly count as a *profession*.”

Zane took another small bite of his dessert, then realised that Caart was watching him intently.

“Y’know, I’ve spent the whole day gassing about me, but we’ve hardly *mentioned* you, big guy.” His voice... softened. “Is everything ok, man?”

“What?” Thrown by the question, the giraffe blinked. “Uhh, yeah, I’m... fine. I guess. Why?” The hefty horse looked a bit embarrassed, but pressed on.

“It’s just... you seem... less happy than I remember.”

Zane sat very still for a moment, still holding his fork, before sitting back with a brief grunt that might have been the start of a laugh. He gave the horse a complicated smile, and glanced away.

“Yeah, I guess life can do that to you,” he said, pretty much to himself. After a few moments he looked back to find the soft stallion’s grey eyes still on him.

“I always thought you had such a... a model life,” Caart commented. He took another bite of meltingly thick tiramisu, then waved the spotlessly-clean spoon absent-mindedly, squinting with the effort of recollection. “Let’s see... Born and grew up in... Cape Town, right? Won

a scholarship to go to college in Johannesburg, where you were a straight-A student: damn, you're a smart guy-

"Whoa!" Zane was laughing and shaking his head, hands out in front of him to stop the horse, cheeks faintly pink. "Where'd you get all *that*?"

"Hey," Caart grinned, "you're not the only one who reads interviews! They did a couple of profiles on you, way back, and I guess I remember because I was... curious about you." He flashed the giraffe a quick smile. Zane shook his head again.

"I really don't like doing those things. They always make me feel so... full of it."

"Yeah, but it's amazing some of the background stuff they *do* fill it up with if you don't give them what they want." He took a gulp of his beer, and despite the giraffe's feeble protest, carried on. "Oh yeah, you only took up basketball when you started college- pretty late- but were an instant natural. Played on your college team all four years, won three straight championships. So hot you got noticed by the Big Teams over here, and then got offered a deal by the All-Stars when you graduated. Been top of their A-list ever since. Man..." the horse shook his head wonderingly. "And you even married your high-school sweetheart." He chuckled. "You're practically a *cliché* ..." he glanced around with a grin, "...Big. Z."

The giraffe suddenly wasn't smiling any more.

"Caart..." He put his cutlery down. "Look, there's something you should... I need to..." he stopped, took a breath, then looked at the horse and shrugged helplessly. "Pren and me... we divorced."

The noise of the restaurant around them seemed very loud, all of a sudden.

"Oh, *man*," the horse said slowly. His spoon clanked onto his plate. He was quiet a moment, looking deflated, then shook his head. "I'm sorry, man- I... I didn't know. Honestly, I really *didn't* know."

"It's ok, man." Zane shrugged. "We kept it pretty quiet." He produced a rather weak smile.

"That was something I *really* didn't want splashed all over the papers."

"No, it's *not* ok! *When*?" Caart asked, voice rising. The giraffe shrugged tiredly. This conversation always went the same way.

"Just over a year ago." He forestalled the stallion's next outburst. "It's really no big deal- we'd already been separated for a couple of years before that. I guess it was pretty inevitable by then."

“A couple of *years*? Waitaminute...” the horse was very obviously doing mental arithmetic, which at this stage of the evening required the use of his fingers.

“Yeah, we started living apart before you left the game,” Zane said quietly, looking at his plate.

“*What?*” This news seemed to distress the stallion even more, somehow. “But I... you... I never *noticed*...” his jaw worked in silence a few more times, then he finished feebly, “I always thought you two looked so happy together.”

“Yeah,” Zane said, still stoically scrutinising his half-finished dessert, hands resting either side of it, “everyone says that.” He looked up apologetically. “I’m sorry man, but can we talk about something else? Please?” He attempted a smile. “This isn’t exactly my favourite topic of conversation.”

“Yeah, alright. But, seriously, if you ever need to talk...” impulsively the horse reached out and put his plump hand over the giraffe’s outstretched on the table. He felt Zane flinch a little at the contact. “I’m always here to take a pass from you, you know that, right? Wait,” his face worked as his brain caught up with his ears, and he pulled his hand away as though it had caught fire. “As in *basketball*! I didn’t mean... not like... not *that*.” Cheeks steadily turning more and more crimson, he put his hands over his eyes to hide. “Argh. It was a sporting metaphor! Not... oh dear god, somebody save me from my stupid mouth!”

When he dared peek between his fingers, Zane was shaking in his seat with the effort of not cracking up all over again.

“I th-think we’d better stop talking and finish dessert,” the giraffe spluttered out.

“Yeah, that’s probably safest.” Caart glanced down at his two-thirds empty plate, he blinked.

“And if Lars sees this left, he’ll think *I* think there’s something wrong with his cooking, and *kill* me.”

“That or you’ve burst.” This teasing comment from Zane was so unexpected that Caart nearly choked on the mouthful he’d just shovelled in. Managing to swallow it without spluttering, he summoned a grin for his friend.

“Hey, I’m still making up for ten years without getting my just desserts!” Zane actually groaned aloud at this dreadful pun. “Not to *mention* all those birthday cakes I missed.” The horse snorted. “I’m *owed*, man. Big-time.”

“When is your birthday?” The giraffe was leaning forward again now, laughing.

“Next month. The 24th. Seriously,” Caart said with a rather proud grin, patting the soft mass

of his middle. “It takes more than seconds of pudding to fill *me* up. You should see me when I’m let loose at a buffet.”

“Kid, is there something you want?”

Caart blinked, nonplussed, then realised that Zane was addressing a young-looking waiter standing close by their table- a skinny red panda he’d seen in the background on a couple of visits. Still in training. The kid didn’t answer- he was still gaping at the giraffe in what he’d probably thought was a surreptitious manner, his mouth half-open and his eyes aglow, almost out on stalks. Caart frowned, confused, then comprehension suddenly dawned. He’d had stares like that directed at him a few times, in the old days.

“Umm... could... could I...?” The kid finally stopped his goldfish impression and started talking. Well, trying to talk. He seemed painfully over-awed. Caart watched the giraffe forcibly fix a friendly smile in place.

“If you’ve got your order book on you, will that do?” The trainee gulped slightly, and nodded. He produced it, along with its pen.

“Th-thank you, it’s... it’s a real... oh, wow..!”

“What’s your name?” The trainee turned bright pink.

“Umm... T-Travis, Mr., Ah, uhh, Z-Z...”

“Well, Travis,” the giraffe scribbled methodically for a few moments, then finished with a flourish, “here you go.” But then he tore out the page, and its pink copy beneath. Folding them neatly, a monetary note magically appeared in his other hand, which he handed to the bewildered trainee instead, along with his notepad. “I’ll leave this on the table,” smiling, he gestured with the autograph, “and another twenty as a tip when you clear away, so long as you *promise* you won’t mention this to anyone, anyone at all, until we’re long gone.” He gave the gaping trainee a wink. “Is that ok?”

“Umm... co. could you maybe sign th-?”

“Sure, why not?” Zane took the pen back off him, produced the promised twenty and scribbled on it as well. “Dear... Travis... thanks so much... for keeping... our bargain.” He signed that too, and handed the pen back, still smiling warmly. “Deal?”

“Absolutely, uh, sir.” Travis gulped and gave a truly dreadful wink. Zane nodded, and pointedly tucked both the note and the autograph under the edge of his plate. “Th-thank you so much, I really. I... thank you!” He stumbled backwards, then turned and hared off towards the kitchen.

“Smoothly played, man.” Caart said quietly, with a grin. He watched Zane keep on smiling until the kid was at a safe distance, and then watched it slowly evaporate. The giraffe looked down at his half-eaten dessert, then across at Caart’s now-empty plate.

“Do, uh, you want this?” The horse’s eyes widened slightly.

“Seriously? Uhh...” he scratched his plump neck, “Well, sure, if you don’t want it...” The giraffe nodded.

“Yeah, I think I’ve had enough,” he said quietly. He started to slide the plate across the table, but the big black stallion’s hefty hand suddenly stopped it, pressing back.

“Hey,” he said, “Come on, man. Please tell me that you’re not going to let that spoil your dinner.” At some point those sunglasses had dropped back down, making Zane’s expression unreadable. “*Please.*” The giraffe shook his head gently and flashed him a brief smile, the kind he reserved for the cameras.

“It’s fine, man, really. Of course it hasn’t.”

“Then I’m sure you can finish this.” Caart increased the pressure on the plate, and met resistance coming the other way. For a second they stared stubbornly at each other across the table, the plate locked between them. Then Zane let out a small chuckle and let the plate swish back towards him. Immediately he seemed his genial self again.

“Eh, sure, why not?” Picking up his fork he stabbed down with it, the tines sinking into the breaking edge of the cheesecake. “After all, you’d not catch a basketball star eating this kind of stuff during a championship, right?” Spearing a piece, he lifted it and popped it in his mouth with that curiously birdlike grace of his, and chewed with obvious enthusiasm.

He finished his dessert. But the glasses stayed firmly in place, and Caart could see little versions of himself in the lenses, his reflection bounced straight back at him like they’d hit a wall.

* * *

Zane didn’t take his glasses back off until after he had a coffee cradled reassuringly in both hands. Somewhere else. As they’d left the restaurant he’d made to go back the way they came, but Caart had slipped his soft, plump arm around the giraffe’s firmly muscled one, and pulled in the other.

“Hey man, let’s go grab a drink or something.” Seeing the giraffe’s hesitation, he’d said, almost pleadingly, “There’s a bar nearby that does great coffee- I don’t know about you but I could really do with one about now. It’s nice and low-key, too. I *promise*.”

In Zane’s head this had translated into a coffee bar, and, seeing the hope in the heavy horse’s face, he just couldn’t say ‘no’. What it in fact turned out to be was a bar that also served coffee. But it was pretty good. Sitting in a corner booth with the cosy illusion of privacy he sipped a smooth espresso, one sugar to sweeten it. To his surprise the swollen stallion also drank espresso. He was sprawled across the adjacent corner of the booth, his bulk making the space a lot cosier than perhaps was intended.

“I, uh... thought you’d drink something... fancier,” Zane said. It was the first conversation he’d actually started since dessert. Caart smiled at him, then took another slurp of his jet-fuel like drink.

“I can’t *stand* milk in coffee. *Ruins* the taste. Every time a customer orders a ruddy Frothoccino on me, it makes me want to smack ‘em until they’ve seen sense.”

“But you’re ok with sugar, huh?” You could probably stand a spoon up in Caart’s coffee. The horse grinned unrepentantly.

“It sure gives it a nice boost. I’d have had twice the energy on court if I’d been allowed sugar in my coffee back then.” He smacked his lips appreciatively. “And they do a nice blend here.” He paused, and then added with a small smirk, “But not *quite* as good as the stuff we sell at Valhalla, of course. We’ve got a deal on a single imported variety, and we get it roasted specially.”

“I didn’t realise coffee could be so complicated,” the giraffe admitted with a small smile. He finally lifted up his sunglasses. Breaking into a broad smile, the hefty horse across from him snorted good-humouredly, and waved expansively with a plump arm.

“Man, don’t get me started, I can rant for hours on the subject.” Perhaps fortunately, however, by that point he’d drained his coffee, as had Zane. Caart then ordered himself a beer from a passing waitress- obviously they were going to stay a little while. When the waitress looked at him expectantly, the giraffe asked for an orange juice. The horse gave the giraffe a long look, but let it pass without comment.

His back to the rest of the bar, Zane swivelled his head round to take a closer look at his surroundings. He had to admit, it was nicely done up. And it was a far cry from the cutting-edge bars and clubs he found himself in with fellow All-Stars and their Fashionable Friends,

who he suspected wouldn't be caught dead in a place like this. He liked it. There was quite a lot of music memorabilia on the shadowy walls. Some other tables were occupied- most by obvious couples- making the place lively without being crowded. There were enough conversations going on that you could be comfortable that *yours* went unnoticed, too. The lights were reassuringly low, a couple of spotlights illuminating their table, and the owner obviously believed unshakably that the 80's had been the only time when music had been worth listening to. The occasional lyric washed over the background hubbub in a sweet surge of nostalgia.

"At least the soundtrack's my era," he commented wryly. Caart emitted a deeply derogatory snort, and pulled a face around his beer.

"Geeze, will you stop making out like you're *old*, man?"

"Hey," Zane said with a small laugh, "I'm older than you, remember."

"Not by that much! A couple of years, tops."

"You're... what, 28?"

"About to hit 29."

"Well, trust me," Zane settled back against his seat, "I turned 31 last year, youngster, and I *felt* it."

The bulging black stallion snorted in amusement whilst the giraffe took a slow sip of his iced fruit juice. They'd made an effort to jazz it up- a cocktail parasol kept trying to stick itself up his nose. Then Caart said gently:

"You really, genuinely hate it, don't you? Being famous, signing autographs and all that."

Zane visibly flushed, even in this dim lighting, but after a few moments uncomfortable silence he finally nodded.

"Yeah." He shrugged helplessly under the horse's painfully sympathetic gaze. "I just... do. That... that *hero-worship* stuff gets to me." He shook his head and, drink lifted to his lips, looked deeply into its depths. "I just play a stupid game for a living, fercryingoutloud. I'm not hero material." Then he stopped and blinked as he registered what had started playing on the sound system.

'Where have all the good males gone and wheere are all the gods? Where's the street-wise Herrr-cules, to fight the rising odds...?'

His ears flattened and he gave the nearby speaker a radioactive glare. Caart was biting his lip in a futile effort not to grin. Finally something seemed to give inside the giraffe, and he started laughing quietly. His shoulders relaxed, and he grinned weakly at his companion. "I guess I really should have read the job description more closely before signing that contract, huh?"

"I'm sorry, man." Caart said quietly. "About earlier." He put his beer down on the table. "Geeze, I just keep reading you wrong, don't I? I thought you were just... putting on a show for the sake of it, with that dumb hat and those glasses. I always used to make out like I didn't want all that attention, but..." he gave a lopsided smile, "part of me really *did* enjoy it. It made me feel special." He snorted mockingly at himself. "Apart from winning, that's really the only thing I ever miss about the old days. Feeling *loved* like that."

'...holding out for a Hero 'til the end of the ni-hight! He's gotta be strong, and he's gotta be fast...'

"But you really *are* the smart one, man," the heavyweight horse snorted ruefully. "The minute you stop being exactly what they want you to be, they can turn on you." The giraffe's scrutiny sharpened suddenly. Caart shifted his weight self-consciously. "Uhh... some of the fan-mail the Cougars forwarded to me after I left was pretty... well, I stopped reading it pretty quick." He flashed a grin, and snorted with amusement. "Most of them couldn't even *spell* the things they were calling me."

'...gotta be larger than liiiiife...'

"I wanted to tell you man..." Caart coughed uncomfortably, "thanks for that letter you sent me. Really. It... really did help." The softened stallion gave the giraffe a sincere smile. "It meant a lot to think that someone out there was rooting for me."

"Eh, come on." Zane blushed modestly. He looked up. "Besides, you must have got support from the other guys, right?" Seeing the horse's face he added, "At least some? I mean, we never actually got together and discussed it, but..."

Caart was quiet for a moment, the music playing around them.

"I got a few letters on top of yours," he admitted. "They, uhh, didn't quite see things the same way." He snorted and took a swig of his beer. "Especially Fuzz-Face Altaica."

“What did he say to you?” The giraffe asked, after a moment’s uncomfortable silence.

“Ahh, c’mon, man,” Caart shook his hefty head. “It was a long time back now, it’s not important.”

“What did he say?” Zane asked again quietly, but this time there was a steely edge to his voice. The horse rubbed his neck and, eventually, spoke into his beer.

“He said that if I wanted to eat myself to death that was fine by him, so long as I didn’t embarrass him or anyone else in the Game any further while I did it.”

Zane sat back against the plush fabric. He looked thoughtful.

“What’re you thinking, man?” Caart asked finally.

“I’m working out when I’m likely to play against him next,” the giraffe said levelly. “And then I’m going to break his legs.”

“Whoa!” Sheer surprise made the supersized stallion burst out laughing. “Man, no, you... seriously, you *can* ’t!” he giggled.

“I reckon I could get away with it,” Zane disagreed calmly, “Make it look like an accident. A bad fall, or something. He always plays too damn close, anyway. All I’d have to do is land the wrong way on him. Then I’d just have to bat my eyelashes at the umpire and act the innocent, shiny-white All-Star.”

“Man, really, *no*. That’s... that’s really sweet of you, in a sick and... kind of horrifying way...” still giggling, the horse took another gulp of his beer, “but I got over it a long, *long* time back.” Zane didn’t look particularly ready to get over it just yet. “Besides,” Caart snorted, “I don’t think I could wish much worse on him than to play for the *Giants*.”

As if on cue, Bonnie’s fading wail was replaced by another quintessentially 80’s blare of up-tempo sound:

‘When two tribes go to war...!’

Horse and giraffe stared at each other, then both of them broke into broad, rather sheepish grins. The notorious bad blood between the Capitol City Cougars and the Atlantis All-Stars was partly media hype, part genuine rivalry. But the *idea* of it was now so integral to the game that whenever they met, that song was invariably played as they ran onto the court. It felt very strange hearing it here, sitting in a bar in the company of someone who any true-blooded sports fan would have said should have been their mortal enemy. But one of the few

things those two teams *could* agree on was that, while each might not like the other much, the Giants were even worse.

Caart took another pull on his beer, then nodded at the speaker whilst he wagged a plump finger at Zane.

“For the record: the All-Stars *are* up themselves- most of them wouldn’t even talk to us Cats in the changing room- but not *you*, man. You always seemed... kinda above all that.” The giraffe shrugged and smiled.

“Eh, most of the time I *was*, literally. It’s kind of hard to keep track of what’s going on down there, sometimes.” Caart sniggered. Zane grinned. “And team huddles *suck* when you have to fold yourself in half to join in.” He remembered himself and coughed self-consciously, then took another sip of his juice. “They’re ok guys, man. Just a little...”

“Stuck-up? Prissy? *Obnoxious*?” Zane blushed, but grinned all the same.

“...aware of what’s expected of them.”

“*You’d* always shake hands with me after a game.”

“And for most of the time *before* the game *you’d* be trying to psych us out with that Wild Stallion shtick of yours,” he replied with a smile. The big, chubby hayball of a horse sitting opposite him whickered in laughter.

“Ehe, I never did manage to rile you with that, did I?” He supped more beer. “By the way, well done- for not calling me ‘Clay’ once today, man. I appreciate the effort.” Zane smiled, then shrugged.

“I guess I didn’t ever really think of you as that.” He shook his head briefly. “I never bought the PR crud the Cougars spun about ‘Clay-Hoofed Hørssten’. It just didn’t square with the guy *I* knew.”

“Oh?” Caart’s ears perked up and he gave the giraffe a plump, playful grin. “What *did* you think of me, then? *Apart* from my being an appalling show-off.” He winked. Zane grinned weakly.

“Eh... well, yeah, on court... a bit. Ok, quite a lot.” But then he said quietly. “Seriously, man... underneath it all, I thought... you seemed like a genuinely sweet guy, just... a little unhappy.” He shrugged and gave the horse a rueful grin. “Guess I was more right than I knew.”

The giraffe’s smile slowly faded. He toyed fitfully with his glass, something obviously on his mind. In the background, a youthful Madonna began to sing her heart out.

“Can I ask you something, Caart?” he said finally. His outsized friend grunted, reaching for his beer.

“Whoa, sounds serious, big guy. Sure.”

“Do you still think you made the right choice? Leaving, and everything?”

The horse paused mid-swirl, then swallowed carefully and put the bottle down. After a moment he said,

“Yeah, man, I did. I really, *really* did.” He sat back with a slow smile. Lounging against the booth’s interior- practically *filling* the booth’s interior- the sumo-sized stallion was looking bigger than ever, stuffed stomach jutting out against the edge of the table. Zane was pretty sure he’d heard a few stitches in his shirt pop surreptitiously since finishing his massive meal, but hadn’t commented on them. The elephantine equine... radiated warm contentment. One porky hand rubbed absently against his massive middle.

“Sure, sometimes I still miss that stuff a little, but...” he shrugged, “I feel so much better nowadays. Inside. I’m happy as a hippo in a mud-hole.” He chuckled, then surprised himself with a beery burp. “Whoops. Heh, damn, man, I can actually be *myself*.” He grinned, cheeks bulging chubbily. “Belching hugely in public and all. I don’t have to think about what I’m *meant* to be doing. Even meeting guys, if I’m attracted to them I can have... well, y’know...” he paused delicately when he saw Zane’s face, “...relationships.” He leaned earnestly across the table. “All that... I’m *free*, man. For the first time since I can remember, I’m having *fun*.” His beatific smile shifted towards more of a devilish grin.

“Tonnes of fun.”

“I’m glad, man,” Zane said hurriedly, summoning a smile. He leaned closer and put his long-fingered hand over the horse’s doughy digits. “I’m really, really glad for you. You deserve-”

‘...*Papa don’t preach* ...’

“Oof,” Caart pulled back and squinted at the speakers in disgust. “Talk about a mood-killer.”

“What?” Zane laughed. “You don’t like Madonna?” He took a long drink of his orange juice. “I’ve got a soft spot for her, I’ll admit.” The horse grunted, and shook his head.

“Not that, it’s...” he smiled ruefully. “Every time I hear this song, I think of my dad.”

“...Oh.” Zane could see his point. “I’m sorry, man.” Caart grunted, and took another long pull on his beer, which by now was down to the suds. His expression had clouded over.

“You’re an only child, right?”

“An only *son*,” the giraffe corrected him carefully. “I’ve got three sisters.”

“Did your dad... *push* you like mine did me?”

“My dad...” Zane trailed off for a moment. “Eh, with us giraffe... it’s the females who wear the trousers.” He shrugged, “We’re a pretty big family- some pretty big personalities, too, *especially* my mother.” He half-smiled. “I think Dad learned a long time ago to just keep his mouth shut. He was always there, I guess, but I can hardly remember him ever actually *saying* anything.” He gave a small laugh and swirled his drink. “*Mama*, on the other hand... well,” the giraffe grinned uncertainly, and rubbed the back of his neck. “Let’s just say, I think my mother could give your dad a run for his money in the pushy-parent stakes.” Caart didn’t smile back.

“Family’s really important to you, isn’t it?” he said suddenly. “You practically *glow* when you talk about them.” Zane felt his smile shrink, then he shrugged.

“I guess...”

“You must miss them so much,” Caart said. “I mean, being over here all this time.” He laughed shortly. “At least I was born here. Even if I don’t have a family any more, this is still *home*.”

“Sometimes I miss them,” Zane agreed slowly, after a painful moment. “Sometimes...” he smiled, “Sometimes I’m very, very glad there’s a whole ocean between me and them. Even Mama’s voice can’t carry *that* far.” He snorted wryly. “But that doesn’t stop her trying, sometimes.”

Caart didn’t respond to the joke, his expression still stormy. Madonna was into her second verse.

“I guess at least the Team is Family, right?” the horse commented in too-cheerful a tone, inspecting his beer. He observed more quietly to himself, “right until you don’t fit in anymore.”

Zane leaned forward as he tried to divine what was going on behind those troubled grey eyes.

“I guess it must have been hard for you, growing up,” he said tentatively, “Realising that you... well...”

“Wanted to have ‘relationships’ with other guys?” Caart supplied brutally. The giraffe flinched back, and the het-up horse’s expression softened. “Sorry, man.” He heaved a

contrite sigh and shook his head slightly. "It took me a long time to realise- I was so busy playing basketball growing up I hardly *noticed* anyone else, and, well, *especially* not girls." He snorted mirthlessly. "When I did work it out though, the first thing I remember thinking was that I could never, *ever* tell my folks." He drained the last of his beer in a couple of hard gulps. "It was like the bitter cherry on the cake, man- I felt like enough of a failure as it was."

"You've never, ever been a failure," Zane said abruptly, grabbing the stallion's hand tightly. Caart blinked and stopped dead, astonished. The giraffe flushed and pulled back slightly, but his jaw set stubbornly. "I know you wound up hating your dad, but even then you stuck with playing basketball- I think part of you was still trying to please him, still wanted his approval, his *love*. And... damn it, Caart, you made it all the way to the top! They're still talking about you as the best basketballer of the last decade. If *that* didn't validate you in his eyes then nothing else ever, *ever* could have. *It's not your fault*, ok? *He* has the problem, not you." The giraffe's voice softened, even as he tightened his grip. "You did everything you could. It wasn't your fault. *Please* stop beating yourself up over him."

'...Daddy, daddy if you could only seeee, just how good he's been treating meeee...'

"Whoa," the horse said eventually in a far-away voice. "Are you this good at therapy with *everyone*?"

Zane rather abruptly remembered where he was and what he was doing.

"Uh... oof... sorry about that, man," he said bashfully, carefully untangling his hand. "I just... thought you needed to hear that from someone." He could feel his cheeks colouring painfully as he sat there. "I guess I've thought quite a lot about you and your dad since I read that stuff about you." His friend was still staring into the middle distance. Then the enormous equine blinked, and slowly focussed on Zane as though seeing him for the first time. His smile flickered uncertainly back into life, like a candle being re-lit.

"And you said you weren't a hero," he said weakly. The giraffe hid his blushes by draining his much-diluted orange juice.

"Eh... I think I'm more just a cheerleader in this instance." Caart's smile grew a little stronger.

“*Thank you*,” he said softly. Then he seemed to pull himself together, and shook his head briskly. “Uhh, sorry man,” he said more normally, “when I get onto the subject of my dad I guess I can still lose it.”

“It’s ok man, I understand,” the giraffe reassured him.

The superlatively plump stallion gave him a rather abashed, hopeful look.

“Uhh... could you stand it if I... got some more of this off my chest? I’ve never really ever talked about this kind of stuff properly before.” Zane, cheeks blushing bright pink, said,

“Y-you go ahead, man, if it’ll help.”

“I’ll try and be delicate, Mr. Regular,” the huge horse said with more of his customary grin.

With a small grunt he sat forward, face cupped reflectively in his hands, elbows on the table.

“The penny finally dropped when I was 16, and I found I only ever wanted to pass to this one particular buddy of mine on the high-school squad.” He gave a soft snort of amusement.

“*That* was hard to explain away, I can tell you- and it badly screwed up my play for a few months. Damn,” he said, suddenly distracted. “I really hope Chad never realised- that would have majorly freaked him out.” Another thought struck him, and he looked across at Zane.

“Did any of *you* guys ever guess? Sometimes I caught you looking at me like... like you couldn’t make me out.”

“What? No! I mean, no, I never noticed anything,” the giraffe said, floundering in embarrassment. “I mean, you’re not... that is, you don’t... you don’t *act*-”

“Like this?” Caart said teasingly. He suddenly drew his short, chubby neck back into an arch posture, raised one wrist limply and uttered an astonishingly high-pitched, Nancy-boy neigh. The transformation was horrifyingly complete, especially when he simpered and batted his eyelashes at the giraffe. He then ruined the impression by letting out a deeply masculine, flatulent-sounding *snort* of mirth.

The spell broke, and Zane found himself stifling laughter alongside Caart, almost spilling the remains of his drink as the horse relaxed back into his normal demeanour.

“Uh, yeah, that would have been something of a clue.” The horse snorted again.

“I’m not *that* kind of a guy: I’m a unicorn, man, not a *gelding*.” With a laugh, he gestured to the waitress and asked for a new drink. But what she soon placed in front of him on the table wasn’t beer.

“What’s *that*?”

“A caramel appletini.” The obese equine propped his plump chins on one hand and gave the giraffe an evil, teasing grin before taking a sip. “Gotta admit, they taste *great*. So... there really weren’t any rumours or stuff about me?” he persisted, “I mean, *everyone* in the changing rooms knew about Vince, even if nobody actually ever said anything to his face... what?” Zane realised that his mouth was hanging open, his new drink stalled half-way to his lips- up until then, he *hadn’t* known. He hurriedly took a sip of his second orange juice, but he was too late. “Geeze, man, *seriously?*” At least that made the horse giggle again. “You’re *really* not the right guy to ask about this kind of stuff, are you?” he said sympathetically. “You’re so... sweet.”

“So what *did* you say to Benny?” *That* stopped the horse dead.

“When?” Caart asked innocently, taking a slurp from his frosted martini glass. Zane rolled his eyes and shook his head patiently.

“When you went to pay for dinner, and you practically held him up against the wall by his neck.” The giraffe smiled. “You’re, uh, not exactly the inconspicuous type, big fella.” The hefty horse blushed somewhat, but still looked defiant.

“I told him if Lars ever wanted my custom again, he’d make sure his staff knew not to declare Open Season on autograph-hunting.” Caart shrugged defensively. “It really bothered you, man. Sue me.”

“You weren’t just jealous that he didn’t want *your* autograph too?” the giraffe asked teasingly, to lighten the atmosphere. His chubby companion snorted in momentary mirth, “Kid probably wouldn’t have believed you even if you’d told him who I was.” But then the stallion scowled. “If Lars did put that little brat onto you, I’m going to kill him,” he said mulishly. “I’d have sworn he wouldn’t let on to anyone who you were.”

“Eh,” Zane shrugged, “I’m pretty sure the kid spotted me all by himself- he dropped the tray he was carrying.”

“Huh? Caart looked surprised. “I didn’t notice that.”

“You were a little preoccupied with your tiramisu,” the giraffe said with a small smile.

“Oof,” the horse commented, pulling a face. “Now I feel kind of bad for that kid- Lars is probably dangling him by his tail over an open fire.”

Zane took a deep breath, then sighed.

“It’s not really his fault, either. It was pretty obvious- there’s not many of us giraffe around over here.” He took a sip of his drink. “Yeah, it was annoying, but I hope nothing too bad’ll

happen to him.” He glanced over at Caart. “Maybe you could let Lars know to let him off with a warning, or something?” The enormous equine shook his head and half-laughed. “Man, you are too nice for your own good.”

The horse stirred his flamboyant drink with a cocktail stick. The best of the 80’s played on above them.

“Can I ask *you* something, big guy?” Zane blinked.

“Uh, sure,” he said, with something of a sinking feeling.

“Are you...” Caart hesitated, “...*tall* for a giraffe?”

“Huh?” Completely thrown by the question, the giraffe in question hoped he didn’t look quite as dumb as he felt.

“It’s just something I was always curious about. I mean, do other giraffes look at you and think ‘Geeze, he’s lofty’?” Zane coughed, trying not to laugh.

“Ehe...” he scratched the back of his neck, face going rather red once again. “I guess I’ve got a couple of inches on most other guys I’ve met, but not *too* much.”

“And how do *I* measure up to most of them?” Caart asked with a teasing smile. Zane cast his friend an embarrassed grin, and thought hard.

“Eh, if you were a giraffe you’d be...” he groped for an adequate description, “...dumpy.”

“*Dumpy?!?*” The humungous horse’s self-esteem didn’t take the news at all well.

“Yeah,” the giraffe said, “I guess like a pit pony, or something.” His smile turned teasing.

“A cute little fella.” The until-then unquestionably outsized stallion looked outraged, practically breathing fire from his nostrils. Zane gave a little laugh as he picked up his drink. “Sorry man- you *did* ask.”

For a moment the horse hovered on the edge of apoplexy, but then he deflated slightly with a badly stage-managed grin.

“Yeah... I did, didn’t I?” he reflected sourly. Hurrying away from that particularly humiliating conversational byway, he said, “In that case I’m surprised there aren’t more of you guys in the Game- you’d wipe the floor with the rest of us runts.” With an internal smile Zane sensed that Caart wasn’t going to let go of ‘dumpy’ for a *long* time.

“Well,” he shrugged, “basketball’s not really that big a thing, back home.” He ticked off on his fingers, “Football, rugby... cricket...” he spread his arms, “even beach volleyball’s more popular.”

The horse was silenced for a couple of moments. His eyes seemed rather wide- Zane could see the whites around those large grey irises.

“Oh. Uhh...” he gave the giraffe a somewhat goofy grin, “Wow... beach volleyball, huh?”

“It’s the climate,” Zane said with a smile. “All that sunshine- in the summer you want to be near the water.” He thought about it, “I’m surprised you don’t play it more down here, actually.”

“And, uhh...” the supersized stallion smiled a bright, enquiring smile, “did *you* play beach volleyball much?”

“Yeah, a little, on my vacations and stuff,” the giraffe answered. “You get sand *everywhere*, though.” Then his eyes narrowed, suspicion belatedly starting to gather. “Why?”

“Uhh, just *interested*, man,” Caart replied with a little cough, before taking a gulp of his drink. “I’m trying to picture what you were like growing up,” he added innocently. “Were you a beanpole, like me?”

“Ehe,” Zane blushed as he wagged a hand equivocally, “A little, I guess. I mean, giraffe are *born* tall, but it wasn’t like I was the only one around.” He thought about it, sipping his drink. “I was never really ‘tall’ as a kid, compared to other giraffe, I just... kept growing up for longer than everyone else. But I probably was pretty skinny.”

“And the, uhh... swinging both ways thing?” Caart asked casually. Seeing Zane’s expression, he chuckled and said, “Hey man, come on, you can’t blame me for being curious.” He gave the giraffe a challenging look. “I shared, after all.”

The giraffe struggled with himself, but reluctantly acknowledged that their conversation had waded into deeper waters.

“We... we usually call it ‘letting off steam’. Y’know, experimenting and stuff whilst you’re growing up. Teenage flings. It’s not *expected*, but... I guess we’re kind of more relaxed about it than some species.” Zane shrugged laconically, although his cheeks were still mortifyingly pink.

“And..?”

“We’re... expected to grow out of it,” he added with another self-conscious shrug.

“And did *you* ever..?” Caart asked patiently. His voice was pitched privately, at least. Zane shook his head briefly, rapidly.

“No.” When the horse just kept looking him in the eye, he sighed and shrugged. “Seriously man, no. I mean, it’s... I just... never really felt that strongly about any guy... and no-one ever asked *me* to... besides, I was pretty shy...” He realised he was babbling and took a deep

breath, then a gulp of cold, sobering orange. “And then I met ‘Pren at high school, and after that, well, pretty soon we were dating. My folks would have killed me for breaking *that* up.” He found himself smiling at the memory. “Besides, she had this *sweet* behind...”

Zane suddenly realised that he’d said this last out loud. Cursing himself, he waited for the inevitable ribald commentary from the stallion, then found he actually felt worse when none came. They sat in silence for a moment, only made deeper by the background music. One song faded out, and another began.

“What went wrong, man?” Caart asked gently, putting his hand on top of Zane’s. The horse’s plump palm felt incredibly warm despite having been clutching an ice-cold glass, and very soft to the touch. His fingernails were extremely well-kept and clean too, the giraffe noticed distractedly.

‘...You must und-er-stand, though the touch of your hand, makes my pulse re-act...’

“Everyone always said you two looked like such a....” the horse struggled to find the right phrase, “an *item*. And you must have loved her to marry her.”

The giraffe sat unmovingly for a moment, then let out a soft snort that might have been a laugh.

“Like Ms. Turner says-” he looked pointedly up at the speaker, “-what’s *love* got to do with it?”

‘...Who needs a heart, when a heart can be bro-ken...?’

Caart looked stubborn.

“She’s only singing *that* because she’s still hurting.” He put his other hand on top of the other two. Zane sighed, and slowly put his free hand on top of the pile.

“And I’m... not. Not any more.” He looked away. “I’m sorry that that offends everyone, but ‘Pren and I lived apart for more than two years. No,” he corrected himself gently, “let’s be honest: *she* moved out. I tried to keep it going with her after she left, I really did, but we just... drifted further and further apart. Then when I finally saw her again I found myself

saying..." he looked the horse in the eye, and gave him a sad smile, "'If we divorce, you'll still get half my All-Star's salary'. And that..." he shrugged, "was that. We filed a couple of weeks later." He shook his head gently, "It just hit me... I didn't love this person any more. I hardly even recognised her." He shrugged helplessly, "It's no-one's fault, maybe we just... both grew out of it."

'... what's love, but a sweet old-fashioned notion...?'

"Damn, man..." Caart said, hesitantly.

"Besides," Zane added lightly, "a few weeks after the divorce came through, she introduced me to this new guy she'd 'just started' going out with." He pulled his hands back and took a deep drink of his juice. He finished it off and wiped his lips with the back of his hand.

"Seriously?" The horse's expression was now deeply cynical, tinged with anger. "'Just started going out with' -?"

"Eight months: we compared notes when she visited the watering hole." The giraffe gave the horse a lopsided grin. "He's an ok guy, actually- I'm not sure which of us was more embarrassed by the situation."

"Another giraffe?" Caart queried. Zane started with surprise at the question, then grinned wryly.

"Of course, man. 'Pren wouldn't dare do anything *that* unconventional. It might suddenly go out of fashion." He raised his glass in a mock-toast. "And good luck to him- he's going to need it. She was starting to sound like my *mother*."

The soft, swollen stallion shook his head slowly.

"Geeze..." he drained the last of his drink, then looked at their empty glasses. "We definitely need another." He called the waitress over and ordered himself another appletini. Zane ordered too.

"A Screwdriver?" Caart commented casually when his fresh orange juice arrived. The giraffe gave him a mollifying smile.

"Well, it's the handle, just not the screw."

"Oh, come *on*, man!" the horse exclaimed with an exasperated snort, "What's wrong with you? You used to be a party-animal! We're supposed to be *celebrating*, here- old buddies meeting up at last and your freedom from that conniving little..." He trailed off, then gave the giraffe a searching look. "At least have one proper drink with me."

“Whoa, ok, ok, keep your mane on.” Zane shrugged and gave a little laugh. He caught up the drinks menu, called the waitress back, and pointed.

She quickly returned with a tall, fizzing glass full of ice and lemon peel. The horse blinked.

“Whoa, what’s *that*?”

“A Pony’s Neck.” The giraffe flashed him a cheeky grin as he took a sip. The horse stared at him for a second, then looked away moodily, his chubby chin on his fist.

“A mocktail. Hoo boy, we’re rocking tonight.”

“Caart...” Zane began, looking pained “... listen-” but the horse held up his hands apologetically, cutting him off.

“My fault, man- it’s alright, I get it. I do, really. A slice of cheesecake’s one thing, but you’re still an athlete. Your body’s a temple.” He gave a short, whinnying laugh. “So’s mine, but I guess we follow pretty different religions these days.” He smacked a hand to his stupendous, shirt-stretching stomach, which sloshed sluggishly from the impact. The giraffe smiled back, but still looked uncomfortable.

The full-featured horse’s grin faded, then he sighed.

“And here I am, freaking you out even more than you were already.” He gave the startled giraffe a melancholy smile. “You’re not having second thoughts about hooking back up with me, are you, man?”

“Huh?” The giraffe looked stunned. “No man, of course not!” he said, looking concerned.

“Why would you think that?”

“It’s just...” the hugely hefty horse tailed off, staring at his drink. He shook his head and sighed, “I must be a hell of a lot for you to take.” He gestured down at himself, rather helplessly. “All of me. Compared to what I was.”

“Hey,” Zane said softly, leaning his face closer to Caart’s, “I already knew about this stuff, remember?”

“Yeah,” the horse conceded, those grey eyes still uncertain, “but that’s not the same as... coming up against it in the flesh.” He snorted. “Especially *this* much flesh. And besides, you’re so... *normal*.” The horse gave him an apprehensive smile. “I’d really not blame you for being completely weirded out.”

“I’m still here, man,” the giraffe said calmly, taking a sip of his drink. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Then he suddenly smiled- it was like watching a flower open to the sun. The big, bulging stallion found himself smiling too.

“What?”

“Oh... just this song,” Zane confessed, gesturing at the speaker. “It’s probably my favourite in the whole world.”

‘...If I tell you, if I tell you now...’

The horse’s hefty features slowly broke into a broad, disbelieving grin.

“Sweetest Taboo?”

“Hey it’s a classic,” the giraffe exclaimed with a laugh, “Sade’s iconic in *my* book.” His chubby companion just laughed and shook his head. Zane chuckled, and took another sip of his drink. Then he looked around, and lowered his voice. “Look, the... uh... steak thing-” “Ugh.” Caart flopped moodily against the booth’s backrest, head tilted to the sky. Zane noticed the way the back of his soft neck rolled and folded thickly over the cushion-top. “I take it back- I *am* gonna kill Lars. It was just the *once*, man. I tried it, I didn’t like it, and I wish I hadn’t. I’m a bad horse, I know.”

Zane nodded, deadpan, and sat thoughtfully for a moment.

“Next time, you might want to go for sushi instead. It’s more digestible.”

The giraffe took a theatrically prim sip of his orange juice. Caart blinked at him for a few moments, then his eyes narrowed. A sly smile twisted his chubby lips.

“You... *carnivore*,” he said accusingly. Zane’s po-faced pose cracked, and he flashed the horse a sheepish grin.

“Hey, the All-Stars are majority-predator. We had to find something in common.” He shook his head, “And it was just so sad, watching Leon try to *enjoy* asparagus.” The stupendously-sized stallion was still looking at him speculatively.

“You really are full of surprises, man, aren’t you?”

“Well, who wants to be *normal*?” Zane replied, taking another sip of his drink. Then he smiled teasingly at the already-grinning horse. “So do you bring all your ‘beaus’ here after dinner?” Caart blushed, but his grin remained.

“No, man, they’re normally ready to go straight home with me after one of Lars’ meals.” He toasted the giraffe with his glass, smiling unsteadily. “*This* is a special occasion.”

'... You give me, you're givin' me the sweeeetest taboos...'

"I guess, uhh..." the horse stifled a hiccup, "At least you must have been able to have some fun since 'Pren left, right?" He waggled his eyebrows for emphasis. Now it was Zane's turn to blush. He grimaced slightly.

"Eh... not really, man."

"Huh?" The big beast across from him blinked in surprise. "But you must have the girls *queuing* up to-"

"I couldn't," the giraffe cut him off. "I don't." For a moment he sat in silence, then he sighed. "I was trying to keep the problems with my marriage quiet. I never wanted to cheat on 'Pren anyway. Besides, can you imagine the headlines if the papers had caught an All-Star 'At It' behind his wife's back?" He snorted mirthlessly. "I'd have had the team press managers fighting to be the one to murder me. And that's nothing compared to what my *family* would have done when they found out. And, since the divorce..." he shifted his weight, unsure about how to continue. "...I don't do one-night stands, man. Maybe I *am* old-fashioned, but..." he shrugged, almost helplessly, "turns out I'm just not that kind of guy." He flashed Caart a conspiratorial grin. "I guess I really *am* boring, huh?"

But Caart didn't respond.

"Oh, man," the bulging black stallion said quietly, cheeks steadily turning more and more berry-like. "You must think I'm a complete and utter..." he struggled to find a sufficiently polite term, "... *slag*."

"What?" The giraffe gaped at him. "No, man, that's not-"

"It's not that I... I know Lars said I... but... I didn't set *out* to... I mean..." his galloping tongue having thrown a shoe, the overinflated equine stumbled to an incoherent halt. He took a deep breath, then looked at Zane with an almost beseeching expression. He smiled forlornly. "I've only dated seven guys. Well," he corrected himself wretchedly, "nine if you count Hernando and Enrique, but that was just a really, *really* good party..." His eyes dropped, and he spoke to his hands instead. "I always start dating someone with good *intentions*, man, it's just... things haven't worked out."

'... You've got the biggest heart...'

“I’m not judging anyone, man,” Zane said feelingly. “Hell, look how well *my* relationship turned out. What do I know about anything?” Diffidently he reached across and squeezed one of the horse’s chubby hands. “Who you want to sleep with makes absolutely no difference to who you actually *are*. You’re a good person, Caart Hørssten.”

‘...*Sometimes I think you’re just too good for me...*’

“...What’s it like, man?”

“*Huh?*” The oversized stallion blinked, entirely thrown. “What’s *what* like?”

“Being... big.” Zane coloured slightly, nodding at Caart’s prodigious, lap-filling paunch.

“Being *that* big. I mean, I’m sitting here and I can’t even imagine...” He trailed off, then gazed curiously at the horse. “Do you... feel any different?”

This time the heavyweight horse really DID go red, even as he smiled unsteadily.

“Damn, man... uhh, no-one’s ever asked me *that* before... I don’t really know how to...”

One hand crept down to his barn-sized belly, then he stifled a small, whickering giggle and swept a few strands of loose mane from out of his eyes. “Uhh... I guess I still feel the way I always did, only... bigger.” He bit his lip, trying not to laugh at his own useless description.

“It’s like when you’re growing up, you don’t really feel like you’re getting larger, it’s the world that gets smaller. I *do* feel heavier, though, man. Oof...” For a moment his legs quivered as he attempted to stand, then he let his large backside settle back against the padded bench of the booth. “A lot heavier. But that’s so *good*, man.” A faint pink flush crept across the bridge of his dark snout, to match his rosy cheeks. “I feel... rooted to the ground. Solid. Unshakeable.” He took a large gulp of his potent cocktail, and the pink blush spread. “I guess I feel... stretched, as well. Kinda the way a balloon must feel. I mean,” he laughed briefly, spreading his arms out with a creak of clothing. Zane’s loaned shirt chose this moment to loudly pop a stitch, but went ignored by both of them. “There’s just so much *more* of me now- my hide’s having to go way further to keep me covered.” The horse thumped a hand against his hay-ball belly for emphasis. As his stomach wobbled Caart whickered, an odd expression crossing his plump face.

“Hrrmmpph... and... I’m more *sensitive* too, man. Like when you’ve just stepped out of a really hot bath, only... all the time. All over, but especially...” Zane watched the obese, shadow-black stallion rub a plump hand slowly up the bare front of that stable-sized stomach.

A small shiver ran through him, setting his entire tubby torso wobbling. He looked fondly down at his middle, chins bulging, hand still resting on his belly. “I mean, I got hit in the gut by the ball plenty back in the day, but it was just an impact, I didn’t really *feel* it. Now... oof...” Head still down, he cast the giraffe a rather shy smile. “I... uhh... could have stood there and let you bounce basketballs off of me all day.”

The giraffe sat back slightly, his glass pressed up against his lips to hide his expression, but his eyes were rather wide.

“Haha, sorry man, too much information?” Caart whinnied in laughter, wiping his forehead. “You *did* ask.”

“Yeah, I guess I did.” Zane pulled an ironic little smile. The big, bulging beast sat back again. He let out another soft whicker and tossed his head, more of his mane working loose from its styling.

“Yeah, I’d, uhh... not go back to the way I was, man. Not for anything. I’m hooked.” He drained the last of his appletini in one long swig. “I don’t even miss Winning- turns out I can get the same kinda adrenalin charge stuffing myself silly down the local All-You-Can-Eat buffet.” He grunted slightly, and Zane noticed the horse’s hefty hand absently resume stroking the front of his stomach. “Heh, though, uhh... I can get kinda competitive *there*, too.” He gave the giraffe another shy smile- a lock of his increasingly uncontrollable mane had fallen over one eye. “But yeah, you can keep being rich and famous- I’d rather be *fat*.” He hiccupped.

“What about the Ferrari?” Zane asked. Caart burst out laughing.

“Oh, man...” He snickered. “Okay, okay, it was a wrench giving *that* up.” The supersized stallion looked up at the giraffe with a moon-faced grin. “But I couldn’t fit behind the *wheel* any more, man!” He patted the front of his stomach again, almost proudly this time. “I sold it and bought something more... practical.”

“Man, you *loved* that car,” the giraffe said with a laugh, shaking his head. “*And* pointing out how you could have modelled for the mascot.” Caart whinnied in laughter, then fondly wobbled his sumo-sized stomach with one hand.

“Guess I’m perfect for a Ferrari SUV range now, huh?” Zane put his hand to his mouth, shoulders shaking with laughter.

The hugely hefty horse hesitated, then gave him a rather bashful grin.

“One more personal question, man? *Last* one, I promise”

“Eh, sure,” the giraffe replied with a roll of his eyes, still smiling. “Why not?”

“The, uhh... neck-wrestling thing..?” he asked. Whether Zane had already passed his limit for embarrassment for that evening or whether something else tipped him over the edge, a mad moment of flippancy surged through him. He shrugged.

“Hey, you can’t blame us if we *enjoy* foreplay.”

A lull in the music amplified the sudden silence at their table, and then Caart started to snigger, then snort, and then burst out belly-laughing. Mid-laugh, however, the humungous horse was ambushed by a high-pitched, stomach-quaking *hiccup*. Then another. Each time his middle made this kind of *gloomp* noise as it smacked back down against his thighs.

“Oof... Oh... -hic!- *shucks*.” The somewhat-sozzled stallion looked ruefully at his empty glass, then across to the giraffe, who was trying not to laugh himself. “S-sorry man, I-hic!-th-think I’ve had one too man- many - *hic!*- argh...” Zane obligingly passed him the remains of his drink, and watched Caart drunkenly trying to cure his hiccups with a mocktail. The third attempt seemed to do the trick. He shook his head, his chubby chops jiggling and wobbling impressively.

“Whoof... Uhh, where... where are you staying tonight, man?” Caart enquired belatedly- and a little blearily.

“Oh, a bed and breakfast place downtown,” Zane replied. The horse pulled a face.

“Geeze... why not the Pandora? It’s the best around! You can *afford* five-star, right?”

“Incognito, remember?” the giraffe shrugged. “Cheap and cheerful it is.”

“Cheerful? I’ve had to kneel down to use the shower in places like that- and compared to you, I’m *dumpy*.” The giraffe let out a little snort. Caart, meanwhile, looked thoughtful.

“You checked in yet?”

“No, man,” Zane reached down and patted the bag at his feet. “I’m travelling light. But,” he couldn’t help a slightly wistful sigh, “I should probably think about checking in soon, or I’ll lose my reservation.”

“C’mon man, crash at my place tonight instead. There’s only a couch, but at least the bathroom’ll fit you better.” He snorted in amusement, “The couch too, probably. The beds in those places suck.”

“Really, man?” Zane had to admit, he hadn’t been looking forward to a night with his legs hanging off the bed from the knees down- sometimes he’d resorted to sleeping on the floor instead. He scratched the back of his neck. “You, uh, sure that’d be ok?”

“Yeah man, absolutely!” He grinned plumply. “What’re friends for?” The giraffe found himself smiling back.

“Then yeah, thanks. I’d really like that.”

‘... You fall in love- Zing, Boom...!’

Both of them stared at the speaker, which was suffering from an outbreak of jazzy trumpets.

“*Björk?*” Zane asked incredulously. Caart gave him a rather sheepish grin, his ears wilting.

“Hey, be fair, man- not *everything* Nordic can be as great as me.” He was still holding Zane’s mocktail. “You, uhh... want to finish this?”

“No man, I’m done,” the giraffe said with a smile. “You want it?” The outsized stallion nodded, swallowed the remains in one long *glug*, then wiped his lips.

“Oof... I think we’d better get outta here, before they start playing ‘Hoofloose’.” With an effort, he started to haul himself unsteadily from his seat. Blocking the light behind him, the giraffe found himself completely in the stallion’s immense shadow. That huge horse-belly wobbled above the table like an advertising zeppelin. “*Then* I’d have to start dancing.”

Zane gulped. Clay-Hoofed Hørssten’s dancing had been infamous. His on-court poise, superb co-ordination and lithe footwork... all of them had been sacrificed to his apparently primal desire to shake his thang. And now, at *this* kind of weight...

“...Yeah, in that case perhaps we’d better.” Zane agreed with a little smile.

* * *

On the way home, Caart ordered pizza.

“*Seriously?*”

“*Hey,*” the sloshing stallion chortled back, “I’m not just some fat slob, man- I *work* at this.” He patted his overhanging medicine-ball of a belly as they strolled along. “Besides,” he

grunted with a grin, “these days I can work up an appetite just by thinking about it.” Somehow he squeezed his phone out of his skin-tight shorts’ rear pocket. “You want anything, big guy?” Laughing, Zane shook his head, palms out in front of him.

“No man, I’m still stuffed from dinner.” Caart snorted.

“It’s all that orange juice- Hey,” this he spoke to his phone- apparently he had the pizza place on speed-dial. He grinned chubbily. “Yeah, it’s me, how’d you guess? Listen, can I get... yeah, my usual, please. Aw, ok, hot, cheesy garlic bread *does* sound too good to resist right now.” He licked his lips, heavily. “I can practically smell it from here. When will- 15 minutes? Wow, slow night, is it? Uhh... make it 25, huh? Yeah, I’m out and about right now. Thanks. See you soon!”

The atmosphere outside had become sultry, the humidity starting to build, although the night air was cooling to a fresh breeze. The humungous horse had staggered on the step, and Zane had tried to steady him.

“Whoof!”

“Uhh... th-thanks, man. Damn...” he’d whickered and shaken his head, leaning pretty much his full bodyweight on the suddenly straining giraffe, “those appletinis pack a *punch*.” He snickered.

“N-no problem, man. Oof...” Walking more steadily, his larger-than-life buddy eventually took his pillowy arm from around the giraffe’s broad shoulders, where the weight would have dragged a lesser neck from its moorings. The air suddenly felt very chill where that arm had lain. But he was impressed at how quickly Caart soaked up all the alcohol he’d downed- by the time he phoned the pizza parlour a few minutes later you’d hardly know he’d been drinking at all, and he seemed stone-cold sober when they reached his house. It did leave him very mellow, however. He even tipped the delivery guy who was waiting for him.

Caart’s ‘usual’ turned out to be two extra-large pizzas with cheese-stuffed crusts (not to mention the hard-sold garlic bread- the hugely chubby horse was already munching on a piece of *that* before he’d found his keys). And...

“*Pepperoni?*” Zane asked with a grin as Caart extracted a slice from one pizza box. The supersized stallion just grunted and took a bite, smiling around it.

“Pepperoni doesn’t count as *meat*, everyone knows that,” he said indistinctly as he chased strings of cheese with his wide tongue. “It’s... mph...” he gulped down his latest mouthful, the slice half-gone already. “It’s practically a food group all by itself.”

Shaking his head slightly, the giraffe let a smile quirk his lips and took a look around.

“Man, nice place you’ve got here.” He sank back comfortably into the embrace of the couch. It was a relief to be back on a piece of furniture on his scale. At that moment Caart chose to join him, still carrying the two pizzas- the garlic bread was gone already. He settled slowly into the large double-dip in the opposite corner-cushion, like a pair of shallow craters. The couch responded to the load with a weary creak of the familiar. The horse’s burdensome bulk caused Zane to rise perceptibly in his seat. Now that he’d got more used to his friend’s fulsome frame, the giraffe couldn’t help noticing how his shape changed as he sat. His chest spread and sagged, pulling the material of the t-shirt along with it, whilst his belly piled up and pushed out. He seemed to have grown even rounder since they’d played basketball that afternoon.

“You, uhh... don’t mind that it’s leather, right?” the huge horse asked belatedly, indicating the furniture. Zane grunted, and waved a hand dismissively.

“South African, man. We don’t get so hung up on that kind of thing.” He yawned and stretched his neck. Even better- high ceilings. “We’d never get *anything* done, otherwise. Besides, it is pretty comfortable.” He patted the soft, warm leather. “Hard to argue with that.”

“Damn right...” Stuffing the tip of another slice of pizza between his lips, the overblown equine shifted his weight slightly. There was a moment of tension and then a muffled *pop*. Caart stopped squirming and sank back with a sheepish grin behind the half-eaten pizza slice, even as he seemed to grow a little wider. “Whoops... I should have unbuttoned before sitting down,” he said after swallowing his mouthful, patting his doughy side. “Could have guessed *that* was coming- they’ve been feeling tight half the evening.” He whickered slightly, hand rubbing against his overhanging belly as more slowly spilled over his shorts. “Man, I musta made a real pig of myself today.” He caught the giraffe’s expression and whinnied in teasing laughter, “C’mon, aren’t you just a *little* impressed, big guy? I probably couldn’t have *planned* that better- once a show-off, always a show-off, right?” The stallion smacked a hand to his stupendous stomach, setting his weight wobbling. “I’d, uhh... offer to share my bed tonight,” Caart added slightly sheepishly, gut still jiggling, “but it’d probably be kinda

cramped with the three of us.” Zane glanced at him, then smiled and patted the couch’s plump cushions.

“I’m sure this’ll be just fine, man.”

He was finding the whole *place* comfortable in fact, built to a larger-than-average scale. The oversized owner obviously spotted him registering this fact.

“Heh, I couldn’t find anywhere that fit off-the-peg” Caart said, gulping another mouthful of pizza, “so I had the place remodelled when I bought it.”

“Nice, man, nice...”

And it *was* nice- what had probably been a fairly compact two-storey home was now one outsized storey. From the entrance hallway Zane had glimpsed a kitchen, bedroom and bathroom down the hall, before being led straight in here. The lounge was plushly appointed, with thick rugs soft underhoof and the furniture all overstuffed. Much like their owner, who was sprawled massively across half the three-seater couch. And that was three of *his* backsides- he hadn’t just been boasting about the length. Zane could probably almost stretch fully out along it- if it wasn’t quite so emphatically occupied at present. Its obese incumbent was more than half-way through his first pizza already, both boxes balanced atop his stomach, where they hadn’t even had time to cool. However, this place was very definitely still an untamed bachelor pad (again like its owner), with the same characteristic hint of scruffy dishevelment about it. Nevertheless, the place felt amazingly homely- it was almost as nice as his apartment back in Atlantis, only without the view.

At that moment, freed somewhat from the constricting confines of his shorts, his humungous host sank further back into couch’s back-rest stifling a deep belch, his oversized black belly jutting enormously out of his clothes and providing quite a different sort of view altogether. He was practically a landmark on his own. With a luxuriant sigh he stretched his arms up- the pizza boxes bobbing unstably- scrabbled to kick his pumps off without untying them, and then stretched his doughy legs out in front of him.

“Oooooof... that’s better.” He let his arms flop over the back of the couch like a pair of beached black seals, and grinned at his houseguest. “Man, I’m bushed.”

“Yeah... I’m pretty beat, too.” Likewise, Zane slowly kicked off his own footwear, freeing his more elegant hooves.

“That’s it man, just let it all hang out.” The horse snorted and juggled his mostly-bare stomach with both hands. The giraffe grinned sheepishly. Caart chuckled, his big belly wobbling. “That was some workout you gave me earlier, All-Star.”

“Urgh,” Zane said with a small, rueful grin, “I think *I* was the one who got given the workout, man.” He wiggled his toes against the thick, comforting pile of the rug. It felt ludicrously, deliciously informal.

The horse watched him, grazing on yet another greasy slice of pizza.

“What’s the matter, big guy? Really.”

“Huh?” the giraffe’s long neck stiffened. He swung it look at the enormous equine in surprise. Behind pizza-stuffed cheeks Caart rolled his eyes, but his voice stayed gentle.

“C’mon man, I’m fat but I’m not *stupid*- something’s been on your mind all day. Spill. Seriously, I want to help.” He noticed the giraffe rubbing the outside of one knee. “Are you sure you’re ok?”

“Yeah man, I’m fine. I’m just...” Zane chuckled and shook his head ruefully, “getting *old*. My knee gets stiff if I play too hard on it, and I can’t put my back into the moves quite like I used to or it winds up going into spasm.” His eyes met those of the bloated beast of an ex-basketball legend watching him. “I guess I’ve been thinking a lot about my future, and whether I’ve got much of one.”

“Hey, man,” the horse spluttered, wheezing as he struggled to sit forward against the downward push of his bulk and the sucking pull of the couch. The pizza boxes teetered dangerously until he steadied them. “Of *course* you have!” He looked concerned when he saw the giraffe’s unconvinced expression. “When’s your contract run till?”

“End of next season,” Zane replied quietly, looking at his hooves, “After that... well, who knows?”

“The All-Stars aren’t going to let *you* go, man.” Caart reached over and put a hand on the giraffe’s broad shoulder. “They wouldn’t be on top without you. *They* know that, even if you don’t make a lot of noise about the fact.” He hesitated a moment. “You’re a better player than I ever was, big guy- you set up the shots like you’re supposed to. *You* stick to the game-plan. The only reason my stats were higher was because *I* was a Glory Hog.” He smiled encouragingly and patted Zane’s patterned shoulder through his shirt. “You’re still at the top of your game. You’ll get another three years, easy. Probably five, if they’re smart.”

“Yeah. Maybe.” It lacked conviction.

“Hey, c’mon, even if you are slowing up some, no-one out there’s going to top you for *height*, right?” Caart grinned.

“Yeah, that’s me,” the giraffe replied wearily, “professionally tall.”

“Hey, you’re just lucky *I’m* not still around to show you up,” the horse commented with a smirk. He sat back and smacked his belly. “Even at *this* size I wiped the court with you today.” *That* raised a small smile.

“You did *not* wipe the court with me.”

“I so did,” the humungous horse grinned, tongue stuck between his teeth.

“You *sat* on me, that’s not the same thing.”

“Hooves down, I beat you today, All-Star! I always could.”

“Excuse me!” the giraffe exclaimed with a smile, “What happened to me being the better player all of a sudden, Glory Hog?”

“I was just trying to make you feel better!”

“*Who* shot the most hoops today again?”

“If I hadn’t been going *easy* on you, you wouldn’t have scored *one*.”

“*Eas-* oh.” Zane was laughing now. “*Right*. Rematch. That ego of yours needs to be put on a diet, *Dumpy*.” A muscle twitched under Caart’s eye and his nostrils flared, but his grin widened.

“Bring it on: where and when?”

“Anytime. Any *sport*, for that matter.”

“Hah!” the horse snorted immediately, “*Competitive eating!*” He took a huge, victorious bite of congealing pizza, tongue wrapping round it with indecent glee. Zane started, then after a couple of moment glanced sideways at him with a wry grin. He shook his head slowly.

“Ok, I’ll admit it- you’ve got me beat on that one.”

“Damn, *finally!* Progress!” Caart whinnied triumphantly, much to the giraffe’s bemusement.

“C’mon man, say it. Please. Call me *fat*. Just once.” Zane started laughing quietly, shaking his head again. “At least stretch to ‘Big C.’, huh?” the enormous equine entreated, “I’ve got to qualify for *that*, at least!”

Still leaning forwards, the giraffe looked back at the outsized tub of a couch-crushing stallion, propped forwards on his podgy arms, stomach bigger than ever thanks to two entirely gratuitous extra-large pepperoni pizzas. Then he smiled slowly.

“Sure, I could call you that if it’d give you satisfaction, short-stuff.”

Caart slowly blinked, then let himself thump back into the couch's embrace.

"Y'know, for such a nice guy, you are *evil*." He whickered in amusement, but it was cut off by a truly head-splitting yawn. "Oof... sorry about that, man."

"S'okay," Zane mumbled, mid-yawn himself now. "It's... been a long day."

"But damn, a *fun* one, though." The big black stallion hesitated, then reluctantly heaved himself to his hooves. "I guess we'd probably better both hit the hay. I'll get you a spare blanket and stuff. It, uhh..." he hesitated, "might be a little horse-y..."

"I'm fine with that, man. So long as you don't mind it getting a little giraffe-y."

The shrug turned into a brief shiver, the giraffe's sturdy shoulders twitching. "Is it just me, or is it kinda cold in here?" he asked when the heavysset horse returned.

"Sorry, Africa-boy," the overfed equine grinned at him sympathetically. "I sweat like a beast if it's too warm at night. Plus I like it kinda cold- blame my Nordic roots." He snorted, "Besides, *I've* got plenty of insulation." He held up a large, thick blanket. "Think this'll keep you warm enough?" He looked rather embarrassed for a moment. "Sorry it's kinda basic man, mostly the people who stay here are, uhh... spending the night with *me*."

"I'll be fine, man." The giraffe chuckled and shrugged drowsily. He flashed the outsized stallion a smile even as he tried not to yawn at the same time. "Thanks for putting me up."

"My pleasure, big guy. G'night, man."

Heading for the door, the horse hesitated, and turned back.

"Thanks for coming, Zane. Really, I mean it. It's been... just great. I'll see you in the morning."

* * *

A little later, the bottom of the bedroom door swished gently against the carpet as it was slowly pushed open. A single bedside lamp lit the spacious room, the glow reflected by a full-length mirror in one corner. The sumo-sized stallion, now just in cotton underwear almost blacker than his own hide, was standing in front of it, examining himself pensively. It seemed he had to stay a couple of paces back to fit all of his reflection in. His other clothes were strewn chaotically, dropped where they'd been taken off. Standing sideways-on, the horse was subjecting his backside to scientific scrutiny. Then he turned full-frontal, put both hands under his gut and lifted, holding it, before letting it slap back softly, watching it ripple.

It was hard to tell if he was satisfied by what he saw or not. Just then, he caught a movement in his peripheral vision.

“Whoa!” A jolt of surprise ran through his bulk before he registered what it was. He spoke sternly to the mirror to cover his blushes. “Geeze, man... you could have knocked or something!” With the shock wearing off, he managed a little grin, and unclenched his grip on the waistband of his boxer shorts. “I mean, another couple of minutes and I’d not have been wearing *anything*.”

“Uh... sorry, man.”

“Everything ok?” the horse asked. “You need something, big guy?”

“...Yeah...” the giraffe replied, stepping gingerly into the room. *He* was only wearing boxer shorts too. He seemed nervous about entering. His neck swung as he glanced around.

“Whoa, that’s some bed.” He took in its dimensions. “King-sized?”

“Hey,” Caart said, recovering his old smug smirk, “I’m a King-sized stallion nowadays. Plus I like room to spread out when I sleep.” He watched as his friend tentatively prodded the mattress, which rippled under the pressure.

“A water-bed, too?”

“Yeah,” the humungous horse replied with a smile, still looking in the mirror, “it’s better for my back.” His smile flickered as the giraffe noticed what was next to the bed, beneath the bedside lamp.

“Seriously, *snack-cakes*?”

“Uh-huh,” Caart said with a grin, “those are for if I wake up hungry in the night.”

There was something else on the bedside table- a photograph in a frame. The giraffe picked it up, and looked at it for a moment in the dim light. In the mirror, the horse’s lips compressed into a line.

“And that’s for if I wake up and *don’t* feel like a snack.”

“This is you, man,” Zane’s reflection said quietly, neck turning to look at the horse’s wide back, then down at the picture again.

“The *old* me.” Caart gently squeezed a roll of flesh up at his side, and regarded himself in the mirror. “Damn, I remember when that publicity shot got taken. I was feeling so low they had to retake it about five times to get one with an even halfway-normal smile.” He put his hands to the sides of his stomach and shook it. It made a *gloop* noise. “If I ever have any doubts about how big I’m getting, I look at that skinny little kid and remember just how

miserable he used to be.” Still looking in the mirror, Caart frowned and peered closer. “I can still just about see myself from back then, if I look hard.” He snorted. “Not for much longer, hopefully.”

“I can still recognise you.”

“Oh?” Caart frowned. “How, man?”

“That *mouth*.”

The hugely hefty horse blinked, then broke into a broad smile. The giraffe’s reflection gently replaced the frame, then moved quietly to stand directly behind the big, black stallion. The thick carpet muffled his hoofsteps. All the horse could see in the mirror were his shoulders, the base of his neck, and the bottom edge of his chin as his head leaned down.

“You are... so...” The giraffe’s low voice hesitated, apparently lost for words.

“*Fat?*” Caart gave his reflection a lop-sided, chubby-cheeked grin. His ears perked up. “Am I finally gonna hear you say the F-word, big guy?”

In the mirror Zane’s hands rose, and gently rested on the smooth curve of the stallion’s bare, soft shoulders.

“...*Beautiful*.”

Caart’s ears practically turned a somersault.

“HUH?!” He whirled around on the spot, an act that knocked the giraffe back two paces and nearly knocked over the mirror to boot. He stared, round-eyed, at his friend. The giraffe stared right back.

“I...” You could have lit a room with Zane’s burning cheeks. “That is, I... I mean, I wanted to... I didn’t...” He suddenly froze, then let out a strangled little laugh. He turned his neck to look away from the horse. “Damn,” he whispered hoarsely as he looked into the middle distance, a strange smile on his face. “I... I *really* suck at this!” He gave another little laugh. “Here I am trying to... I mean I *want* to... and... and I can h-hardly even say the *word*-”

“Yes,” Caart said simply. Derailed, the rambling giraffe stuttered to a halt.

“...What?” he asked faintly.

“Yes.” A smile was growing on the horse’s round face, broader and broader. He took a small step forward. “Whatever you were planning to say, whatever play you were going to make, man, consider it worked.” Zane was staring at him in incomprehension. Grinning fit to burst, Caart held his arms out wide. “Damnit, don’t just *stand* there, you gorgeous hunk of a ‘raffe, take me, I’m all yours!”

The giraffe remained mute, blinking in bewilderment.

“And YES!” Caart roared with laughter, shaking his head in exasperation. “You absolutely, *completely* suck at this, doofus! Damnit, man...” he wiped his mane out of his face, his grin so big it felt like his skull was going to drop off, “I couldn’t even decide if you were *interested*! I mean, I was practically *throwing* myself at you this afternoon- even *before* I knew you were available- but each time you just let the pass fly right by!” As he spoke, he moved slowly towards Zane. The giraffe stumbled back skittishly, but the horse kept coming, gently, cautiously, corralling him back against the edge of the bed. “I kept thinking I saw *something* in the way you looked at me... but then I was worried, I wanted so *badly* to see it, maybe it was all in my head. But I *hoped*. Oh man, I hoped... so... hard...”

Now they were belly-to-belly again, closer even than they’d been on court, and Zane still hadn’t reacted. Very, very gently, Caart reached up and put his plump hands on the giraffe’s upper arms. The animal flinched, but the contact seemed to shock him back into life. He looked down, and blue eyes met grey.

“You could have just *said*, man,” the big, black, bloated stallion told him with a gentle smile. “When you walked in Valhalla today. You could have said something right then. Or bought me flowers. Winked. Hell, just snapped your fingers. You had me from hello.”

Very, very slowly, an answering, deep, sincere smile dawned on the giraffe’s face, like the moon rising in the night sky. He chuckled weakly.

“A-and here I’ve spent the last four hours trying to nerve myself up to ask if you’d still got a crush on me...”

“Oh, man...” The horse shook his head in delighted exasperation. “I used to *fantasise* about you- even *before* you drop-kicked Phil out of my life like that. The Cave-Giraffe look

reeeeally suits you, by the way...” Caart trailed off as Zane’s hands finally touched his sides, and he let out a low, soft, drawn-out nicker. It was possibly the cutest sound Zane had ever heard. The huge, soft stallion looked up at him bashfully. “And here *I* was, about to cry myself to sleep because I thought you really didn’t... or that you *had*, but had changed your mind because I’d gone and got so *fat*...”

“When I first saw you this morning, my legs nearly gave out on me,” the giraffe said with a sheepish grin. “I spent all day trying not to ogle you.” His muzzle took on a wry smile.

“And I spent most of it thinking you were *taken*. When I realised you *weren’t*, I... I...” he shrugged and shook his head, his grin now as wide as Caart’s, hands still resting on the sumo-sized stallion’s bulging saddlebags, “I just couldn’t believe my luck.” Zane’s smile became earthier, and his hands stroked those tyre-like lovehandles. “You’re... *stunning*.” His hands slid down over the horse’s soft, pneumatic sides. Caart’s smile widened in response, and he nickered blissfully as those strong digits caressed his doughy flanks, then cradled his rump, one cheek apiece. Then he let out a surprised little squeak, rising briefly onto hoof tip as the giraffe suddenly *squeezed*.

“Whoa... d-damn,” he murmured, blinking upwards. “This really *isn’t* a dream, is it?”

“No,” Zane said from above with a small shake of his head, still smiling.

“Oh, man... all those years, fantasising about you... and this is actually...” The horse trailed off, looking almost overwhelmed. “And... I’m *really* your first?” he asked tentatively.

“...Yes,” Zane nodded hesitantly, his cheeks starting to go red again. For a moment the stallion outright smirked, and wrapped his arms more firmly around the giraffe’s back.

“I’ll go gentle on you,” he teased. Then his expression became more serious. “You’re *sure* you want to-?”

“Yes,” the giraffe husked in a way that almost made Caart melt in his arms. The lamplight made his eyes glow like sapphires. He slowly cantilevered his long neck down as the horse lifted his chubby neck up, their faces inching closer...

The giraffe hesitated.

“Caart... Promise me you’re just not doing this to... I don’t know... be friendly or something,” he entreated in a low voice. “I’m serious, man: my heart’s hanging wide open here, I couldn’t *bear* it if this wasn’t-”

“Zane,” the stallion said seriously, voice growing desperate, “*Please* kiss me before we both flunk the shot...” He stretched his neck upwards as far as it would go, trying to make his lips connect with the giraffe’s, then he suddenly pulled back, flustered. “Geeze,” he distractedly rubbing the back of his neck, “I’ve never, ever been the *little guy* befo- mph...”

Zane’s lips pressed slowly, softly against his, and kissed him.

When the giraffe eventually let up, Caart’s eyes had closed, and his arms hung limply by his sides. Swaying slightly on his hooves, he stayed like that for long moments after the kiss had ended.

“Whoa...” he whispered, eyes still closed. With an effort of will he opened them and looked up into the giraffe’s blue eyes, momentarily struck dumb. He hadn’t expected something so... gentle. He was used to groping enthusiasm, to lust, but had instead met *tenderness*. And behind it, something... else. Something deep enough to drown in. He gulped slightly. “G-good kiss, man.” He felt an unaccustomed blush building on his cheeks. “*Great* kiss.”

The giraffe leaned down and planted another, delicate kiss between Caart’s ears. He could feel the giraffe’s hands holding his rolling sides, his lips tickling the top of his head.

“There’s something,” Zane murmured into enormous equine’s unruly mane, “I’ve been longing to do since I first saw you today...” Lifting his muzzle from the horse’s hair, the giraffe slowly sank to his knees, then lower as he folded up still further, smiling as his face dropped almost out of view, cast into the shadow of that supersized stallion’s stupendous stomach. Caart blinked, smiling back dazedly, and then his eyes widened in shock as he guessed the giraffe’s intentions.

“Whoa!” He whickered and shuffled on his hooves. He blushed again. “Uhh... d-damn man, you sure work fa-*haaaaahhh*...” Caart let out a high-pitched little gasp, his stomach flinching back as Zane’s lips unexpectedly made contact just beneath his bellybutton. The giraffe waited patiently, and the sucked-in gut slowly rolled back out to its former glorious girth. It bumped gelatinously against his lips. He moved his hands to support the sides of that enormous equine belly- another fleshy flinch.

“You *are* sensitive, aren’t you?” With a smile Zane slowly kissed Caart’s belly again, the same exact spot. He heard a stifled whicker from above, and a quiver ran through the horse’s

obese body. The ripples sloshed sluggishly against his nose. “And *fat*,” the giraffe breathed softly. The F-word reached in and pulled something very deep in the horse’s chest, making his heart lurch. “So... very... very... fat.” Zane punctuated each word with a lingering kiss to the overfed stallion’s mammoth middle, skipping from place to place around his belly’s colossal circumference but slowly working up its deep curve, latitude by latitude. His hands gently pressed against that gargantuan gut, shifting and sloshing its substantial weight. Each kiss produced another flinch, another twitch. “Amazingly... unbelievably... fat. You... beautiful... King-sized... *fat-ass*.”

As he paused at the top of the stallion’s stomach, the horse was breathing raggedly, nostrils flexing and flaring like jet intakes. His eyes were closed, his arms held out a little from his sides, and sweat was starting to bead on his face.

“Don’t... stop...” he panted. Then he opened his eyes, and looked down into Zane’s adoring smile. “Don’t stop!” the het-up horse whinnied urgently at him, “*Please*...” It came out as a low moan. The giraffe’s smile turned impish. He gave the stallion’s stupendous belly a bounce, which dragged another worked-up whinny out of him, then planted a kiss on the underside of each of the stallion’s bloated breasts, making the horse gasp on the first and shiver deeply on the repeat. His hands shifted up, framing Caart’s colossal chest, but he tantalisingly avoided the dark nubs of the horse’s nipples, instead kissing him twice on the sternum, pressing his muzzle deep between those porked-out pecs.

The big black stallion found himself frozen to the spot, unable to move, barely able to breathe, every muscle in his legs and spine gone rigid. Holding him under his bloated armpits, Zane slowly, sensuously kissed his way up the horse’s neck, both chins, his cheeks and his forehead, then back on top of his head again. Silent until then, the giraffe let out a deep, wistful sigh as he nuzzled his hair. Then, finally, he kissed Caart’s plump, heavy, aching lips. To Zane, nothing had ever tasted sweeter, despite the garlic. They clinched tightly.

The super-sized stallion distantly realised that every part of his body now felt aflame, even the feel of air flowing coolly over his skin was nearly unbearable. Zane broke off, saw his expression, then glanced behind him.

“... Do you think the bed can take the three of us?” he asked with a little smile.

It could, and did. But only just, from some of the alarming noises it made with them on top of it. And they only got as far as cuddling, or ‘necking’. But then again, there was such an awful lot to cuddle, and at least one of them had an awful lot of neck...

For Zane, being in bed with this vast, bulging beast was simply mind-blowing. He was swamped by his sheer bulk, threatening to drown him and squash him at the same time. But at the same time, he was so round and voluptuous and invitingly, yieldingly plump. He’d stared at Caart all day, and wondered, *wanted*, hardly daring to hope... but the reality was so much more than he’d anticipated. The stupendous stallion was absolutely butter-soft in his grasp- he could sink his hands deep into those dark, doughy depths without meeting bone, feel the horse’s blubbery acreage squeeze and shift, but then it would push right back at him, warm and living, demanding its space, refilling, no, over-filling his grasp. The huge horse seemed to grow in his grasp- he was just mountainous, never-ending. And so *hot*- his massive, bloated body was pumping out heat like the African veldt, pummelling him with warmth and horsey-ness, making him seem even *bigger*.

For Caart, Zane was an absolute revelation. He’d never expected... *this*. He felt like he’d chipped at his old friend’s reserve, expecting a frozen, rock-solid wall, only to smash through a paper-thin layer of ice and go falling, falling, falling into a bottomless ocean of passion beneath. He’d never *guessed*...

Other lovers had made a thing about his size and escalating weight, sure- a kiss here, a teasing squeeze there- but nothing ever, *ever* like Zane. The giraffe seemed determined to kiss every single part of him, every stretched, bloated bit of him where excess weight had accumulated, softened him, fattened him up. And with that neck he *could* kiss him almost anywhere from his thighs to his ears (and he did just that) whilst lying right in front of him, his hands meanwhile squeezing and kneading areas of super-fatted horseflesh that his lips weren’t kissing. And oh, it felt so *good*...

“Juiciest... apple... *ever*,” he thought he heard the giraffe grunt cryptically at one point, although in his distracted state he couldn’t swear to it. Zane’s neck was draped over the horse’s chubby shoulder at the time, his chin cushioned against one of the padded bulges of his lower back, whilst his arms were wrapped around the inflated equine’s equator, his hands kneading Caart’s tyrelike sides. Then, “Found it,” the giraffe chuckled deeply, setting a

quiver through the horse's blubber that left him tingling.

"Mphhh... f-found what?"

"Your tattoo." And to prove it, Zane put his lips against it, and kissed. The horse shuddered and snorted rapturously, his tail swatting the laughing giraffe in the face. It didn't stop him kissing it some more.

The humungous horse found himself growing increasingly helpless under the giraffe's meticulous, loving attentions. Caart had always enjoyed being in the saddle, so to speak- and these days, to get on top in a relationship all he really had to do was roll over onto his partner- but Zane was different. Every time he came even close to taking the reins with him, the giraffe found some new, unexpected spot to kiss, a new roll or ruckle to nuzzle or lick on his beau's bloated, barn-sized body, and the sumo-sized stallion found himself sinking back, muscles quivering powerlessly as they were overloaded with another blast-wave of bliss. He hadn't been joking about liking foreplay. The only advantage Caart seemingly had was his discovery that, for a giraffe, the G-Spot was definitely the throat.

"Just... go with it, man," he panted soothingly as he bore down on top of the groaning, shivering giraffe. He landed another kiss under Zane's chin. "You're with the Big Stud now, Handsome, you just let him take charge of things..." There was a muffled snort from beneath him, then a stifled laugh.

"*Big Stud?*" Caart flushed and hesitated- that line had worked fine on everyone else- and then the gorgeous giant of a giraffe kissed him just *there*, and with a deep whinny the humungous hayball of a horse collapsed helplessly on top of him as his arms went limp. Then he was being rolled, the giraffe holding him, squeezing, caressing, stroking, kissing, nuzzling. So... *good*...

"You... big, beautiful basketball," Zane panted out adoringly, kissing the summit of Caart's spherical belly, who now lay sprawled on his back, legs kicking feebly. The giraffe's tongue tickled inside the bloated beast's bellybutton, triggering a deep, shuddering neigh of delight. He couldn't help himself. The pleasure Zane's affections produced in him never seemed to grow any less intense, it just went on, and on, and on...

The bed heaved and surged like a tsunami as the two giant beasts entwined and rollicked amorously, hooves tangling together, the giraffe apparently making sure he had kissed every

square inch of Caart's behemoth belly, colossally chubby chest, ample arms and tubby thighs, fat front and bulging back, and that round, round rear. Then he started over.

"Oh, god, s-stop man, stop!" Panting and sweating from his exertions, the swollen stallion, overloaded with pleasure, managed to focus on the giraffe's flushed face up close above him. His hair was dishevelled, those sapphire-blue eyes gazing intensely, lovingly at him in a way he'd only dreamed of before now. Moaning, Caart bit his lip, "Oh, g-god, n-no, *don't* stop! Please, don't stop!" With a wicked grin, Zane kissed him deeply on the mouth before returning his attentions elsewhere.

He was helpless now- Caart needed the giraffe's strong hands on him, his tongue, his velvety-soft lips. It was so intense it hurt, but not to have them hurt more. He lay there like a beached whale, transported as his lover explored his bulk, now focussing his affections entirely on Caart's heaving belly and chest, making the equine wriggle and writhe in ecstasy, his own fattened flesh wobbling and weighing him down, sloshing sluggishly on top of him. He'd never been made to feel so... *big* before. He was Mt. Hørssten now- his belly the mountain and his chest was the foothills. He was an island, he was a *continent*, he was a whole damn *world*! Another shudder went through him as Zane's breath tickled just beneath his navel.

"Zane," the horse found himself panting out weakly, in between deep, passionate kisses with his partner. "Z-Zaaane..."

"Caart..." the giraffe whispered back, neck wrapping round the horse's to kiss him from the other side, catching him by surprise. "Oh... *Caart*..."

Not even Hernando and Enrique had managed to make him feel like *this*.

Finally, they wore each other out. Balanced on his side by his belly and backside, the supersized stallion smiled beatifically as he passed out, saturated with loving attention beyond his ability to measure. The exhausted, euphoric giraffe cuddled up against the padded cliff-face formed by Caart's back, his arm draped lovingly down the valley between two of the horse's hill-like lovehandles. He drowsily nuzzled the padded space between his larger-than-life lover's swollen shoulder and neck, which he seemed to infinitely prefer to any pillow, before he too was sand-bagged into sleep.

As the night deepened the weather outside turned darker and wilder, clouds scudding overhead. Rain started to patter against the glass, then drum mutedly. Since falling asleep the outsized pair of lovers had rolled apart, the supersized stallion now spread on his back like a beached whale, belly rising and falling with the soft, tectonic rumble of a low snore, the giraffe on his side, beneath the remaining fraction of the duvet that wasn't taken up by horse.

The drumming rain grew louder, more persistent. The hefty horse shifted in his sleep, legs twitching. His nostrils flexed, a faint frown creasing his chubby features. Then-

“NO!”

The anguished bellow tore Zane from sleep in time to find the ground heaving wildly beneath him. For one disoriented moment he was convinced some kind of bomb had just gone off. Then waking memory intervened, and he looked around.

Caart was sitting bolt upright in bed, panting. In the dim light his enormous, beautiful ball of a body was sheened in sweat, and it looked like he was trembling. His eyes had a wild, glassy look to them as he stared into the distance at something Zane couldn't see.

“Caart?” The giraffe struggled to sit up as well, hampered by his long, ungainly limbs and the uncooperative bed, already pressurised beneath its owner's prodigious weight. “Are you ok?”

The sumo-sized stallion flinched and looked around- the sight of the giraffe apparently startled him, as though he'd forgotten he'd got company.

“M... fine... fine...” the horse mumbled as he focussed on him, his shoulders slumping into a more natural posture. He seemed to wake up a second time. He wiped his face with his hand, stared at it, then blotted himself on the duvet instead. He took a deep breath, then another, eyes closed. When he opened them again, Zane had finally sat up next to and was watching him anxiously. “I'm fine, man, really,” he said with an ill-looking parody of his usual smile. “S-sorry I woke you. Just... just a stupid dream.”

Falling quiet, the horse made no attempt to lie back down. He was still trembling. Zane moved a little closer, and went to put an arm around him.

“Caart, are you sur-”

“Get the hell away from me!”

Lightning cracked in the sky outside, punctuating the sudden, stricken silence. It was impossible to tell who was more stunned by the roar, Zane or Caart himself. The giraffe stared speechlessly at the horse, who stared right back at him, round-eyed, his mouth working fruitlessly. The following thunder finally rumbled through the room.

“I... I...” Caart faltered, then he suddenly lurched up and out of bed. He looked sick. “I’ve gotta...” He didn’t finish the sentence, didn’t look back; he practically galloped out of the door. Zane heard another slam a couple of moments later.

Locked in the bathroom, Caart sat on the can for a while, breathing raggedly. Then, slowly, he hauled himself up and went to the basin. He splashed cold water on his face, and then stared at himself in the mirror. He went on staring morosely, the disgust and self-loathing he felt gradually growing deeper and deeper.

Then came a gentle, tentative knock on the closed door. It sounded like a gunshot in the horse’s enclosed, tiled ceramic world of misery.

“...Caart?” Zane’s low, muffled voice came through the wooden door. “Caart... are you ok?” The horse in the mirror flinched like he’d been whipped. “Caart,” Zane tried again when he made no response. He sounded upset. *“Please... just... say something. Anything.”* “I’m fine.” It came out as a pitiful, dry croak. He cleared his throat roughly and tried again, wiping strands of hair out of his face. “I’m ok,” even to him, his voice sounded strange and raw. “Just... just give me a couple of minutes. Please.” His voice caught on the last word. Absolutely pathetic. There was a long pause.

“Caart... please come out. You’ve been in there for half an hour.” The fat-ass in the mirror started in shock- that long? He looked down, and realised he was still wearing his underwear. He hadn’t even taken it off before taking his... his friend to bed. “Please...” The giraffe fell silent.

A few minutes later the lock on the bathroom door clicked, and the door swung open. The dejected stallion crept out. He found Zane leaning patiently against the far wall of the short, shadowy hallway. In addition to his boxer shorts he'd thrown on a T-shirt- with a wrench Caart realised it was his own from earlier. While the stretched neck-line actually fitted ok, and the length was pretty much right, everywhere else it hung off the giraffe like a deflated life-raft.

Grey, red-rimmed eyes met blue.

"I'm sorry," Caart sniffed, a lump in his throat. "I di-"

Zane crossed the gap in one step and crushed the astonished stallion tightly in his long, strong arms. Then he leaned down and kissed the top of Caart's head.

"It's ok, sweetie," he murmured softly into the horse's rumpled mane, "It's ok." The swollenn stallion blushed, plump face pressed against the folds of his own T-shirt, meeting the giraffe's firm chest beneath. It was strange and familiar all at once- someone he'd known for so long from the court, seen casually naked in the showers, now nuzzling him in the dark. Everything felt so different now. "I promise, it's all ok..." He felt Zane's hands gently rub his back, and some of the tension in his shoulders finally unknotted. The big, fat horse gave a short, involuntary sob and just let this gorgeous giraffe-guy hold him for a while.

Eventually, Caart slowly lifted his heavy head from Zane's chest. Bending his neck even further, the giraffe gently pressed his forehead against the hefty horse's own, making a line from their noses to their ears.

"Some dream, huh?" he asked gently. Caart grunted, and managed a smile in response, albeit more of a grimace. He took a deep breath.

"Yeah... s-some dream."

"You want to talk about it?"

"No." The horse shook his head, breaking contact. The giraffe lifted his head a little and cocked it, but didn't say anything. "Really, it's not important, man." Caart blushed, aware he was sounding stubborn. Well, he *was* stubborn. He looked down at the giraffe's chest again. "It's just a dream- some dumb dream I used to have sometimes. Haven't had it in a while." He tried to laugh it off, but failed. "Just bad luck it happened again tonight."

"A nightmare," the giraffe stated, his voice still quiet, but flat.

“Uhh... yeah, I guess you could call it that.” The heavy horse tried gently to disengage himself from Zane’s grip, but the giraffe kept hold of him, fingers linked around his back. He was still being gazed at expectantly. “It’s stupid, man, really.” Zane didn’t say anything. “It’s... kinda embarrassing, actually.” The giraffe still didn’t say anything, but he could feel those blue eyes on him without his even looking up.

“I’m back on court...” the words were out before Caart could stop them. He pulled up, then his shoulders slumped a little more in resignation. “In the dream,” he muttered, “I’m back on court- the *old* me. Like I never left. I’m still playing for the Cougars. I’m... I’m in a game, a big game. I don’t know which one, but I know it’s big. And... and I’m *there*, I’ve never left, I’ve got the ball, and everyone is shouting and hollering for me, the fans, the team, everyone, and I’m *stuck*, and I’m looking around and *I can’t get out!*” The horse’s voice rose, he stopped and made an effort to control it. “I can’t get out. They won’t let me go.”

Zane had gone very still, his arms still around the supersized stallion. Very, very slowly, Caart sighed, neck drooping.

“When... when I was getting changed to play you earlier today... yesterday... I... I froze, man. For a moment... That changing room, putting on a kit again, it... I just kept having flashbacks of that *stupid* dream, that if I stepped onto that court I’d be *back* there and none of this would have been real...” He trailed off wretchedly, and leaned his muzzle against Zane’s chest. Zane didn’t react.

“This is all my fault.” The giraffe’s husky voice now sounded hoarse. “Oh god, Caart, I’m so, so sorry...”

“S’not your fault,” the super-chubby stallion in his arms mumbled stubbornly against him.

“Yes, it *is*. If I hadn’t made you play... damnit, if I hadn’t stirred this all back up by waltzing out of your past-”

“*Don’t you dare say that!*” Caart vehemently thumped Zane on the chest. “Don’t you *dare!*” The winded giraffe suddenly found himself crushed in a hug like a death-grip. “You’re the best bloody thing that’s happened to me since... s-since...” The horse gulped, and went quiet, face buried against Zane’s chest. “... I need a coffee,” he mumbled suddenly, and tried to pull away. A look of pain crossed the giraffe’s face, and he resisted.

“Caart... I know what you said about usin-”

“I *need* a coffee.” This time there was an edge in the supersized stallion’s voice. He pulled harder. Letting go, Zane caught hold of his horse’s chubby cheeks, leaned down and kissed him, a long, lingering kiss, full on the lips. It caught Caart completely off-guard. When he stopped the horse just stood there and blinked up at him stupidly, his cheeks going ruddy.

“Come into the kitchen, sweetie,” Zane said gently, taking his hands. “I’ve got something better than coffee...”

* * *

Caart’s kitchen was modern Scandinavian in design- clean lines, fitted cupboards, bare wooden work-tops. For some reason the side-lights above the work-tops were on, casting the room in a dim glow. That was the first thing an equally-subdued Caart noticed as he was led in- he’d definitely killed the lights before going to bed. The second thing he noticed was the smell.

“...Chocolate?” The question was completely pointless- the scent of it was too strong and heady for it to be anything else.

“Uh-huh,” the giraffe replied with a smile. He crossed to the stove-top, where Caart spotted a rogue pan bubbling. A couple of his coffee mugs stood nearby- his favourite, readily identifiable by the stains, and one of the ones he kept for guests. The giraffe busily divided the contents of the pan into the two mugs, then turned back towards him. His smile faded slightly at the horse’s expression. “...what?”

“Man, I...” Caart scratched the back of his neck, and confessed wretchedly, “I don’t *like* hot chocolate.” He felt a total hoof for saying so, with all the effort Zane had obviously put into this whilst he’d been locked in the bathroom, snivelling. “I’m sorry, it’s... so, so sweet of you, I just... I know I *look* like the kind of guy who’d love the stuff,” he said, helplessly, “but... it’s always disappointing, y’know?” He shrugged. “It always smells good, but you never get the taste to go with it.”

For some reason Zane didn’t look as upset by this crushing news as he’d expected him to.

“Oh, I think you’ll change your mind on this occasion,” he said with a little smile.

“Why?”

“Because.” He put Caart’s steaming mug on the table that occupied the middle of the room.

“C’mon, have a seat, and just try it. You’ll see.”

“Man, I really-”

“Sit, Caart.” The giraffe’s tone was still gentle, but this time it didn’t brook any argument. After a longing glance at his trusty espresso machine the enormous equine sat down reluctantly, taking his habitual place at one end of the rectangular table. Each armless chair was about half-as-big-again as most ordinary furniture. His boxer-clad backside now hung off both sides of the seat. Zane folded himself neatly onto the chair alongside his, sitting at the table’s long edge, then slid Caart’s mug across to him.

“I couldn’t find any marshmallows,” he said apologetically “but I guess we can live without them for tonight.” The gloomy horse paused, the mug in his hands. He’d been peering morosely into its dark-brown depths. He managed the ghost of a smile.

“I don’t like marshmallows, either.”

“You’ll like them with this,” Zane replied imperturbably. He lifted his mug, wrapped his prehensile lips around the rim and sipped delicately. He put it down, and gave Caart an expectant look. The horse grudgingly lifted his own mug. He had to admit, it did at least smell stronger than most hot chocolate. He took a small sip for the sake of appearance. Maybe he could fake it...

“Still disappointed?” the giraffe asked with a small smile. The horse was still sitting with the mug to his lips, his eyes rather round.

“Mph.” He swallowed with a kind of *glop* noise, then immediately took a larger swig. The stuff was actually almost thicker than if Zane had just melted chocolate in a mug, but the moment it hit his tongue it seemed to instantly spread and coat everything, filling his entire head with the taste and smell of chocolate. He coughed in surprise, then put the mug down, blinking. He wiped his nose.

“Whoa... Man, what... what’s *in* this stuff?” His tongue was still practically glued to his teeth.

“Secret South African recipe,” the giraffe replied, grinning teasingly.

Caart had already brought the mug back up to his lips, not quite able to believe what he’d tasted the first time. No, he had been right.

“M-man, and you can *make* this any time you like?” He actually blushed. The giraffe chuckled, obviously delighted with the big, fat stallion’s reaction.

“Oh, it comes in handy- I usually make sure I’ve got the essentials with me, just in case.”

The horse noticed that Zane’s sports bag was on the kitchen counter, unzipped.

“Damn, if that was me... I’d be *beyond* whale-sized.” He could practically feel the calories swilling past his tongue. He buried himself in the mug, but found that even he couldn’t bolt down something that rich. For once he was forced to sip. Looking up, he found himself grinning stupidly at Zane, his cheeks still red.

“T-talk about a love potion...”

The giraffe very gently reached out and put his hands over the horse’s chubby mitts as they clutched the warm mug.

“I think we need to talk, Caart. About a lot of things. And... how we feel about each other.” In the dim light the horse’s smile withered. Putting the mug down, he pulled his hands away.

“It’s not you, Zane” he said wretchedly as he stared at the table, “You’re... you’re *wonderful*. It’s me. I’m... still totally screwed up, man.” He shook his head slowly, still looking down. “I keep telling myself I’m fine, but... I’m really not.” He laughed shortly, bitterly. “Does it sound bad if I say that Clay-Hoofed Hørssten’s ruined my life? If I could go back in time I’d like to pin that scrawny, egotistical kid against a wall and slap him silly, teach him a lesson he’ll not forget in a hurry.”

“Caart-” the giraffe said gently, looking pained. The horse snorted.

“I’ve dated a whole bunch of guys, and it always, *always* goes wrong. You know why? Because, to *them*, I’m always still bloody Clay Hørssten.” He sighed bleakly. “Some of them I think just got a thing out of banging a sad, fat, washed-up superstar for a while. Others... well, you *met* Phil.” The horse rolled his eyes. “It’s always the same. It’ll go ok at the start, then they start talking about me shaping up, getting back on track, getting back in the Game. They only ever want *him*, not me. Not me...” He gave a mirthless little laugh. “I even managed to go out with a couple of guys incognito, y’know?” He smiled momentarily in recollection, then his shoulders slumped again, “But then someone else would recognise me, or I’d let something slip, and they’d find out. And then it got... awkward. I broke up with one guy because he just wouldn’t shut up about it- it was never the same between us after that. And Bruno...” the horse faltered, “When Bruno left he said it was because he couldn’t deal with me having been someone else like that, someone so different.” He snorted again, and gave the giraffe a distressed smile. “It’s ironic, huh? Even when they didn’t want me to *be* Clay-bloody-Hørssten, he still managed to wreck everything.”

He subsided into miserable silence. Zane reached out again, tentatively putting one hand back on the upset stallion's. The big beast flinched slightly at his touch- they both did.

"Caart..." the giraffe said hesitantly. "After you left... did you ever... talk to your dad again?"

"Oh," the horse said with desperate jollity as he sniffed, wiping his eyes, "He called, once."

"How... how did it go?"

"I didn't really listen too closely. The usual kind of things, I guess. Disgrace to the family, brought shame on everyone, disgusting, *pervverted*, needed psychiatric help, no son of his, blah, blah."

"And what did you say to him?"

"I put the phone down on him," Caart said matter-of-factly. Despite himself, Zane smiled.

"It was worse when my mom phoned," the horse confessed, his voice now barely above a whisper. "She and my dad divorced when I was in college- turns out I wasn't the only one who couldn't stand him anymore. *She's* the one living in Scandinavia now, can you believe it? Started a whole new life out there." The smile on his plump face lasted scant seconds.

"But she'd heard about me quitting and... everything else. She... she *apologised* for the way I'd been brought up, and for what it had *made me into*. Like, like she thought I was..." The horse's lip trembled for a moment before he got it under control.

"You've got nothing to be ashamed of, sweetie. *Nothing*." Zane squeezed the horse's hand tighter. The stallion grunted, barely hearing him, let alone listening. He took a deep breath.

"I even went to a few therapy sessions to get over it, man. I *tried*, I swear. But they all just wound up focussing on *this*," he smacked a hand to his stomach, "like *it* was the problem. They all thought that my walking away from more money than they'd ever seen in their lives was the crazy part." He shook his head disbelievingly. "They just... couldn't get it."

"You were trapped in a life you didn't want," Zane said quietly, staring at the table.

"Trapped *being* someone you weren't, someone you didn't *want* to be."

He looked up to find the fat horse staring at him, round-eyed.

"You get it," he whispered incredulously. "How can *you* get it and they can't?" There was absolutely no trace of bravado left now. His eyes were large and anguished. "I... I thought I could just leave Clay-Hoofed Hørssten behind and live happily ever after, but... .. now I can't ever get away from him." He sniffed, and managed a travesty of a smile. "That kid was right- I *am* a psych case. Just look at how I *lost it* at you tonight, because you remind me

of who I used to be.” He took a deep, shuddering breath. “Now you know,” he added miserably. “And now I can’t think why you’d ever want to have anything to do with me ever again. I’m a big, *fat*, screw-up.”

“I *like* screw-ups,” the giraffe said tenderly, reaching up with one hand to stroke Caart’s cheek.

The horse snorted brusquely, pulling his hands and face away. His chair scraped back.

“I really, *really* need that coffee...”

“Caart, please, *I love you*.” Zane said desperately, standing up as well. Pushing past him, the horse just snorted and began fiddling with the espresso maker. He wouldn’t look at him, his bulging back between them like some unbreachable barrier. “I know how you’re feeling, I understand, I’ve *been* there-”

“*How could you know anything about how I feel?*” the stallion snarled bitterly.

“I’m an alcoholic.”

Caart’s second-favourite coffee mug smashed to pieces on the tiled floor. The stallion stood stock-still, rooted to the spot, then slowly turned around. For a moment it was hard to say who looked more thunderstruck.

“...What?” he asked weakly.

“I. Am. An. Alcoholic.” His eyes shut, Zane pronounced each word slowly and clearly. He breathed out slowly, and opened his eyes. His shoulders rose as though a weight had been lifted, and he gave the horse a wan little smile. “You know, it actually feels good to finally tell you that?”

The dishevelled stallion was still staring disbelievingly at him. He was shaking slightly, and his ears apparently didn’t know what to do with themselves.

“Don’t... don’t *joke* about things like that, man.”

“I’m not joking,” the giraffe said. Then he turned and slowly sat back down at the table, cradling his hot chocolate.

“...God... Zane...” the swollen stallion’s voice cracked slightly. He took a step towards the giraffe- you could tell by the way the floor creaked. “... *How?*”

“The same way as usual, I guess,” Zane said flippantly, shrugging with one shoulder. “I was unhappy, and when I drank I felt... better.” He took a deep breath, and spoke to the table, his

voice oddly dispassionate. “So I started drinking too much at parties. People *liked* me when I drank at parties. Then I started drinking too much after a win- and we won pretty regularly. Then even if we hadn’t won, I’d drown my sorrows with the guys. Then when I had a hangover before training I’d knock one back to cure it. Then I’d have a drink after training, because, what the hell? Then...” he shrugged again, his voice dropping, “Then I suddenly needed a drink to get up in the morning.”

“But... *why*, man?” The horse’s voice was angry now, bewildered. “*Why?* You had *everything!*”

“For exactly the same reasons *you* were wiping the court with other players’ faces,” Zane snapped abruptly.

Silence fell like a guillotine.

The giraffe took a sip of his hot chocolate, closed his eyes, then put the mug down again. The silence lengthened. He kept his eyes resolutely on the table. He heard the horse inch gingerly closer- no one that heavy on his hooves had a hope of creeping up. Then he could feel the stallion’s bare bodyheat warming him from behind, like he was sitting with his back to a night-time sun. He closed his eyes. Then a pair of soft, plump, horsey hands alighted nervously on his shoulders.

“Zane,” the bulging beast breathed softly right behind him, breath hot on his skin. Hairs on his chin tickled against the back of the giraffe’s neck. His voice sounded thick. “Oh, *Zane...*” The giraffe raised one hand and placed it over Caart’s, then slowly twisted his neck around to softly press his nose against the stallion’s. Caart let out a distressed little noise.

“Come and sit back down, sweetie,” the giraffe murmured. He squeezed Caart’s hand on his shoulder. “Finish your hot chocolate, huh?”

The superchub stallion slowly sank back into his seat, still staring at the giraffe in anguish. Their hands stayed clasped tightly together.

“How...” Caart swallowed. “How long, man?” The giraffe shrugged.

“Hard to say- it sneaks up on you without realising. But I was drinking hard before I ever knew you.”

“I never... I never even guessed, man.” The horse pulled up. “Were you... I mean, did you ever play against me half-cut?” The giraffe snorted.

“I’d never have got away with *that*, fabulous height or not. I had just about enough control to be with-it at game-time.” He grinned weakly, “But boy, did I play with some bad hangovers. If it helps,” the giraffe added conversationally, still staring at the table, “I’ve been sober for two years now. Not a drop.”

“So you’re cured?”

“You don’t get cured, Caart.” Zane gave him a sad little smile. “Once an addict, always an addict. I’m sorry.” Caart’s fat face suddenly blanched guiltily.

“Oh god... And I spent all evening trying to make you have a drink so you’d loosen up...”

“You didn’t know,” Zane said softly, “I didn’t tell you- I *couldn’t* tell you. I nearly managed to work up the guts, in the bar, but then you got the wrong idea, and I just... flunked the shot. I’m a coward, Caart- I was scared that if I let on you’d run a mile from me.”

“... Is *this* why she left?” the horse eventually asked. Zane started, then laughed in genuine amusement.

“‘Pren? Hell no, man, ‘Pren drank more than *I* did. Especially since we could afford the good stuff. I hope her new guy’s liver can keep up, not to mention his wallet...” His smile faded, and he looked back at the table. “The drinking wasn’t the problem. ‘Pren left me because...” he glanced across at the bulging, black, ex-basketballer blubber-butt, “...she couldn’t understand how I could possibly be unhappy with the life we had. She was happy, so why wasn’t I?” He looked down at his free hand again where it rested on the table. His voice was dry and factual. “Money, glamour, parties almost every night, and unlimited shopping the rest of the time... We had everything *she* could possibly want. How could I not be happy with all that? What was wrong with me? I tried to explain, but... she just couldn’t understand.” He slowly swung his neck to look at Caart. “You know the *really* nuts part of it? ‘Pren was the one who filed for divorce, but *I* got the blame. My parents didn’t want us to split up- said we should stick it out. Mama... took the bad news about as well as your dad did.” The giraffe managed a small snort of laughter. “I’m definitely the black sheep of the family, now. I’ve not been back home since.”

“Zane...” the soft stallion said gently.

The giraffe heaved a small sigh, and carried on talking to his hands.

“After ‘Pren left, I lived in an alcoholic funk for nearly a year. I practically saw the world from inside a bottle. Then...” he looked up slowly and fixed his blue eyes on Caart. “Then I found myself sitting reading this interview with Clay Hørssten, this amazing, successful star

who'd done the unthinkable, actually *left* top-flight basketball, thrown it all up and gone for some reason, this madcap guy I'd thought I'd known up until that moment, and... and I discovered that *he was just like me!*" The giraffe's hand gripped Caart's so fiercely his knuckles went white. "I... I wasn't *alone*." He made an effort to relax his grip. "First thing the next morning, I walked into Sunken City and told them I had a drink problem. And you know what the first thing *they* said was?" His eyes searched Caart's, who sat, spellbound. "I... I don't kn-

"*How can we keep this quiet?*" A sardonic smile twisted his lips. Just for a second, the horse found himself looking into the eyes of an angry, *angry* animal. "I'd been first line-up Center for the Atlantis All-Stars for five Championships, and all that mattered to them was protecting the All-Stars' precious reputation. And I realised... you were right about them not caring about us as people. I'd have to do this for myself. By the time I walked out of that office I'd quit drinking. And blindly obeying orders- I'd always followed the game-plan, and look where *that* got me." He gave the horse a tight smile, and gestured down at his torso, currently smothered in Caart's tent-like orange T-shirt. "I guess I *have* been spending more time down the gym these days- it saves me trying to explain to the Guys why I don't want to get smashed anymore." He shook his head, "They don't know. No one else knows. Kind of like my marriage." He laughed softly. "But you know, before every game someone from the coaching staff sniffs my breath before I go on court? Just in case? Because at any time, they think I might-"

The giraffe stopped and swallowed, and took a deep, calming breath. Then he stood up slowly, releasing Caart's hand.

"I am Zane Horatio Alekai," he said with mock-formality, spreading his arms wide. He smiled. "And I am an alcoholic, bisexual giraffe with a broken marriage. So I know a thing or two about being screwed up. I am just as damaged a person as you." He suddenly knelt in front of the astonished stallion, his face pressed close to his. "And now I need you to listen to what I'm about to say very, very closely. I know how screwed-up you are, Caart Hørssten, and *I still love you*." He cupped the horse's chubby cheeks in his hands. "I fell two-thirds in love with you when I read that interview two years ago, and today I went all the rest of the way in one jump."

The enormously plump equine somehow managed a weak smile,

"Wh-when I accidentally sat on you?" The giraffe snorted back a laugh.

“When you stopped acting the part of Clay-Hørssten-XXL and I found myself talking to the sweet, sensitive, funny guy hiding underneath.” He held the hefty horse’s gaze. “I love *you*, Caart.” His hands slid down and he pressed them against each side of that tremendous tummy. The bulging beast shivered softly in his seat. “*You*: the big, fat sweetie of a stallion sitting right in front of me, psychological stretch-marks and all. I’m not interested in Clay-Hoofed Hørssten, and I never was: he’s as much a fake as Zane Alekai.” He wrapped his arms around Caart’s mammoth middle, then gently hauled him to his hooves. “I. Love. You.” Standing over him, he leaned down and pressed his lips tenderly down against those of the huge, blushing horse. The kiss lasted a long time before they finally, reluctantly separated.

“...*Horatio*?” Caart asked, his arms now wrapped around the giraffe’s waist. “*And* I have a deeply embarrassing middle name,” Zane winced, his ears flicking back. He grinned ruefully, and shrugged. “It could be worse- when my big sister was born, Mama thought *Zucchini* was a girl’s name.” The horse he was still hugging snorted back a laugh, his head laid across the giraffe’s chest. Slowly the giraffe’s hands slid down over Caart’s flanks, making him whicker softly. He reached the horse’s rear end and squeezed, eliciting a whinny. “Now, are you and this beautiful big butt of yours coming back to bed, or do I have to go Cave-Giraffe and carry you there over my shoulder?”

Against his chest, the soft stallion let out a deep *snort*.

“D-don’t tempt me to make you *try*, All-Star...”

Before, they’d slept apart. Now, they clung to each other like survivors of the same shipwreck. Zane, still wearing Caart’s T-shirt, lay half-buried beneath his beau’s belly. The vast butterball of a stallion was cuddled up close, arms wrapped round him like a safety-belt, snout resting against the giraffe’s chest. Sunk into the dent in the mattress made by Caart’s colossal weight, the giraffe’s long body lay flexed to accommodate the equine’s expansive curves, knees pressing against his underbelly. Emotionally wrung-out, the humungous horse had already fallen asleep in his arms. Zane let out a soft, blissfully-happy sigh, and slowly laid his neck against that pillowy, blubber-warm bulk.

“My big pony,” he murmured drowsily into the sleeping stallion’s ear. “My big, *fat* pony.” The horse snorted.

“Call me that ag’n,” he roused himself just enough to mumble, “’n I’llllll...” he slurred back into sleep. Zane kissed the top of his head fondly. His eyelids were getting very, very, hea...

* * *

The next time Zane came to, it was to an earthquake. The whole bed *heaved* beneath him, then twanged back. It had the effect of catapulting him bolt-upright into a sitting position, and almost head-over-heels. His eyes lurched open of their own volition. He swayed, and his reflexes kicked in enough to prop him up on the mattress.

“Sorry,” he heard a voice whisper, although it was trying not to giggle. “I was trying not to wake you.”

“Wstfgl.”

Zane blinked, and tried fruitlessly to find the On switch for his brain. In its absence, he needed some clues. Who was he again? And where? He peered around in the gloom, and focussed on the window blinds. That... wasn’t right, was it? Those weren’t his. There was some light around them, but... really not much. There should be more light. With an effort he pulled his leaden arm in front of him, body and neck both swaying unsteadily, and tried to read his wristwatch.

“Five... *Thirty?*” he grunted aloud in disbelief, to be sure he was actually seeing what he thought he was. He crashed back down limply onto the mattress, closed his eyes and hoped for death.

“Oh *ho...*” the voice said again. Now it was laughing. “So the secret’s out- my gorgeous giant giraffe is a *grump* in the mornings...” The bed lurched again, a shadow eclipsed his closed eyelids and someone planted a sloppy kiss on his cheek before retreating. Zane grunted, and with a supreme effort of will and coordination, manually organised his neck into turning towards the voice, and re-opened one eye. Denied a merciful End to it All, parts of his brain were gradually, grudgingly warming up. Caart was sitting on the edge of the bed, grinning like a pumpkin. Wait, this was just a dream, wasn’t it? Except that he wasn’t normally wearing...

Zane slowly opened his other eye, and tried to make sense of what they were telling him.

“...What...?” the giraffe croaked slowly, “... the... hell...?”

If his eyes were to be believed- highly doubtful right at this moment- Caart was wearing workout gear. *Spandex* workout gear. Emphasis on the ‘spand’. Black shorts and black running top, both slashed with a bright orange stripe. To call the outfit figure-hugging would be technically inaccurate, because a generous portion of the horse’s black-furred belly was hanging out from under the singlet. It was clinging on for dear life. The elastic shorts were at capacity, and *skintight*. His tail twitched against the material with a faint, taut *bong*, like a drumskin.

“I’m just going for a jog, Handsome.” Grinning, the sumo-sized stallion, disgustingly bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, finished tying up his shoelace with some effort and stood, hauling his backside from the mattress. The bed underwent another slosh. “Back soon.”

“... Jog?” The giraffe gaped at the word incredulously. His language centres must be on the fritz through sleep-deprivation. “As in... go *running*?”

“Hey,” Caart whickered in mock-offence, still grinning, “I may be a fat slob, but I wanna stay fit for as long as possible.” His grin turned teasing. “And technically, these days I don’t so much run as bounce.” He rubbed a hand over the curve of his bulging, chubby belly, “Besides, I like messing with the fitness-freaks’ heads as they see me jogging past every day, but getting *bigger*. I’ve met a couple of nice hunks that way- Aaron actually ran into a *tree* he was staring so hard.”

Zane had managed to winch his neck a little way off the pillow, and was giving the stallion a level look. Whickering in laughter, Caart leaned back over the bed, which sank dangerously beneath his weight, and kissed the semi-conscious giraffe’s forehead.

“Don’t worry, I’m not going fishing today- I’ve got *you* to come home to.” His teasing smile softened, and he ruffled Zane’s hair, which was sticking up boyishly. “You get some more beauty sleep, All-Star. I’ll be back in time for breakfast.”

The giraffe watched, incredulously, as the hugely chubby horse started running on the spot- as predicted, that overfed gut jugged heavily with each thumping hoof-fall- and then he bounced energetically out of the room, most of the fittings shaking around him. A couple of moments later the front door thumped shut, and silence descended.

Zane’s head fell back against the pillow. He stared blearily up at the ceiling in the cold, grey light of day, and thought about what he’d done.

Caart lumbered laboriously back up the short flight of stairs to his front door with far less enthusiasm than he'd run down them forty-five minutes before, backside bouncing heavily with each step. It was cool and grey out, but by now he was steaming. Wheezing like a steam-train, he reached the door and leaned against it heavily for a moment to get his breath back. Then he unlatched it carefully and stepped inside, closing the door quietly behind him. Tantalising visions of last night flickered through his mind again, and he felt the grin on his face renew despite his aching legs. He was still having trouble believing it, but this morning, there he'd been- this sleeping god in *his* bed. Even his mouth hanging open slackly and the little line of drool hadn't made him any less wonderful to behold. The thought of Zane, and of Zane *loving him*, made Caart's already pumping heart beat a little faster.

"Honey, I'm *hooome!*"

With a grin he trotted sweatily down the hall to the bedroom, and poked his head round the door.

"C'mon, lazybones, hup hup hup! Geeze, you All-Stars are real... slug... a-beds..." The horse's spiel trailed off as he realised rather grumpily that the bed was disappointingly empty. But there was always plan B...

Smirk resuming, the overheated horse reversed course and clopped to a stop at the bathroom door. During his run he'd fantasized about getting back and catching a certain gorgeous 'raffe in the shower, and- his grin widened- even joining him. He rapped on the door with a knuckle.

"Zane? I'm back. Mind if I squeeze in with you, beautiful?"

No response. He put his ear to the door, and frowned when he couldn't hear anything inside. Just in case, he tried the handle, and peeked around the door when it swung open, but the bathroom was frustratingly empty. The evidence suggested that it had already been used and vacated. His spare towel hung neatly along the radiator, and, in a reversal to most guests that Caart had known, the place was generally tidier than he himself left it.

“Geeze, up and dressed *already*, man?” the spandex-stretching stallion snorted out as he stomped into the lounge. “Talk about a kill-joy. We’re going to have to do some *work* on this whole... relationship thing...” he trailed off as his eyes were met by an empty room. Zane *had* been there, though. The giraffe’s clothes were gone, and he’d even tidied away the pizza boxes from last night... and last Tuesday.

“Man, it’s really sweet of you but you don’t have to clean my whole house, y’know...” He stopped dead in the kitchen doorway, and stared at the empty room. He felt an unaccustomed knot of tension in his stomach. Where the hell had he got to? But he’d been here, too- a couple of cupboards hung open, suggesting a search for breakfast had taken place. More tellingly, the broken cup from last night was swept up and the pieces carefully put on the work-top, as though someone intended to glue them back together. The other mugs from last night were washed up and on the draining board, along with the saucepa-

Zane’s bag was gone from the work-surface. His eyes suddenly worked out what was making the room feel so wrong. He glanced around the rest of the room, behind the door, then peered at the seats of all the chairs. Suddenly moving more quickly, he headed back to the lounge.

“...Zane?”

He searched, increasingly frantically, but the giraffe’s sports bag was defiantly, distressingly absent.

“Zane!”

Back to the bedroom. Looking again, Caart realised that the bed wasn’t only empty, but made. His orange T-shirt lay on top, neatly folded into quarters. But he couldn’t see that bag. He was starting to sweat again, only this time he felt cold all the way through. No, this couldn’t be happening, this was all some laughable misunderstanding. They’d just missed each other, somehow. Oh, how it’d turn out to be funny in a few... minutes...

The bag wasn’t here either.

“ZANE!”

He was back in the hallway, by the front door. He remembered thinking that if he went back outside, came back in, everything would be different, that the giraffe would be right... here.

Somewhere along the way he'd grabbed up that orange T-shirt and was clutching it to his chest. If he sniffed, he could *smell* giraffe on it. Now he was standing in the door of the lounge, staring at the couch where Zane had sat last night. The unused blanket still lay on the cushion. He hadn't imagined it all.

The room felt much larger and colder than before. It matched the rock suddenly sitting in his chest.

“...Zane,” the horse whispered. It's kinder not to describe his expression.

Just then, the lock in the front door turned.

Caart spun on the spot, and in stepped the giraffe. His bag was slung casually over one shoulder, and he carried a large plastic grocery bag in each hand. He was trim, jaunty and immaculately groomed- he looked every inch the All-Star. The horse must have made some sound, because he looked round in the act of shutting the door behind him.

“Hey!” On seeing him, the giraffe's ruggedly-handsome face lit up like the sun. He looked indecently happy to see him, given they'd last set eyes on each other only just short of an hour ago. He grinned. “Man, for a fat-ass, you sure don't keep much food in the house.” He turned from the door and took a step towards his bulging beau, smiling wide.

“*Don't... DO THAT TO ME!*” The stallion bellowed thunderously. Zane reeled back as if he'd been punched.

“Wh- wh- wha..?” he stammered uncomprehendingly. Then he registered the equine's expression. He backed up another step. “Caart, what... what's wrong?”

“*Don't you DARE ask what's...*” Now that his heart had started to beat again, it was palpitating like he'd just played an entire Championship solo. So why did his chest still feel like there was a rock in it?

“Caart... sweetheart, *please*,” the giraffe pleaded, not daring to get any closer to the apocalyptic-looking stallion- the fact that *he* was the object of the horse’s cataclysmic wrath was agonisingly apparent. His face twisted in anguish, and he held his hands out desperately. “What have I done? *I don’t know what I’ve done.*”

“You’d *gone!*” Now that relief had swept away the cold, sucking dread, Caart felt like he was going into shock- he could feel his hands shaking. The cold numbness inside was replaced by a hot roaring in his veins. “I thought...” he swallowed- his throat tightened up painfully around the words, choking him. “I... th-thought...”

Realisation visibly smote the giraffe like a hammer-blow.

“Oh... *crud!*” The shopping bags hit the deck, and Zane lunged for the near-hysterical horse. The stallion furiously tried to shove him away, but the giraffe got him in a clinch and held on tight, hugging him hard even as he struggled. “Sweetie I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, I didn’t think... I thought you’d be gone longer than... I only went to get breakfast... I’m here, I’m here, *I’m here...*”

“*I thought you’d left me...*” Caart finally grated out. His voice broke on the last word. Zane buried the huge horse against his chest as best he could. The stallion went limp against him, and uttered what sounded suspiciously like a sob. The giraffe clutched him tighter- against his chest he could feel the horse’s pulse pounding in his throat. Zane gently pressed his face against the rolls at the back of the horse’s hefty, padded neck.

“I told you, I’m not that kind of a guy,” he murmured soothingly, now nuzzling the flesh just inside the stallion’s spandex shoulder-strap. “I’m here, Caart, and I’m not going anywhere, you hear me?”

Gently, he rocked the anguished animal on his hooves until the horse’s hammering pulse finally started to drop out of the danger-zone. After a couple minutes more he risked affectionately fondling one of the silent stallion’s ears. He gave it the gentlest tug, and got a soft whicker in response.

“Hey... you uh... ok down there?”

“Yeah...” came the muffled reply. Now the emotional storm had blown itself out, the big black stallion was starting to suffer from acute embarrassment. “Can, uhh... we just forget that ever happened and start all over again?” Slowly, cautiously, he shuffled and pulled his

head up. He wiped his damp and heavy mane out of his face, and wiped his nose on his arm. Then he finally looked up and made eye contact. “Morning, hon,” he said shyly. “Morning, sweetie.” Still embracing him, Zane leaned down and gave the horse a demure peck on the lips. Finally he won a small smile. The giraffe flushed slightly. “I, uh... went to get some breakfast...” Gingerly taking one arm off his beau’s bulging back, he fished in his pocket, then held up Caart’s spare set of keys.

Of course that’s where he’d gone, the keys were right there on the shelf, why hadn’t he bothered to check?

“Th-thanks, man.”

“I, uh... wasn’t expecting you back quite so soon. I wanted it to be a surprise...” This time it was the stallion who blushed, guiltily.

“You’re completely wonderful, you know that?” He wrapped his bare, chubby arms around the giraffe’s firm back and held him tight. The giraffe answered the hug with a loving squeeze, pressing his arms into the horse’s billowing, lycra-stretching lovehandles.

“Nah, you’re the wonderful one, stud. I’m just the cheerleader.”

“I... cut my run short,” the horse admitted to Zane’s chest. “I think I’m finally getting too big for that second lap.” He chuckled self-consciously, “Pretty soon I could be going for a morning *waddle* round the park.” He thought Zane made some kind of noise, but he was too busy just soaking up the giraffe’s presence to concentrate. He let out a slow, pressurised sigh.

“Hey,” the giraffe’s lips were right by his ear. “Why don’t you go get changed, sweetie, and in the meantime I’ll get you breakfast. Deal?” Still not quite trusting himself to speak, the heavyweight horse nodded meekly. The giraffe’s tone changed slightly. “But, uh, shower first, ok? Cool down after that run.”

“Hey!” Caart looked up, feeling himself start to smile. “Are you trying to tell me that I stink? *Again?*” Zane smiled and squeezed the sumo-stallion’s swollen, tyre-like sides once more.

“Hey, I *like* the way you smell, sweaty- uh, sweetie.” Caart shot a suspicious glance upwards, but the giraffe was looking improbably innocent. “I just think Kürt might object if you go quite *that* authentically Viking without checking with him first...” The stallion snorted with laughter.

“I’ll go shower.” He gently, reluctantly untangled himself from Zane’s long arms, and made for the bathroom, already starting to hitch up his top.

He suddenly stopped and turned around, his bloated belly now completely bare and on display, and his chest half-out as well, the lycra rolled up under his ample arms.

“You won’t go anywhere, will you man?”

“Quit stalling and go get changed, Hørssten,” the giraffe replied with an irascible snort. One of the grocery bags had spilled on impact with the hardwood floor, and he was now on his hands and knees scooping the packages back into it. Giraffe weren’t really built for crawling around. “A bit of cold water won’t kill you.” It was an evilly good impression of most coaches the horse had ever known.

“Yessir,” he said with a grin.

* * *

The shower did calm him down, but all the same Caart found himself hurrying through his routine as fast as he could. He wasn’t worried, as such, just... suddenly struck by the superstitious fear that Zane would somehow disappear into thin air again. Which was completely stupid, of course. But, still...

To his frustration, he found his efforts hampered by his own size- there was just so much of him now to wash, and then dry, and then make presentable.

“Damnit,” he muttered to his reflection in the bathroom mirror, as he fruitlessly towelled seemingly endless acres of himself in an effort to get dry, “You’re getting *fat*, tubbo.” Then he was suddenly back last night, with Zane saying the F-word for the first time, and a little wave of delicious giddiness passed through him. He found himself standing and grinning stupidly at his own reflection. He snorted, shook his head briskly, and gave his own rotund rear-end a *smack*. “C’mon, fat-ass, hustle!”

In 14 minutes flat he stumbled out of the bathroom, chin stubble hastily trimmed back, mouth gritty with toothpaste, trying unsuccessfully to pull a fresh T-shirt down across his still-damp torso, and to drag a brush through his towel-messy mane at the same time. He’d ‘dried’ his tail by the simple expedient of wringing it out over the bathtub, and it now kept smacking against his shorts like still-wet washing. Didn’t matter. He made a bee-line for the kitchen,

and was irrationally relieved to hear definite sounds of activity from within. He finished dressing just before stepping over the threshold, the stubborn T-shirt un-sticking from between his shoulder-blades with a final yank on the over-stretched hem.

“Whoa.” The exclamation was out before he could stop it. He hesitated, blinking uncertainly in his own kitchen. Zane had been busy. There was a whole mix of smells in the air, and chopping boards and mixing bowls he’d forgotten he’d owned sat out, used. There was fruit, and stuff. The table was neatly laid. The giraffe was busy at the stove, long neck bowed over, apparently doing something complicated. At least a couple of pans were on the go. The giraffe’s ears perked up and swung back.

“Hey,” Zane glanced back over his shoulder and grinned- damn, that *smile* made his legs go weak- “Good timing.” He turned from the stove, picked up a mug and handed it to the horse. The smell of strong coffee greeted him. “You kind of looked like you could do with one earlier,” the giraffe said, rather bashfully. “Black, with three sugars.” His smile grew anxious at the edges. “...Did I get it right?”

“You... you can *cook*?” Clutching the mug, the stunned stallion was still a little behind events. The giraffe flushed.

“Well... yeah, of course.” He smiled weakly. “I’ve had quite a few free evenings to practice in.”

“Damnit man, when you said ‘breakfast’ I thought...” the horse found himself blushing again, looking up at the giraffe. “Well, not *this*.”

“Hey, c’mon man,” Zane said with a modest smile, “you *bake* for a living.”

“Yeah, with help.” The hugely plump horse took a mechanical gulp of his coffee. “Still a trainee- right now Kürt just about trusts me to bake things off for him, and prep some of the simpler stuff. But I can’t actually *cook*.” He gestured at the under-used kitchen.

“So what do you do for breakfast?” The superchub stallion grunted around his coffee mug.

“I usually snag a bag of doughnuts on my way in to work. Then there’s always yesterday’s leftovers to snack on.” He grinned weakly. “Plus I’m chief Taste-Tester.”

“Right,” the giraffe said. He drew himself up, his smile become more determined. “Well, today we’re getting a *proper* breakfast inside of you.” His smile turned part teasing, part bashful. “We’ve got to keep your strength up, sweetie.” He gently pinched and wobbled a thick roll of fat on Caart’s side, drawing a whinny from the adipose-laden animal- it felt even more amazingly intimate than the ear-fondle.

“I still... can’t believe you’re here, man,” the huge, soft stallion confessed. “I mean... *here*, like this.” He took another slurp, then smacked his plump lips. “The coffee’s perfect, b-by the way.” He looked up into the giraffe’s blue eyes, then looked down at his chest. “About earlier... I’m not *normally* this... unstable, man, I swear.” The giraffe rather diffidently put his arms around the horse’s bulging sides.

“It’s ok, man. I think this is going take some getting used to for both of us.”

“Promise you won’t tease me about it?” Zane smiled suddenly.

“Oh, I think I’ll have to, just occasionally. It’ll be good for that ego of yours...” Suddenly he leaned his head down, used one crooked finger to tilt the horse’s chubby chin up and kissed him lightly on the lips. Caart whickered slowly, deeply, kissed back. He felt a smile stretching his lips as he did so. The giraffe gently broke contact, also smiling. “Come and get breakfast, sweetie.”

Caart sat at the table, Zane’s hand on his plump shoulder, and *his* hand on Zane’s. His other hand clutched his now empty coffee mug. The giraffe obligingly topped this up, with-

“*More chocolate?*” The hefty horse asked.

“Important part of the Zane Alekai Special,” the giraffe replied with a smile.

The supersized, super-soft stallion sniffed the stuff, blushed, and nickered. It smelled almost better than last night’s.

“You trying to get me hooked on this stuff or something, man?”

“Hey,” Zane said with a teasing grin, “I’m not proud- if it makes you want me around more I’ll take any unfair advantage I can get.” The horse snorted, and took a sip. This time he was in the right frame of mind to appreciate it.

“Mph...” A little shiver ran through him, amplified by his bulk. His tail flicked in pleasure.

“You have *got* to tell me how to make this stuff, man.” At the stove behind him the giraffe chuckled, then reached over and tenderly tugged the horse’s ear again.

“If I did *that*, you’d not need me around to make it for you, would you?”

“Hrmph...” The stallion’s eyelids flickered blissfully at the ear-rub. “Seriously man, this stuff is *killer*. If I were to sell something like this in Valhalla, we’d make a bomb.”

At this point Zane slid a plate in front of him, then sat down with his own- they’d wound up swapping places from last night. The horse’s helping was significantly more piled-high. Suddenly the stallion’s mind wasn’t on profits.

“*Pancakes?*” His plate carried not one but two stacks, roughly eight apiece, though it was hard to tell through the layers of fruit and honey- strawberries, melon, banana... you name it, it was probably in there. Each pancake by itself was about the size of his palm, and half a finger-width thick. He looked up to find the giraffe grinning at him. His plate held a modest three, and a simpler serving of fruit.

“Don’t tell me you don’t like pancakes,” Zane said. That patently wasn’t the case- the outsized equine was practically drooling. Caart’s stomach abruptly let out a deep rumble, as if worried its owner couldn’t be trusted to get that question right on his own. Horse and giraffe glanced at one another at this interruption, then shared a grin.

“I was never allowed pancakes for breakfast growing up - too unhealthy.” They were almost the ultimate in forbidden fruit. After a moment the giraffe reached over and fondly patted the hefty horse’s cheek.

“There’s more if you want them, sweetie.”

Caart found himself blushing again, and to hide this as much as anything else he tucked in. After the first mouthful, conversation failed him for a while. They weren’t like the pancakes he usually had- these were still fluffy, but damn, they were substantial, and quite madly sweet. You *needed* the sharpness of the fresh fruit to balance them out.

“Seconds?” The giraffe offered. The horse realised he’d demolished the whole plateful in record time. Zane’s own plate was empty, and was now apparently just watching him eat, a happy look on his face.

“Please,” Caart grunted, a silly grin stretching his muzzle. His ears splayed goofily to the sides. “Damnit, how did you make those taste so *good?*”

“Traditional South African recipe,” Zane said, grinning back as he picked up the horse’s empty plate.

“Mmph... like the chocolate?” The giraffe gave a brief laugh from the stove.

“Kind of,” the giraffe said from the stove. “But *that’s* special. My grandfather gave me his secret recipe just before I moved over here. I, uh, improved on it since then.” Almost immediately, another decadent helping of pancakes was placed in front of the horse. The stallion’s insatiable stomach growled greedily at the sight.

“M-Man, I’m gonna wind up as big a *house* if you keep cooking for me like this.” Caart shifted ponderously on his overhanging backside, tugging on his T-shirt.

“You just enjoy these, sweetie.” The giraffe’s adoring grin turned teasing on him. “And wait till you’ve tried them with my home-made strawberry ice cream.”

“Mmphh...”

Even Caart couldn't demolish two full platefuls of those pancakes at once, especially on top of that rich hot chocolate.

“This... this is absolute heaven, man,” the superchub stallion said, stoically ploughing through the last few- no matter how full he felt, he wasn't prepared to waste a bite. Zane was nursing a glass of freshly-squeezed orange juice, grinning. He looked happier than Caart ever remembered seeing him. He matched the way Caart felt. But the horse glanced at the wall clock despite himself, and his ears drooped. “Your, uhh...” There was a long pause. “Your flight's at five?”

“...Yeah.” The giraffe gave the horse a stricken look. “I... I wish I could stay, sweetie, but-” “Yeah, I know, I know.” The horse looked at the last pancake on his plate, now thoroughly soaked with honey and fruit juice, and left it sitting there, his fork still held aloft. “I'd take the day off man, really, but-”

“I know,” Zane smiled sadly, “It's ok.”

All breakfasts end. Suddenly, Caart hated that fact, hated that he had to be at work in an hour and 15 minutes, hated that Zane... had to go back to work too.

“I'm... not going to see you again for a while, am I, All-Star?” he made the dreaded statement a question, trying to keep his voice light. Unfortunately, the rest of his body-language gave the game away.

Zane shifted uncomfortably in his seat, looking at his hands. The base of his neck started to go red.

“Sweetie...” he looked up, “There's... something I should tell you-”

Caart's cutlery crashed into his plate as he thumped it down.

“I knew it.” He scowled. “I knew it!” Why couldn't *anyone* ever be straight with him? “I *knew* this was all too good to be true!” He fixed the giraffe with a look. “Well? *What?*”

“No, no, man!” Zane was saying, trying to forestall the storm clouds piling up ominously behind those suddenly-hard grey eyes. The signs weren't promising- the supersized stallion had folded his hefty arms defensively across his chest, and was now glaring at him suspiciously. “This is something good, I promise.”

“So good you waited until *now* to come out with it?” was Caart’s sarcastic reply. Zane winced- he could hear the horse’s teeth grinding from here. He reached out to stroke the stallion’s cheek soothingly, but the angry equine shied back, still glaring.

“Caart, please, don’t get mad. I... I just didn’t want to *complicate* things...”

“Just how complicated can it be?” The horse’s scowl deepened dangerously. “I thought you came looking for *me*, right?” He said it with all the false innocence of a noose.

“I *did*, sweetie, that’s th-

“Don’t you *dare* ‘sweetie’ me!”

Zane shut his eyes a moment, took a deep, calming breath, and tried again.

“Caart... I’ve got... a meeting today-”

“A *meeting*?” It didn’t go down well. “And this meeting relates to ‘us’ how, exactly? Who the hell is it with? *Why exactly have you come here?!*”

Zane opened his mouth, but the stallion suddenly sat bolt upright, his eyes wide. His jaw fell open as the light dawned.

“Oh, my god.” His ears quivered, then he shook his head and let out a soft snort. The smile that appeared on his face was appalling to see. He actually slapped himself on the forehead with the podgy palm of his hand. “Of course!” He laughed bitterly, “How could I have been so completely *stupid*? This isn’t about *me* at all.” When he twisted to face Zane, his eyes were glowing like a lightning-storm. “You’re signing for the Giants!”

The giraffe sat stupidly, his mouth open.

“...*What?!*”

“You... you *sell-out*!” The storm finally struck. Caart had never felt so angry in his entire life. Zane physically rocked back in his seat from the hurricane force of fury the enraged equine unleashed at him. “Oh, no *wonder* you wanted to have a look around yesterday!”

They always, *always* lied to him!

“No, Caart, that’s not-!” But the stallion wasn’t listening- his rage was like a dam bursting, obliterating everything in its wake.

“And since you’re going to be here anyway, you thought you’d just... just fix up a *convenient* local boyfriend at the same time, huh?”

“Caart, will you just li-?”

“I’ll bet it gave you a real thrill huh, finding out just what a sad, fat slob your old ‘friend’ had turned into! What was the deal going to be, you’d swan around being the new Giants Center and when you found time or got bored you’d hop downtown for a quick ‘relationship’? Was I expected to be *grateful!*?”

“... Caart...” For one spiteful, shameful moment, the stallion exulted at the look of deep hurt and distress that stabbed across the giraffe’s features. Zane shut his eyes, and his face went deathly pale. Then a burning spot appeared on each cheekbone. He opened his eyes again, and they were aflame. He glared. “You’re *wrong!* You are so *completely* wrong!”

He had finally, finally riled Zane Alekai. The giraffe’s ears were back, and he looked like he was holding onto his temper by his fingertips. His neck was like a burning fuse. The thunderous black stallion was panting, eyes ablaze, working up to another firestorm.

“I *love* you, you stupid...” Zane bit back his next comment, seemed to have to physically swallow it. The red blotches on Zane’s cheeks were spreading. The dark red was flushing up his neck, too.

“Liar!” Caart roared, “You didn’t come here for me”- oh, it *hurt*- “you came for your *career!*” He abruptly hauled himself to his hooves, to his full height and width- suddenly all he wanted to do was to kick this conniving, underhanded, *lying, basketball-playing... giraffe* out of his house, out of his life, and *laugh* as he broke his neck on the stairs on the way down!

This was how these things always seemed to end- a flaming row the morning after. You couldn’t trust anyone.

But Zane had scrambled up too. He leaned that ludicrous neck of his across the table, putting his deceitful face within spitting distance of Caart’s, and roared right back.

“I am *not* signing for the Giants!”

“*Then what the hell are you playing at?!*”

“I might be signing for the *ORCAS!*”

Caart’s backside fell onto the chair so hard it almost broke. It felt as though his legs had been cut out from under him with an axe.

“... What?” he croaked. His ears were ringing, he didn’t think he’d heard right.

“I might. Be able. To play. For. The Orcas,” the giraffe repeated, managing to lower his voice with a visible effort of control. No, it still made absolutely no sense. Zane might just as well have said he was going to play on the moon.

“B-but...” Caart blinked stupidly. “The *Orcas*?”

“Yes!”

“But... they’re...”

“‘Little League’?” the giraffe commented acidly.

“Yes!” This was ludicrous. “You’re an *All-Star*, damnit! Why the hell would you *ever* want to play fo-”

“To be with *YOU*!” Zane’s temper finally cracked. “To be with *you*, you... *you...!*” He was *shaking* with anger. “*You complete-and-utter DOOFUS!*”

Caart just sat, staring, as it finally sank in. For once he was the one who felt he’d been struck by lightning.

“You... you’d *leave* the All... Stars?” he faltered.

“Yes!” Zane roared in exasperation. Then the giraffe’s anger seemed to evaporate as instantly as it had come. It left... something else. “I couldn’t...” the giraffe gulped, then took a deep, hurting breath. “I couldn’t come here without a *game-plan*, Caart.” He fixed the humungous horse with a beseeching, hopeless look. “I’ve spent two years thinking through my feelings for you, ever since I read that interview, but...” he gulped again. “I couldn’t come here, and maybe *find* you, if I had to leave again the next day and be stuck living without you. I couldn’t...” he swallowed, the perhaps the closest to tears the horse had ever seen him. “I just couldn’t *cope* with that, not after everything that’s...”

Zane shut his eyes tightly.

“I’m a coward, Caart. A wretched, spineless coward. I’m not brave enough to do what you did- basketball’s the only thing I’m any good at now. What the hell *else* would anyone pay me to do? I was stuck as an All-Star in Atlantis, and you were over here, living a normal life, in *Giants* territory!” He laughed harshly. “Even if I *was* a Giant, I’d be in the same boat- I’d still be Zane Alekai, famous top-flight basketball player, and I’d never, ever get to be with you. We were in different *worlds*! And... and then...” he opened his eyes and smiled, like sunlight glimmering at the end of a storm, “and then, four months ago, the *Orcas* put in an

offer for me!” He snorted in disbelieving laughter. “I didn’t even know they *existed*, and... and their bid... oh man, you should have seen it! It was definitely wasn’t serious- for a transfer bonus they’d listed ‘a free T-shirt and meal coupons for Sharkey’s House of Squid’! I only got showed it because it was being passed around for a laugh. But then I thought... maybe, just *maybe* they could be my way out, and maybe a way to get to *you*. So, I... I called them back.” He snorted again, “Do you know how many times I had to call to actually convince them I was Zane Alekai? They thought I was hoaxing them! Man, the questions I had to answer about myself and the games I’d played- even I didn’t know half of the answers. But they finally, *finally* accepted that I was genuine and... they agreed to a meeting. Today.”

But Caart was barely listening. He sat motionless, staring into space, a slow, cold feeling of horror creeping up his spine. All he could see was Zane’s face, so hurt and distressed and hopeless as he bawled him out. And at the same time he heard a voice, his own voice, asking him sardonically:

Would you do that for somebody, Hørssten? If you were still a Cougar, would you have given all that up? The money, the fame, the Ferrari? Would you have even considered it, just so you could be with someone?

He blinked, and realised that Zane was kneeling in front of him, pleading, an anguished expression on his face.

“Caart... sweetie... I’m so, so *sorry* that I didn’t tell you earlier, but... I... I didn’t want to freak you out. I was *scared*.” He paused, swallowed, then continued in a quieter voice, not able to look at the horse. “I’ve been scared ever since I thought about doing this. I... I just didn’t know what I was going to find here.” He looked up with a watery smile, “I convinced myself I was going to turn up find you happily married with two adopted kids, or something.” He shut his eyes again. “I didn’t even dare think you’d really be interested in some damaged basketballer from your unhappy past. Then you *were*, and... then that was even worse. When... when I owned up to being an alcoholic last night, y-your face... for a second I thought that was us over, there and then...”

Oh, and now he’s the one apologising to you...

With a terrible, sick lurching feeling, Caart suddenly knew exactly what this was.

Zane stopped abruptly, knocked back as the sumo-sized stallion violently threw his chunky arms around his neck and clung on as though his life depended on it.

“I’m so, so sorry...” the stallion whimpered wretchedly, face pressed hard against the stunned giraffe’s shoulder. “I’m sorry! I just... dammit...” He shuddered, and made a noise that was either a hiccup or a sob. “I love you, Zane.” He’d never truly been in love before. And it was *terrifying*. “I love you so much it *scares* me! This has been so much like a fantasy I keep thinking that it can’t be true, any second I’m going to wake up from it and... and I’ll lose you! And now...” he hiccupped again, swallowed hard. The giraffe seemed to have frozen into a lump of ice in his arms. The horse sniffed miserably. “Now... now I’ve probably lost you anyway because I couldn’t keep my *stupid*, fat mouth *shut*. I... I wreck *everything*, and stop *LAUGHING* at me!”

Furiously, the big, black, bewildered stallion reared back, trying to pull away from the giraffe, who *had* started to laugh uproariously. But he caught hold of the bulging, bristling beast by his beefy arms and, still laughing, heaved him closer. Their lips collided.

There was a long, still, moment.

When Zane gently pulled back from the kiss, it was as though he’d reached in and snuffed all the anger and hurt out like a candle. On his knees, the big, fat stallion blinked, and then slowly fell forward against the giraffe’s broad chest. Slumped there, bulging backside resting on his hooves, he felt the love of his life affectionately nuzzling the back of his podgy neck, where he’d broken out in a sweat again. Zane’s arms had wrapped comfortably around him, holding him tight.

“I love you too, sweetie. I love you too.”

“Mph...” Caart buried his plump face deeper into Zane’s chest, slowly feeling his cheeks starting to burn.

“Our first fight,” Zane commented amiably a little later, one hand patting the horse’s bulging back. Mortifyingly, the last couple of minutes refused to undo themselves. Caart wanted to hide from anything that had possibly witnessed him making such a spectacle of himself, up to and including the laws of physics.

“Arrgh.” Caart groaned softly, his voice muffled. “Is it too late to just go back and start today all over again?”

“I wouldn’t change a *second* of it,” the giraffe replied, grinning affectionately into his big, beautiful beau’s neck. Caart snorted bashfully. “You’re *magnificent* when you’re angry, you know that?” The horse made a stifled hiccup of laughter. “But don’t blow your top like that too often, or I’ll have to put you over my knee and spank that outsized butt of yours- I don’t care *how* cutely dappled it is.” The horse made another, different sound, and shifted against him. “...Oh,” Zane said with a soft chuckle into the horse’s flicking ear, squeezing his enormous, bulging beau some more. “That’s a whole *different* fantasy, huh?”

Face rather red, the horse slowly looked up at the giraffe.

“Just... promise me you can manage to put up with a stupid, self-centred, insensitive, inflammable, tantrum-throwing, paranoid screw-up who can’t even bring himself to trust the most wonderful guy in the whole wor-” he broke off, buried his face against Zane’s chest again.

“Well,” Zane said conversationally, gently rocking the rotund, roly-poly beast in his arms. “If I ever bump into that guy, I’ll think about it. But if it’s ok with you, I’d rather just spend my time with this big, sweet, lovable, soft-serve stud of a stallion I know.” He gently ran his hand down the horse’s damp mane. His smile turned impish, and he kissed the back of Caart’s soft neck again. “Even if he *can* act like a grumpy little pony when he’s feeling vulnerable and insecure.”

Caart’s body quivered, and he snorted softly.

“I deserved that. I *don’t* deserve you. Y-you’re an angel, Zane. An absolute *angel*. You’re... you’re such a dream come tru-ooohrrrmph!” He finished with an undignified whinny as the giraffe pinched his bulging backside through his shorts, his tail flicking wildly. “Ow, man!”

“This definitely isn’t a dream,” Zane said firmly as the horse’s full face resurfaced, big, reproachful grey eyes blinking at him from behind cutely chubby cheeks. “And we don’t always get what we deserve.” With an effort, he managed to coax both himself and Caart off the floor, and plump his pony’s ponderous poundage back onto his chair. “Neither of us deserved the kind of crud we’ve been through in our lives. But now I know what I want from mine.” He took a deep, slow breath and looked into those sweetly shy, uncertain grey eyes. “Yes, I’d quit the All-Stars... if it means I can be with you.” He closed his own eyes for a

moment, and leaned his forehead against Caart's. "I'm so sorry I sprung this on you like this, sweetie," he said quietly. "I'm... I'm going way too fast for you, I know. I can call this meeting off, stall them a while, but," he looked up nervously, "if there's even a *chance* you might wa-*mph!*"

Zane was silenced as the humungous horse flung his hefty arms back around his neck and held him tight.

"I want you," Caart nodded fervently against the giraffe's neck, cheek brushing against his short, dense fur. "I *want* you! Do it, man- join the Orcas. I need you. I need you *here*- I don't care how that happens, so long as it does. Damnit," he laughed sheepishly over the giraffe's shoulder, "and I said such mean things about them yesterday..."

"You did, sweetie," Zane chuckled. The horse could *feel* the smile on the giraffe's face.

"For such a wonderful guy, sometimes you can be a *snob*."

"Mphh..." The sumo-sized stallion reluctantly released his grip on the giraffe. "S-so how *is* this going to work, man?" Zane shrugged.

"Easy: I'll tell them the truth: my boyfriend lives in town, I love him more than anything else in the world- basketball included- and the only reason I'd play for the Orcas is so that I can be with him. Take it or leave it."

Caart was looking at him with saucer-sized eyes, his breath making a kind of whistling noise in and out of his gaping mouth.

"You... you can't tell them *that*," he finally stammered with a shocked, disbelieving neigh of laughter. "They'll... they'll *freak!*"

"I'm not hiding who I am," the giraffe said, gently but firmly. He put his hands to Caart's swollen sides, and tugged the horse's rumpled T-shirt down over the huge black bulge of his belly. It immediately started to ride back up again. "And I'm never, ever going to act like I'm ashamed of being in love with you, you hear? If it comes to it, I'll quit basketball altogether for you."

The horse blushed, entirely floored.

"Zane... I..." he looked down at his enormous paunch, then back up again. The supersized stallion sighed, and his weighty shoulders slumped. "You've seen me, man- I'm still a complete train-wreck when it comes to basketball." He looked wretched. "I... I just don't

think I could cope with being dragged back into all that, even as a plus-one.” He shrugged, “Y-you know what the papers’d be like if they found out about us. I mean, you’re going to be the biggest player that ever hit this city- even if you’re playing for the Orcas. Besides,” he managed a weak, unconvincing laugh, “if anything they’d expect you to be dating someone like Leon.” He snorted. “Or bloody Fuzz-Face. If they found out it’s *me*...”

“Then I guess they’re just going to have to get used to it, aren’t they?” The giraffe looked him in the eye, then leaned forwards and kissed him again. Each time it happened, it sent a little shiver through the stallion’s fat-swaddled spine. “Don’t worry, sweetie, I understand. It’ll be ok- I’ll find a way to keep things quiet, if that’s what you want.”

“How, man?” Caart hated himself for sounding so negative.

“Easy, actually,” Zane said with a sudden, wicked little grin. “I’ll get a privacy clause in my new contract. I’ll tell them my partner hates sports, and doesn’t want to get dragged into the media spotlight just because I happen to play basketball. So they’d better make damn sure the press respects our privacy.” He snorted. “It’s about time a press manager did something for *us*, for a change.” His face turned more serious, “And if anybody ever tries to hurt or upset my gorgeous soft stud... they’re going to find out what it means to be dropped on from a great height.” *That* made the horse blush all over again, even as Zane squeezed him tightly. “Mph... I th-think I’m going to like being the Little Guy.” The giraffe found himself grinning idiotically.

“You’ll always be humungous to me, Caart Hørssten.”

Still crouching in front of his barn-sized beau, Zane very gently leaned forward and hugged him.

“Promise me something, sweetie? Well... a couple of things, actually.”

“Yes,” Caart said, nodding against the giraffe’s shoulder.

“Great,” Zane said, sarcastically, “Now do you want to *hear* what it is you’ve just promised to do?”

“It doesn’t matter,” the horse said with frightening sincerity. “Anything you want, hon. I’ll do *anything*.”

“Well, item one: promise me you’ll watch that blood pressure of yours, ok? I swear, a couple of times today I thought you were going to have an aneurysm!” The stallion gave a weak snort of laughter.

“Ehe... yeah, I’ll watch that, big guy.” He gently rubbed his muzzle against the giraffe’s neck. “And the other thing?”

“Sweetie...” Caart looked up in time to see Zane’s cheeks going pink. “Promise you’ll be honest with me about my next question?” His hands gently squeezed against the horse’s stomach, provoking a soft whicker.

“Promise.”

“You really *are* happy at this size, right?”

“...Yeah, man,” the horse nodded eventually. He shifted a little on his chair, which creaked heavily. “But if you want me to slim down, I wi-mp-” Zane pressed a finger to Caart’s plump lips.

“Don’t ever say that,” he murmured gently as he squeezed the stallion tighter, leaning his long neck down. “I love you for being *you*, you hear? I don’t want to change you. I just want to know that you’re happy. If you’re happy, then I’m happy. Just remember that, ok?”

“Ok.” With a soft grunt the stallion gently pressed his forehead against the giraffe’s. They stayed that way for a moment, basking in each other’s presence.

“How, uhh... would you feel about me getting any bigger?” Caart broached the topic tentatively. Zane was silent for a few moments, then said,

“Do you want to be bigger, sweetie?” The hefty horse let out a little snort, then said meekly.

“Promise you’re not gonna freak out on me?”

“I’ve made it this far, haven’t I?” Zane replied with a smile. Caart hesitated.

“I had a dream, a while back-”

“Another one,” Zane groaned with mock weariness. It earned him a thump on the shoulder.

“This was *different*, hon...” When the hefty horse didn’t continue straight away, the giraffe looked at him curiously. The supersized stallion was blushing. “I kind of woke up, in bed- but I was *huge*, man. Properly, properly humungous. As in, nearly bed-filling. I was a *whale*. I tried to sit up, and I was just so damn *heavy*... My arms... well, I could barely reach past *me*, I was that big.” He whickered softly, and caught Zane’s eye. “I know it sounds crazy, but... it felt so *good*...” One hand absently stroked his oversized stomach, and he shivered slightly. “Sitting there like that. I was so warm and... and full.”

“... Would you want to get that big?” the giraffe asked him gently. “Honestly, remember?” he prompted him. The answer was a while in coming.

“Maybe not that big,” Caart grunted bashfully, “but... but I do want more, man.” He grinned weakly, “Hell, I’m not sure I could actually stop myself if I tried, to be honest, I’m such a pig these days. But...” he fixed the giraffe with a searching look. “I’d only want to do it if

you're ok with it. I can stick at this size, if I try." He gently bumped foreheads with Zane again. "Ball's in your court, man."

"I want you to be happy," the giraffe replied instantly. Caart waited. "And..." Zane blushed, "before I'd seen you again, if anyone had said I'd ever find a guy your size almost unbearably sexy, I probably *would* have freaked out. But not now." His grin turned earthy, and he slid his hands over the enormously overweight horse's black-furred lovehandles as they bulged lushly over the waistband of his shorts. He squeezed. "Damnit man, some of those comments you made about getting fatter had me... Get as big and fat as you like, you huge horsey hunk. I'll be right behind you, cheering you on."

"Promise, man? You're really ok with this?"

"Do I have to prove it?" The swollen stallion felt the giraffe's hands give his rear a squeeze. Half-expecting it, it still made the swollen stallion blush. Squirming his hands free, Zane rolled up the remaining honey-and-fruit-soaked pancake popped it into Caart's mouth.

"Finish your breakfast, sweetie." The horse's cheeks bulging with food, he leaned forward and lightly kissed those plump, sticky lips. The stuffed stallion let out a soft, whickering moan. The giraffe's neck lowered, and he planted a kiss dead-centre on that overfed blimp of a belly spilling out from under Caart's T-shirt. The huge horse whinnied and wriggled, his back twitching.

"Mphh... n-no man, really... you mustn't..." He groaned as Zane tenderly kissed his overgrown gut again. "I... mph... I *believe* you man, but... but not *now*..." The giraffe hesitated, lips still brushing Caart's bulging belly.

"I know- you've got to get to work soon." He sighed. "And I've got a cab coming to pick me up."

* * *

It was 8:25, and they were reluctantly waiting inside the front door for Zane's car to arrive. His sports bag was by his feet. He'd put his old white cap on, the sunglasses perched on top. It would be nice to say that it was a bittersweet moment, but in truth it wasn't.

"We might be able to meet for lunch?" Caart asked, feeling rather helpless.

"I'm sorry, I just don't know- this meeting could take a while." Zane sighed. "They might need some convincing."

“They’re not gonna let you go man- they’re never getting another chance like this, *ever*, and they know it. So you can go in there and kick butt.” Caart managed a smile, despite his sinking heart. “Don’t start acting like a Nice Guy on them, ok?”

“Oh, I’ll get that contract, just you wait and see.” The giraffe smiled, trying to keep a brave face. “I can fight dirty when the stakes are really high.”

The hefty horse shuffled his hooves morosely.

“...Promise me you’re coming back?”

“Hey,” Zane wrapped his arms as tightly as he could around the subdued stallion. “I *promise*, ok?” He gently pressed his head against Caart’s. “I’m going to come back, sweetie. Please trust me.”

“I... I’m *trying*, hon. I really am.” He looked wretchedly down at his stomach, his hooves well past his personal horizon. “I could... I could come up to Atlantis, soon.”

“I’d love that more than anything, you know that, but-” Caart snorted in laughter.

“Yeah, imagine *me* trying to sneak in to see an All-Star. They’d probably arrest me as a stalker or something.”

“I was *going to say*, you’ve got a business to run here: that’s important, sweetie. Not like my stupid job.”

The horse managed another little laugh, but then went back to tracing a hopeless little pattern on the hardwood with one hoof.

“Is this going to work? You and me, I mean- is this Happy Ever After?”

“I want it to,” the giraffe replied. “More than anything.” He gave the horse a wretched look.

“I... I can’t honestly promise you Happy Ever After, sweetie- I think life’s kicked us both in the teeth too often for either of us to trust that- but I’m going to *try*.”

“What... what was your game-plan if this hadn’t worked out?” Caart looked up at him with large eyes.

“Oh...” Zane took a slow breath, and managed a smile. “I’d have gone back to Atlantis and served out my time as an All-Star. Then I’d have eventually gone back to South Africa, bought a vineyard like Grandma wanted and-” he bit off the phrase ‘drunk myself to death’, but something must have shown in his face. Caart suddenly crushed him in a painfully tight huh.

“Then that’s just one more reason why this *is* going to work, you hear me?” Zane just nodded dumbly, arms wrapped tight around him.

The horse took a deep, ragged breath.

“When am I going to see you again, man?”

“As soon as I can make it back,” Zane promised fervently.

“Any guess?” They both knew how busy the Championship got. Caart wasn’t optimistic.

“Your birthday,” Zane said suddenly. He leaned his neck down and nuzzled between the expansive equine’s ears. “I’ll be back for your birthday. I swear.”

“Mph...” the soft stallion whickered. “Best present ever.” Then he sighed. “You’ve still got another season as an All-Star...” He very carefully didn’t say: that’s a long time.

“Well, I’m going to be doing my best to get out of *that*,” the giraffe said, in the tones of one who was going to re-read his contract very, very closely.

“Man, they... they could be difficult about it. The All-Stars aren’t gonna be happy about any of this, you know that, right?”

“I don’t care.” Zane said, simply. He snorted, and straightened up. “If the worst comes to the worst, I’ll just start turning up to games so drunk I’ll hardly be able to stand. Then they’ll want rid of me soon enough.”

“Zane, *no*.”

“I was kidding.” The giraffe grinned. The horse didn’t.

“Seriously, no.” Caart said, his eyes distressed. “Don’t even *joke* about that. Promise me you won’t.” The giraffe looked stubborn for a moment, then remorsefully hugged him tight.

“I’m sorry, sweetie. I won’t, I promise.” Reluctantly, he let go. “Whatever happens, I won’t *ever*. I just...” he shot the heartbroken horse an aching look. “I don’t want to *leave* you like this.”

Just then there was a beep outside the door. They both flinched.

“Th-that sounds like your ride,” Caart said, stepping back and trying to smile. “Good luck, All-Star.” The giraffe hesitated, then suddenly dove into his bag. He retrieved something foil-wrapped.

“These were for the flight home, but... you need them more.” He pressed the packet into the surprised stallion’s hands, then suddenly swept down and crushed the horse in a hug.

“They’re a promise. I’m coming back, you hear me? Just... hang on, Caart. I’m coming.”

The hurtling hayball of a horse returned the hug with desperate fierceness.

“I’ll be waiting man. I *promise*. I’ll wait.” His eyes were large, anxious.

“I know,” Zane said simply, “I trust you.” Caart snorted with laughter, fighting back tears at the same time.

“Some stud *I* turn out to be, huh? All this time, and I was just waiting for my perfect guy to come along and sweep me off my hooves.”

“I... I wish I was perfect, Caart, you deserve so much bet-”

“You’re perfect to *me*, Zane Alekai.” He took a deep breath. “And I’ll go get some therapy, man... I know I need- mph...”

“You don’t need therapy, Caart,” Zane whispered as he squeezed him tight. “You just need love and understanding, that’s all.” The horse managed a snorting little laugh, but his voice was rough.

“Oh man... that brat Clay-Hoofed Hørssten may have won three ASBC Championships in a row, but its fat-assed *me* who’s gone and won the *real* prize.” The horse gave him a wobbly, despairing grin. “J-just promise me you won’t go falling for any of those other handsome hunks you play against in the meantime, huh?”

Zane nearly broke down. His voice cracked.

“If you think I could even *look* at any of them after spending last night with you, Stud-”

The horn outside sounded again, impatiently. With a growl Zane stuck his head round the door.

“I’m coming, damnit!” He turned back to Caart, reaching for his bag. “I’ll call you. Every day-”

They stared at one another.

“Oh, *crud*!” They hadn’t even swapped numbers. Zane’s hand thumped against the phone in his back pocket. Caart frantically patted himself down, but his phone was somewhere in the litter of clothes he’d discarded after the jog, and what with one thing and another he hadn’t thought to transfer yet. He cast an agonised look at his bedroom- it was in there, somewhere- just as the horn outside beeped for the third time.

“What’s your number?” he said desperately. “I’ll... I’ll remember it.”

“I don’t...” Impotently, Zane shook his head, glaring at the useless chunk of technology in his hand. No-one knew their own number by heart, did they? “I’ll get it to you,” he said, staring wildly at the distraught stallion. “Before I leave this afternoon, I’ll get it to you, I *promise*!”

The waiting car beeped again. Two long, angry blasts. It wasn't going to wait much longer. Zane threw back his head and uttered what was either a primeval noise of frustration or something truly obscene in Cl!ck. He grabbed his bag, and swung it over his shoulder. "And I want a *photo* of you, your hear? Something I can keep next to my heart." He grabbed Caart's shoulders, kissed the horse hard. "I'm coming back," he whispered, begging the horse with his eyes to believe him. "I'm coming *back*."

The door slammed behind him. Caart was left staring helplessly at it, holding a foil-wrapped brick. He slowly opened it.

* * *

At Valhalla, Caart had re-tuned the kitchen radio to the most determinedly cheerful, aggressively feel-good station he could find.

'AH-loooooooo-HA! Welcome back to another gloriously sunny afternoon here at BeachShack FM, playing music because it's good, not because it's popular! Proud (and only) supporters of the Orcas basketball team. The Giants suck! And now on to an old favourite to cheer up any lost souls out there today, Julia Fordham's 'Happy Ever After!'

... It wasn't helping.

"Caart, you ok?" He blinked, jerked out of his reverie by Kürt's gruff voice. They were both serving behind the counter that afternoon- there wasn't any point in baking anything else today.

Soon be closing time.

"Uhh... y-yeah, sure." the supersized stallion replied, rather surprised- normally, outside of baking-related instructions the bear was about as communicative as an iceberg. He hurriedly winched on a smile. "Why d'you ask?"

"You no bother me *at all* with pointless talk today," Kürt commented. He held up one paw and derisively flapped it like someone operating a sock puppet. "No *chit-chat*." Caart felt his smile slipping.

“So? We’ve been busy.”

“And you not *eat* anything today.” The bear shook his head gravely. Caart’s smiled collapsed into a scowl. “You not even your *coffee* finish.” The horse blinked down at the cup he realised he was still holding. Putting his other hand to it, he discovered the ceramic was now stone-cold.

“It’s not coffee,” he muttered sullenly, “It’s hot chocolate.”

“... You not *like* hot chocolate,” the bear reminded him slowly, apparently convinced his business partner was capable of forgetting such things.

“... No,” the super-hefty horse agreed, sourly. He put the cup on the counter.

“Your friend yesterday,” Kürt resumed after an awkward pause. “You have good time together?”

“Uhh... yeah... yeah, we did.”

“Is very good time?” the bear asked, voice tinged with dark suspicion. The horse opened his mouth to reply, but found himself blushing instead. “Oh boy,” Kürt said quietly, in the manner of someone who’s worst fears has been confirmed. “Is like so.”

“Is like *what*?” the horse asked, hotly.

“You look at him yesterday, is same look you give *kanelbullar* fresh from oven- hungry.” Caart stayed silent. “He more than friend now, *ja*?”

“*Ja*,” the heavy horse admitted, a grin breaking through despite himself. “We’re more than friends, now.”

“So now long face, space-staring, *not watching pastries properly*,” Caart winced- he wasn’t going to live down this morning’s burned batch of *bakverk* for a long, long time. “Customers not like this. They ask- is Caart ill? *Tykk hingst* look gloomy today. Is no fun. No, they *chit-chat* with *me*, instead.” The horse couldn’t help a grin at the thought.

“That must have been fun.” For everyone.

The bear looked even more gruff than usual- this conversation was obviously well out of his usual comfort zone. “It go... ok, last night?”

“... Yeah,” the gloomy *hingst* said with a sniff. “Yeah, it did. Better than ok.”

“Your friend... he still here?”

“His flight leaves at five.” The bear glanced up at the clock with his one eye.

“Hmph. But you seeing him again soon, yes? Yes..?”

“Kürt,” the bulging back stallion said in an abrupt change of topic, “I want you to try something...” To the polar bear’s surprise the horse lumbered into the kitchen and returned holding a crinkled foil package. The baking bear carefully peeled back one edge, and lifted out one of the dark, gooey squares inside. A couple were already missing.

“Is brownie,” he said with clinical detachment. He turned it this way and that, like a doctor at an autopsy. He brought it up to his broad, blunt nose, and sniffed. Then he carefully broke a piece off and put it in his mouth. To most people his face would have appeared to remain completely unchanged, but with Caart’s greater experience, he saw muscles shift in a way that indicated Kürt was pleasantly surprised. “Is *good* brownie,” he clarified. “Is not my thing, but is good quality bake.” He actually bit off an extra piece, something which the horse had never witnessed him doing before, before placing the remains of the brownie back in the packet. He fixed the horse with a calculating monocular look. There was still a great deal of suspicion in it, but grudging approval as well. “You practice at home, now? You improve.”

Sadly, the stallion wasn’t paying attention to this near-unique instance of praise.

“Damnit,” Caart whispered thickly, staring sightlessly at the countertop. “He can even *bake*.”

“Oh boy,” Kürt repeated in dour tones. “Is *bad*, this time.” His bulging business partner didn’t respond. A note of gruff sympathy entered the bear’s voice. “He not call you, huh?” “Huh?” The hefty horse started. “What makes you say that?”

“You check phone every three minutes.” Caart blushed and, with an effort, forced his plump hand away from his bulging back pocket. It was completely pointless, of course. But he couldn’t help himself.

“Kürt... he didn’t call or leave a message with you, did he?” The horse had been forced out on deliveries over lunch time, so it was *just* possible... “Seriously, if he phoned here, if he turned up, left a note, *anything*, I do want to know about it.”

“Is no message.” The bear was looking uncooperative, but then he always did.

“Kürt, *really*-”

“Is *no* message,” the bear repeated, without rancour. “I no see nor hear from lover-boy today.”

“Oh.” The horse glanced up at the clock again. The bear followed his gaze.

“He at airport by now.”

“*Maybe.*” Only maybe. But...

“He cutting it fine, then.” The huge horse didn’t respond, face longer than ever. More space-staring.

Kürt watched him for a moment, then sighed.

“He not worth it.”

“What?”

“*Sjiraff.*” The bear interlinked his paws and cracked his knuckles. “Bad news. Heartbreaker. I know next time. I ever see him again, I wring neck for you.”

“*Don’t you touch him!*” For once Kürt was made to back away as the stallion suddenly seemed to grow by six inches, eyes blazing. The ice-bear watched, grudgingly impressed, as the berserker horse struggled to get a grip on himself. “It’s... it’s not *like* that, ok? He’s an *angel*. And he promised he’d get in touch before he left. He... he’s just got held up, or something-”

He took a deep breath, and to calm himself down tried to focus on the mellow-sounding song jingling in the background.

‘...*Oh, I think I fo-ound myself a cheer-lee-der...*’

“...You ok?” the bear asked, for once looking openly concerned as the stallion’s face... changed.

“...‘Scuse me-”

The horse turned and bolted into the kitchen. He made it to the sink at the far end before he burst into tears.

“Damnit, Hørssten,” he said to himself through gritted teeth, a few minutes later. He summoned the memory of every coach who’d ever yelled at him, his dad included. “Get a *grip* on yourself.” He took a few deep breaths, sniffed hard, wiped his eyes with his hand, which unbeknownst to him smeared flour all the way up one side of his nose, and pushed back through the saloon doors.

“I’m... sorry about that, ma-*glnk!*” He met a very gruff, awkward bear-hug from his business partner, which stopped him dead in his tracks. After a couple of moments Kürt released him,

and then abruptly thrust a plate at the stunned stallion's chest. It was laden with three different pastries, each of them one of his jealously-guarded specialities.

"Eat," the bear commanded. "You feel better."

"I... I'm not--"

"Eat," Kürt repeated, not unkindly. "On house. Good advertising, remember. But *only* this once," he added, hurriedly. The stallion grunted, but finally picked up the top-most pastry and bit into it. Once they'd got the idea his jaws worked through it on automatic. And, it turned out, his stubborn stomach wasn't going to just take all this cissy moping lying down. Starting to feel peckish, he reached for the second pastry with more enthusiasm.

"It be ok," the bear said suddenly. "He come look for you after three years? He call soon, you see."

"He can't," the horse finally admitted, abashed. "We forgot to swap numbers." The bear gave him a rather incredulous one-eyed look.

"...You sure not like things easy," he said eventually. The downcast horse grunted.

"He promised to get his number to me before his flight..." but even as he glanced at the clock on the wall, he knew it was too late. It was 4:30. If he was going to catch his flight, Zane had to be at the airport by now. He was probably boarding the plane right now. For a second the horse's heart leapt as he entertained the idea that Zane hadn't caught his flight, that he'd decided to stay. He'd turn up *here* any second... but he squashed that pathetic hope harshly.

Don't be stupid, Hørssten. He's gone.

But... he'd promised...

"Special delivery!" Caart blinked the water out of his vision and turned to see a cocky adolescent fox sauntering up to the counter, struggling somewhat under the weight of a large package, with a clipboard balanced on top. To his surprise he was wearing a brown apron over his clothes.

"Package for a Mr..." the fox consulted his clipboard, looked up, blinked, looked at the clipboard more closely, and sniggered. "... 'Carthorse-Tonne'? Oh, I get it! This is a wind-up, right?" He looked up, then further up, into two unsmiling snouts somewhere in the stratosphere.

“That’s *Caart Hørssten*,” the *geeze-he’s-big* horse rumbled with a decidedly unamused scowl. The fox’s ears wilted.

“Uhh... sorry. Th-this... this is for you.” He placed the package on the counter- bizarrely, it looked like a patisserie box. “Just sign here, please. And, uhh... Happy Birthday.”

He blinked in the sudden collective focus of three mystified eyes.

“...What?” the horse asked him.

“Happy... birthday?” The fox tried again, rather hesitantly. The *holy-hell-its-a-Viking!* bear was giving the box a much sharper scrutiny with his one good eye.

“Is *cake*,” the bear said, almost accusingly. He glared at the by-now thoroughly cowed delivery boy. “We are *bakery*. We not need *cake*. We have cake. We *sell* cake. Why you bring us cake?”

“Whoa,” the fox said, taking a step back and clutching his clipboard protectively across his chest. “I’m sorry it’s a bit late- I know the guy who ordered it over the phone wanted it here by three-thirty, but it was a rush job, and they had to redo the icing on it because they made a mistake first time. He was real picky about the icing,” the fox explained, “It needed customising. He said it was for your birthday.”

Nobody said anything. The fox stared up, bewildered, at the enormo-horse, who was looking somewhere into the middle distance with a frozen expression.

“...*What?*” the fox finally asked. He checked his clipboard, losing confidence. “Maaan, don’t tell me I’ve come to the wrong place again...” He *eeeped* and sprang back as the Viking Warrior produced a *freakin’-axe!* from behind the counter and used it to slice through the tape holding the box closed. “Whoa, the baking must really bite back where you come from, huh?” The fox’s mouth hurriedly shut itself of its own accord when the bear subjected him to a Look.

Woodenly, the horse lifted the lid, his expression sphynx-like. It was a cake.

“Our 12-person party special,” the delivery boy proudly informed them, before he was silenced by the bear lifting one lip to expose a pearly-white fang. “So what’s the big joke?” the fox’s latent death-wish drove him to ask.

“Joke?” It was the bear who replied. The horse seemed to have turned to stone.

“Yeah, the joke,” the fox said. “The guy said it was a joke, we had to make sure we got the icing right, or it wouldn’t make any sense.”

The cake was a single rectangular layer, solid and dense, with a field of white cream-cheese icing on top. On top of that, piped by hand, was a string of numbers. And beneath that:

‘Happy Birthday. Z’.

The person icing it had finished the last letter with a flourish, presumably on their own initiative, to make it look as though Zorro had decided to ditch freedom-fighting and open up a bakery instead.

The big fat horse started to laugh. Or possibly cry. Maybe both at once, it was kind of hard to tell. Herbivores were *weird*.

“So what’s the joke?” The fox persisted. “Is he on a diet, or something? I mean, you’re lucky, I actually almost dropped it on the way here-”

“*Out.*” Kürt stepped out from behind the counter with his hatchet and chased the fox to the open door- although he made sure the idiot-child got away from him. When he turned back, the snickering, sniffing, snuffling stallion had got his phone out and was entering digits with painstaking care, struggling against the thickness of his fingers, and the fact that his hands were shaking. He checked the sequence three times, and hit save. The phone recognised it as a number. He then took a photograph of the cake as an insurance policy and then clamped the phone to his ample chest, as though to emboss the number onto his heart.

The bear loomed over the counter, and with professional interest pinched a tiny corner off the cake and tasted it.

“Carrot cake,” he said with a grunt of amusement. “Boy, he really know the way to *your* heart.” Something like the old Caart Hørssten finally looked back at him.

“K-Kürt, buddy,” he said, a little shakily, but grinning hugely, “I’m... I’m gonna need you to do me one more big favour...” He handed the startled bear his phone.

* * *

Zane sank down into the first class seat- he'd flown out low-profile, there was no way he was folding himself like an ironing-board into an economy seat on the way *back*, too. He'd bought the ticket on the All-Stars expense account, which gave him some grim satisfaction.

"Welcome on board sir," the flight attendant twinkled prettily at him. She was already elegantly parading around with a trolley of refreshments, and they hadn't even taken off yet. "Would you like anything to drink?"

The giraffe gave the extensive and varied line of bottles a long look.

"Some water, please."

"Are you sure sir?" she queried politely, surprise writ large on her cosmetically perfect features. "Everything is complimentary. There's even champagne."

There was indeed- good champagne too, from the label, on ice, still smoking from when the cork had been pulled.

"Just water, thank you," he smiled politely at the nonplussed attendant, who nevertheless went to fetch his order- apparently there wasn't normally a call for soft drinks in first class.

Once she'd gone, he sank further into his seat and stretched out his legs insofar as he could. The opposing, adjacent seat was empty, and in his mind's eye he longed to see it filled- overfilled- by a certain very-special stallion.

Every step he'd taken along the embarkation pier towards the plane, all he'd wanted to do was turn around, run back through security, back through the airport, back through the whole city until he could throw his arms around Caart, bury his face against that colossal, comforting chest and just stay there forever.

...But he couldn't. Life wasn't that easy.

The meeting had overrun. Correction- the meeting had started late, then overrun. And the Giants were at least partly to blame- whatever else, Zane wasn't going to forgive *that* in a hurry. He'd had a bad feeling when he'd turned up at the appointed time to find no-one from

the Orcas there to meet him. He'd had to send a message up without actually using his name. Fortunately, the person on reception- who thankfully wasn't the same one as yesterday- seemed entirely disinterested in who he might be: anyone visiting the Orcas was by definition Not Important.

Then *Larry* had appeared- possibly tipped off by the receptionist. Thank god he'd got into the habit of wearing his sunglasses.

"I knew it!" the puma said with almost unbearable smugness. "I had this *feeling* I'd be seeing you again, tall guy." He'd beamed at him with over-whitened teeth. "Just too good a chance to resist, eh?" He looked around theatrically. "I guess, uh, you didn't want to hurt your big buddy's feelings yesterday, I get that. Between you and me, I was probably being optimistic about him ever making the reserves- there was just too much flab to sweat off of him for it to be worth our time. But you, hot-shot? Boy, with some training I really think you've got potential!"

"I'm not-"

"Not ready to sign anything just yet? Sensible business approach! C'mon, let me give you the tour. The, uh, guys are away today I'm afraid-" no, they'd be gearing up to play the Titans in Troy tomorrow- "but the next time you come in I'm sure they'd *love* to meet you."

He bet they would...

So he'd found himself hijacked onto a tour round the Cave and its facilities, all the while being subjected to a sales pitch. He had to admit their facilities were ok, but boy, the terms of employment were appalling. No wonder the Giants always seemed so surly when they shared the changing room. During all that time he didn't say a word, but that didn't seem to deter Larry in the slightest. It was 20 minutes before the Orcas representative caught up with them, in the gallery overlooking the training courts- a perky snow leopard who burst rather clumsily through the double doors behind Larry, her limbs and tail flailing erratically. She appeared to have been running very, very fast.

"Too late Ingrid, I spotted him first. Better luck next time."

Larry had carried right on with his sales routine without taking breath, pointedly turning his back on Ingrid, who stood, staring round-eyed at Zane. Well, at least it seemed he wasn't going to have trouble proving who he was. She listened to the puma's pitch in fascinated silence for a good five minutes, and it was only when he started on about the room for improvement he'd spotted in Zane's game and the need for further training that she'd finally burst into hysterical giggles.

At that moment the giraffe realised that he was going to get on with her.

"If you don't *mind*, Ingrid."

"Don't... don't you have *any idea* who this IS?"

For once, Zane had taken vindictive pleasure in what happened next. Sweeping off his cap and sunglasses, he'd straightened to his full height and put on his best blue-eyed All-Star smile. Larry had stared blankly at him for a good few heartbeats before he gulped and actually took a step back.

Zane had then leaned his impressive neck down and spoken in the spluttering cat's ear in a quiet, friendly voice:

"I really don't think you're going to want to mention this to anyone, right? It might not look too good..."

He'd patted a by-now rigid Larry on the shoulder, and left with Ingrid.

The Orcas' tiny suite of offices was certainly a more relaxed, fun affair than the cold, megalithic machinery of the Giants. He'd found himself liking the place more and more. However, he'd struggled to convince Ingrid- who seemed to be the one and only member of Team Orca around that day (quite possibly she WAS Team Orca) and doing everything from the PR to the photocopying- that he actually meant business. To start with, it became clear they'd not totally believed that he was going to turn up. Obviously on the phone he'd not been as convincing as himself as he'd first thought.

But he'd doggedly started talking about the Orcas' offer, and it was only after fifteen minutes of rather confused dialogue that the snow leopard had abruptly sat up from her bombsite of a desk (she apparently preferred to sit on the desk, rather than her chair) and exclaimed: "You... you're actually *serious*?" She'd then burst out laughing, and didn't stop for a full two minutes. "We... we thought you were coming to visit us for a laugh!" she'd giggled helplessly, trying to gulp down water from a paper cup. "We just... the guys are all waiting to meet you and take some photos! We were just hoping for your *autograph*!"

Zane had smiled, laughed politely along with her, and then carried right on from where he'd left off. Ingrid had sat there, increasingly silent and wide-eyed over the next few minutes as he'd talked about terms and conditions, until she'd finally blurted out:

"But... but we can't afford *you*!"

"Well, what *can* you afford?" After a couple of moments rooting through the team accounts she'd given him a ballpark estimate. He'd said 'done'. Then she'd stared at him, hard.

"*Why*?"

So he'd told her. Everything. And- after he'd helped her up off the floor and got her another cup of water- she'd said...

Yes.

To everything.

She'd hoped he'd be very happy with them.

It had been difficult to concentrate after that, but the rest of the afternoon had been spent getting the rough outline of the contract drafted- fortunately Ingrid doubled as the team's lawyer, too. Smart girl. Time had been tight, but his copy of the precious document was now stowed in his bag, signatures still wet. They'd left the start date tactfully blank, for now. That was his job, back at Sunken City.

The only breaks had been a quick trip to meet his future team-mates- who it was fair to say had got way more than they'd bargained for- and, when it had become obvious he could get

the contract finished or get back to Valhalla, but not both- to make a very important phone call.

Sitting in first class, he checked his phone again- still nothing. Every time there was nothing another chip of ice seemed to enter his bloodstream. That ruddy bakery had better not have messed up the number- he'd made them repeat it back to him three times down the phone. He couldn't have got it wrong, could he...?

He was starting to regret his impulsively romantic gesture. Idiot. He'd have to turn his phone off soon, and there was *still* nothing. But Caart would have had a busy afternoon. He couldn't waste time standing around thinking of his personal life when he had a business to run. That was probably it. *Please* be that. Caart was just busy- he probably didn't realise that he was sitting here, his heart, lungs, spleen and pretty much every other internal organ his body possessed (or could reasonably imagine) in his throat.

There hadn't been space on the cake to tell him the good news.

"Here you go, sir." The attendant was back. To her credit, she'd found sparkling water, and added ice and lemon.

"Thank you."

If there wasn't anything by the time he landed in Atlantis, he'd dig Valhalla's number out with his bare hands and keep phoning until someone answered-

A sudden 'ping' made him jump, slopping water down his chest. That sounded like his phone. Message received.

Suddenly Zane had trouble using his hands. He managed to drag his phone back out of his pocket with numb fingers, and operate it whilst still clutching his fancy glass of first-class water, trying to seem casual about it all. There was a new message. Unrecognised number. No text, but... an attachment.

If this was just spam... His throat suddenly felt like it was lined with sandpaper. Taking a nervous sip of water, he opened the file.

A couple of other first-class passengers looked around at the commotion. The stewardess rushed back over and patted the spluttering passenger on the back. He was hunched over, and seemed to be choking.

“Are you alright, sir?”

“Yes I’m... I’m fine,” the giraffe gasped rather hoarsely after a long swig of water. His face was still very red. He took another gulp, then breathed deeply, perhaps to prove that he could. “Thank you miss, I just... swallowed some the wrong way, that’s all.” He flashed an apologetic, boyish smile, his face still quite pink.

“Very good sir, if you could please buckle yourself in for take-off? Enjoy your flight.” She walked away with a couple of backwards glances. Obviously people who drank champagne never had this kind of problem.

Zane sank back in his seat, trying to make himself inconspicuous. After a slow count of thirty he casually fished out his phone, which he’d hurriedly sat on at the stewardess’s approach. The picture was still on the screen. He clicked it off, carefully put the phone in his pocket and leaned back against his chair, trying not to grin too idiotically.

Oh, you naughty, naughty horse- that’s no way to eat your nice cake...

Fin (for now...)