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A Series of Tubes

Timothy Concannon

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A Series of Tubes

Timothy Concannon

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Requirements for Commonwealth Honors in English

Bridgewater State University

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Professor Bruce Machart, Thesis Director
Dr. Joyce Rain Anderson, Committee Member
Dr. Kimberly Davis, Committee Member

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Midwest Comicfest

It was 9:00 PM on a Thursday night, the occasion being significant for two reasons: it was only one week until Midwest Comicfest, and the six-month anniversary of Zack's constant urge to vomit from stress. Buying those plane tickets with the money he'd earned from the job he got *specifically* for travel money should have felt like a huge reward for him. Instead he couldn't help but think there was some byline in the confirmation of purchase about a gremlin living in your stomach until you boarded as punishment for not upgrading to first class.

Midwest Comicfest was exactly what it sounded like: a comic convention in Chicago, and a popular vacation spot for a growing world population of modern-day carnies. The kind of nerds you'd hear about with an encyclopedic knowledge of specific comic book runs or Star Trek extra features; people Zack looked up to. And several of those said people he'd gotten to know online in the past few months thanks to the magic of social networking would be in attendance. Each one of them had specifically expressed their excitement to meet Zack in person. Something that filled Zack with pride, having never received so many compliments since winning the first grade spelling bee.

It was going to be a goddamn train wreck.

There was one big reason Zack had taken to friends on the internet— he'd never have to see them in person. He'd never have to play soccer like he did at every birthday party he'd been dragged to as a ten-year-old. He'd never put anyone off by wearing the video game t-shirts that were a little tight on him after discovering how effectively he could chug two-liter bottles of soda. He didn't have to worry about breathing too loudly, or how abysmal he was at shaving, or his posture that looked like he was always wearing a backpack.

Weeks had been spent fooling them, tricking these fantastic people into believing he was cool, too. Jacob valued his input to discussions about the continuity of the Zelda timeline. Richter had done fanart of Zack's Evangelion original characters, and always gave tons of feedback on the fanfiction Zack had slaved over so much. Zwei couldn't go a day without complimenting Zack on his role-playing abilities. Only cool people doing cool things and he wasn't going to fool anyone.

Unfortunately for all of the paragons of style that frequented the event, Comicfest was changing locations after this year. It had landed a contract with a hotel in western Spain, a veritable hotbed of video game culture and Japanese media. Or, as the moral outrage online called it, someone didn't read the fine print somewhere. The good news was everyone attending was planning on making it the biggest hurrah they could muster, sending off their yearly gathering before it went to the exotic eastern land of Barcelona. The bad news was, if he wanted to meet his friends in person, it was now or never unless he wanted to learn Spanish. This was the only weekend of the year all of them ever planned to travel, and there was no telling when the stars would align like this again.

Zack was lying on his bed underneath the myriad of posters and framed memorabilia he'd purchased online, all of them emblazoned with Japanese lettering he didn't know how to read. The lavender scented candle he'd lit mixed with the half-eaten burnt pizza in a combination that normally made him feel at home, but only made him feel queasier. In another twenty-six minutes he could take another dose of antacid without voiding the warning label. Time couldn't go fast enough.

Zack's screen lit up with notifications, prompting him to unfurl from the fetal position. He expertly sidestepped both the pile of laundry he'd yet to fold and the cache of wooden

weaponry he was stockpiling to sit down at his desk, the maneuver expertly practiced for years during weekends where the only activities available were sleeping and editing fan wikis. He took a sip of his open Red Bull as he clicked through the new messages, the sharp medicinal tang stinging his eyes.

Thursday, 7/13

9:22 PM

tacticalwalnut yo, we're setting up for a raid. you free? we could use a good tank.

zenmagus Sorry Jacob, I still need to pack.

tacticalwalnut for MCF? that's still a week away

zenmagus I just don't want to forget anything.

tacticalwalnut you feeling ok?

zenmagus Yeah, totally! I'm fine, man. Just busy.

tacticalwalnut cool, cool. i'd have figured you'd have pre-con jitters by now, haha.

zenmagus Not at all! I can hardly wait!

Zack wiped the sweat from his brow. His hands shook as he went to take another sip and he spilled some of the drink on his shirt, sighing heavily.

tacticalwalnut alright dude, cool. it's gonna be fun to finally meet you, haha

what time are you getting in again?

zenmagus My flight gets in at 6PM, so I'll be there around 7:30 I think.

tacticalwalnut you're rooming with zwei, right?

zenmagus Yeah, he offered me the other bed.

tacticalwalnut that's good stuff! zwei's a great roommate at these things. I roomed with him last year and it was sweet, dude keeps the room immaculate.

zenmagus Didn't he throw a massive party? I thought you told me you got so fed up you had to leave the room.

tacticalwalnut nah, it was only a few guys playing street fighter. I got kicked out because zwei was salty he couldn't beat me when I played hakan. :D

zenmagus I was wondering why he wouldn't stop saying you kept grabbing and body slamming him over and over. That makes a LOT more sense.

The next morning was spent in front of the mirror, a location Zack had never stood in longer than thirty seconds at any one time. He figured he looked pretty good, as far as internet chat room stalkers went. This shirt actually fit alright and was the same color as his everyday shoes. *Is it the shirt that's supposed to match the shoes? No, wait, that's the belt.* The belt he'd just put on was a forty-two inch trail of fire shooting out of a rocket that formed the belt buckle. It wasn't going to match anything anytime soon. *Still looks awesome as hell,* he nodded to himself. Rockets never went out of style.

He brushed his bangs away, meeting his own gaze. People had always told him he had nice eyes. They sure did their job, he'd respond, and then wonder why people would laugh. A few idle slaps of his bangs made them sway before coming back to rest, half-obscuring his eyes like broken blinds in a run-down motel.

Come to think of it, what about his hair? Oh god, he'd never worried about his hair before. He'd been saying "do whatever" at the barbershop for almost a decade now. Luckily, this time around he was still sporting a normal shoulder-length straight cut, the usual fare. Zack's mother was always complaining that his bangs were too long, but being able to see his hair when

he looked up made Zack feel a lot calmer. His Dad had started to go bald when he was twenty-six and Zack planned to enjoy the hair while it was still around.

NEW TOPIC: Dress Codes?

posted by zenmagus, 7/14 3:12 PM

Hey guys, I was wondering, what's the typical dress code at MCF? I know it's not some kind of black tie only event, but is there anything I should know about it?

Re: Dress Codes?

posted by Zweihander 7/13 3:28 PM

You wear clothes to school. You wear clothes to the store. You wear clothes to a convention. Just keep your shirt on and make sure it doesn't advertise some entry-level garbage and you'll be fine.

Re: Dress Codes

posted by zenmagus 7/14 3:33 PM This post has received 2 favorites

Thanks, Zwei! I just wanted to make sure. Don't worry, I have a closet full of Star Wars prequel shirts I can't wait to show you. :D

Re: Dress Codes

posted by Richter474 7/14 3:49 PM

Zwei is gonna love those! I have this amazing Street Fighter hoodie I've been meaning to show him too, since he loves it soooooo much!

Re: Dress Codes

posted by Zweihander 7/14 4:02 PM

All of you are banned. None of you may come to my room. Never return to this forum. Zen you're dead to me forever.

The next morning's series of doubts were much more colorful than the last. Zack had made the mistake of leaving soap operas on as background noise like he always did when sick at home and by the third dramatic wig removal of the episode he deemed the series realistic fiction.

What if they wound up not liking one another and actually had some kind of fight? Or worse yet, having nothing at all to talk about? Or what if he had to spend time alone with anyone? They were always in a group. What if someone took an interest in him? What if someone wanted to have sex? Holy shit, he needed condoms.

Zack made a trip to the local pharmacy, having walked there a lot faster than he felt like he should be. The fluorescent lights dulled in the sunset streaming in the big front windows. He passed by the family planning section seven times, sneakers getting progressively squeakier the more he walked on the freshly polished tile floor. He could feel the old woman looking at toddler toys judging him harshly as her cheap floral perfume stung his eyes. The trip ended in a purchase of iced tea and trail mix for the plane instead.

Two hours were spent browsing Wikipedia for tips on how the female anatomy worked before remembering the only girl he'd know there was in a stable relationship. His cursor hovered over the link to male anatomy, finger raised mid-click. OK, now he was just being stupid.

When he got home his messaging client alerted him he'd missed five calls in the hour he'd been gone, all of them from Richter. She'd always been persistent. Zack slumped in his chair, opening a bag of pretzels and immediately letting them drop atop his stack of old DnD character sheets. He jumped as the phone rang again, picking up almost immediately.

"Yo, Zack! There you are!" Richter's voice was welcoming and crisp like the tin foil being peeled off a juicy burger. "I figured you were in the loo when you didn't pick up the first time. And when you didn't pick up after that, well... I'm glad I'm seven states and a mountain range away, let's say that much."

Zack's response was a single barked "HAH" as he convulsed once in his chair like a seal who'd just been shown a treat. He narrowed his eyes at Richter's profile picture, then looked at his balled fist. He could probably take her in a fight. Even if that picture of her stabbing a political history book with a claymore made her seem intimidating. It'd be a fair fight. But it wasn't so much the fighting he was worried about, it was the loving that concern—

"Zack, are you alright?" Richter broke the silence. Zack jumped again, knocking the stack of character sheets and pretzels everywhere. He felt a lot hungrier seeing them wasted like that. "You're breathing. Like, *really* heavily. I know you said the stairs in your house were steep but dude, calm down."

"Huh? Yeah. Sorry, I was reading about- nothing." Zack closed the three tabs of Wikipedia visual aids he had open.

"That trip to the loo wasn't *that* serious, was it? Holy shit."

"Of course not! I'm an old pro at... that."

"Shitting? I'll believe that. Still, you're panting something fierce. If you want to look at weird porn while we talk, that's all on you. Just mute your mic so I can keep respecting you."

"Nah, I'm just looking at... well, I guess it's porn? I dunno. I just realized that I never knew how a vagina actually... worked."

Richter's laughter was poorly stifled. Her avatar lit up as she replied, like explosions going off in her battle against bad literature. "I respect you wanting to learn but you could always just ask me, y'know. Did you learn about what a clitoris is?"

"I think so?"

"Then you're already doing better than 80% of men and all three of my ex's. Your diploma is in the mail."

Two more trips to the pharmacy were orchestrated to purchase aspirin and antacid tablets respectively. In the rare occasions he'd conquered his feelings of stress enough to eat, Zack had eaten far too much. *At least the first class gremlin is miserable too*, he told himself, punching his own stomach. His parents weren't too happy about all the boxes being shoved in the trash, either. At least, Dad seemed more concerned he wasn't getting a slice of his own.

"I thought I was a growing boy, Mom, I need to eat!"

"Honey you're nineteen. The only way you have left to grow is out."

Wednesday night was traditionally the night everyone hoped on the online game of the week for a long session of what Richter articulately called "dicking the fuck around." The nausea kept Zack fairly quiet in the big group call that Zwei set up, listening to everyone he knew sharing stories of cons gone by to get themselves excited for this year's events.

"Remember that dude who followed you back up to your room, Richter?" Jacob was clapping his hands. "That guy was CRAZY. I've never seen someone so desperate to buy one of your prints." Zwei started to reply before Jacob cut him off. "And I've seen Zwei."

"That doesn't even make any- shut up, Jacob." Everyone could practically hear Zwei rub his temples. "I'm not as bad as that guy."

"So you admit you're bad."

"Shut up." There was a loud shuffling as Jacob clasp a hand over his microphone, audible snorting sounding like it was far in the distance.

"Yeah, I remember that dude! He comes to my table every year and asks for freebies because of our 'close personal relationship.' It's amazing. It's great. I can't wait for you to meet him, Zack."

Zack nearly spit out his antacid tablet. "Why?"

"Because it's fun! It'll be fun, man. You're gonna hate every single one of these people and it'll be the best time of your life."

Zwei and Jacob laughing in agreement did little to help Zack's nerves. He missed the next couple of weirdoes he had to look forward to meeting due to his microphone being muted as he got sick in the bathroom for twenty minutes. "It'll be fun," he mumbled in between trips to the sink to refill his water and the toilet to empty everything else. "It'll be *fun*."

"It'll be fun." Zack said aloud, sitting in bed, the night before he left. "It'll be fun." He said it every fifteen minutes, punctuating his spells of tossing and turning. He tried counting and must have said it twenty-two times. He was so focused on the words he kept forgetting he'd need to be well rested to get to the airport in the morning. He blinked into the red robotic glow of his alarm clock. *If I fall asleep now, I'll get three hours and thirty minutes of sleep.* The worn sheets and body pillow with an anime girl on it Jacob had sent him for his birthday last year as a joke were no less comfortable than usual. It was a cold and rainy night. Perfect for sleep. *Three hours and twenty-six minutes.*

After a hearty hour and a half of sleep, Zack's alarm went off at 3 AM. He jolted out of bed, flinging himself from sleep like a child from summer school, only to doze off putting on his shirt and leaning against the closet door. He almost fell asleep again sitting at the kitchen table with his father, wordlessly eating cereal before being driven to the airport.

"So, these people you're going to meet," Zack's dad broke the silence better than the tailpipe backfiring ever could. The early morning condensation pooled on the car's windshield. It wasn't disappearing despite the heater being on full blast. Zack felt cold just from looking at it.

"Do you know them?"

"Yeah, Dad."

"Who are they again?"

"Jacob, Tiff, and Peter. And a couple other people, a whole lot."

"And you're staying with..."

"Peter. He got the room, I'll be in with him."

"Okay." They took a left turn, splashing into a puddle of still water along the way. "No drinking or drugs, remember."

"I know, Dad."

"Okay." A few cars swooshed by effortlessly, gliding along in the early morning like bubbles on the surface of a bathtub. "Are you excited?"

Zack paused for a moment. "Probably more than I ever have been in my entire life, yeah."

"Do you want me to bring you back anything?" Zack turned and yelled in the concrete parking garage, his voice echoing out to meet the engine sounds of everyone else in active drop-off. The noise was startling after the forty-five minutes of near silence in the car. His father had the window rolled halfway up, giving serious thought to the offer before shaking his head. "Just have fun!"

"It'll be fun," Zack said to himself as he watched his father drive away. "Shit. Shit, fuck, this is going to be the worst. It'll be fun, though. Goddamn. "

He bought a soda at the newspaper stand after the security check-in and found his gate, excited to be sleeping on the plane. In his hoodie and headphones with the posture of a homeless man he could feel the tired businessmen walking a little bit faster when they saw him. "It'll be fun." The gremlin bounced up and down in excitement. It was the only one who seemed to express any.

Zack didn't sleep a wink on the plane. While it had failed him before, he thought staring intently at the time during the entire length of the flight would bore him enough to cause him to pass out. The plan backfired worse than Dad's muffler, getting him more anxious with every tick of the digital big hand. The concerned stares from the man next to him as he swayed around in circles like the living dead didn't help much, either. By the end of the trip he'd made friends with everyone around him after they offered spare barf bags, each claiming "you look like you really need it."

They also all thought he was on his way to tour colleges. It was better they all believed that.

The trip to the hotel was a short five-minute drive and the most sleep Zack managed to get all day. You in town for the comic thing, the cabbie wanted to know. A lazy hand wave akin to a Roman emperor giving permission was all that he could muster, sprawled out on the pleather with his mouth agape. Stepping into the blinding sun in a series of movements that could only be described as "shambling," Zack almost immediately made eye contact with a tanned young man wearing a tattered hoodie, ripped jeans, and carrying an assault rifle. He was caked head to toe in costume scars and grime, dressed as a character from some zombie thing Zack wasn't familiar with.

"Almost mistook you for one of them!" the zombie guy shouted, pretending to reload his gun. Zack nodded weakly and turned toward the hotel. "Be careful, they're everywhere!"

The co player meant other zombies, but the statement still applied to the mass exodus Zack had wandered in to. He was lost in a sea of cardboard tubs and duct tape, caught between a seven-foot-tall werewolf with animatronic eyes that looked at him and played a growl off a soundboard and a girl four years younger than him wearing a cape that looked like it had

previously been a painter's sheet and a pair of old jeans. She adjusted a paper crown on her head and smiled at Zack as they walked. "I'm Princess Lea."

The front of the hotel had a long concrete runway that looked like a western Taj Mahal, the building at the end sprawling into every direction like a knocked out octopus' tentacles. The lobby of the building was abuzz with people checking phones and adjusting costume pieces, screams and hugs, and a banner that said "Welcome!" that looked like it had been picked up at a party store hours before opening.

Zwei was supposed to meet him in the lobby at noon. It was 12:03 and Zack's feeling that he was going to suffer horrible bodily accidents was only growing as the seconds passed. He gripped his bags tighter as a troupe of cosplayers walked past, yelling something in Japanese to the normal families checking out in order to avoid the weirdoes coming in for the weekend. It was still Thursday morning, it's way too early to be doing that crap, you id-

"Yo, Zack!"

Zack looked up from his angry Tweet to see three people smiling and vying for his attention before jogging over. Two boys, one heavysset and dressed in jeans and a Beatles t-shirt with headphones around his neck and the other wearing checkerboard shoes so loud they drowned out the cosplayers, both reached for handshakes at the same time while the girl in the jacket one size too big for her called all of them idiots.

"You find the place alright?" Jacob asked.

"Well it wasn't that hard, honestly."

"We're all just impressed you made it." Richter patted Zwei on the shoulder. "Plus it helps this dude owe me ten bucks now."

"I did NOT make that be- hey, Zack." Zwei properly shock his hand. "Let's get you moved into the room already. The elevators are on the other side of the con floor."

The group elbowed through the huddled mass of assembled nerds, stepping off the carpet of the lobby and onto solid concrete of a proper convention hall. The loud beeping of heavy machinery echoed off every wall as two forklifts worked in conjunction on the fall side of the arena to hoist the mascot of MOBA everyone but Zwei hated into place on top of a huge booth. They were waved by security to another hallway in the actual hotel, and sat waiting for the elevator between a couple in their mid-twenties yelling things at one another through their costume foam animal heads and a trio of sweaty and sniffing boys with plastic Halo weapons strapped to their backs and shuffling through Magic the Gathering cards. Zack had never felt more at home.

"I can't believe you saw that guy already and I missed it." Jacob lamented. "Zack, you gotta let us take you on a hunt for him, it'll be so worth it."

"We should at least see something that won't scar you for life first, though." Richter slapped Zack on the back. "You got anything in mind, bud? There's not a lot open on the first day, but..."

"You think we could just hang out in the room for a while?" Zack adjusted his bag, nearly falling over as the weight shifted. "I'm, uh... kinda tired."

"You look it." Zwei nodded.

"Fuckin' charming, dude." Jacob took a hold of Zack's bag. "Let's go get you some rest, man. You're gonna need it for the rest of the weekend!"

Zack smiled weakly as the elevator doors opened. "Yeah." He nodded. "Yeah, it'll be fun!"

Sending

March 13th 5:03 PM

SockKnocker Yo!

Roundtable heya Sock, what's up?

SockKnocker Just looking up on the new patch notes. You see what they did to Warlocks? Goliath is SCREWED, man. :(

Roundtable that bad? i figured you'd be fine, haha

SockKnocker It's awful. They nerfed EVERYTHING. My whole build is trash now.

Roundtable didn't they only lower most warlock values by two percent?

SockKnocker Like I said! Trash!

Roundtable i think you might be overreacting just a bit. you want to hop on and show me just how trash you've become?

SockKnocker I'm already on, get in here!

Roundtable gimme two minutes to set up.

beyond the revelation that your main is now some kind of pissbaby, how's your day been?

SockKnocker I dunno. It's been kind if OK, I guess.

Roundtable don't even try to say it sucks because of this warlock garbage

SockKnocker I'm still a bit down because of this warl-

Roundtable You're lucky you can type so quickly.

bro you're 16

i envy you if that's the worst thing to happen today, haha

SockKnocker Well we DID have a big test in biology that I totally wasn't ready for.

Roundtable what on?

SockKnocker Cell anatomy.

Roundtable dude you said last week you loved that stuff.

mitochondria and the endoplasmic thing.

SockKnocker Reticulum!

Roundtable see? bet you did fine.

just wait until you get to college before you start to stress like that

SockKnocker Is college really that bad?

TV makes it look like a nightmare.

Roundtable it's not nearly as bad as you'd think.

i keep telling you that, smart kid like you is gonna do fine.

especially if you master the art of not caring. that's a skill that serves most students here well.

SockKnocker I don't think my parents would be happy to hear I got really good at not caring, haha.

Roundtable well you don't TOTALLY not care. just stop caring enough your head doesn't explode.
so what's going on with this warlock?

SockKnocker Look at the DPS! One point four mil.

Roundtable ah yes, your damage output is insanely fucking high, this character is surely useless

SockKnocker It USED to be one point five! Do you know what that means for our dungeon runs?

Roundtable that you still do twice the damage i do

SockKnocker It's gonna take five hits to kill the fodder mobs! I used to be able to do it in four. Raids are gonna take FOREVER now.

Roundtable ok i have two pieces of advice

1. put more points into crit chance
2. shut the hell up

SockKnocker Sorry. I guess I'm just worried Jansen will kick me out of the guild if I'm not up to snuff.

Roundtable Sock you play this game twice as much as Jansen and Motley combined. plus we all think you're legit as hell, so there's that.

SockKnocker Are you sure I'm not annoying you? I mean, if there's college stuff or homework or studying you should be doing, I don't want to keep you from it...

Roundtable dude keep me from my sociology paper as long as you can
i am NOT looking forward to that thing

SockKnocker If you say so.
So you want to do some farming as long as you're on? I need to find a couple of those new gems they added.

Roundtable yeah i'm game.
brb first though

SockKnocker Alright!

March 13th, 6:37 PM

SockKnocker You there, man?

Roundtable yeah, sorry
mom needed some help taking the groceries upstairs

SockKnocker Oh, no worries!
You still want to play?

Roundtable maybe later, sorry
i'm kind of out of it at the moment

SockKnocker You feeling OK?

Roundtable tired
SockKnocker Were the groceries that heavy? :P
Roundtable heh, you could say that
you mind if i catch you later, Sock?
i got some work to catch up on
SockKnocker Sure, dude! Hit me up whenever!
Roundtable you keep talking about your warlock like you do and i'll take that more
literally than i should
SockKnocker *gulp!*Roundtable man you're a nerd
i'll see you soon, bro
SockKnocker See you!

March 15th, 11:29 AM

SockKnocker Hey, Round!
You there?

March 15th, 1:46 PM

SockKnocker I was just gonna let you know your advice worked. Boosting the crit
chance leveled out my damage output, my warlock is stronger than
ever!
So thanks for the tip, haha. :)

March 15th, 2:49 PM

Roundtable oh crap, my bad dude
i was totally asleep
SockKnocker Until 3 PM?
Roundtable well two pm here
but it's a saturday
and i'm allowed to do that
SockKnocker Wouldn't your parents get mad?
Roundtable mom doesn't seem to mind, haha
SockKnocker You're lucky. My parents would throw a fit if I stayed in bed that long.
Even if it was on a weekend.
Roundtable hey, don't call me lucky just yet.
i still gotta go to my sister's meeting tonight. it's gonna suck.
SockKnocker What kind of meeting?

Parent teacher conference?
 Roundtable nah, haha. she's older than me.
 but it's not important, i don't want to depress you
 does suck that i gotta dress up for it

SockKnocker Why's that suck?
 Roundtable because i hate dress pants
 seriously they're the worst garment ever invented

SockKnocker But they give you +5 charisma!
 Roundtable ok Sock I know you're trying to be cute
 but seriously fuck dress pants
 you haven't seen me, dude. my body type is "bag of pudding covered in
 rubber bands"
 pants and i agree about as well as you and recent patch notes

SockKnocker I bet you look fine in them. You gotta give yourself more credit!
 Roundtable no i gotta give myself less twinkies

SockKnocker So what time do you have to go get ready?
 Roundtable pretty soon. sorry i haven't been able to get online more often

SockKnocker Could have fooled me! You always show up as online on my screen.
 Roundtable guess i have that to thank for you bugging me so much

SockKnocker :D
 Roundtable but you're doing alright? decent day at school?

SockKnocker It's Saturday! :P
 Roundtable well yesterday then, how was that?

SockKnocker Not bad! I got a 92 on that test I mentioned. :D
 Rtt hey, there you go! told you you were smart.

SockKnocker Well I guess I DO read the book a couple times. Just to make sure I
 know it all.
 Can't say that doesn't factor in.
 Do you actually use the kind of stuff you learn in high school in
 college?

Roundtable depends on what you study
 i haven't had to use a lot of it but i study aviation
 so there's not a lot of need to know subjects and predicates

SockKnocker Why did you pick aviation?
 Roundtable i think planes are really cool
 and i always liked traveling as a kid. airports are really exciting.
 we used to fly out to see family every christmas but we haven't in a long
 while. i always missed flying.

SockKnocker That sounds really awesome! :D
 You'll have to fly to my house sometime so we can hang out for real.

Roundtable yeah I'll do that
 that sounds like fun. :)
 alright dude I gotta go get dressed for the meeting
 I'll talk to ya soon
SockKnocker Bye, Round! Good luck!

March 18th, 8:09 AM

SockKnocker Yo, Round!
Roundtable hey Sock
SockKnocker How're you getting on?
Roundtable eh, tired, haha
 haven't been able to get on as much since sis is home now and we need
 to share the computer
 how's the guild?
SockKnocker They're all OK!
 All kind of worried about you but I'm glad everything is fine.
Roundtable yeah, just been busy, you know how it is
 i can't stay for long now either, mom needs my help with some more
 stuff
SockKnocker More groceries? :P
Roundtable yeah, groceries
 you nailed it, kid
SockKnocker Are you sure you're OK?
 You can talk to me if something's the matter.
Roundtable oh i know dude
 don't worry, i'll figure it out
SockKnocker Really?

March 19th, 10:12 PM

Roundtable really
SockKnocker Oh, hey!
 I was wondering where you went, haha.
Roundtable sorry, sis pulled me off the computer
 wasn't a lot i could do about it
SockKnocker She seems kind of rude, no offense. Can't you tell her to wait her turn?
Roundtable i can try. she doesn't really listen to that kind of stuff, though.
 plus she has to report to some guy about some stuff.
 I dunno, she tells me to mind my own business.

SockKnocker But you're both adults! That hardly seems fair.
Roundtable you're not wrong.
SockKnocker Don't suppose you have time for some games, huh?

March 19th, 12:07 AM

SockKnocker I guess not...

March 19th, 4:09 PM

SockKnocker OK seriously man, what the heck is up with you?
Roundtable what are you talking about?
SockKnocker This whole week you've just vanished off the face of the earth. I know you're busy with school and your family, but what about your friends here? You deserve some down time.
Roundtable i do deserve a break
you know what, i couldn't agree with you more
SockKnocker Awesome! I'll boot up the game. :D
Roundtable haha, Sock, no
i DESERVE one, sure
but it's not likely i'm gonna get one anytime soon
SockKnocker Why?
Roundtable aaaah, it's nothing
SockKnocker It's clearly not!
Is it your family? Your sister?
Roundtable ...a little bit
look dude, i don't want to bum you out
SockKnocker You're not gonna bum me out! If you need to talk I'm here!
Roundtable really Sock, it's alright. you get back to studying for that test you got coming up.
SockKnocker That test was two days ago.
Roundtable oh crud! how'd you do?
SockKnocker 87%. :)
Roundtable that's my man, way to go
you always keep up that success dude, seriously proud of you
SockKnocker Round, are you sure you're OK?

March 20th, 12:54 PM

SockKnocker Hey, Round!

March 20th, 4:56 PM

SockKnocker You there, buddy?

March 21st, 2:20 AM

SockKnocker Hey, if you're around tomorrow, try and get online. Jansen is planning a big raid and we could really use your help!
Plus... I miss you. I know, I'm probably being lame, but I just really hope stuff's still going alright over there.

March 23rd, 10:47 AM

SockKnocker Hey dude!

March 24th, 11:23 PM

Roundtable nobut fuck her and I don;t even crae

SockKnocker Round?

Roundtable bitch

shes' so stupid thinkin she could get away with stuff like that

SockKnocker Who's stupid

Roundtable wait

oh shit

wrong window

SockKnocker Dude what's wrong? Where have you been?

Roundtable Sock hey man

im kind of drukn

SockKnocker I noticed.

Roundtable good

always said you smart

SockKnocker Why are you so wasted? You coming home from a party?

Roundtable just kinda having some samples

sis brought home some and I wanted

to tyr a couple

SockKnocker You're underage, isn't it risky to drink so much at home?

Roundtable man

go study uot books

SockKnocker Alright, alright. Just promise me you'll be on later, I really want to catch up with you.

March 25th, 1:37 PM

SockKnocker Hey man!

March 26th, 1:43 AM

SockKnocker Come on dude, are you there? I really want to talk!
I'm really sorry if I'm annoying you but what's going on?

March 29th, 2:45 PM

SockKnocker Heya, Round!
Haven't seen much of you anywhere lately, everything OK?

April 4th, 8:09 PM

SockKnocker Yo!

April 29th, 11:23 PM

SockKnocker Hey, Round. Look, dude, I don't know what was happening last month or where you've been lately, but I do know I miss you. A ton. You're one of my best friends and I owe you a lot just for listening to me. Please respond eventually, OK? I need to know you're OK.

May 8th, 6:01 PM

SockKnocker Yo, Round! Thinking of you, dude. Wishing you all the best!
I hope you're seeing this, too. Hurry back, alright? I can't wait to show you my new warlock!

July 19th, 8:13 PM

SockKnocker Whoa, today's your birthday? I totally forgot! I'm glad the client told me, else I never would have remembered! Happy Birthday, dude!
Hard to believe I know someone five years older than me so well, haha. And hey, at least now you don't have to hide that sweet tooth for booze! Or at least not hide it as much.
Or... so well. Like the rest of you. Y'know.
You've gotta have your reasons for not being around. Jansen told me

more about your sister, and... look, I'm sorry for not understanding before, I didn't know what you were living with.
I'm still here if you need me, dude.
I hope you're OK.

September 1st, 6:55 PM

SockKnocker

Today's my first day of senior year. You always told me this is when stuff to worry about came into play, and I believe it.
But I just need to remember to care less. Take it easy. It's weirdly good advice, now that I actually get to use it. Advice I hope you're following yourself, wherever you are.
I miss you a lot, man. If you ever make it back here drop me a line. I'd love to catch up. :)

November 3rd, 8:19 PM

System

User ROUNDTABLE is now Offline.

November 3rd, 8:48 PM

SockKnocker

I'll see you soon, buddy. Drop me a line sometime. :)

System

User ROUNDTABLE is Offline and will receive your message when they log in again.

Sending...

Sending...

Sending...

Sending...

General X and the Legion of Doom

lol ur dum

can't believe ur so bad

u sux nerd lol

Connor scratched his chin. A glance at his watch confirmed that it wasn't 2004. People still did this kind of thing? He always assumed those posters in his middle school library of girls looking at their phones and crying were made up. But here he was, a twenty-three year old graduate student in the same position as preteens photographed with a monochrome filter someone threw on for "dramatic effect." Of course it didn't feel good, but for completely different reasons.

The hardwood floor creaked with age as Conner rolled to the other side of the room, refilling his glass from the kitchenette sink. The sparsely decorated room contained only his desk, basic appliances, a few posters of movies and anime Conner liked, and two doors: one to the hallway and the rest of the apartment building, and one to his bedroom. He re-lit the pumpkin spice candle sitting in a jar atop his printer, taking a deep breath. Aaah... Soothing. Just what he needed to sort through all his fan mail.

As a dozen more messages poured in, each more poorly spelled and more vaguely insulting than the last, Connor opened up his running game of Totalitaria. The updates were the usual business.

"France claimed for the Empire of Contopia! Battle Losses: 7 to 31."

"Twenty new recruits in the homeland."

"New Player Alert: General X has joined the game. Stronghold stationed in Madagascar. General X has conquered your Outpost in North Africa. Battle Losses: 3 to 0."

According to the notification, the guy had squeezed into the game just ten minutes before it closed and the round formally began. *Well, there goes my easy reputation boost.* The object of the game of Totalitaria was simple: conquer the world and get points for victory in the form of "reputation." Games were anything from space battles in the far-flung future to historically accurate simulations of World War II. Though most people didn't know that, since the World War II section went untouched due it being "realistic" and any order you give taking three days to process.

Connor normally played the World War II games against the computer, earning easy victories and boosted reputation points as he went. But the inclusion of another player meant he'd actually have to focus on the game if he wanted to win, which wasn't an attractive option.

"Well, go fuck yourself, General X." Connor clicked open the Settings and selected "Leave Game."

"Warning! You have left too many games in the past play period and your account is currently on probation! Removing yourself from this scenario will result in a suspension of three months and a loss of Rep!"

Come to think of it, leaving a game every time someone new had shown up this week had been a bad idea. According to the probation notice, he wasn't allowed to join any new rounds until this one was finished. Conner took a deep whiff of his pumpkin spice candle and pressed his fist into his forehead. Normally he could clean up a map in about a week since computer players never moved, but another player could drag it out for a month or more. And surrendering would reset all of his rep progress, meaning he not only had to play, but he had to win.

"Fucking *hell.*"

Connor checked the growing pile of mean spam again. Nestled among the legion of server-clogging "insults" was a properly worded subject line, reading "Declaration of War." Finally, some *good* news! Conner began to read the message out loud, stopping only when his jaw dropped to the point of no longer being able to formulate words.

"Greetings, simpleton! It is I, your better, the infallible, invincible, pragmatic and bombastic ruler of the Pacific and the Atlantic, the genius General X! And you, my dearsweet cannon fodder, have found your way into my little gambit. I must thank you for sending those scouts my way, my men were getting *quite* bored... muhahahah!"

"Are you kidding me?" Conner rubbed his temple. "Wha- are you *serious*?"

"I offer you this ultimatum, sir!" He returned to reading the message after getting a bottle of beer and setting it next to his water, having a feeling he was about to need it. "Total submission may ultimately lead to your surviving this ordeal! I demand free passage through all of your territory along with half of all the resources you produce. Refuse... and you'll wind up like your poor captain!"

There was an image attached to the message with the file name "threateningimage.jpg." It looked like one of the low-resolution character portraits that showed up when commanding a specific unit, horribly compressed to the point of looking more like one of Dali's melting clocks than a face. The image was of Connor's scout party captain, a normally handsome man with a mustache any mortal man would be jealous of. But instead of his usual cocky expression he had crudely drawn x's over his eyes and a bright red lump applied by a fill tool that Connor guessed must be blood.

"You have twenty-four hours to respond. I'll be waiting! And I look forward to *working* with you. MUAHAHAHAH!"

The loud *hiss* of the bottle opening drowned out Conner's groan. The game was still open in the other window, a black flag with a big red X suddenly replacing the default assigned to Madagascar. Still dumbfounded, he noticed a list of tags at the bottom of the player list that only had him and General X listed. "This game is tagged as: World War 2, large map, realistic moral, bonus start troops, roleplaying-"

Oh god *dammit*. No wonder no one was playing in this game. Whack jobs who got far too into character ran rampant in the role-play tag. He'd thought most of them had left ages ago but evidentially General X was here to stay. And unfortunately, so was Connor. He was probably the one behind the inbox spam, too. This was going to be a long, long game.

Conner brought up the in-game chat menu, furiously typing out a trouble ticket. *Dear mods: The guy who just joined my game just sent me really blatant threats of violence and won't stop spamming my inbox with junk mail. Can't you guys ban him? He has to be breaking some kind of rule.*

The response to the ticket came almost immediately. *The rules of the roleplay boards are different. While we don't stand for direct threats of violence, I reviewed the messages in question and General X is clearly dedicated to remaining in character. After spending so much time in that board I'd figure you'd be more aware of these rules. Best of luck in your upcoming game, and may you find glory and fortune! -Arbiter*

After five minutes of aggravated yelling at the ceiling and getting a second beer, Connor sent a message to Davidson instead. Having known him since the time he needed to borrow a pencil (and shortly after half the answers to the test) in tenth grade, Davidson had remained one of Connor's best friends for years. They used Totalitaria to keep in close contact, and if anyone was going to understand how bullshit this was, it would be him.

"You brought this upon yourself, you know." Connor could practically hear Davidson's shit-eating grin through the phone. "I kept telling you boosting games was a bad idea."

"Can't I just vent without the 'I told you so?' I get it."

"I told you so."

"Dude, I get it. This just sucks." Connor ran a hand through his week-old stubble, the smell of the morning's "fresh" pot of coffee hanging inside the small apartment. The windows were cracked since the building's thermostat kept the building a toasty eighty-five degrees all through the winter. A more sane man would describe it as "fucking busted." A sharp February breeze tingled Connor's moist brow.

"Personally I think it's hilarious you wound up in a role-playing match." Davidson's sentence was punctuated by a controller creaking and a flurry of punches landing from the game he was playing. "Most of those dudes are really lackluster and half-ass their posts. Sounds like you got a try-hard instead."

"Awesome. Just great." The strong scent of mayo from his lunch sitting nearby wasn't helping Conner's headache. "I can't believe I have to play with this idiot. He won't even tell me his name or anything, he just spams my inbox with messages from another username. I think it's the 'demoralization' he was talking about."

"Seems like it's doing its job. You sound dead inside," Davidson yelled over explosion sound effects.

"I hope he's dead inside."

"What?"

"Nothing. Just... man, fuck this guy. Can't he break character to at least tell me who it is?" Conner groaned as a notification reading "u r teh wurst" popped up on his desktop.

"It's probably Gary." Davidson laughed. "That dude's always complaining about people who boost. Plus he seems like he has the time on his hands."

"Oh my god, it probably *is* Gary. Oh man I *hate* that guy!"

Gary, also known as "xXxREVOLVER_SNIPERxXx" on the Totalitaria forums, was the thorn in the community's collective side. Regardless of topic or severity of complaint, Gary was almost always the first person to reply with his trademark "devil's advocate" approach: calling the person a giant baby. There was a running pool between Connor, Davidson, and a few others during every update to the game where'd they'd estimate how soon Gary would use the word "bullshit" in his reply to the announcement. It was almost always within the first twenty words. No one knew much about him in person, but it was heavily rumored he was in his thirties and mooched off of his parents professionally. Others would tell you he was a pile of Doritos given sentience.

"Why don't you level with him outside the game?" Davidson suggested through a mouth full of potato chips. "It sounds like the kind of thing he'd do. Maybe he'd stop 'teaching you a lesson' if you convince him you've learned it."

"It's against the rules of the roleplay board. Breaking character that directly could get me banned. Gary would love the excuse to rat me out to Arbiter." Connor could hear Davidson choking on chips through his smile.

"Well, good luck in your battle against General X, Admiral Dumbass. I can't wait to see how this plays out."

South Africa has been claimed by General X! Current Standings: Contopia- 1st place, 70% world conquest. Legion of Doom, 30% world conquest.

The "Legion of Doom" was what General X had called his empire. He hadn't be subtle about it, either. Conner had barely been able to get through the rambling message about how they were "named for what they brought" or some crap. Luckily for Conner, they also seemed to bring something else- their own demise.

"Watch as my supersoldiers take over the globe, one country at a time!" General X had boasted. His troop movements showed he was sending one unit into every computer-occupied territory that bordered him, whose garrisons were filled with twenty times the men. He was promptly defeated at every turn. "From the inside, they will take down the system and bring anarchy! Our numbers grow, and you will fall!"

Conner brought up the Totalitaria forums as he looked over the battle reports.

"And furthermore," Gary's forum post went on, "The implication of starting with four tanks on this map is nonsense. We should start with six. Historical records show, after some number-crunching, the average tank force in every country that fought in World War II was six."

"Gary, are you counting countries that didn't have any tanks at the time again?" Even as bolded text on a webpage the admin sounded bored.

"Well, it's integral to the global scope of the conflict! Without that element, then-" The next three paragraphs of text didn't seem to be worth reading. The use of bold and italics got more and more liberal as the post went on.

"Come on, Gary, give it a break. Can't you just break away from the hard facts for once?" Connor replied. "Suspension of disbelief is a thing."

About an hour later Connor received a reply, the trend of liberal font alterations continuing. He noticed an underlined sentence comparing him to several different historical dictators and closed the window.

A few days later General X was down to just a few territories, his troops still marching one by one out to die against the computer. But of course, he had a new "secret weapon."

"An unparalleled espionage network the likes of which the world has never seen! I know where you live, where you eat, where you sleep! I know everything there is to know! I'll keep my methods a secret, Mr. DAWSON. But if I'm ever in the CHICAGO area I'll be sure to pay a visit!"

"All that information is available on my public profile, you could just get it there."

"Yes, but what about your likes and dislikes? Your hopes and dreams, desires and fears? I know it all, Connor... and you have your friends to thank for betraying you!"

Connor's client flashed as he got a new message from his friend Para. "Hey Connor, this General X dude's been messaging me for about an hour begging me to tell him stuff about you. Do you know him?"

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure that's just Gary. He's getting too into an RP game I got roped into with him."

"Ooooh, OK. If anyone asked I told him you're afraid of pickles."

"...Pickles? Para, what the hell?"

"It's a real thing! Shut up. I gotta get back to work."

Attached to every spam message that came in to Connor's inbox in the next week was a pickle. It started as a series of simple pieces of clipart with white backgrounds, but by day's end he was getting links to external animations made on face-insert greeting card websites his

grandmother liked to use while claiming she was technology savvy. The images were all posted to the account of one "xXxREVOLVER_SNIPERxXx." Connor couldn't tell what was worse, the fact Gary would reveal himself so blatantly or the fact he still used that username in other places.

Truly, Connor's mental state was being worn down; though with boredom rather than fear. He hadn't had to move a single troop in days thanks to the "super soldier" strategy. Though all the time that would have been spent moving troops around was spent reading up on the other game modes and going to the store for a jar of pickles. Some of the pictures looked appetizing.

Finally, after two weeks, General X's last soldier marched into the slaughter and was lost. Connor was notified of his "victory" in two ways- the first was a banner that popped up on his screen, listing the rewards of his triumph, and the other was a personal message from the general himself.

Connor's instant messenger started to ring. The icon on display was General X's flag, his username embossed in all capital letters underneath it. "Oh, this ought to be good." Connor selected accept and the audio that cued in sounded like someone in the middle of laughing at their own joke. The voice sounded like someone talking into a kid's toy in an attempt to do a robot impression.

"Well played, Connor! Well played!" General X clapped his hands, then took a deep breath. Connor heard the puff of an inhaler. "Your victory against an unknown adversary was decisive and hard-fought. But do you know the truth of who you've been fighting? The real story?"

"Gary I can see our chat history in this same window, I know it's yo-" Connor was cut off by ominous Russian chanting playing through the other party's microphone, the quality so poor it must have been coming out of a phone held up to the speaker.

The icon of the other party's IM changed to an all-too-familiar black and red pixelated mess. The supposedly foreboding text GENERAL X vanished from the screen and letter by letter a new name was typed out: "GARYSAURUS."

"IT WAS ME!" Gary shouted, the voice modulator making a clatter as it was thrown to the side of his room. From the sound of it Connor guessed it knocked over a glass and landed in a pile of empty Doritos bags. "Your nemesis, all along! I was the villain behind this grand plot!"

"Yeah Gary, I figured that out."

"You see, Connor, I had a brilliant plan! We all know you play these opponent-free matches to get more reputation while the rest of us struggle and fight like you're supposed to. So one day, when you were looking for your next easy victim, I decided 'Why not give him the fight of his life?! And who better to don the guise, the mask of a villain, than no-nonsense Gary. Stick in the mud Gary. It was foolproof, and you fell for it hook line and sinker!'"

"Gary, I just beat your last guy like an hour ago, you really don't have to keep roleplaying-"

"But it would go beyond just a game!"

Connor was really glad he couldn't see Gary's face. The grin that must be on upon saying a sentence like that would've been hard not to punch. "Your suffering would be eternal, didn't I promise you? The earth would be scorched and not even your meager sanity would be able to be salvaged from the ashes!"

"But Gary, I wo-"

"You may have claimed victory, but at what cost? What precious remains of your psyche are still intact enough to march on after this brutal slaughter? The day is yours, but I will

continue to haunt you, like the spirit of a defeated warrior out for vengeance! Your suffering will be endless and your misery et-"

Gary's voice cut out as Connor clicked the large "End Call" button, creating a few moments of blissful silence. The chat window lit up as Gary started to type out the rest of his speech without missing a beat. Connor lit another pumpkin spice candle, hovering over it and breathing deeply while the general raved. His posts were coming far too fast to be read completely, but the moment "righteous crusade" was seen for a third time it seemed safe to tune him out.

Another notification came from Arbiter, and Connor happily clicked on it while ignoring Gary's continued rant. *Congratulations on your victory in the most recent game! I knew you could defeat such a worthy adversary. And you can rest easily knowing your vanquished foe won't be coming back for some time, either. Gary just sent me and all the other mods full transcripts of what he'd been doing to you. I think he was looking for congratulations, but when he admitted to being the one behind the hundreds of fake accounts recently we had to give him a temporary ban.*

Connor looked back at Gary's continued rant. He spotted the phrases "trump card" and "divine intervention." This was starting to make some sense.

Unfortunately, Arbiter continued, I'll have to ban you from the World War II section of the game for a while as well. You failed to remain in character during the length of your match, and looking over your previous record of matches we have grounds to ban you for unsportsmanlike conduct. Given the circumstances, though, I convinced the other mods you've suffered enough. You're free to go so long as you play real matches from now on.

Arbiter, Connor typed back, if I see another World War II era infantry unit I think I'm going to barf.

Gary had finished typing at this point. Connor flipped back to read the last paragraph:
"And thus, my ultimate trial is complete! I stand in the ruins of my empire, bested by the superior commander, but my message rings on in his head! An emperor turned messenger for a more divine communication! May your nights be sleepless and your days without tranquility as you embrace all of your sins!"

Connor whistled as he clicked the "Block" button next to Gary's name and pulled up his conversation window with Davidson.

"So, what kind of round are you starting this week?"

"One of those 23rd century scenarios. With the laser tanks, because they're stupid and cool. Why?" Davidson loudly took a large drink of something.

"Oh, no reason."

"You weren't thinking of joining, were you?"

"Do you have a slot?"

"I thought you were stuck in the past fighting that G.I. Joe villain."

"Well, not anymore. He killed all his units a couple of hours ago. Turns out it really was Gary." Connor blew out his candle. The spice wasn't doing great things for his stomach. "So do you have a spot I can jump in on or what?"

"For the great hero who defeated General X? Of course!"

"David, could you just not do th-"

"Well old timer, I know you've never played a *real* game like this before, so let me show you the ropes. This here is called a 'pulse rifle.' Can you say that?"

"...pulse rifle."

"There you go, Connor! We'll have you adjusted to modern times faster than you can say solar panel."

Sprinkles

Clarissa landed face-first on her bed, muting her threat to punch the next jackass wearing a Sprinkle Cat t-shirt who she saw mid-sentence. The soft powder blue comforter didn't seem to be doing much in the way of comforting her. After throwing a few pillows to the floor, she walked back downstairs to the kitchen and slam-dunked one of her mom's cheap teacups into the trash. There. *Much* better.

Matt was sitting in his usual 3:29 Sunning Area, laying on his back, arms and legs bent lazily with a content look on his face. His dull orange fur looked like a spaghetti stain on the living room's bright white carpet. A light breeze drifted in from the open window, rustling the bright white curtains and carrying with it the smell of clean linen and fresh cut grass. It looked like a commercial for kitty litter.

"*Screw you.*" Clarissa whispered at Matt. Matt's response was to yawn and roll over, tail swishing as if it were thumbing through a phonebook. Clarissa put a hand to her mouth and silently apologized. "It's not your fault everyone loves you. Including me. I love you. I'm sorry."

Might as well check the answering machine while she was in the kitchen.

beep

"Hi, I'm calling from Channel Five News and would like to schedule an interview with-"

"Hello! This is Chad Demont calling from America's Wackiest-"

" Good morning! This is Peter, I'm with Cute Cats Quarterly and want-"

OK, that may have been a mistake. She'd already let one person interview her yesterday and by that evening there was a piece on some clickbait site about "the cat everyone is talking about." What a bunch of sensationalist trash. It was up to three hundred thousand views.

You know what? She needed to relax. It had been a trying couple of days and called for rational and healthy de-stressing techniques. There was a mighty *clang* as the large beige ceramic bowl normally saved for Halloween candy was hoisted onto the white countertop and a mighty clatter as she dug through the silverware drawer, tossing aside all of the small spoons before settling on a ladle. Mom and Dad wouldn't be home until later that evening, so no one was around to tell her that it was "impolite" or "unsanitary" or "would be much easier with the ice cream scoop."

It was going to be perfect. The ultimate comfort food. Half a gallon of ice cream, some hot fudge heated in the microwave she nearly burned herself on, whipped cream, a cherry, sprinkles.

Sprinkles. Her hand was clasped tightly around the bottle of red and white confectionary sweeteners, nearly empty with a faded label. The heavy smell of a cake shop gently wafted up from the shaker top. She could so vividly taste the almost plastic-like consistency of the topping that one of her front teeth started to ache.

The trash can lid nearly broke off as Clarissa used it like a backboard to pitch the sprinkles into the trash. It was almost silent except for the dull rattle as the bottle joined the broken teacup. She hoisted the giant sundae over the trash in the fever of frustration, but set it down on the table. Too hungry to be that dramatic. Matt's responses was to reach out with his paws, kneed the air, and go back to lounging.

Stupid cat. She loved him so much, that asshole. Sprinkles was her best friend and *no*. God damn it *no*. There was a ringing clatter as three more teacups were tossed into the garbage. Matt bothered to look up when she started screaming but a slow blink registered he didn't really care.

Matt was, for all intents and purposes, Clarissa's best friend. She certainly considered him as such, anyway; he was probably closer to the yarn mouse she pulled around to amuse him than her. But that was OK, cats can be like that. He was certainly a better listener than anyone she went to school with. Not that she ever had a lot to say. But if she ever did it would be really, really interesting. Matt always paid lots of attention to her, even when he didn't seem to be. And everyone liked Matt. Literally everyone liked Matt.

It was four days ago (even if it felt like longer). Clarissa had spent her Saturday night doing what she always did: playing with Matt and taking several memory card's worth of pictures. Other kids in school could go out to parties and drink all they wanted, that stuff wasn't for her. She never even thought about it that much. All she wanted to do was take pictures of her cat. Sometimes he played with yarn, sometimes he just slept a lot. He was the best.

At one point in the evening he got into the cabinets and started to knock over bottles and cans of stuff. It was OK, though, Clarissa thought it was really funny. And she knew everyone else would too. Because why wouldn't they love Matt? Everyone always loved the other pictures she posted. Even when they never said so or posted comments, they were admiring from afar. It always made her so happy to see everyone loving her cat. Filling up her inbox with all the love they had for him.

And boy did they fill up her inbox. Everyone did! People really thought it was funny to see Matt playing in the sprinkles. They started to share it with friends and relatives. It was in everyone's news feed for days. Even perfect strangers started to share pictures of Matt. They started to edit it and add text and it started to lose context. That part Clarissa didn't like as much since it was harder to see all the nice things people were saying. But Matt still got lots of attention and everyone knew he was her cat, that was the important part.

Even if everyone called him Sprinkles. People didn't seem to read all her messages that said that. She could see they were grayed out so it meant someone opened it. They all knew. Sprinkles was a fun name, anyway. But she was starting to get tired of it. Everyone loved Matt so much and it was exhausting having to tell everyone at school she couldn't bring Sprinkles she means Matt in to show off. They were always saying the same things: "Come on, you have to, it'd be great!" "Can you at least film him knocking down the sprinkles again?" "Clarissa why are you yelling so loud? We could hear you three rooms over." What a pain.

She could always delete the picture so everyone would stop and leave her alone. But why deny them the chance to love Matt? She was too nice to do that.

She thumbed through her phone, petting Matt on the head. He had moved from the first sun spot to his 3:52 appointment six inches to the left, the early spring sun still going strong. Only five hours and eight minutes until Dad always said he'd be home and seven hours and forty six minutes until he actually would be. It was always like that. When he came home, that is. Sometimes he had business trips. Mom had a lot of them too. Clarissa didn't mind that.

But it was all okay because the art show was this weekend. She was going to have lots of fun at the convention, she knew it. She started to gently pet Matt while he was sunning himself. Matt didn't move very much. He looked really peaceful. Clarissa took a picture and posted it immediately: "Tired from all the sprinkles he's been knocking over lately!" People started to comment on the picture with really nice things and she smiled. It felt really good to know people were happy when they saw Matt.

Before long she had to clean out her inbox again. She loved making others happy but they were very vocal about it. It was overwhelming sometimes. She thought about deleting the

first picture a lot. Then everyone would stop. But then, everyone would stop... Clarissa pitched another teacup into the trashcan. Oh, well! She would buy Mom more later.

Clarissa spent the entire evening with Matt, watching him more from his 3:52 spot to his 4:17, to his 5:00 on the dot, until sunset where he crawled under the desk light in the den where he normally sat until someone shooed him away before bed. He did this every day and it was the cutest thing. Like some kind of wandering nomad making a pilgrimage, but with less prayer and more shedding. She couldn't wait to tell everyone at school tomorrow about it. She loved Spr- she loved Matt, and so did everyone else!

"Guys! You won't *believe* what my cat did last night!" she'd yell.

"You already told me, Clarissa." Molly would reply. Molly ate lunch with Clarissa every day. She smelled like relish but was really good at the clarinet. She was always happy to hear about Matt. At least she said she was, and Molly was really honest. So Clarissa believed her. "He went from the first spot to the others and then slept by the light."

"And he didn't even knock over a single bottle! I'm so proud of him."

"OK, Clarissa." Molly went back to eating. She chewed really loudly. Clarissa didn't mind. She hated it, but didn't mind.

When she got home from school that day she found the usual scene that greeted her: notes from Mom explaining she'd be home late, Matt sunning himself with a half-empty bowl of cat food by the door, and a mountain of emails and alerts on her laptop to go through. It was getting so hard to find messages from her actual friends. Even though her actual friends weren't all that chatty. Everyone else sure seemed to be, though!

"Are people still posting pictures of that cat? That's so lame."

"THIS CAT SUX FIND A NU JOKE"

A bunch of the comments also included several swears and demands whoever reposted these pictures do unholy things with the business end of a cactus. There were still some positive comments, but more and more people being angry and upset.

She still had a lot to read, though. And she read all of it. She was sad that people weren't liking Matt as much. She replied to as many of the comments as she could defending him, though since most of the images had been reposted to image hosting sites a hundred times over and were totally removed from her original account, no one seemed to believe her. A few people re-aimed their cactus comments at her.

Sprinkles (she meant Matt) didn't seem bothered by some negative feedback. Neither should she! He was just as happy playing with his yarn as he always was. People were still looking at her cat and he was still making people smile. That's all that mattered. That's all that mattered!

The next night—the day before the convention—she sat in the den at the desk, Sprinkles curled up next to her, laptop on. The quiet humming of the laptop fan mixed with Matt's breathing were enough to forget the constant smell of dander and beef flavored ramen she'd made for dinner. Clarissa sat face forward, shuffling her feet on the heavy brown rug, clicking refresh on her inbox. It was empty. It must have been broken. That was the only solution, really. It must be completely busted. How was she going to see what everyone was saying about Matt now?

A single alert beeped into her inbox. Someone told her to go do something with a cactus again. Earlier she had seen another picture of a cactus wearing sunglasses falling on top of someone in a really funny way. That must be why everyone was talking about it lately. That cactus made her laugh. And she was sure Sprinkles was making everyone else laugh, too. Matt,

she meant. Well, Sprinkles was what everyone else called him. That wasn't important now, though.

She spent the evening stacking cans of sprinkles next to Matt and gently poking him with her finger. He didn't seem to be moving much. Matt had always been a lazy cat and didn't want to knock stuff over. Clarissa stacked up cans of other things instead, like confetti or glitter or even beans. Matt ate a few of the beans but refused to pose. The pictures she took and posted got very little response. She frowned.

Why did people seem to not like Matt anymore? Or at least, people stopped saying they liked him. They also stopped saying they *disliked* him, which was nice. And she was really glad people were leaving her alone. No magazines had called all day. It was nice to not have to deal with all the headaches of being famous. But she still wanted people to love Matt. He brought everyone so much joy before! He needed to do that again.

Saturday morning was the day of the art show, and Clarissa showed up around noon. The show was being held in the local function hall, a modestly sized building with floor tiling from 1990 and architecture from sometime much older. It was always unnaturally cold in the building and smelled with wet wood, but every year drew a crowd from all over the state to buy crafts and goods.

In her backpack she had printed off hundreds of copies of Sprinkles and his antics, lounging with beans and even being dangerously close to a cactus she had run out and bought at a twenty-four hour home décor store. It was fake but no one had to know that.

Clarissa stood by the door to the dealer's room, stack of papers in hand. Every single one of them had been stamped with Matt's paw as a signature. She thought it was really cute. At

least, it was when he did it accidentally once with bean residue. She tried to get him to repeat the effort but he refused. She had drawn on the paw in marker instead. No one had to know!

"Come here and get a signed picture of Sprinkles the Cat!" she shouted to everyone walking into one of the side rooms in the hall. People didn't even look at her. People kept walking by, brushing the pictures off of themselves. Several fell onto the ground as she let them go, hoping someone would catch them. They were promptly stepped on and bent beyond recognition.

"Excuse me, ma'am."

Clarissa turned to see a bald man in a t-shirt with the event's logo on it standing behind her. He had sunglasses on indoors and a walkie-talkie attached to his belt, his muscles sturdy despite looking over sixty. "I'm going to have to ask you to stop distributing these handouts unless you have a pass to do so."

"I don't need a pass!" Clarissa smiled. "I'm making people happy with pictures of my cat!"

The bald man raised an eyebrow. "Your cat, you say?"

"Yes sir!" Clarissa extended her arm to present the man with a copy of the picture. He took it gingerly and held it down at his side.

"I thought this cat belonged to that fella in Hall C. He has pictures of it everywhere. But regardless, I need you to stop with these hando— hey, where are you going?!"

Clarissa was off like a shot, running toward Hall C. She knocked down several people in the process, but dropped more pictures of Sprinkles behind her. That would make them feel better.

Hall C was the biggest hall in the building, with a twenty-foot ceiling and several hundred square feet of floor space. Here were the largest stalls reserved for professional companies to come and sell merchandise, set up in a large circle for people to mill about lazily. Clarissa scanned the room, elbowing past people, until she made eye contact with a familiar sight: Matt. A giant poster of Matt rested on wall of thin black metal bars, held up by hooks. It was surrounded by t-shirts, posters, and even travel mugs that all had Matt's face on them. Poorly spelled text captioned several of the shirts and each one was being sold for almost \$40.

There was a loud crunching sound as Clarissa walked over the shards of the now—shattered teacup she had been carrying in her bag for just such an emergency. "Excuse me!"

The shopkeeper was in his fifties and balding, a floral bandana doing an absolutely horrible job at hiding that. His leather jacket didn't look like it would zip up. He smelled like the inside of the Halloween decoration box they kept in the attic and looked like the biker Santa ornament Dad had given Clarissa for Christmas three years ago.

"Do you mind explaining what all... *this* is?" Clarissa's rolled her wrist around vaguely. Santa's expression was as vacant as the lineup to his stall and his jaw was as slack as his understanding of copyright.

"I'm sorry, ma'am?" He sounded like he smoked as much as the chimneys he went down.

"This!" She pointed to the pictures of Sprinkles. The t-shirts, the posters. She pointed to the words "Sprinkles Emporium" hanging on the portable cage wall that formed the rear of the booth. "Why are you selling pictures of MY cat?"

"Your cat?" Santa patted his chest. Against the tightness of his pants the dull outline of a cigarette pack was visible, a roll of mints in the other pocket. His question didn't sound like a question; more like a repetition of detail.

"Yes! Sprinkles is MY cat!" Clarissa shouted. Oh no, people were starting to look... Couldn't they respect people's private business? "How DARE you sell his likeness for profit!" Her hands were on her hips and she was leaning forward. If she hadn't had to keep her stare so intent she'd have asked someone to take a picture. She probably looked really cool. Like some kind of anime character.

"You're saying that's your cat?" Santa cast a half-asleep gaze at a coffee mug with a poorly aligned picture of Sprinkles on it.

"Yes! See?!" Clarissa proudly showed the man a picture of Matt, grin confident. People were still watching and she cast a scowl at them. Privacy was just dead nowadays! "He even signed it! It's totally him!"

The shopkeeper looked at the picture, then back at his merchandise. "Honey you can print all the photos you want. I need to get back to work. Lot of customers coming in." He made eye contact with a few of the onlookers. They hurriedly jumped back into motion.

"But that's my cat!"

"He's everyone's cat. He's just on the internet."

"But he's MINE!"

"Honey, it's not that big a deal-"

"HE'S MINE! HE'S MINE! HE'S MINE!"

She slammed the "2 for \$70" signboard onto the ground and stomped on it. "Ma'am, I think you need to- please calm down- would you like a discount? Come on, get down from there!" The shopkeeper rambled on in shock as she climbed up the wall of t-shirts, kicking the bald man away and howling like a spider monkey. "Stop making money off my cat! Loving him is free!" she shouted, flip-flop knocking her attacker's sunglasses off. "Stop it!" She could see the

entire dealer's room from up here and they were all looking at her. She started to rip the shirts off of the wall and throw them into the crowd. The buzz turned into cheers as people picked up the merchandise, clapping and hollering.

Everyone was looking at her! All of their cameras were out and flashing at her. The surprised gasps had turned into cheers or shouts and some kind of noise she didn't recognize. Maybe applause? So *that's* what that sounded like! She waved, twisting her face to smile and betray her continued angry shouts of "Stop profiting off my cat, you assholes!"

The heavyweight shopkeeper could do nothing but swat at her, the eight-foot cage somehow supporting her weight despite wobbling like poorly stacked teacups. The security agents who were running over to it weren't helping the stability much either.

The structure buckled. There was a massive clatter as it, the rest of the teacups in Clarissa's bag, and two of her ribs all broke in one fell swoop. The sound of the crowd screaming completely filled her ears, drowning out her own demands to stop selling her cat. Whatever his name was. It was tough to think of while she was blacking out.

The hospital wasn't so bad. Waking up there to both her parents was a nice surprise, having not seen both of them in the same place for four months, three weeks, and a couple of hours. Give or take. After checking to see if she was alright, they'd followed a doctor into an adjacent room. Probably to talk about insurance stuff. Mom was crying. Insurance must be expensive.

The smell of lemon floor polish was as invasive as the bright white lights. The room was totally empty except for a nightstand where her personal objects were resting, her bed, and

medical equipment. It was so quiet she could hear the wind whipping against the window in the pale yellow sunset and the soft clap of dress shoes on tile floors outside the door.

Clarissa closed her eyes. Her knees throbbed with pain every time her heart beat. She could feel cuts and bruises all over her arms and legs. Her head buzzed, but for some reason it didn't feel like much of anything. Almost... empty, in a way. All she could think about was how quiet it was in the hospital bed.

So quiet. Extremely quiet. Footsteps outside and then nothing.

So quiet. So alone.

She felt bile well up in her throat and nearly tore her bandages off reaching over to pick up her phone.

As usual, her inbox was full. But it wasn't the usual response to Matt she had become accustomed to getting. All she saw were pictures of her. Videos of her. Text overlays with extreme zoom-ins of her face giving people horrible life advice. Her jaw dropped as she saw everyone saying how funny she was. *She* was the one making people happy now!

She was everywhere. Everyone was talking about her. So what if people were calling her a liar? So what if she kept seeing people say "Merch Girl is so stupid!" and calling her names? She knew she wasn't stupid. She had no interest in doing what people wanted her to do with a cactus. At least, not now. Maybe it would be kind of funny. Maybe she'd do that later.

Merch Girl looked in the mirror. She put her hand up and waved, grinning and shouting "You assholes!" with enough venom to melt through steel. She took a picture of herself and posted it, adding her quote as a caption. Almost immediately her inbox started to fill. People were sharing it. Commenting on it, liking it. Her inbox was almost full again after a few minutes.