Harlow groaned, smacking his dry lips he tried to open his eyes, immediately slamming them shut once more. He regretted every decision in life that brought his next agonizing breath. Whatever he had to drink the night before was not worth this massive of a hangover. There was no part of his body that didn’t hurt. His face felt like it had been torn off with a potato peeler, cut up, and put back together like a drunken Picasso. He was used to the subtle pain from the sprain in his ankle but today the pain had intensified and spready from his ankle to his heels to the tips of his toes. Maybe he should see another doctor for a second opinion like Daniel kept insisting after all. ‘Later,’ he thought. Everything hurt, each breath reminded him of the corsets Val insisted she wear only much worse. ‘Guess I fell asleep in it again.’ He groaned softly and swore he heard Daniel saying something from the kitchen, or maybe the living room? ‘Eh. He’s a big boy, he can take care of himself.’ he thought drifting off somewhere between awake and sleepfulness.

His stomach cried out at its own emptiness. Over the last couple of weeks he had gotten more accustomed to eating less at Val’s insistence. “We can’t out exercise a bad diet, right?” she told him and just expected him to go along. The corsets made it hard enough to eat the portions he was once used to but now thanks to Valerie his daily portions were smaller. She convinced him a protein shake at lunch would save him time since he was busy cleaning. And since she started adding chores like cleaning *her* bathroom and washing *her* clothes to his daily chore list he didn’t put up much of a fight. Protein shakes replaced his lunch. Then they replaced his breakfast and lunch. Cooking breakfast for Daniel, smelling it and watching his friend eat while he drank a shake was torture, still he did it. Then his lunch time shake was replaced with some green sludge that Val claimed was a smoothie of blended fruits and vegetables. It tasted like absolute ass but it kept him full and gave him an odd energy boost for their workout later in the afternoon. At least Val was letting him sleep in today, ‘Oddly kind of her.’

Despite his pain if he laid still long enough he could fall back into blissful sleep. The only problem was his bladder. The stinging in his feet? The twisted angry knot in his stomach? The crushing pain on his chest? The burning of his face? All of these things he could have ignored and continue lying in relative comfort, but his bladder cared not for his comfort. It had a duty and it was going to do it wherever Harlow was any minute. So Harlow might as well be in the bathroom when it happened. Harlow blinked against the harsh light above his bed and pulled the covers back with great effort. ‘Jeeze, feels like it weighs a hundred pounds.’ The pain all over only intensified as he shifted his body until finally a pain like a knife sliced through his urethra. “Motherf-!” Harlow cried and grabbed his crotch expecting to feel a pool of blood, not a tube.

The world came rushing back as Daniel jumped to Harlow’s side. He was not in his bed. He was in a hospital bed?! Was he in an accident? Daniel was asking him something too quickly for his brain to keep up. ‘No. They put me under…for fake surgery.’ The thought forced itself through the fog. ‘Then why is Daniel here?” He thought groggily then looked at his chest. He could’ve sworn he had taken his breast forms off before they put him under. It had been ridiculously embarrassing to ask one of the nurses for a remover. So…why did he have tits? He pulled back the hospital gown and stared at the bandages and sports bra covering his chest. With a shaky hand Harlow flicked what should have been a silicone nipple. Pain shot through his body once again. Reflexively he grabbed the painecd area only to cause more pain everywhere else. “Daniel?! Wha-” He choked.

“I’m here. I’m here” His voice was frantic as he pushed a straw to Harlow’s lips.

Harlow gulped down mouthfuls of water as more memories came back to him. The doctor, the surgeon…it wasn’t Dr. Crane! “Daniel,” he said hoarsely. “I have tits!” Harlow cried before passing out in Daniel’s arms.

The next time Harlow woke it was night and he could hear someone talking. “-say the strangest things coming off anesthetic.” The male voice chuckled.

“I think she’s waking up.” Valerie whispered to the first voice.

“Lucy?” Lucy realized the voice belonged to a doctor now that he came into view. “Good evening, Ms. Hole’.”

“Nnnh…” Harlow groaned, trying to sit up, “it right.”

“Don’t sit up. Let me get that.” He pushed a button on the side of the bed and Harlow felt the bed rising, slowly elevating him to a reclined sitting position. “Now, what were you trying to say?” He asked passively as he took out a pen light and shined it in Harlow’s eyes.

“Nno.” He pouted and tried to push the pen away.

“I know it’s bright. I do apologize. This won’t take but a second.” He said, still shining the light from one eye to another. He clicked the pen satisfactorily, “Everything’s in order. See? All good.” He smiled. “Now what were you saying?”

“You said it right.” Lucy’s voice came out weakly.

“I guess I did.”

“Where am I?” Once again Harlow took in his surroundings and remembered.

“You’re at Summersend Hospital in Las Vegas, Nevada. Can you tell me why?” The doctor grabbed Harlow’s wrist and checked her pulse.

“Uh…” he swallowed the glass in his throat as he looked at Valerie at the foot of his bed and Daniel at his bedside, “I think…I had breast surgery?” Harlow burned with embarrassment seeing the look of concern on Daniel’s face and the smile on Val’s.

“Yes you did.” The doctor released Harlow’s wrist.

“Wasn’t sposed to happen.”

“Pardon?”

“Where’s Dr. Crane?”

“He was called away due to a family emergency I’m afraid. His father had taken ill.”

“Oh, I hope he feels better.” Valerie added sympathetically.

“I have no doubt, but his father is fairly old so I understand his concern.”

“Who are you?” Harlow asked, already knowing the only possible answer.

“Oh, apologies. I forgot to introduce myself. I’m Dr. Nguyen.” He answered kindly.

Harlow stared quietly at his new chest in shock as the wrong doctor continued talking as if this were all perfectly normal. Nguyen the butcher had a smile on his face the entire time he explained what Harlow needed to do as post-op care. As if he wanted all of this?! And Danny? Why was he listening to this man? He knew this was fake! He had to! They’d known each other for years, he couldn’t possibly think this was something he wanted! Valerie was all smiles while she played on her phone. Even she couldn’t be this stupid! “Mmm…monster!” It took all his strength to simply growl at the man.

“I’m a monster.” Lucy’s voice croaked.

Danny looked to his girlfriend, still weak from the anesthetic, “What?”

“You made me a freak!” She yelled and pointed weakly at Nguyen.

“You’re not a freak, baby.” Danny said softly.

She turned to him and glared at him through glassy eyes, “Look at me!” She sobbed. “I…didn’t want this!” every word came out with great effort.

“Lucy-”

“Shut up!” Lucy cut off Val, her voice breaking. “Fucking butcher!” Lucy picked up the only thing by her bed that she could, the television remote and hurled it limply at Nguyen.

Nguyen easily stepped out of the way and Lucy lunged at him from her bed. Danny quickly grabbed a hold of Lucy, while the doctor yelled out into the hall for a nurse. Lucy struggled in vain against Danny, shouting incoherently that she was a freak and a monster.

Lucy shrieked in pain but continued thrashing, “She’s ripped out her IV!” Nguyen yelled as two nurses rushed in, one held Lucy’s legs while the other held her down by her waist. Nguyen quickly lifted the hospital gown and jabbed the needle into Lucy’s rear. In seconds Lucy’s thrashing ceased and she fell into a deep sleep.

“Lucy?!” Danny asked, the panic in his voice turned to anger as he glared at Nguyen.

“She’s fine. She’s gonna be asleep for several hours, but she won’t do any more harm to herself.”

Danny glared at the doctor before turning to look back to his sleeping girlfriend, “Why did she do that?”

“Let’s talk in the hall.” The trio walked out into the hall, Danny keeping a close eye as the nurses dressed the wounds Lucy had given herself before reinserting the IV. “Has Lucy talked with a therapist?”

“Not that I’m aware of.”

Nguyen nodded, “Trans people, some trans people, build up their surgeries in their mind. They build them up as if once they wake up everything will be perfect. We can try but it is still extremely difficult for us to match the image they created in their mind’s eye. Especially if there is a history of repressed emotions.”

“Yeah, like, totally repressing.” Valerie spoke softly.

“What’s this got to do with what she did?”

“The process of transitioning…isn’t always beautiful and it is definitely not immediate. The process itself can trigger dysphoria, and if she had been repressing these feelings she can become greatly upset. It’s similar to Paris syndrome.”

“She said she didn’t want this…is it possible…”

“She’s been for realz repressing for a long time.”

“How do you know?” Danny asked.

“We talk, and it’s, like, kinda obvious.” Danny frowned. “Danny, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that.”

Danny ignored Valerie’s attempt to comfort him. Seeing neither one of them were about to speak he took the opportunity to explain, “We do have her signatures on all the forms consenting to surgery. That is a lot of opportunity to back out if this wasn’t what she wanted. If it is a case of repressed emotions, then what we saw was likely the dam finally bursting.”

“So she’s better now?” He asked hopefully. “It’s all out of her system, right?”

“There’s no way to tell.” Valerie explained.

“Your sister is right. But for the time being we’ll have to monitor her.”

“You said earlier we could take her home!”

“Danny…”

“That was before, Mr. Sanders. She’ll be monitored for seventy-two hours to ensure she’s not a danger to herself or anyone else. And once we have a psychologist examine her…then we can release her to your care.” Danny stopped listening, instead he watched as they strapped Lucy’s arms to the bed.

“Are you sure this is what she wanted?”

“Danny, fer real?”

“What?! You saw her with bandages all over her face and feet. What if they got the wrong patient or the charts got switched up. Maybe she was thinking about implants, but she didn’t say anything to me about the rest.”

“Would you have listened?” Danny’s only response was to glare at Valerie.

“If you’d like, I can bring you the consent forms she signed for her surgeries."

"She had more than one?" Danny asked.

Nguyen paused before speaking again, thinking of the simplest terms the siblings would understand, "As I was saying earlier; besides her implants she also had rhi–" he stopped and looked to Valerie before continuing– "a nose job. We lowered her hairline and trimmed and reshaped her chin and jaw." 'Thankfully not as much as we initially thought.' he thought internally.

"And her feet?'

"She did, like, have issues with her feet for like forever."

"It is not uncommon.” The doctor said softly, “She signed up for a procedure commonly called ‘Cinderella surgery’. The purpose, in cases like hers, is to reduce the length and width of the feet. Not drastically mind you, but her feet should be at least a size, size and a half smaller.”

“Why would she do that?”

“Duh,” Valerie rolled her eyes, “it’s easier to find cuter shoes in smaller sizes.”

“I cannot speak to that, but yes that is the consensus among my patients who have requested the procedure.”

“I’ve never heard of this surgery.”

“It’s relatively new but it is becoming increasingly common among the trans community. Especially among transwomen who wish to wear high heels as they find it less painful after the procedure.” Danny nodded and went back to staring at his sleeping girlfriend, “That being said, she will have to be on bed rest for a few days after she leaves. She should walk only when absolutely necessary for the first week.”

“That sounds painful.”

Dr.Nguyen sighed softly at the large man whose face twisted with worry for his sleeping girlfriend. He understood the man’s worry, even if it was unnecessary. Doctor’s, especially surgeons, had been trained to have a certain level of detachment that most others never learned. It sounded cruel to the common man but it is what allowed them to cut and operate on another living being. “She will be fine.” He finally said, having regained his detachment, “We will be sending her home with the usual post-op medication along with a week’s worth of pain medication.”

“What if she’s still in pain?” Danny pleaded.

“I can give her one refill at a milder dosage just in case she is still experiencing some discomfort.”

“Thank you, doctor.”

The next afternoon Harlow met with the psychologist after lunch. His head was still a little foggy and he couldn’t believe what had been done to him but after their brief introduction and a promise that he was fine she released him from the restraints. “So, Lucy. Why don’t you tell me about yesterday?” The woman, who had introduced herself as Dr. Gwen Teaver, appeared to be in her mid to late forties, her light brown hair was pulled into a bun and her face was framed with a pair of glasses. She looked every bit the cliche’ of a female psychiatrist.

“Not much to tell.” Harlow frowned, “I don’t wanna be here.” Thoughts of lawsuits danced around his head, quickly extinguished by the fact he would expose himself to scrutiny and the truth may come out if he did.

“Hmm. I think that much is obvious.” She spoke with a slight southern accent, “Your reaction yesterday however is concerning.”

“That was yesterday. Today’s today. So can I go?”

Harlow rolled his eyes as Teaver wrote a note on a pad. “I get the sense you’re angry.”

“Can’t imagine why.” he growled, immediately regretting the pain that reverberated against his jaw. “What with me looking like the damn mummy after all.”

“Are you sure that is the only thing upsetting you?”

Harlow crossed his arms, ignoring the pain in his chest and sides, “Do I need another reason?”

“No, I don’t suppose you do.” She took note of his body language as he sat in the hospital bed. “Are you perhaps uncomfortable with my being here?” Harlow looked away, glaring at the closed door, “You don’t much care for psychologists do you?”

“I thought you were, like, supposed to talk to me so I can go home.”

“I am. And I have limited time to do so.” ‘Good.’ Harlow thought immediately, “But if you refuse to talk to me then I cannot in good conscience recommend your release.”

“Not like they’ll let me keep a room here. I’m sure there are people here who actually need this room.” Harlow met the woman’s brown eyes across the room.

“No. I don’t imagine they will. But there are other facilities that we can transfer you to.” She looked at her watch and noted she had ten minutes remaining. She understood the hospital wasn’t particularly geared towards psychological issues but giving her fifteen minutes to interact with her patients was ridiculous, even if they were temporary ones. “They are actually great facilities.” She said with a smile, “Some can rival five star hotels. Others–” she shook her head side to side slowly as she searched for the words–“others are not five star of course but they are decent. Nothing like you would see in television and movies.” Harlow licked at his dry lips, it felt strange not to feel or taste lipstick on them, “But I don’t imagine you would still enjoy those places. So why don’t we talk here. Then we can send you home.”

Harlow nodded slowly. “Fair.”

“Good. Now, would you like to discuss what happened yesterday?”

“Seems pretty simple.” He said carefully. If he wasn’t careful she would realize he was the result of a failed attempt at fraud, “I wasn’t supposed to look…like this.” He giggled nervously.

“How were you supposed to look?”

“I…don’t even know what I look like. But it wasn’t an extra from the thriller video.” Harlow imagined how black and blue his body must be underneath the bandages. If they resembled anything like his feet…he really was a freak now.

“You thought you would wake up after your recovery?”

“I guess I did.”

“If you could wake up tomorrow and all of the bandages and bruises be gone, would you be happy?”

“Obviously.” Harlow arched an eyebrow as Teaver wrote something on her steno pad. Had he said something wrong? “I mean…what kinda girl doesn’t want to wake up and be beautiful?” ‘That should cla-fix things.’

"According to your medical records you have a GP, correct?"

"Uh…"

"A doctor. What's his name?"

"I know…he's uh…" Harlow racked his brain trying to remember his actual name but all that kept coming up was "Doctor cutie!" He realized only when he felt himself smile that he had said that stupid nickname out loud. "I mean, that's like what Val and I, I mean, just Val, calls him." He giggled nervously, watching Teaver once again scribble on her pad.

“Why do you think you’re not beautiful?”

“What?" 'Can you focus, lady?!' "...look at me!” He held up his hands and gestured angrily at his bandaged face, “See this is why you don’t-” he stopped himself, crossing his arms once again and glared at the door.

“Don’t what?”

“Nothing. Is that enough to get me out of here?”

Teaver checked her watch once again, only a minute remained, “Unfortunately not today.”

“You said if I talked I could leave.”

“I did. And you made some good progress today. But since you’re here for the week anyway I’ll come by tomorrow and we can talk some more.”

“I thought I could leave in seventy-two hours?”

“Your doctor believes it would be better to let your feet recover here in the hospital after yesterday.”

“So…I can leave in a week?”

“It depends on the rest of the week.”

“Fine.” He grabbed the remote off of the nightstand and turned the tv on in its position in the top corner of the room.“Great, two more days stuck here bored outta my mind.” Harlow grumbled.

Teaver opened the door before stopping and turning back to Lucy, “Would you like me to ask one of the nurses to bring you something to read?”

“...no.” ‘It’s probably some weird test.’ He thought angrily and turned back to the television where he zoned out until Daniel came to visit for dinner.

The next two days were a repeat of the same probing questions, with Harlow refusing to give anything but the vaguest of answers during their brief interview followed by a dinner with Daniel as if everything were normal. By the fourth day Harlow was annoyed to learn his television was broken. “So, Lucy. How’re you doing today?”

“Stupid tv’s busted.” he pouted.

“That’s no fun. Have you spoke to anyone?”

“I told the last nurse, but she doesn’t care.”

“What makes you say that? Did she say something?”

“She said she’d get someone to look at it.”

“So what makes you think she doesn’t care?”

Harlow shrugged. “It, like, doesn’t affect her.” He said, still pouting, “Unless I wanna get really annoying.”

“You don’t have a high opinion of medical professionals do you?” He shrugged again. “Why is that?”

“They’re just in it for the money.”

“Is that all?”

“I mean…yeah.” he lied. “I mean, like, look at the Nguyen guy, he doesn’t care what he did to me. It’s like my mom said, they’re all caring to your face until the check clears then you’re just, like, left twisting in the wind.”

“Your mother believed this too?”

He shrugged, “Can’t say I blame her.”

“Why’s that?”

“Doctor’s did her dirty too. Not as bad as me, mind. Well…maybe.” He pouted again, feeling a tear form in his eye.

“What did they do to your mother?”

“Nothing to her.” He very delicately took a kleenex and dabbed at his eye. He learned the previous mornings that simply rubbing them as he was accustomed to before brought nothing but pain.

“To who?”

“They gave my dad cancer.” No matter how hard he fought the tears kept coming to the surface. ‘The hell is going on with me?’ he thought angrily, unaware of the small pellet embedded under his left tricep slowly pumping in a constant cocktail of estrogen, progesterone, and testosterone blockers.

“How did they do that?” She asked wide-eyed after writing on her steno pad.

“I don’t know. I know he was perfectly healthy, then one day he goes to, like, the doctor for some totally routine check up and fer sure they say he has cancer.”

“That must’ve been awful. How old were you?”

“I guess I was six then. But I didn’t know at the time. Mom didn’t wanna worry me, I think. I didn’t find out until after the funeral six months later.”

“That…sounds like it spread pretty quickly.”

“Yup. Well, we couldn’t pay so they didn’t bother helping him.”

“With that, I’m actually surprised you came to the hospital for your procedure let alone spoke to doctor Nguyen.”

“Well, I told myself everything was gonna be okay. I was gonna go to sleep and when I woke up everything was gonna be okay.”

“And it wasn’t.”

“...no.” He dabbed at his eyes again. ‘Da-arn doc probably screwed up my eyes too. They won’t stop leaking.’ “And I didn’t speak to Nguyen. I spoke to Crane.” Again she noted something in her notepad.

“It may be me telling tales out of school but I’d say you were lucky to get Dr. Nguyen.”

“Why?”

“Dr. Crane…Dr. Nguyen has much better results.”

“Totally.” He rolled his eyes, still frantically dabbing at his eyes.

Teaver once again looked at her watch and frowned, “I’m afraid we’re out of time.”

“Tragic.”

“Would you like for me to ask the nurses to bring you something to read?”

“...No.” ‘What’s she trying to prove?’

“Alright, then I’ll see you tomorrow.”

The next session Teaver found herself starting with a new question. “I understand you and your partner had an argument last night?”

“He’s an idiot.”

“Would you like to tell me what happened?”

“Not particularly.” He chewed on his pinky nail.

“Fair enough. Are you excited to get some of your bandages removed today?”

“Not really.”

“Why’s that?”

“Cause, I know I totally look like pumpkinhead underneath all this.”

“The doctor says you're healing nicely. Your bruises are even gone for the most part.

“Yay me.” He frowned before working on his ring finger.

“Why don’t you tell me what happened last night?”

After hours of sitting in utter boredom, especially since he wasn’t allowed to even leave his bed to use the bathroom Harlow was happy to see Daniel returning for his evening visit. “Hey, baby.” He’d said gently, like every time before when he walked in the room with a plate of cafeteria food for the both of them. “Guess what they have in the cafeteria?”

“Blackjack?”

Daniel chuckled, “No. Your favorite.” He sat the tray down in front of Harlow, revealing a small amount of sliced turkey, corn, green beans, and best of all, peach cobbler.

“Ah!” Harlow giggled and kicked his feet happily, “You’re the best!” He cheered, holding his arms out for a hug.

Not missing the opportunity Daniel wrapped his girlfriend up in a gentle embrace, “I thought you might like it.”

“Mhm. You’re so smart.” Harlow kissed Daniel on the lips, ignoring the pain from the unkempt beard. “What’s with this?” he smirked, pulling on a stray beard hair.

“What? You don’t like it?” He asked, rubbing his chin.

“I’ve just never seen you as the mountain man type.”

“You like it better shaved.” Daniel picked up one of the chairs and brought it to the side of Harlow’s bed.

“It’s less…pointy.” Harlow blushed, not wanting to admit he thought his friend and boyfriend looked much better with a clean face. “You know, some people have a face for beards and some don’t.”

He smirked, “Speaking of faces,” he said as he used a plastic spork to cut into the slice of turkey, “Dr. Nguyen says you’ll get to take your bandages off tomorrow.”

“Yeah.” Harlow pouted and immediately scooped up the cobbler.

“Aren’t you excited?” Harlow shrugged. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m not a fan of sideshow freaks.” he said as he ate a sporkful of cobbler.

“You’re not a sideshow freak. You’re my beautiful girlfriend.”

Harlow pouted again, “You should, like, get a real girlfriend.”

“What?”

“You def heard me. You know none of this was supposed to happen.”

“Lots of things weren’t supposed to happen, doesn’t make them less good.”

“Maybe.”

“Come on, cheer up. Tomorrow we get to see your beautiful smile again in all its new glory.”

“I’m so not looking forward to seeing what that butcher did to me.”

Daniel chewed on his mouthful of corn and green beans. Dr. Nguyen had shown him the consent forms. For everything. For the implants, the cinderella surgery, the facial feminization surgery, the lower rib removal. That’s a lot of mistakes for a doctor to make at once and one hell of a coincidence if that were the case. But the most damning to Danny was the fact that Lucy had not only requested an hrt pellet implant, but requested for it to be *refilled*. Dr. Nguyen explained the pellet dissolves completely after six to eight months and needed to be reinjected under the skin. Tiny, painless, and effective. According to the consent form Lucy signed, what now pumped estrogen through her veins was her second pellet implant and she already planned for her third by the start of next summer!

“Babe, you don’t have to lie to me about this.”

“What?”

“I know we never really…talked about this and I’m sorry. I should’ve been a better boyfriend to you…hell I should’ve been a better friend and maybe you would’ve felt safe enough to tell me when we were kids.”

“You…think I seriously wanted this?”

“You don’t have to-”

“You remember this started because some frickin men in tracksuits are trying to kill me, right?! Or did I make that up?”

“No, I know that’s really happening but you didn’t have to go to these extremes to hide from them if that was the case.”

“What did you say?!”

“Everything you’ve done so far? I mean the ‘disguise’–” he sat his spork down to actually make air quotes–“sure. Dressing like a girl makes sense I guess. But changing your name? The…the stuff we’ve done? And the way you dress. And now these surger-”

“Get out.”

“What? Baby-”

“Don’t call me that!”

“Lucy I’m just saying I accept you and I lo-”

“Get the fuck out!” She screamed, kicking her tray at Daniel before, and let more obscenities fly until the nurses rushed in.

“Kind of a blur after that.” Harlow explained as he bit his nail. It was another strange sight to see his nails no longer perfectly manicured.

“Is everything okay between you two?”

“We’re fine. I thought, like, you were sposed to, like, shrink me. Not me and my boyfriend.”

“It is important we know you have a good support system in place. What you’re going through can be stressful under the best circumstances.” Harlow nodded. “Is he supportive?”

“Yeah. He always has been.”

“So you knew him before your transition?”

“...since we were kids.”

“What was that like for you?”

“Daniel, Danny, ” the correction felt oddly wrong, “he was, is, a great friend. I used to have a crush on his mom.” Harlow giggled. Gwen chuckled along with him.

“And when did you realize you were actually attracted to him?”

“Um–” a memory popped in Harlow’s mind of a fourteen year old Danny dragging the then thirteen year old Harlow to the highest diving board, finally getting frustrated and picking him up and dropping them both in the cold water fifteen feet below, “uh…about a year ago, I guess.” He lied. He wasn’t attracted to Daniel after all. ‘Why’d I think of him like that? I’m not gay!’ This was for safety he reassured himself. He was safest with Daniel. That and nothing more.