

The Not-So-Secret Interior Life of the Scientific Moose

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That was Heart's "Magic Man", following Pat Benatar with "Heartbreaker". You're listening to 92.7 WBBR and I'm Jensen Ross, your guide through the wee hours, rounding out a block of rock goddesses with Patti Smith.

Jared was always a little irrationally surprised when people called Pat Benatar a rocker – ever since Chad's boss had told him that she'd trained as an opera singer, he couldn't help but picture her dressed for a Wagner opera, with her spear and magic helmet. But that was why he was a grad student working late nights in a lab and not a DJ working the overnight shift at a radio station.

Jared would be the first to admit he didn't know a lot about music, but that didn't mean he couldn't appreciate a good DJ. Jensen Ross had a sense of humor and sounded like someone who genuinely liked his job, which was encouraging when you were looking at months and months of fairly repetitive tasks. Microbiology, Jared's area of specialization, was intellectually challenging and full of questions he wanted to answer – why does the body do this, what happens if you do that, where did these behaviors come from and can they be changed – but the actual lab work, the experiments and procedures, could be really boring. He knew you had to put in the hours, and whether or not he got his degree was kind of dependent on the results of his lab work, and sometimes he got lucky and saw actual evidence of the things he'd been learning, but most of the time, working in a lab wasn't all that thrilling. Jensen Ross at least helped make the time go faster.

Patti Smith gave way to an ad for Bob's Discount Furniture, and Jared collected his thoughts and got back to work. Tonight he was infecting cells with a virus, and he had to shake them, wait half an hour, shake them again, and wait again. He shook all his cell bottles, set both the timer sitting on his bench (which was really more of a counter and not an actual bench at all) and the alarm on his phone for half an hour, and pulled his sketchpad and a pencil from his messenger bag.

One of the very few things Jared really liked about his job was the downtime. It gave him a chance to draw. He and Chad had been working on a web comic called *Haro* for a couple of years – Chad wrote, Jared drew – it was originally Chad's baby but Jared did a lot of design and the comic was still half his. It was a lot of work, but it was more creatively challenging than the job he actually got paid for, and he knew people liked it. They updated with two pages each week – Chad really wanted three, but there was no way Jared could keep that schedule on top of forty hours of lab work plus graduate classes.

Jared had already sketched out the next page and gotten Chad's okay on the general layout, but the new pages went up in three days and he still had to finish the actual drawing and inking, never mind the scanning and cleaning up and shading and adding word balloons and text boxes. But he wasn't too worried about getting everything done, and in fact he liked a

challenge. Besides, the new pages were set in a kind of post-apocalyptic old West, and he really liked drawing that.

He twirled his pencil, mentally slotting drawing time into the evening's schedule, and shifted his shoulders inside his lab coat. The fabric pulled a little. Why was there only ever one lab coat that would fit him, and why did it have to be the only one that fit Welling too? Jared glanced around. Welling sat serenely at the desk against the wall, typing on his laptop. It wasn't worth getting annoyed at him – it wasn't as if he was taking the only lab coat that fit both of them just to be a dick. Jared should just buy his own and bring it with him. He'd only just started the second year of his Master's and still had some years of PhD in front of him, and he figured he'd be working in labs a long time.

Investigate lab coats, he scribbled down the side of his page.

He glanced at Welling again, started sketching the guy's profile in one of the comic panels. He didn't think Welling even read *Haro* – and if he had, he'd never said anything – but Danneel did. She'd recognize the face and tell him he'd been immortalized on the web.

She was the only other person in the lab tonight besides Jared and Welling, but Genevieve should be in pretty soon. Welling preferred quiet and always made sure the radio was off, but Jared had an app for the radio station on his phone so he could listen to the overnight DJ with the generally-cheerful, slightly-sarcastic, sexy voice.

...listen to the morning show for tickets. It's a breezy 60° at Logan right now, and there's an 80% chance of rain later on, so bring an umbrella if you have to go anywhere.

Jared looked down at his page, at the panel with Haro, the comic's protagonist, standing in the middle of a wide and empty plain, dressed like a scruffy and not entirely historically accurate Wild West cowboy, staring up at the sky. Jared had already sketched in the word balloon and dialogue: *Looks like rain. Don't forget your hat.*

"When are you going to put me in your comic?" Danneel asked, suddenly leaning over his shoulder. It was a tribute to Jared's general zen that his pencil didn't even twitch.

He pulled one of the phone earbuds out of his ear and turned to look at her. "I did," he said. "One of the horse traders in the alternate West, the one Haro bought his horse from."

"You only see her once."

"I'm sure we can find a reason to bring her back."

"Uh-huh." Danneel didn't look convinced.

"If it makes you feel better, Welling has only ever been an extra in a crowd."

"Genevieve gets to be a recurring character."

"Technically just her face does." Jared had used her as the reference for a nurse at a clinic. She'd appeared briefly in a couple of scenes, and he was sure she'd show up again. "You got to wear six-shooters and a cowboy hat," he pointed out.

"True, true. She gets more scenes, I get a better costume. I'd say you like me better." Danneel batted her eyelashes at Jared and he puckered up and blew her a kiss. He didn't swing that way, but he liked Danneel a lot.

Unlike Jared and Welling and Genevieve, who were still all second years working towards their Master's, Danneel was actively working on her PhD. She'd just passed her qualifiers in May and had already told Jared that she was available to help him with his, and to assist if he needed help picking a thesis committee to get him through the rest of his grad school years.

Now the timer on his bench went off, followed immediately by the alarm on his phone. He stuck his pencil behind his ear and handed Danneel the sketchpad so he could shake his cell bottles. Danneel flipped pages while he tended to his cells, and when he was finished he reset his phone alarm and the timer and held out his hand so he could get his sketchpad back.

"Write 'Draw more Danneel' right there," she said, pointing to a blank spot down the side of the page, near 'Investigate lab coats.'" Jared scribbled obediently. Danneel patted him on the head and went back to her own workspace on her own bench. Jared adjusted his earbuds, retrieved his pencil, and went back to his comic page.

Genevieve came in a couple of hours later, but after twenty minutes she wandered over to Jared's workspace and leaned against the bench.

"Dr Helfer's already on my case to start picking my thesis committee," she sighed.

Welling had gone home, so Jared had plugged his phone in to recharge it (the radio app drained the battery like no one's business) and turned the radio on.

"Didn't Danny offer to help you with that?" he asked. "She offered to help me."

"Just for my qualifiers. She wants to know what I've been doing here, if I've made any progress on my project."

"Danny?"

"Dr Helfer." She nudged his arm. "Pay attention."

"Sorry." Dr Helfer ran their lab, and all of their individual experiments and projects fed into hers. They would ultimately have to justify everything they did to her, and more importantly they would have to justify their positions in her lab, because their work would win the grants and help write the papers that allowed her to continue her research and keep her job. When Jared got around to picking a thesis committee for his research, she would be on it. He

hadn't gotten any indication that she was dissatisfied with his work, but maybe she was going alphabetically.

"Most of my experiments are failing and it's stressing me out," Genevieve went on. "What are you drawing?"

"A comic book page. It's too early in the semester to be stressed."

"It's never too early to be stressed. Danneel told me you put me in that."

"Well, your face." Jared needed to finish this page and to do that he needed to concentrate, but he didn't want to give Genevieve the brush-off. "I thought you read it."

"Only a couple pages. Tell me about it." She made puppy-dog eyes at him. "Distract me for ten minutes and then I'll let you get back to work, I promise. I have centrifuging to do, anyway."

Jared glanced at his timer – ten minutes – and put his pencil down, then changed his mind and picked it back up. He flipped to a clean page in his sketchbook and drew a quick sketch of Haro's face, trying to portray in thirty seconds a former soldier with a haunted expression, shoulder-length dirty-blond hair, and an old Army cap.

"Ok," he said, "this is Haro. He's our hero. Sort of. He's a veteran of some unnamed war, but I always assume Iraq or Afghanistan to give myself a set time period to making drawing his world easier. He's supposed to look old enough that you could think he fought in the first Gulf War, but he's messed up enough that you could assume he looks older than he is. He's got the hat because he doesn't want people to be able to see his face. He's homeless in a big city, he has PTSD – hypervigilance, hallucinations, voice in his head, that kind of thing – he's lost a chunk of his memory, and he's looking for a woman named Alys." Now he sketched a woman's face - dark hair, soft features, kind smile. "She's not in the comic except in memories and little flashbacks. Haro carries a picture of her around with him, but it isn't clear who she is. Girlfriend? Wife? Sister? Mother? Colleague? Friend?"

"Fellow soldier?" Genevieve suggested. "Commanding officer?"

"I don't think so. I don't know if Chad knows, and if he does he hasn't told me. My housemate. I think you've met him. You'd remember if you had – he'd have come on to you."

Genevieve giggled. "I think I met him at the end-of-year thing before the summer. Blond, right? Kinda cute? Very, um, sure of himself."

"That's Chad." Jared drew another sketch of Haro, this time wearing a cowboy hat and with longer hair. "Haro in the city is only half the story. The other half is set in this weird combination of post-apocalyptic landscape and steampunk old West. It's like a mash-up of 'Firefly' and *Unforgiven* and *A Canticle for Leibowitz*. With steam, but no dirigibles."

Genevieve raised an eyebrow. Jared shrugged his shoulders in a "what can you do?" gesture. "I think Chad just wanted to mash a couple-three genres together. In this world, Haro's a gunslinger – righting wrongs, rescuing damsels from men who want to steal their land, saving towns from bandits and corrupt mayors, that kind of thing. He's still missing part of his memory and is still looking for Alys, only in this world the photo he carries is more daguerreotype and less Kodak moment. Something, or someone, may or may not be chasing him. We've never shown it, whatever it is. The question is, which is the real world and which is the hallucination? Which is the fantasy?"

"The big city. The real world." She sounded decisive. "The West is his fantasy."

"Maybe." Jared grinned. "I think they're both real, just alternate universes. I think the thing that might be chasing him in the alternate West is the same voice he hears in his head in the modern day city. Some of the fans think it's an angel, but I don't want to burst their bubbles by admitting we don't know. It's mostly Haro and Alys who appear in both places, but I think it would be interesting to have more faces crop up more than once – some of Haro's fellow homeless folks, people he runs into on the street or does business with, people at the VA, some of the people in his memories and flashbacks. It would help muddy the question of which world is the real one. So far you've been a nurse at a clinic in the modern world, and Danny was a horse trader in the alternate West. Welling's usually a face in a crowd. Crazy Dr F is going to be a traveling medicine man in the next issue. The story's broken into issues," he added, because Genevieve was looking confused. "Chad always wanted to see it in print, so each issue is twenty pages with its own cover. We're currently on issue eight."

"That's 160 pages. Shit. That's a lot to catch up on."

"It's just a couple hours. Some of it reads pretty fast. There's a bunch of extras on the site too – concept sketches, character pages, sources, some fanart, a short story that Chad wrote about one of Haro's homeless friends, who disappeared in issue six. He's supposed to come back in issue nine, as a character in the alternate West."

"Do you write it too?"

"No. It's Chad's story. I count myself lucky he wanted to set it partly in a version of the old West, with a lot of the tropes you find in Western movies. I don't know that much about post-apocalyptic stories, but I figure between my mom and my brother, I've seen every Eastwood western ever made. It's like I've already got all the references in my head. Less research. Turns out a lot of the alternate West is really fun to draw."

"Yeah, I can tell." Genevieve giggled and tapped the piece of paper with her finger. Jared realized he'd sketched out the rest of Haro's body while he was talking, cowboy boots and duster and six-shooters and all.

"Chad has an idea what things look like," he went on, "but I get a lot of leeway in terms of character design and little details and stuff."

Genevieve looked like she was thinking about something, maybe coming up with another question to ask about the comic, when Danneel came back from wherever she'd been and the song on the radio ended and Jared could hear the DJ's voice.

And we finish up a block of 70s rock with Foghat, or as they say around here, "Fahg-hat." Danneel snickered. Please don't call me and tell me how terrible my Boston accent is. Believe me, I know. Call me with a request instead. 781-875-WBBR. Give me your best Kennedy impression. Do Matt Damon from Good Will Hunting. Quote me something from Dennis Lehane. Give me stereotypical Boston, Boston.

"Bahstin," Danneel mused. Genevieve giggled.

"Jared was just telling me about his comic," she said. "You didn't tell me how long it was!"

"I don't know how long it is."

"160 pages! Plus extras!"

"It's not that long," Jared said distractedly. The timer on his phone said he had two more minutes. Did he have time to make a request? How bad was his Teddy Kennedy impression? Should he call Jensen Ross the DJ and potentially embarrass the hell out of himself?

His timer went off right then, solving the problem for him. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Genevieve get something out of the freezer and go back to her own bench, but Danneel just watched him check his cells and split his cultures into new bottles so they'd have more room to grow. He had to throw some out, but that wasn't much of a problem. The last thing he was worried about was not being able to grow enough cells for his (or anyone else's) project.

The DJ had come back on by the time he was finished, which meant he'd lost his chance to call and put on his best fake Southie accent in an attempt to impress the guy. It was just as well – the thought of actually talking to Jensen Ross made Jared a little nervous.

"Call him," Danneel said. Jensen Ross' chatter had sequestered into another song – the locationally appropriate Mighty Mighty Bosstones – and she added "Man up and call him when he's not talking on the radio."

Jared wished he'd never told her he had kind of a crush on the DJ's voice. He'd admitted it in a moment of weakness a few days ago, although to be honest he'd never been able to keep a secret and it was bound to come out eventually.

But now Danneel knew it and if Jared knew her – which he did – she wasn't going to let it go. She'd already told Genevieve, if Genevieve's grin was anything to go by.

"Call your DJ," Danneel repeated.

His name's Jensen Ross, Jared wanted to say, but that sounded too much like they actually knew each other.

Not a lot of Boston impressions! Where are you guys? I feel like I'm the only person awake on the Eastern Seaboard, and I know that's not right. So tell me who you are and what you're doing. WBBR.com has all the info. Call, text, tweet, email. Leave a note on our Facebook page. Share with another night owl. Have some Juno Reactor to get you thinking.

This time Jensen Ross stopped speaking before the intro to the song, so Jared heard what sounded a lot like a sample of Faye Dunaway from *Bonnie and Clyde* before the music really kicked into gear. He held up his phone so Danneel could see that he was going to actually contact the DJ, and texted *Jared's washing cells. They like bubble bath.*

"It's not a phone call," she said, "but it'll do for now." She ruffled his hair and added "You need a haircut." Jared rolled his eyes, mock-annoyed, and went back to work.

The DJ played another couple of songs after Juno Reactor, before returning with his tally of fellow night owls.

Nice to know I'm not alone out here. Junya's writing a paper – good luck with that, man – Duke's got insomnia – that sucks - Shelly's waiting for her boyfriend to come home, Ryan's driving his baby daughter around because the motion of the car is the only thing that gets her to sleep – I hope you waited for a red light before letting me know that – Marcel and Joey are painting the living room? Did I read that right? You guys can't do it during the day when the light's better? Circe's fixing bugs. Cleo is up with a sick cat, Ethan's playing some online game called Glitch, and Jared's washing cells. They like bubble bath.

Jared could tell from the tone of voice that Jensen Ross was amused.

Maybe I'll make this a nightly thing. Take a poll every night around – what time is it now – 3:30, 3:45. What do you think?

Make it a nightly thing, Jared texted the station, and stopped there because it seemed a little too stalkery to add I like having an excuse to talk to you.

He'd never actually contacted the radio station before, but he could tell himself it was because he'd never received such a direct invitation, and he'd never been pestered into it. And now that he'd said something (so to speak) to Jensen Ross the DJ, and now that Jensen Ross the DJ had been entertained by it, Jared felt reassured that he wasn't too much of a doofus and could actually attempt a conversation. Maybe next time he'd actually call, and then Danneel would leave him alone.

* * *

Jared usually went to bed around seven or eight in the morning, because he'd work until five

or six and need some downtime with his dogs before going to sleep. Sometimes Chad was just waking up when he was just going to bed, and sometimes Jared would later find notes that Chad had left about things he considered important.

In this case, what Chad considered important, because he'd written it on a Post-It and stuck it to the fridge where Jared would see it first thing, was "Buy TP" and "Kickstarter's a go".

"Kickstarter," Jared said to Harley and Sadie as he dumped some sugar in his coffee. Chad had thoughtfully set the timer on the coffeemaker so Jared could have fresh, hot caffeine when he got up. He filled a cereal bowl with Lucky Charms and added milk. The dogs looked expectant. "You had breakfast. Lemme eat and caffeinate and get dressed and I'll take you out." Harley barked. "I love you but you're not getting my cereal."

Chad had been talking about and working on the idea for crowd-funding a trade paperback of their web comic for a while. Over the summer Jared had put in some work on getting *Haro* ready for print, drawing cover ideas, recoloring the title pages for the first two issues, starting to re-letter the early pages. He wondered what had happened to finally push Chad past research mode and into production mode.

On their walk, Jared and the dogs passed a man walking a greyhound and a dachshund, the greyhound tall enough that the dachshund could easily trot along underneath its belly. The bike path itself was oddly dog-free, but Jared did see a good-looking guy out jogging. Harley pulled on the leash, wanting to follow the stranger, and for a second Jared was tempted – the guy's blue t-shirt stuck to him with sweat, showing off a nicely muscled chest and shoulders, and he actually nodded a little at Jared in greeting as he passed. But no, there was too much work to do. Hot Jogger would have to do as brief eye candy.

Jared took a shower after he got home, then got dressed again and went down to Harvard Square to visit Chad at Excelsior Comics, the store where he worked. But not just to talk about Chad's Kickstarter idea - it was Thursday, new comics came in on Wednesday, and Jared had been waiting for the new issue of *Batman, Inc* for a couple of weeks. Besides, he didn't have class today and while he did have a lot of reading to do – not to mention drawing the comic so they'd have something to Kickstart – he could take some time to say hi to his housemate and hopefully pick up some new reading material.

Excelsior was below street level, and Jared could hear Chad from the stairwell. "Loki wanted to be loved," Chad was saying. "He just wanted his father to love him as much as he loved Thor. He wanted his father to be proud of him."

"He let frost giants into Asgard," someone else said. Whoever it was had a higher-pitched, slightly nasal voice. He sounded like a kid, maybe a high-schooler. "Twice. That's not gonna make his dad proud of him."

"What are you talking about?" Jared asked, walking through the door. The other voice he'd heard belonged to a boy in jeans and a faded Ramones t-shirt, with sunglasses perched in his curly dark hair. He looked like his voice. He was kind of short, although to Jared a lot of

people were. Excelsior was crowded with shelves and the kid was standing by the counter, kind of blocking Jared's way.

"Loki," Chad explained. "His motivations. Why he did what he did."

"Because he wanted Odin to love him?"

"That's what I think."

"Odin did love him. You're talking about the movie, right?" Thor had just come out on DVD, but they were in a comic shop and Jared wanted to be sure which version they were discussing.

"Odin used him," the kid said. "He was embodying chaos. He's *Loki*. He's not misunderstood, he's a trickster. He lied to everyone. Besides, he was all in Erik's head in the last scene. I think he was Erik."

"We never got to see him actually be anyone else," Jared pointed out. "He could make simulacra of himself, but we don't know if he could really change shape."

"Simulacra'?" Chad repeated, cocking an eyebrow. Jared could tell he was about to make fun of his vocabulary. Chad wasn't stupid, but Jared was in grad school at MIT, and Chad could always find a reason to tease him about his giant brain.

"You know what I mean. On the rainbow bridge, he faked a bunch of Lokis to throw Thor off. But he never turned into anyone else."

"I still think it was him being Erik," the kid insisted.

"We should find out when *The Avengers* comes out," Chad said. "But for the record, you're wrong."

"I'm not – "

"You think we'll see Jane again?" Chad was clearly trying to change the subject.

"I liked Darcy," Jared said. "She was a scientist. And she tazed a god."

"She didn't know he was a god," the kid said.

"Are you gonna argue with everything today?" Chad demanded

"I'm not arguing. I'm just saying."

"Chad," Jared interrupted. "Did the new *Batman, Inc* come in?"

"Did you look in your folder?"

"Is that a yes?"

"No," the kid said. "I didn't get mine."

"Diamond shorted us a couple," Chad explained to Jared. "Alona thinks it's our fault, not theirs." He shrugged. "I couldn't fill all the subs. I saved you one, though."

"Why does he get one and I don't?" the kid whined.

"Because he's my roommate and you're arguing with me about Loki." Chad looked smug. "We're getting more next week, don't get your panties in a bunch."

Jared walked over to where the subscription folders were kept in filing cabinets and looked for his. Someone – he suspected Chad, although it could've been anyone who worked there, or even Misha, the owner – had written "Padamoose" on his folder. He was tickled that he'd earned a nickname at Excelsior. But more important, the new issue of *Batman, Inc* was in his folder.

Chad and the kid had moved on to the movie version of *Captain America* and were talking about what extras were likely to be on the DVD and if the director had cut any good scenes and how much it had to suck to wake up sixty years after being frozen, when everyone you loved was dead and nothing looked familiar any more.

"Yankee Stadium probably looks the same," the kid commented. "Bet the hot dogs taste the same. Bet the hot dogs *are* the same."

"Didn't they build a new stadium?" Jared asked. Chad looked pointedly at the kid, who sighed.

"Is everything I say gonna be wrong?" he asked plaintively. Chad nodded. The kid sighed again. "I should go anyway. Things to see, people to do. See ya." He waved at Chad and Jared and walked out.

"Just Batman?" Chad asked Jared, pointing to the comic.

"Yeah," Jared said. "I saw your note about the Kickstarter. I thought you had a good quote for the printing already."

"I did. I broke down all the different pledge amounts and rewards and figured out the timeline. I made charts." He looked pleased with himself. "We'll talk about it tonight."

"I wanna be at the lab by nine."

"I'll be home before then." The phone rang and Chad let it ring twice before answering.

"Excelsior Comics," he said into the receiver. "You're talking to Chad. What can I do you out of? Oh, hey, Gabe."

Jared listened to Chad's end of the conversation - it was a very short conversation – before repeating "Things to see, people to do," and leaving.

Chad was his housemate and his best friend, and organizing a Kickstarter for their web comic was important, but Jared had other things to do. Like working on the web comic, for one. And going to the gym, for another. And buying toilet paper. And wondering how he could start a conversation with his favorite overnight DJ.

Oh, and studying. There was always that. And he'd probably need a quick nap before going to the lab. Two weeks into the semester and he was already tired. This did not bode well.

He was taking a break from his genomics reading by eating dinner – a giant stack of waffles made on the Texas-shaped waffle maker his brother got him for Christmas – when Chad came home. Jared could hear Chad's indignant noises when Harley tried to jump on him to welcome him home before he'd even had a chance to close the front door.

Jared snickered around a mouthful of waffle. Chad had known him since they were college freshmen and had been living with Harley and Sadie for three years, and it was only because he was also a dog person that he'd lasted this long.

"Call off your dog!" Chad yelled from the front hall.

"But he likes you!" Jared called back.

There were more noises and some barking – Sadie had apparently joined them from wherever she'd been napping – and then Chad came into the kitchen, brushing himself off and being trailed by both dogs.

"I told you not to jump on Chad," Jared admonished Harley and Sadie. "You know he's not tough enough to stand up to you."

Sadie barked. Chad made a bitchface at Jared, then dropped the paper bag he was carrying on the kitchen table and opened the fridge.

"Did you finish the Coke?" he asked.

"No." Sadie barked again. "Sadie did."

Chad pulled his head out of the fridge and said, "I'm gonna get my notes", and then disappeared. Jared finished his waffles, peeked in the paper bag - it contained what looked a lot like a burrito wrapped in tinfoil – and put his dishes in the dishwasher. Harley and Sadie looked expectant.

"No waffles for you," he told them. "You showed up too late. Besides, you already had dinner."

Harley barked. Sadie sat on Jared's feet and gave him her best begging face. He relented and gave them each a pig's ear, and by then Chad had come back with a notebook in which he'd made notes for their Kickstarter project.

First Jared showed Chad the comic page he'd been working on in the lab, and when Chad had no comments other than "Looking good", they got down to discussing Kickstarter. Chad's aim was simple – he wanted to fund a trade paperback of the first six issues of *Haro*, and thought he could get enough friends and readers and total strangers to give them money to make it possible. The comic was up to issue eight on the web site, so except for re-lettering most of the first issue, the hard work was pretty much done. Jared had to lay it out for the printer, but Chad had always envisioned the comic in print, so Jared had always drawn and scanned it with that in mind. The layout shouldn't be that difficult, just time-consuming, but Jared was prepared for that.

He'd just forgotten all the extra stuff.

"I was thinking we'd do digital copies," Chad said. "It's an easy incentive for people. We can send them an issue at a time until the hard copy's ready to ship, or all at once if that's what they want. It shouldn't be that hard, right?"

"I don't think so," Jared admitted. "If I'm already laying it out for the printer, how much harder can it be to convert it to PDF?"

"That's what I was thinking." Chad turned the notebook so Jared could read the list he'd drawn up of various pledge amounts and incentives. "A buck, that's nothing, you get undying gratitude and a hug if we ever meet you in person. Five bucks, the digital copy. Eighteen, the digital copy and the trade."

"Eighteen?" Jared repeated, raising an eyebrow.

"Fifteen plus extra for shipping. Twenty-five bucks, the digital copy and the trade with a sketch in the front. Forty, all that plus we'll sign your book."

"Maybe the sketch should be for forty, and we'll sign the book for twenty-five. One of my sketches should be worth more than twenty-five."

"Yeah, but we want as many pledges as we can get, and more people will want a sketch than our signatures."

"Dude, I'm worth more than twenty-five bucks."

"But more people have twenty-five to spend than forty. I've given this a lot of financial thought. Trust me."

"Ok, fine." Jared tried a pout, but Chad just rolled his eyes.

"Sixty-five," he went on, "a trade with a sketch, a print, and your name in the acknowledgments. Eighty, all that and a finished drawing. For a hundred bucks, you can claim a page of original art. I don't know what we can offer past a hundred. It's not like you can draw someone as a character, you know?"

"I can in a future issue. Offer one-twenty for that. What should we do for the print? One of the title pages without the text? An extra I've already drawn? A new idea? And how many sketches are you thinking?" He got up to find a pen, disturbing Sadie who was sitting behind his chair happily chewing on her pig's ear. She barked at him, got up, and walked out of the kitchen, probably to sit on the couch in the living room.

"The higher amounts can be limited rewards," Chad said, "but I don't know how many lower pledges we might get. Hopefully a lot. I'm not sure what the print should be. What are you looking for?"

"A pen so I can make notes on your notes." Jared found one in the junk drawer and sat back down. He started listing some ideas for the potential print: *Full color, or maybe ink wash? City Haro, Western Haro, Alys, all of the above, 8.5x11 or 8x10? A scene or a promo type print? Glossy paper!* "Go on."

"Maybe do the print last, after you've done all the cover pages and the re-lettering and the layout. We'll list it as a mystery print. I'm hoping we get at least 150 pledges with sketches, because that's over \$3700. I know it's a lot to draw, though. If you think you're going to stress out, I can rewrite the incentive so it's a separate sketch, and you can start doing them whenever you have time."

"I can draw them all on cardstock." Jared sketched a cartoony moose wearing a giant grin and with a few exclamation marks around its head to denote enthusiasm. "But I think it's better to draw in the book. That's what I'd do if someone met us at a con."

Chad took the pen and wrote "YAY!!" under the cartoon moose. "I'll submit the project tomorrow if that's cool with you, and as soon as it's approved we can start pimping the hell out of it."

Half an hour later Jared had spread his books and notes across the dining room table and had gone back to his genomics reading - which was difficult now that he was thinking about potential *Haro* prints and cover designs - when Chad interrupted him with "I forgot we need a video."

"What are you talking about?" Jared asked, not even bothering to look up.

"Kickstarter. We should have a video. No biggie, I'll just put it off a week."

And he left the room before Jared could say anything.

* * *

Jared loved weekends. He didn't have to go to class. He had a chance to catch up on all the things he hadn't had time for during the week – grocery shopping for more than emergency toilet paper, laundry, *Haro*, watching all the TV he'd Tivo'ed, whatever housecleaning chore was his on the Chart o' Chores in the kitchen. He went to the gym. If the weather was appropriate, he went for a run. Sometimes he had to go into the lab for a couple of hours. He studied and caught up on his reading.

Usually Saturdays were for sleeping in, but this Saturday, Harley jumped on Jared's bed and woke him up at eleven, which was a ridiculous hour considering Jared had only gone to sleep at eight. Harley pestered him until he rolled out of bed, stumbled downstairs, and opened the back door so the dog could go out and pee. That took all of five minutes, but Jared was up and wondered if maybe he should just try to stay up and get something done. He poured himself some orange juice and sat at the kitchen table to think about it, but was seriously considering going back to bed anyway when Chad wandered in and plopped down in another chair.

"Guess what I learned yesterday," he said.

"What." Jared yawned.

"Alona teaches Pilates."

"So?"

"So she also does yoga. She's bendy." Chad made his eyebrows jump up and down.

"And this means...?"

"She's single." His eyebrows got another workout.

"And you think you have a chance with her because...?"

"Because I am The Chad." He struck a pose. "Seriously, Jared, how long have you known me? And you still don't know about my awesome?" He shook his head sadly. Jared rolled his eyes.

"So why haven't you asked her out yet? And if you have, why didn't she say yes?"

"I am biding my time, man. I'm waiting for the right moment."

Jared just rolled his eyes again. He was pretty sure there was a reason his dog woke him up after only three hours of sleep – besides needing to go out – but he was also pretty sure that

hearing Chad's plans for Alona was not it.

"Guess what else I learned yesterday," Chad said.

"Alona's got a single roommate who teaches aerobics?"

"Actually, yes. To the first part, anyway. She said her roommate would help us with our Kickstarter video."

"What do we need besides a camera and iMovie?"

"She can make it all fancy and shit. Like, she can shoot good video of us and add background music and pages from the comic with voice-overs and everything." His eyes lit up like they did when he was really excited about something and not worrying about looking laid-back and cool for anyone.

"How hard can that stuff be?"

"She went to Emerson. She was a film major. Like, shooting it, not just talking about it."

"She's cute, isn't she."

"Mmmmmaaaaaybe." Which was Chad-speak for "Oh hell yes". "I was telling Alona about the project and how we need a good video because successful Kickstarters have a good video, and oh by the way I expected her to kick in some funding, and she volunteered her roommate. So she and Kat are coming over today. Kat's the roommate."

"I guessed. When?"

Chad looked at the clock on the wall. "Like four. You can go back to bed. Why are you up now, anyway?"

"I really have no idea." Harley came into the kitchen and put his chin on the table and stared at Jared with his soulful puppy-dog eyes. Jared nodded at him. "That's why," he told Chad. "A hundred and twenty pounds of alarm clock." He rubbed Harley's ears and stood up. "I need like four more hours of sleep and then I'll be human. I'll be up and dressed for Alona and her cute roommate, never fear." He yawned and headed upstairs and back to bed. It occurred to him as he crawled under the covers that Jensen Ross' voice would probably be really nice to fall asleep to.

Alona's roommate Kat had brown hair, bright red lipstick, and an impressive rack. Jared could see why Chad was so interested in her help. She looked kind of familiar, too, but he couldn't place her face.

Kat had brought her own little video camera. Alona volunteered to walk the dogs while she and Chad and Jared talked in the living room, which was five minutes of Chad explaining the

kind of video he wanted and how important it was for Kickstarter projects to have good visual aids if they wanted to make their funding goal, and one minute of Kat interrupting him to ask if he and Jared knew what they wanted to say, and if so, they should probably get to it.

"You look like the girl who played Darcy in *Thor*," Jared told her, having finally figured out why she looked familiar.

"Yeah, I get that a lot," she said. She pointed to the couch. "Sit." The boys sat. Kat giggled at the height difference. Jared tried to slouch. Kat grinned. "You're cute."

"Can we do this?" Chad demanded.

"I can't help it if our cinematographer thinks I'm cute," Jared said loftily. Chad punched him the arm. "Ow."

"Boys," Kat said. "Play nice. Talk about your comic so I can get some footage so I can make you a nice video so you can throw it up online and get people to give you money." She'd dragged a chair in from the kitchen and now sat on it. She looked through her camera and pointed at Chad with one finger. "Go."

"Hi, Kickstarter," he said. "I'm Chad. I'm the writer."

"And I'm Jared," Jared went on. "I'm the artist. And we're the brains behind *Haro*."

"And we hope you give us money."

Jared elbowed Chad in the side.

"Well, we do," Chad protested.

"How about you talk about your comic?" Kat suggested from behind her camera. "I thought you said you were prepared."

"She's got a point," Jared said. "You start."

"*Haro* is the story of a man named – " Chad gestured to Jared.

"*Haro*. Surprising, I know."

"He's a veteran of a foreign war, a homeless man with PTSD in a modern American city. He might be crazy. He's also a cowboy in a post-apocalyptic western wasteland, traveling the country trying to regain his memory and find a woman called Alys." Jared could hear the intensity and excitement in Chad's voice. He knew it wasn't just for effect – it was Chad talking about the thing he loved in an attempt to convince other people to love it too. "Which man is the real *Haro*? Which world is his reality and which is just fantasy? Whose is the voice he sometimes hears in his head? Who is Alys, and why is he looking for her? What's

following him across the waste?" He paused dramatically.

"You can read it at harocomic.com," Jared said. "There's a link down there." He pointed down, indicating a point farther down the theoretical web page in which the video would eventually be embedded. He grinned at the camera. He could see Kat half-grinning back at him and Chad.

"This story is near and dear to my heart," Chad went on. "I've been working on it a long time, but I couldn't tell it without Jared and his art. He's amazing, and I'm not just saying that." Jared made a bashful "Aw, shucks" embarrassed-by-praise face. "Go check it out."

"So, Chad, what are we trying to fund, if you can already read our comic online?"

"Well, Jared, I'm glad you asked. We're trying to fund a trade paperback. In a perfect world we'll be able to put it in comic shops and the hands of new readers. Or even old readers who want to carry it around with them."

"Or lend it to their friends."

"Or their mom."

"Or their brothers and sisters."

"Or their significant others."

"Or read it to their dogs."

"You get the idea," Chad finished. "It looks good on the web, but it looks great on paper. It was always conceived as a print comic. But don't panic if you can't afford a book. We're also offering it as a PDF. I wouldn't read it on a Kindle, but if you have to, it looks ok. It looks much better on an iPad."

"Can you read a PDF on a Kindle?" Jared asked.

"Yeah. But unless you have the color one you won't be able to enjoy the separate issue covers or the sepia-tone."

Well, ok, Jared understood that. "I just hope people don't expect to read the trade on their smartphones – the art looks like shit that size."

"Maybe we can put it on Amazon, in the Kindle store. Could we do that?"

"You could do that. It'd be cool but I don't have time to research online marketplaces."

"I wonder if we need a new ISBN for that. Our overhead would be so much less. Think of all the new readers we could reach."

"Uh, boys?" Kat said. "Video?" She pointed to her camera with her free hand. "I don't have all day."

"Sorry about that," Jared apologized. "Sometimes he gets carried away." He jerked a thumb at Chad, teasing.

"It's a curse," Chad admitted cheerfully. "Where were we?"

"Putting *Haro* in the hands of readers and their friends and family," Jared told him. "You get the idea."

"You get the idea," Chad said to the camera. "Don't feel like you have to fund everything. If all you have is a dollar, that's cool. We'll take it with gratitude. We just want to be able to see our comic on a shelf next to all the other comics we love, and we can't do it without you."

"Why don't you tell these nice people what they actually get for their money? Tell them about the color pages." Jared had done a good job on them and wanted Chad to bring them up so it looked less like he was bragging on himself.

"Good idea. The trade paperback will be the first six issues of *Haro* in black and white and sepia and white, looking like it does on the web site but better, with a gorgeous full-color cover and full-color title pages for each issue." Chad turned to look at Jared. "You should tell them about that." He turned back to the camera. "Jared's really proud of the color pages."

"They look really good. You can see a couple of the issue covers on the site already. I recolored the ones for issues one and two, and of course the cover of the book is brand-new, never-before-seen art, drawn exclusively for the trade paperback."

"It's pretty impressive, and I'm not just saying that."

"He's not easily impressed, either."

"We'll also have some extras in the book – concept sketches, resources and notes, a short story I wrote about a side character. More books should be available to buy after all the pledge copies have been sent out, and in a perfect world we'll be able to fund future trades for the rest of the story."

They heard the front door open and Alona call "I'm back!" three seconds before Harley and Sadie bounded into the room, past Kat, and up to the couch. Harley tried to climb onto Jared's lap.

"This is Harley and Sadie," he said to the camera, as Harley tried to lick his face off and Chad tried ineffectively to shove Sadie out of the way. "Help me keep them in kibble by funding mine and Chad's comic. If you ever meet us in person, they'll give you love."

"I think that's a good place to stop," Kat said, fiddling with her camera. Jared could tell she was trying not to laugh. Harley tried to climb over Jared to get to Chad, and Sadie took the opportunity to squeeze herself onto the couch next to Jared. Alona giggled.

"We met a couple of pugs," she said. "You should've seen it. I tried to explain to their people that Harley didn't want to eat them, he was just making friends, but I don't think they believed me. How'd the video go?"

"I got footage," Kat told her. "I can edit it into something good. You guys want some stills of comic pages in between your talking heads, right? I think that would be helpful for people who've never read it. I can turn you into voice-overs so they know what they're seeing. I can do some background music too, if you want."

"Sounds good," Chad said. Harley barked.

"Harley thinks so too," Jared added. The dog was now standing half on him and half on Chad, and his back feet dug painfully into Jared's thigh. "Ok, Harley, you said hi, now you have to get off me." He shoved at Harley's butt, and when Harley didn't move, Jared tried to stand up. That worked, and Harley jumped off the couch and headed towards the kitchen. Alona followed him, Sadie at her heels.

Kat stood up. "I'll make a pass at this and send it to you," she said. "How long do you want it to be?"

"Maybe a couple minutes," Chad said. "Not too long."

"I can do that. I checked out your comic after Alona told me about it. Looks interesting."

"I'm always free to talk more."

"Did Alona warn you about Chad?" Jared asked.

"Oh yeah," Kat said, laughing. "I'm prepared." She left the room, presumably to find Alona so they could leave.

"Thanks, Moose," Chad muttered, annoyed.

"I thought you were interested in Alona," Jared said.

"I am interested in all lovely ladies."

"Good luck with this one." Jared couldn't stop grinning at the thought of Chad putting the moves on Alona and her roommate simultaneously, and how both of the girls were likely to take it.

He went into the kitchen, where Alona had apparently given Harley and Sadie water and was now chatting with Kat.

"Thanks for the video," Jared said. "And for getting the dogs out of our hair."

"No problem," Alona said. "You meet some nice people that way." She patted both dogs on the head and went back towards the front hall, calling "Bye, Chad!" as she and Kat walked outside.

"Guess I don't have to walk the dogs now," Jared mused. "I should go to the gym. Or should I start on my homework?" Harley and Sadie ignored him. He figured he'd go to the gym now, and with the endorphins from that he'd have the energy to tackle his reading.

Kat sent them a preliminary video Tuesday morning, Chad sent her some notes, she sent a new version Thursday morning, and by Thursday afternoon *Haro* was an official Kickstarter crowdfunding project. Chad asked everyone he knew to help fund the book. Jared tried to be a little more selective at first – there was no point showering people with demands if they'd never read the comic and didn't care – but Chad's excitement and determination were contagious, and it was hard not to share that he might actually have a comic book in print. And he was, after all, categorically incapable of keeping anything this big and important a secret.

That night, in the lab, after sharing the Kickstarter project with his lab mates – twice, because he had to tell Danneel and Welling when he got there, and then Genevieve when she showed up later – he was so excited he forgot to be nervous and actually told Jensen Ross.

Jared's doing a Kickstarter project to fund his comic book, Jared texted the station in response to the nightly "What are you all doing?" question. *It's called Haro and he's really fucking proud of it.*

And much to his surprise, Jensen texted him back:

I think I've heard of it! Good luck!

Genevieve caught Jared looking at his phone like it had started speaking Swahili, and she giggled. He really was going to have to call this guy, wasn't he.

Thanks! he texted instead.

"Call and make a request," Genevieve told him.

"I thought of that," he admitted. "I'm too nervous."

Genevieve rolled her eyes. Danneel, who was listening, laughed at him.

"You can talk to anyone at any time about anything," she said. "I've seen you do it. And

you're nervous calling a DJ to request a song?"

"Yes?"

"Oh my god, Jared, you are the biggest dork ever." Danneel came over, picked up his phone, and held it out to him. "Call him."

"Ask for 'She Blinded Me With Science,'" Genevieve suggested. Danneel nodded in agreement and shook the phone at Jared until he took it and called the station.

"Jensen Ross, WBBR," Jensen said, and even though Jared wanted this, he was so startled to hear that voice on his phone speaking into his ear that he completely forgot why he was calling. "What's your need?"

Genevieve poked Jared in the side.

"Can I request a song?" he asked.

"That's what I'm here for. What do you want?"

"Uh. Shit. I forgot."

Jensen laughed. Jared's stomach flipped over in a way that made him feel like a fourteen-year-old girl after the cutest boy in high school smiled at her. Now he knew what it must have been like to be his sister as a teenager.

Danneel cocked an eyebrow at hm and he smacked himself in the face.

"She Blinded Me With Science," Genevieve helpfully reminded him.

"Uh, Thomas Dolby?" he said into the phone. "She Blinded Me With Science'?"

"I can do that," Jensen said. "Don't sound so unsure. You make a request, I fill it. That's how this thing works." His voice sounded amused to Jared, like he was grinning at the phone. "You have a good night."

"Yeah. You too." He hung up.

"Dork," Danneel said, going back to her bench. Genevieve giggled and went back to her work as well.

Next up is a request for Thomas Dolby from an easily-rattled listener with a nice voice. "She Blinded Me With Science" on WBBR.

Jared could feel his entire face heat up with the force of his blush. Jensen Ross the DJ thought he had a nice voice. He really needed to make more occasions for them to talk to

each other.

On Monday, Dr Helfer called Jared into her office to ask him about his project, see how his experiments were progressing, and remind him about his thesis committee.

"The sooner you assemble a committee, the more we can help you," she said. "Have you given it any thought?"

Jared hadn't. Fortunately, Dr Helfer had some suggestions for advisors, all of whom Jared emailed as soon as the meeting was over. He liked Dr Helfer and thought he could learn a lot from being in her lab – even though most of what he'd learned so far was how to culture cells, and pretty much anyone could teach him that – but she knew how to put the pressure on.

"She got you too, huh," Genevieve said sympathetically in the lab that night. "This is how it starts. Next thing you know, you'll be getting regular emails asking for updates on your project, and if your experiments fail more than 40% of the time, she'll want to have a talk in her office."

"Is that what she's doing to you?" Jared asked. He'd thought it was pretty standard procedure for a certain percentage of experiments to fail, and not necessarily worth the professor busting your chops.

"Not yet. I ran into Rob, though, and that's what he said happened to him. But he also said he thinks someone's been sabotaging his project, so who knows." She shrugged.

"Rob's paranoid," Danneel commented from her bench.

"That's what I think too, but I didn't want to tell him that. He looked really stressed." Another shrug, this one accompanied by a sigh. "I get it. You'll notice I've been coming in earlier." It was only ten and she was already there when Jared showed up. He'd almost gotten used to her appearing after midnight, so this was a switch. "I can't believe it's only September and I already feel run totally ragged."

"It's almost October," Welling said helpfully from where he sat in front of the hood.

"Did you get my email about *Haro*?" Jared asked, to change the subject. It was a much less stressful conversation than how much Dr Helfer was demanding of them.

Besides, now he could tell Chad that he'd done his part in pimping. Because as much as Jared wanted to tell people about his web comic, and as hard as it was for him to keep it secret, he didn't love having to sell himself like this. All this deliberate self-promotion was more a Chad thing.

"I kicked in five bucks," Welling said.

"Eighteen," Genevieve added. "So I can get a book to read at my leisure." She winked at Jared and he grinned back.

"Twenty-five," Danneel said. "Ha."

"It's not a contest, Harris," Welling told her.

"I know that, Tomtom. I want a sketch."

"You guys are fast," Jared said. "Thanks. I almost mentioned it to Dr Helfer when she had me in her office."

"I would've liked to have seen her face when you did that," Welling commented. "I told Mike to kick in some bucks too. It's not Jamie's thing." Jamie was Welling's girlfriend and Mike was one of his housemates. Jared had met them both, and thought Mike was nuts but fortunately Jamie was a calming influence.

"Are you done with the hood yet?" Genevieve asked him. "I need to split my cells."

"Decontaminating. Keep your hair on."

The reason Jared preferred working the night shift was because there were fewer people using the equipment and just generally fewer people in the lab. And yet there was still always someone using the hood when you needed it.

Welling skipped out a little after one-o'clock and Danneel helpfully turned the radio on for Jared. He blew her a kiss. Genevieve took a short break to nap in one of the lounges. Danneel swore at the centrifuge. Jared took advantage of his downtime to work on the next comic book page, and kept an ear and a half on the radio for his favorite voice.

It's that time of night, ladies and gents. Check-in time. Let the DJ know he's not the only person awake time. I wish I had prizes to give you guys – tenth caller gets something, say – but they never give me anything. I guess everyone else at WBBR knows I'm the only person awake too. Let's take a break, maybe I'll think of something. In the meantime, let me know what you're up to.

"You're – what are you doing?" Genevieve asked Jared.

"Texting," he said, holding up his phone.

"Jared is drawing his web comic and letting his fellow lab rats tease him," Danneel fake-quoted, craning her neck and pretending she could read the contents of his text.

"Pretty much." He grinned and put his phone back on the bench. "You don't need the hood, do you? I have to introduce a virus to a cell."

"A match made in Helfer Lab," Genevieve said. "I should tell Dr Helfer we're matchmaking the next time she calls me into her office to ask me what I've been doing."

Three ads and two songs later, when Jensen Ross the DJ ran down his list of what his listeners were doing, he got to "Jared's infecting cells with a virus" and added "Remind me never to piss you off." Danneel and Genevieve giggled, and Jared texted *I only use my powers for good.* :)

Danneel was leaning over Jared's shoulder when Jensen Ross replied *So what good do you use your powers for?* and before Jared could answer, she took his phone out of his hand, closed the text window, and handed it back.

"That means you should call him," Genevieve announced. Jared took the phone, swallowed his nerves – it was so much easier for him to make a fool of himself while talking to someone, as evidenced by his one attempt to call and request a song – and dialed.

It was the only way to shut the girls up. But he did want to talk to the DJ.

"Jensen Ross, WBBR. Speak and be heard."

This time Jared was prepared for Jensen's voice, and managed to tell him "I use my good for science" without stammering.

"What?"

Crap. "It's, uh, it's Jared, I was infecting cells with a virus? And you said never to piss me off? And I texted to say I only use my powers for good? And you wanted to know what good I use my powers for?" He wanted to smack himself in the face for being a dribbling idiot. Danneel was looking at him as if she kind of wanted to smack him too. He waved her away. He didn't want an audience if he was just going to embarrass himself.

"You're Jared the cell guy!" Jensen said.

That his favorite DJ seemed to know who he was surprised Jared enough that he actually pulled his phone away from his face and stared at it for a couple of seconds.

"Uh. Yeah?" he said. "How do you –"

"You always answer my 3:30 poll with 'Washing cells' or 'Growing cells' or 'Splitting cells' or 'Infecting cells' – I like that one – there are fewer people awake at three in the morning and listening to the radio than you might think, much less people who call in. So to speak. So I remember you."

Jared realized he was grinning like an idiot.

"I'll just leave you alone with your DJ," Danneel whispered, and exaggeratedly tiptoed to the

other end of the lab.

"So what do you do, Jared the cell guy?" Jensen asked.

"I'm a second-year immunology grad student. It's all lab, all the time. But the classes are pretty interesting.

"And the lab is all cell massage and infections." Jensen Ross sounded like he was grinning. Jared saw Genevieve give him a thumbs-up.

"It's a lot of work. I mean, of course it's a lot of work, it's grad school, but it seems like you kind of do the same things over and over and any day now my PI is going to start breathing down my neck and I should be getting my thesis committee together and Jesus, I can't believe I'm bitching like this. Man, I'm sorry."

Jensen Ross just laughed. But it sounded to Jared like the kind of laugh that means someone thinks you're kind of cute, rather than the kind of laugh that means someone thinks you're kind of a dick.

"Take a breath," Jensen said. "No worries. What's a PI?"

"Principal investigator. She runs the lab. All of our projects tie into her research. Her name's Dr Helfer and I like her and she's really smart and I'm gonna learn a lot from her, but it's kinda stressful."

"Tell him about your comic," Genevieve hissed.

"Good idea," he told her.

"What's a good idea?" Jensen asked.

"The other thing I do!" Jared told the phone. "I mentioned it before, but I don't know if you remember. I'm not just your average goofball scientist in training. I draw a web comic called *Haro*. My friend Chad writes it. We're using Kickstarter to fund a trade paperback and I think we're actually going to hit our goal."

There was a moment of silence, and then "No shit! A friend of mine turned me on to that just last week. I'm still getting caught up, but I keep stopping to check out all the extras. You really draw that? You're good."

Jared felt himself blush. "Thanks," he said, glad that kind of thing couldn't show in someone's voice. "I love doing it. It's like school – challenging, but fun."

"I'll have to check out your Kickstarter. Tell me something, Jared the cell guy. Where are you from? I detect a hint of Texas."

"San Antonio! How'd you guess? Most people think, like, Georgia or Virginia, if they catch it."

"I grew up outside Dallas."

"Aha! A Cowboys fan!"

"Well, I kind of have to be, don't I?" Jared could hear his grin. "I like the Mavericks, too."

"I don't hear any Dallas in your voice."

"Broadcasting school kind of trained the accent out of me. If I'd stayed in Texas, maybe I'd have a twang."

"So why'd you come to Boston?"

"There was a job." Jared could picture Jensen Ross grinning a little, as if to say *Why else would anyone move here?* "My friend was working in a restaurant in Arlington. Seemed like a good idea."

"Do you like it?"

"Boston? Yeah. It's a nice city. Wish it didn't get so cold, though. Look, I gotta get back to work, but it's nice to hear your voice. Call me any time. Or text. Or both." Now Jared could definitely hear a smile in the DJ's voice.

"I have to tell you what I'm doing with my cells." Jared grinned. He could hear Danneel giggle over by the hood. He'd totally forgotten she was there.

"That too. I'll talk to you later." And Jensen hung up.

"Now was that so hard?" Danneel demanded.

"You didn't sound like a dork," Genevieve added.

"He knew who I was," Jared said. "He remembered that I always answer his poll with whatever I'm doing to my cells."

"You made an impression!"

"Yeah. I guess I did."

He didn't think it had even been long enough for Jensen Ross to remember his texts from night to night.

* * *

The Cambridge Center for Adult Education was a good place to go for life drawing open studio, because they held it Thursday afternoons, which didn't interfere with Jared's job or his classes. That was one of the very few perks of working the overnight shift. Also, four hours with live models at CCAE was pretty cheap. He just had to ignore all the studying he could be doing. He had a massive test on Monday and he knew he should be preparing for it.

There were only two other people setting up when he got there, so he took a seat to the side where he'd have a good view of the models but hopefully wouldn't be blocking anyone's way. He turned his phone off, got out his pencils and charcoals, stuck a pen behind his ear just in case, and realized he'd be starving in four hours. He should've brought a snack.

The first model was a good-looking blond guy, which Jared knew would crack Chad up if he found out. He found himself wondering what Jensen Ross looked like without his clothes on, and even though Jared hadn't even tried to Google his face, the thought of his naked body was distracting enough that Jared had to snap his pencil against his own hand to make himself concentrate.

Fortunately the second model looked a lot like –

"Kat?" he said, surprised, as she dropped her robe. Someone hissed "Shh!" in his direction.

"Jared, right?" Kat answered, moving into her first pose. "The Kickstarter comic book guy. I'm not great with names."

"What are you doing here?"

"Modeling. What does it look like?" She grinned.

"Shh!" someone else hissed.

"I can talk and move at the same time." Kat twisted around into a new position. Jared wondered who was so annoyed that there was talking, but he had a pretty, shapely, naked woman standing right in front of him and given a choice, he'd rather draw her than argue with another artist. "What are you doing after this?"

"Eating."

"Can I come?"

"Sure. I'd like the company."

Chad's going to be pissed, he thought, then shrugged the thought away. Chad should know by now that Jared was no kind of competition when it came to girls.

Kat ran through poses for an hour and then everyone got a break, which gave Jared enough

time to pee and run across the street to the gourmet Mini-Mart for a bottle of water and a couple of candy bars. Not the healthiest snack, but he'd get fruit or a salad or something later.

A different male model came back after the break – he was older and had a paunch and Jared appreciated the chance to get some practice drawing a middle-aged person who wasn't a hardbody. Kat rounded out the session with a few fifteen-minute poses, and then it was over and everyone was packing up their things and thanking the models (the first male model had returned and apparently the middle-aged guy had snuck in halfway through Kat's shift with his own sketchpad) and Jared had to wait in the hallway for Kat to get dressed.

They went to IHOP, because it was reasonably cheap and Jared had been craving pancakes for several days. He got a giant stack with sausage patties, skillet potatoes, and a fruit salad, and Kat just got a chicken sandwich.

She pointed to her sandwich and then Jared's tower of pancakes, and giggled. "Still a growing boy, huh?"

"Yep." He grinned serenely and forked up a mouthful of potatoes before drowning the pancakes and sausage in syrup. "But growing into what, that's the question."

"How's the Kickstarted going?"

"Well, it's only been up a week, so it's hard to tell. We got a bunch of pledges right away, but we mentioned it on the web site and Twitter and Facebook, so that was probably just the first wave. I think we're going to make our goal, but we'll see." He popped a grape in his mouth. "Did you pledge?" He made an encouraging face.

"Not yet. I'm a broke artist's model, what do you expect from me?" But she grinned. "Alona did, though. She wants the boo."

"Cool. If she pledged enough for a sketch tell her I'll draw whatever she wants." He bit into a sausage. "This is the first time I've ever appealed to strangers for money that wasn't for school. It's the first time I ever had to really pimp myself. It's a little weird. I feel like I need a big purple hat and a cane."

"Didn't you have to sell yourself for grad school?"

Jared blinked, surprised Kat knew more about him than just "You're the Kickstarter guy". But she just grinned wider.

"Alona told me," she explained. "Besides, I had to read through your site to get some good images for the video. Chad sent me the ones he wanted me to use but I thought I should read it anyway. So I read your bios, so I know you're in grad school. Science, right?"

"Microbiology. Immunology. And yeah, you kind of have to sell yourself to get into the

program you want, but your work speaks for itself to a point, and I had really good recommendations."

"I don't really know any scientists. Most of my friends are arty types. I know a couple programmers, though. *So* geeky." She giggled. "Almost all of them knit, as if that's something they learn along with all the programming and bug-fixing. If you ever want crocheted dolls of your characters, I can hook you up."

Jared tried to imagine a crocheted Haro, either the contemporary crazy-homeless version or the alternate-West gunslinger version. It was kind of giggle-worthy to suddenly picture the guy as cuddly.

"You don't look convinced," Kat said. "That's ok, I'm not either." She took a bite of sandwich, chewed, swallowed, and asked "Do you like grad school?"

"I like my classes and I share a lab with my friends, which is good because it takes up a lot of time. For example! I have an all-day test on Monday." He cut a wedge of pancake and stuffed it in his mouth while he waited for Kat's reaction. She probably wouldn't believe him, or she would and she'd be appalled.

"Like eight hours?" And yep, she looked skeptical.

Jared nodded, swallowed. "Seven or eight, yeah. Enzymes. Fun stuff."

"Jesus."

There was silence as Jared ate his pancakes and tried to psych himself up for studying, and Kat sipped her soda.

"You've heard of Dr Sketchy's, right?" she asked after a minute. Jared's mouth was full so he just nodded. "You know they have a branch in Allston?" Now he shook his head. He hadn't known that, but to be fair he'd only ever heard of them because of his friend Aldis, and Aldis lived in New York so all of his interesting art-related events tended to be local to him rather than to Jared. "Every second Sunday at Great Scott. One of my friends is going to be modeling at the next one. You should come."

"Sundays, huh?"

"Sundays, huh." Kat sipped her coffee and grinned at him over the rim of the cup. "You won't have class or lab. You know you want to."

And actually, he kind of did.

* * *

Jared finished his full-day eight-hour test in just over seven hours. He'd only had three

hours of sleep, but he didn't realize how exhausted he was until he got into his car to go home and all he wanted to do was lie down. He'd had exactly two full-day tests last semester, but clearly he'd blocked them from his mind. The professor, Dr Ferris, had brought in sandwiches and cookies and bottles of water so no one had to leave the room to eat before they were finished with the exam; you weren't allowed to bring in food.

He went home and collapsed for two hours of nap and even though Jared had managed to scarf down a couple of extra candy bars during bathroom breaks, he woke up from his nap *starving*

While he thawed a bunch of frozen Texas-shaped waffles to snack on while he tried to figure out what to eat for dinner, Jared realized he hadn't done a damn thing all day besides take his exam. A new comic page was supposed to go up tomorrow and he hadn't lettered it or even finished the shading. He still had studying to do and a paper to read in preparation for group discussion tomorrow, not to mention at least eight hours of lab in his immediate future.

Shit. He leaned forward until his head thumped against the tabletop, then started planning. There was nothing to be gained by whining to himself. He could do the reading now and take his laptop to the lab. The page was already scanned into his hard drive, and he could at least do the lettering

He called Chad, left a voice mail – "What's the latest we can put up the next comic page? I can work on it in the lab but I can't promise anything" – ate a couple tuna sandwiches and a giant bowl of ice cream, and spent an hour and a half reading and trying to digest a couple of papers online before heading off to work.

"What did you think about Dr Ferris' test?" Welling asked Jared when he walked into the lab.

"I need a weekend," was Jared's answer.

"That bad, huh?"

"No, it was ok – I was more prepared than I thought I was, except for how much it made my brain hurt – I just have a lot of shit to do."

"Welcome to the wonderful world of grad school." He patted Jared on the shoulder sympathetically.

Jared stuck his earbuds in his phone, opened the app for the radio station, and put the phone in the pocket of his lab coat, which was, of course, short in the arms and tight across the shoulders. He really needed his own lab coat that fit properly. If Welling was so sympathetic, why hadn't he bought his own, so Jared could wear the one in the lab?

At least he seemed to be making progress on his project. He ignored Genevieve when she said she'd seen Rob earlier and not only was he still convinced someone was sabotaging his work, he was now convinced that whoever it was, was sabotaging other people's work in

other labs too.

"Define 'sabotage,'" Welling said.

"Contaminating his cells," Genevieve told him.

"And he's sure it's not just him? Why would someone want to screw with other labs? What do you gain from that?"

Genevieve shrugged. Jared figured a big enough asshole might do that kind of thing, but he'd never met anyone that dickish in the program.

"The dark side of pranking," Danneel suggested. "When landing a TARDIS on the Great Dome is too fun."

"When did you come in?" Genevieve asked her.

"Just now." She ruffled Jared's hair as she walked by him on her way to the freezer. "It's too early for your DJ," she told him, when he looked up at her. He'd set his laptop on his bench and was working on the comic page. It clearly did not interest her, or she would have commented. Told him to take it off the bench, at least. "Are you listening to the station anyway?"

"I needed some music," he said.

"Don't turn the radio on," Welling called.

"Don't worry."

Welling was still around at midnight, but Jared didn't care that he couldn't turn on the lab radio. He wasn't picky about how he got to hear Jensen Ross' voice, as long as he got to hear it.

Now we got something for the nurses at Brigham and Women's, from Josie and Nadine in pediatric oncology at Mass General. A little Dropkicks for a peaceful evening, here on 92.7 WBBR.

Jared figured that was sarcasm. The Dropkick Murphys were a lot of things, but "peaceful" wasn't generally one of them. He felt the urge to chair-dance.

A minute later Danneel walked by and whapped him on the shoulder with a folder. When he looked around at her she grinned, pointed to his earbuds, and asked "Something good on?"

"Was I chair-dancing?" He shook his ass just to make her giggle.

"If you could call it that." She patted him on the head. "How's your DJ? When you get a

chance, can you come look at something for me? I don't know what I did but it looks like I invented a new and exciting strain of Ebola."

For Jensen Ross' nightly "where are you and what are you doing" question, Jared texted *Jared's massaging cells and lettering his comic, and Danneel is doing Ebola one better*, to which the DJ's texted response was *I hope Danneel is using those powers for good*. Jared showed her the exchange, and she laughed.

"I never told you my life's ambition was to be an evil scientist, did I?" she said.

On Friday Jared's enzymes class was unexpectedly canceled when Dr Ferris called in sick at the last minute, so he went home. It was a nice day out – sunny, not ridiculously cold – and if nothing else, he'd just earned himself some extra time to walk the dogs.

Usually he walked them down the bike path to Davis Square and back, because if no one else was on the bike path he could throw balls for them and let them run a little. Today he went the other way out of the house and walked down to Powder House Circle and the giant rotary from hell, because he wanted a change of scenery and he could still throw balls for Harley and Sadie in the park there. Harley liked to pee against the old stone tower that had served as gun powder storage during the Revolutionary War, which Jared thought was kind of sacrilegious, but chasing his dogs up and down and around the hill was always a good workout.

A guy in a blue t-shirt and running shoes sat on a bench sucking on a water bottle and watching the dogs. Jared thought he looked familiar but couldn't figure out why. He was about to go over and say something, but Sadie took off after a squirrel, and by the time Jared got control of her, the guy was gone.

"That looks familiar," Chad commented later, looking over Jared's shoulder at the comic page he was drawing, which coincidentally included a version of the tower he'd walked Harley and Sadie around earlier. He would have added the hot guy on the bench, but it didn't fit the scene.

"The Powder House powder house," Jared said. "I took Harley and Sadie down there today."

"It looks kind of phallic."

"Everything does, to you."

"At least you didn't put the rotary in there. I don't want any of Haro's locations to look too much like Boston."

Chad already knew that contemporary Haro's big American city contained bits of Boston and surrounding towns, as well as bits of San Antonio and Houston and LA, as if Jared had thrown all the big cities he knew into a blender and set it on high. That was so Haro's city looked a little familiar but not entirely, because Chad wanted readers to think it could be

anywhere, and so Jared could lay out a fictional city without having to make everything up.

Now Chad took the opportunity to tell Jared about some upcoming plot points and future characters, and then they talked about the next couple of pages, since Jared was working on the next one already, and by the time Jared got to the lab, he was so deep in thought about *Haro* that he almost walked by Danneel and Dr Whitfield without even seeing them. He wouldn't have expected Dr Whitfield to be here and probably would have passed him anyway if Danneel hadn't said "Just walk on by and don't say anything, it's ok," as he came up to them.

"Oh. Uh. Hi," he stammered, surprised. Danneel grinned brightly.

"Dr Whitfield says you haven't asked him to be on your thesis committee," she said. Dr Whitfield taught Jared's genomics class and was on Danneel's thesis committee. She thought highly of him and had suggested to Jared more than once that he ask the professor to be one of his thesis advisors.

"Have you chosen a committee yet?" Dr Whitfield asked.

"Sort of," Jared confessed, embarrassment making him break eye contact. You were supposed to do it in the beginning of your second year. Jared had set an internal goal for the middle of October, which meant he should have found all his advisors right about now. "I asked Dr Helfer, obviously, and then I got Dr Morgan and Dr Williams, and I asked Dr Hermann but he's retiring and isn't sure he'll be able to do it, and, uh, Dr Whitfield, will you be on my thesis committee?"

Dr Whitfield laughed. "Come see me and we'll discuss it. Miss Harris tried to give me a rundown of your project but I want to hear it from you."

Jared glanced at Danneel, who was trying to look innocent. It wasn't enough she was trying to set him up with Jensen Ross - she had to do it with his thesis advisors too? Although apparently he needed the push, so he shouldn't complain.

Just then someone called "Charles!" and the three of them turned to see Dr F waving and loping down the hallway. Jared really only knew him by sight; he wasn't even sure what Dr F's area of expertise was. He only knew that you'd sometimes see the guy wandering the halls of the building late at night, wearing his lab coat (which you weren't supposed to wear outside your lab) and talking to himself.

"You're here late," he told Dr Whitfield.

"And you're here early," Dr Whitfield said.

"Oh, you know, science never rests." He grinned. "Are these bright-eyed young people your students?"

Danneel snickered. Jared guessed she wasn't used to being called a young person any more than he was. And at nine on a weeknight in the lab, no one was really bright-eyed.

"Mr Padalecki is, yes." Jared waved. "Miss Harris is one of my advisees. She's doing well." Danneel beamed.

"Keep up the good work," Dr F told them.

"We should get back to it," Danneel said. "Bye, Dr Whitfield." She headed down the hall towards the lab and after saying goodbye to the two professors, Jared followed.

"Dr Whitfield said you were doing well," he told her as they walked.

"And the next thing out of his mouth was going to be 'but she could always be doing better,'" Danneel said. "He's more impressed by hard work than schmoozing. You have him for a class. You should know that. Although, to be honest, I kind of wanted to stay and talk to Dr F, just to say I did."

Jared sent himself a note on his phone when they got to the lab – *Call Dr Whitfield re: thesis committee* – and pulled out his sketchpad while he waited for Welling to finish with the centrifuge. A character based on Dr F was supposed to show up in the comic fairly soon, and now that Jared had gotten a good idea of his size and more than a passing glance at his face, he wanted to make some quickie sketches while he had time.

Later that night Jared was taking a break to stretch his legs and get out of the lab (and to listen to his radio show and his DJ in peace) when he encountered Dr F in the hallway near the lounge with the good vending machines.

"Hello!" Dr F called. "Charles' student, am I right?"

"Charles?" Jared repeated, momentarily confused. He pulled an earbud out of his ear to better hear Dr F. "Oh, you mean Dr Whitfield. Yeah. Hi."

"He's a good teacher. Very smart. Good man to have on your committee. He tells me you're in Tricia's lab. She's very, shall we say, determined. Tough. She demands the best from her lab, but a good scientist does. All the same, don't let her scare you off. Immunology is a fascinating field. Great potential there." He sounded ridiculously chipper and had a quick, clipped way of talking. Jared didn't think Dr F had taken one breath during his speech.

"I like it. It's interesting and it keeps me busy." That was an understatement.

"As it should, as it should. I must go – plans to make, theories to ponder. You know how it is. Good evening, Mr Padalecki." He nodded a goodbye and walked off.

Jared was impressed that Dr F had remembered his name.

"Why wouldn't he?" Genevieve asked later on, after Jared had gone back to the lab and related the story to her and Danneel.

"We only talked to him for three minutes."

"Guess you made an impression," Danneel said. "Call your favorite DJ and make another." She gestured at the radio with an empty cell bottle and grinned. Jared rolled his eyes. "Don't make that face at me. I know you're capable of talking to him without sounding stupid." "What do I say?"

"What do you say. Say hi! Request a song. Tell him you had a really weird dream last night and he was in it."

She grinned brightly. Jared just rolled his eyes.

The phone line for the station was busy, oddly enough. Jared wondered if that was a sign that he should maybe stick with texts.

* * *

Sitting in the dining room trying to concentrate on his genomics reading, Jared realized that he actually kind of missed listening to his favorite DJ during the day. It was very quiet in the house – the dogs were asleep on his bed upstairs and Chad was at work – and his mind had wandered. He wondered if it was some kind of sign that he missed Jensen Ross' voice, and if so, a sign of what. Excessive reliance on a nice voice to get him through the night? It was just that Jensen sounded like a nice guy, interesting and fun and maybe someone Jared would like if they were to meet in real life.

And they'd had a conversation and Jared hadn't been too much of an idiot and Jensen even read *Haro*. He remembered something Alona had told him – that when guys said "She looks like a really nice person" about a woman they didn't know, they really meant "She looks hot and I want to bang her". Was he doing the voice version of that very thing? Was it even possible to want to fuck a voice?

Well, it was certainly possible to want to fuck the person behind a voice. And he didn't even know what Jensen looked like.

Jared had to set his mind on something else besides the DJ, and clearly genomics wasn't cutting it. He flipped open his laptop to check his and Chad's Kickstarter project and calculate the chances of them getting enough pledges to fund a trade paperback of their comic.

"Holy shit, we're getting close," he said out loud. "I think we're gonna do it."

He wondered if Jensen had pledged yet.

He needed to start thinking about how long it might take him to draw sketches in people's books and to finish drawings for the couple of eighty-dollar pledges. He needed to talk to Chad - he wanted to ask how long it would take for the finished books to arrive from the printer, now that it looked like they might get all their requested funding and could actually print the damn things. He had to plan ahead.

He hoped he wouldn't have to put any class or lab work aside for *Haro*. He'd have to TA a class next semester, and he hoped that the comic wouldn't have to take a back seat to school either. Science paid his bills and fed his brain, but drawing fed his soul. He really needed both. He'd cut back on sleep if necessary, so he could have both.

Chad wasn't answering his phone and when Jared tried Excelsior Comics it went to voice mail, so he put on his running shoes and ran down to the store, where Alona, not Chad, sat behind the counter. There were only two other people in the store – a guy with wavy dark brown hair who was quite cute despite his nerdy black-framed glasses and grandpa cardigan, and a little blond boy wearing a bright blue jacket and holding his hand.

"Jared!" Alona said. "Did you ever read *Bone*?"

"Do you think it's appropriate for kids?" the good-looking guy asked, before Jared could answer her.

"I'd say so, yeah," Jared said. The little boy hanging on to the guy's hand looked expectant. Jared figured the boy was his and realized what the point of this whole exercise probably was. "It's a great epic adventure – princesses, evil queens, a big red dragon, a kingdom in danger. Oh, and locusts. It's also really funny and light-hearted. You'll like the stupid, stupid rat creatures." He knew he sure had. "Get the color trades. It was originally published in black and white but I think the color's more interesting for kids. Unless you want to color it in yourself." He winked at the little boy.

"Sacrilege!" Alona gasped.

"What do you think?" Mr Good-Looking-but-Nerdy asked his kid. "Does that sound good?" The little boy nodded. "Color or black and white?"

"Color!" the kid said.

"Color it is. You can read it to Walker and Henry, how does that sound?"

"No, Daddy, you read it!"

"I do voices," Good-Looking-but-Nerdy explained to Alona and Jared, sounding almost apologetic. Jared thought it was really cute that this guy read to his kids with different voices, but before he could say so, the guy asked "What am I looking for?" and when Alona pointed across the counter at the right shelf, he and his son turned to look.

"Do you want some other suggestions?" Jared asked. He hadn't read a lot of kid-appropriate comic books, but he'd hung around Excelsior long enough and listened to enough people that he could still make recommendations, and he liked getting the chance to talk comics with new people. "*Bone's* a classic. It's a great comic to start kids on. When you're ready for superheroes, *Teen Titans* is a pretty good bet – it was a cute cartoon, too – or if you like *Bone*, try *Mouse Guard*. It's also a fantasy comic, although it's completely anthropomorphic – I know, a comic called *Mouse Guard*, it's about mice, what a surprise – it doesn't have dragons but it does have some fight scenes and maybe it's not - "

"Jared," Alona interrupted.

"What?"

"Don't stress him out."

Good-Looking-but-Nerdy was starting to look a little overwhelmed.

"Sorry about that," Jared said. "Here, it's right in front of you." He helpfully walked over, pulled a copy of the appropriate trade paperback of *Bone* off the shelf, and handed it over.

Good-Looking-but-Nerdy thanked him and paid for it, and then he and his kid left. Jared watched Alona watch them leave.

"Straight girls everywhere feel *so* deprived," she sighed. "But he probably makes his boyfriend very happy."

"I didn't think you worked on Thursdays," Jared said. "Where's Chad?"

"Getting lunch. And I don't. I was down here so I came by to say hi and he asked me to man the store while he found something to eat. Oh, you got the new *Chew* yesterday. I put it in your folder."

So Jared paid for it and talked to Alona about things that weren't grad school or lab work, but were rather comic books and cute boys and Pilates and the weird weather and when was Chad going to find himself a nice girlfriend so he'd stop hitting on all the women who came into the store?

"A girlfriend isn't going to stop him," Jared said. "In college he dated this one girl Sophia for two years and still flirted shamelessly with every girl he thought was cute. Even my sister, when she came to visit." He rolled his eyes, remembering. Fortunately he'd warned Megan about Chad, which was good because Chad hadn't taken Jared seriously when Jared had threatened murder if Chad laid a hand on his baby sister.

"And how did that go?"

"About as well as you probably think. I threatened bodily harm, Chad ignored me, Megan

put him off, he persisted, I had to wrestle him to the ground and sit on him."

"I bet he loved that." Alona grinned.

"Who loved what?" Chad asked, appearing in the doorway with a plastic container, which he handed to Alona. "I brought you some baklava for watching the store. Hi, Moose. What are you doing here?"

"Keeping me company," Alona said. "Telling me about your failed attempt to flirt with his sister."

"Did he tell you he almost crushed me to death?"

"Yes." Alona giggled. Jared grinned. Chad sighed, sounding put-upon.

"It's a good thing you're cute," he muttered in Jared's direction.

"I sold a *Bone* trade but otherwise it was pretty quiet," Alona said, "and now that you're here, I can go." She came out from behind the counter and Chad took her place. "Bye, guys. See you later." And she took her baklava and left.

"Still haven't asked her out, huh?" Jared asked. Chad sighed again.

"She won't have me," he said mournfully. "What are you doing here, anyway? Don't you have pages to draw or books to read or something? Cells to divide? When are you going to get your own love life so you can stop mocking mine?"

"I only mock because I care," Jared said cheerfully. "I needed some exercise. And I wanted to know how long it will take to get the books from the printer, if we make our Kickstarter goal."

"I don't know. Couple weeks? Depends on when we send them our file. They'll send us a proof, we'll approve it, they'll send us crates of books. You know we'll probably get our funding, right?"

"That's why I wanted to know. I'm trying to plan ahead for all the sketches I'll have to do. Did I already suggest we put *Haro* on hiatus until I'm done with those?"

"Yeah. It's not a bad idea. You don't want to overextend yourself."

"I'm mostly worried about giving up sleep. Shit, we still need to finalize an idea for the print."

"Finish the layout for the printer first," Chad said. "How are you coming on that, anyway? I know you got all the color covers done. They'll look fucking amazing in print, have I told you that already?"

"Once or twice." Jared grinned, pleased and flattered. "I'm almost finished with the re-lettering. I might take my laptop to the lab tonight so I can get it done. All my experiments are in the 'hurry up, wait' stage, so I have a lot of downtime, and I'm making good progress on the new page."

"Good, good." Chad had turned at least half of his attention to the store computer and was no longer focused on Jared. But Jared didn't mind; he'd gotten an answer to his question, more or less, and he did have other things to do. So he said goodbye to his housemate, did some stretches in the hallway, went up the stairs, held the door for a nicely-built guy in a baseball cap entering the building, and jogged home.

He checked his email when he got back to the house, half expecting something from Dr Helfer, and was subsequently unsurprised that she had emailed him about his project. He composed a response in the shower, typed it up while he ate some waffles and bananas, and forced himself to finish his genomics reading. It never failed to surprise him that no matter what kind of information it was trying to impart, a science textbook could strip out all the really compelling stuff and made it boring as hell, and really hard to focus on.

Welling never showed at the lab, so Jared snagged the appropriately-sized lab coat for once. He turned the radio on around ten and just left it on all night, because he could. He pushed stuff around on his bench to make room for his laptop, and Genevieve hung over his shoulder and watched him re-letter the last couple of pages of *Haro's* first issue. She only asked two questions – why was he doing it (to make the lettering consistent for the trade paperback) and was he going to re-letter the whole thing (no). He didn't mind.

"Are you going to get the money to print it?" she asked when he was finished.

"Looks like it. I'm preparing myself to make a hundred sketches in a hundred books."

"Sounds like fun."

Jared shrugged. It sounded like work, was what it sounded like. But the idea of getting to sketch a hundred different things for a hundred different people was kind of exciting, and wasn't that why he'd agreed to draw Chad's comic in the first place? To hone his drawing chops, sure, but to do this thing he really enjoyed that he was pretty good at, and to share it with other people?

His thoughts started drifting towards cover designs and the mystery print, and he dragged them back. He turned the radio up to help him concentrate on science instead.

This one's for the Helfer Lab at MIT. The Boss, on WBBR.

The intro to Bruce Springsteen's "Tunnel of Love" floated out of the radio. Jared shot a look at Genevieve, who was now sitting in front of the hood with an expression of utmost innocence on her face. She had clearly been taking lessons from Danneel.

Helper Lab is full of matchmakers, Jared texted Jensen Ross. Cells and virii, living together! Oh, the cellularity!

Heh! Jensen texted back. Funny guy.

Didn't I say I only used my powers for good? :) I think my friends are trying to set me up.

Any luck?

I don't know, I haven't met him yet. But they're persistent.

If they're really your friends, you shouldn't worry.

I just wish they'd leave me alone for 10 minutes. :/ I gotta get back to work.

Cells and virii, living together. :) Talk to you later!

Jared realized Jensen Ross either hadn't noticed or didn't care that he talked about being set up with a guy. That could be a good sign.

* * *

Jared had been asleep for a whopping four hours when he was woken up by Sadie jumping on his bed, then Harley, then Chad. Unfortunately for Chad, by the time it was his turn Jared had woken up enough to give him a shove and push him off the bed as soon as he landed on it.

"We did it!" Chad announced gleefully, unfazed at having been shoved. Jared was too busy trying to get his dogs off the bed – and too annoyed at having been so rudely awakened – to even think about what Chad was saying.

"Did you hear me?" Chad went on. "We got the funding for *Haro!* Kickstarter came through for us! We even got a little over!"

Jared's brain finally caught up. "No shit."

"No shit! We can print it, color pages and everything! I gotta talk to the printer, nail down the final cost and print schedule and everything, and then I gotta email everyone who pledged – shit, I gotta call my dad." He bounced out of the room. Jared stared at the doorway, then set his alarm clock for two hours later, and went back to sleep.

Chad was busily typing away on his laptop when Jared finally made his way downstairs for breakfast – the first meal of the day was always breakfast, even if it was at noon – and they spent the next couple of hours talking printing and shipping and sketching and pledge rewards, and then Jared remembered he actually had a class to get to.

He slid into genomics five minutes late, causing Dr Whitfield to interrupt himself mid-sentence to say, "So good of you to join us, Mr Padalecki," in a dry voice that made someone giggle.

"Sorry," Jared muttered. Luckily there was an empty seat next to Grace who was sitting near the door, so he didn't have to embarrass himself further trying to find a spot. It was bad enough trying to be quiet as he unpacked his stuff and found a pencil.

"Where were you?" Grace whispered.

"Chad and I made our Kickstarter goal," he whispered back.

"Miss Park," Dr Whitfield said. "Let him be."

"Sorry," she said, turning back to her netbook. Next to her Jared felt like a luddite still taking notes with pencil and paper. She took the pencil and wrote "Congrats!" on his notes.

After class was over, as they were packing up, Grace mentioned to Jared that she and her girlfriend were having a Halloween party and he was invited.

"Saturday night," she said, taking his notebook and writing her address on the back. "Here. It starts about eight, so Larisa can show all the Evil Dead movies. It'll be fun. Wear a costume."

"Will you still let me in if I don't?"

"No." She grinned.

It snowed on Saturday, heavy wet flakes that were not that far removed from rain, and Jared dressed up as Thor – Marvel movie version, thanks to a really good costume rental place – and begged Chad for a ride to Grace's Halloween party.

It was a nerdy party, as Jared realized not five minutes after he arrived, when a skinny guy dressed as Loki (also Marvel movie version) cried "Brother!" and threw his arms around Jared's waist, much to the amusement of the people watching. After two beers he found himself deep in conversation about Dr Who with a girl dressed as the Ninth Doctor and a guy dressed as Ten, and halfway through his fourth beer he realized he hadn't made any provisions for getting home.

He was pretty sure if he called Chad, Chad would laugh at him and say no. And that was assuming Chad even picked up his phone. Jared couldn't remember where Chad had gone, and to be honest he couldn't even remember if he'd ever told him, but he felt secure in assuming that wherever it was, there would be at least one girl Chad deemed worthy of his dubious charms.

Grace got one of her girlfriend's friends to drive Jared home. Jared wondered if this particular guy had been pressed into chauffeur service because he was cute and had come to the party dressed as Jack Harkness, and Jared had admitted a weakness for Torchwood in Grace's hearing.

They chatted in the car, and the guy had a nice voice but, well, he wasn't Jensen Ross. Even if he was cute and Jared's kind of geek, and even if both of them seemed to think Grace and her girlfriend were maybe-possibly trying to set them up.

"She thinks you need to get laid," was Chad's comment the next afternoon. "I think she's right."

For Halloween itself, Jared overbought on candy and Chad took the mini Snickers and little packs of Skittles to Excelsior Comics. That still left a couple of bags, not to mention four feet of sour gummy roll-up that Jared had acquired on Sunday. He wore his Thor costume to class, but with an additional horned Viking helmet because why not, then went home and read immunology articles on his laptop while he waited for the little kids in costume to show up. Harley and Sadie went bugnuts every time someone rang the doorbell, so he finally had to drag them upstairs and shut them in his room.

He even went to the lab still in costume, which turned out to not be such a brilliant idea when he couldn't get a lab coat on over his cape and "armor".

"Who are you supposed to be?" Welling asked, giving Jared the once-over before turning to the microscope.

"What do you mean, who am I supposed to be?" Jared demanded. Had Welling been living under a rock? Everyone knew Thor!

"He's supposed to be Thor," Genevieve commented from her bench. She went on, apparently to herself, "He's Thor? I'm tho thore I can hardly walk."

Jared stared at her, trying to parse the pun and adjust to the fact that she'd said it – it sounded more like something Danneel would say - and then he threw back his head and laughed. Genevieve just looked pleased with herself.

"Why am I the only one in costume?" he asked.

"I didn't have time."

"Mike tried to convince me to be Superman," Welling said. "He destroyed two shirts trying to get the S on them, and then he lost patience. Oh, *fuck*."

"What happened?"

"All my fucking cells died." He looked up from the microscope, his face a combination of

surprise and confusion and annoyance. "Don't say sabotage."

"Maybe it was the medium," Jared suggested. He'd had that happen once, that an entire batch of cells choked and died, and it turned out that the medium in which they'd been ostensibly growing was contaminated.

Danneel said the same thing after she came in, adding "It happens to everyone eventually, Tomtom. Make a note of what you did. It's not the end of the world."

"Dr Helfer's going to act like it is," Genevieve said. "Maybe it is sabotage."

"Contaminated medium," Jared and Danneel said together. Danneel giggled and poked Jared in the arm.

"Poke poke, buy me a Coke," she told him. "It's almost midnight. Why aren't you listening to your radio station?"

"Too busy soothing Welling's fragile nerves." He grinned across the lab at Welling, who still looked baffled and upset. Jared held up his phone. "I got earbuds. Don't worry." He had to untangle them, but he could wear them with his horned Viking helmet still on. He really had to look into buying his own lab coat, though.

Jensen the DJ ran through a lot of Halloween-themed music while Jared worked on his project and drew his comic during lulls in activity, and the rest of his fellow lab rats did their own things.

Maybe you can tell from all the spooky music, but I really like Halloween. You get to dress up and be someone else, you have an excuse to watch terrible horror movies – not that you should ever need an excuse – you can eat lots of candy, and little kids in costume are cute. My nephew's just old enough to take trick-or-treating. He's the best-looking strawberry in the neighborhood, let me tell you. Me, I'm Captain America. Got the shield and everything. I almost look like the guy in the movie.

Jared took a moment to contemplate that. He'd thought Chris Evans was pretty hot, but Jensen had the voice. His eyes flicked up to where he could just see the edge of his helmet. They were short a few Avengers – too bad Welling hadn't wanted to be Iron Man or the Hulk or Hawkeye, although Superman was almost close enough. Jared knew he could've talked Danneel or Genevieve into being Pepper Potts, and if he'd thought of it and been persistent enough, he could've probably convinced one of them to be Black Widow, too.

That'll be the curiosity question for tonight – how's your Halloween? Did you get trick-or-treaters? Did you go to work or school or just leave your house in costume? I had to go to the store and the guys behind the cheese counter were wearing mouse ears. So drop me a line and tell me about it. I'm Jensen Ross, your Halloween host, and this is Blue Oyster Cult on WBBR.

Jared was texting the station when Danneel walked by and paused long enough to shake his helmet by the horns. He batted her hands away and she just laughed.

Looks like not a lot of trick-or-treaters out earlier, resulting in a lot of households with a lot of extra candy. Worse things could happen. Costume-wise we have some Gryffindors and a Hufflepuff, a couple of zombies, two Spongebobs – one adult and one toddler – vampires, a zombie pirate, a caffeine molecule, an attempted murder which seems to be two women dressed as crows – punny, but kind of obscure - a Freudian slip, Charles Dickens, Batgirl and three Robins, and Thor. Avengers assemble!

Jared snickered. In the margin of his comic page, he drew a little stick-figure Thor wearing a horned Viking helmet and carrying his hammer, and under that, a stick-figure Captain America holding his star-and-stripes shield. Jared wondered if he could take a picture of the stick figures with his phone and send it to Jensen, or would that be too weird and suggestive? He took the picture anyway, and then decided what the hell, it was for Halloween, and sent it.

Now I'm going to have a snack while you guys get some music. The next eight minutes are brought to you by Sooner's in Inman Square, with the best pit barbecue north of the Mason-Dixon Line. If you go, ask for Christian. Tell him Jensen sent you. He'll hook you up. This one's for you, man.

Jared made a mental note to drag someone out there with him, although he never needed an excuse to stuff his face with barbecue.

His phone buzzed and when he looked down, there was a reply text from Jensen Ross:

We're cute! Now you just need to draw the rest of us. :)

It took Jared fifteen minutes to get over the fact that Jensen had said they were cute, and by then he needed the hood because he was working with a virus. and the moment to send another little sketch had passed.



* * *

"You know what," Chad said, "now that we're going to have an actual book to sell, we can start going to cons. We could make up some less expensive merch – more prints, single issues, I don't even know. Maybe I can squeeze a few more books out of the printer. We missed all the good cons this year, but we can still prepare for next year. Actually, it's better this way. We can plan ahead."

Jared looked up from the couch where he was trying to read for his enzymes class. Chad was pacing back and forth across the living room floor, only talking to himself because Jared wasn't really listening.

"Are you listening to me?" Chad demanded, stopping to stare at Jared.

"Uh. Not really?" Jared held up his book. "Class, studying, not falling behind and failing out, you know."

"We should talk about this. There's a con for web comics out in Northampton – I don't think it's a big one but I might be thinking of something else – there's Stumptown, there's a couple

in Canada – we could even drive to those – "

"I can't." Any farther than Montreal was too far to drive. If you couldn't do it in a weekend, and Jared was pretty sure Chad was talking about a con in Toronto, and Toronto was too far to drive in a weekend, he couldn't go. As much as he loved *Haro* and loved the idea of meeting and talking to fans, he didn't want to lose any days of lab until he was guaranteed a spot in the PhD program. He could draw at home. He couldn't jeopardize his scientific future.

"You can drive to Montreal. Oh, there's Emerald City, that's a good one. I know it's in Seattle, that's why we start saving now." He grinned brightly.

"Unless there's one during my vacation, I don't have time to go to a con. Not until after classes end."

"If I suddenly came into two tickets for San Diego you'd turn one down?"

"That's different. Comicon's in July. I won't have class."

"No class, Moose, that's you." He grinned and Jared reached for a couch cushion to throw at him. "Like I said, we gotta start planning early. You're done with the layout for the trade, right?"

"I have a draft. I gave it to you yesterday. It should be on your computer. Go look." Jared waved vaguely at the back room which they had set up as their *Haro* office. That was where the scanner lived, as well as Chad's desktop with its giant monitor and his stacks and stacks of notes and comic scripts and printouts and photocopies of research. He'd even set up a filing system for the individual comic book pages, as a way to archive them once they'd been scanned.

It was a mess of a room, but Chad and Jared could always find what they needed. Well, at least Chad could. Sometimes it took Jared a couple of attempts.

"If you're really pressed for time I can ask Gabe to clean it up," Chad called over his shoulder as he went into the office, ideally to check Jared's work right this second so they'd both know how much work it still needed before they could send the file to the printer.

Jared realized he wouldn't be able to get anything done with Chad bouncing around and talking at him and looking over his shoulder. He pushed himself off the couch, packed up his laptop and notebooks and textbooks, put on his shoes and coat, and left. In the middle of the day there was usually a free table at the Diesel Café, and Jared was okay with spending money on coffee and something to eat if it meant he'd have a few uninterrupted hours to get shit done, especially if he was lucky enough to score a booth.

He was engrossed in the reading for his enzymes class when he was (rudely, he thought) interrupted by someone sliding into the seat across the table from him.

"Jared!" the someone said. "I thought it was you!"

Jared looked up, annoyance replaced by curiosity at the cute blond guy now sitting across from him and holding a paper coffee cup. They'd gone to college together. "Justin?" he said. "What are you doing here?"

"Luck!"

"What are you doing in Boston?"

"Working."

"Doing what? And please give me a full sentence this time so I don't have to keep asking you questions," Jared said, getting more and more curious. A mutual friend had tried to set them up but Justin was more attracted to business majors in suits, and blonds weren't Jared's type. But they'd been friends.

Justin had gone to St Louis after graduation and they'd lost touch, and Jared hadn't thought too much about what he was doing. And now he was back in Boston.

Justin just grinned at Jared's annoyance. "I got a job with a non-profit in Cambridge, I start next week, I'm staying with a friend in Arlington until I can get into my new place, I came in here to get a coffee" – he lifted the cup – "and I knew you were living around here somewhere so I was kind of hoping I'd run into you eventually. And you're... studying? I heard you got into MIT."

"I did. Microbiology. Immunology. How detailed do you want me to get?"

"How many details do you think I'll understand?" He grinned. Justin had never been very science-minded. "Do you like it? You were always kind of a science nerd."

"I really do, yeah. But it's a lot of work." He spread his arm, indicating the pile of books and papers on the table.

"You ever have any free time for old friends?" Another grin, and Jared found himself grinning back. He'd liked Justin, and it never hurt to have another person around to talk to and do fun things with. He didn't imagine Justin would be any more interesting in dating than he had been in college, and considering Jared didn't think he really had time for a boyfriend anyway, that was ok.

"Do you still draw?" Justin asked, sipping his coffee. "You were good."

"I hope I still am. You remember Chad, right? We're doing a web comic. He writes, I draw. It's called *Haro*. I'm really proud of it."

"Yeah? Cool. I'll check it out." He took another drink. "So. You have a boyfriend?"

"No." He could hear Danneel in his head telling him he had a radio boyfriend, he just needed to *call him*. But Justin didn't need to know about Jensen. "Why?"

"Just curious. I left my guy in St Louis, but he's looking for a job up here so he can join me. I thought might be fun to double-date when he gets here."

"I'm not sure I really have time for a relationship."

Now he could hear Genevieve telling him that he had time to text a DJ.

"That's a bummer," Justin said. "You're a good guy. You should have someone to come home to."

Jared didn't know how to respond to that. He didn't remember Justin as being much of a matchmaker type. Was it something in the air? Everyone seemed to think he needed someone.

"You look really busy," Justin went on. "I don't want to keep you. Do I have your number? We should get together sometime and do something. Guy stuff. No talking about boys." He winked.

"That'd be cool," Jared said. He ripped off the corner of a notebook page and scribbled his cell number on it. "There. I might still have yours."

Justin took the scrap of paper and called Jared's phone. "Now you do for sure." He grinned. He was still cute, although still not Jared's type. "Ok, we're cool. I'll let you go back to your exciting science. We'll talk. We'll hang."

Justin slid out of the booth and grabbed his coffee. Jared slid out after him and gave him a hug.

"I'm really glad I ran into you," Justin said, after they pulled apart. "It's good to know someone else up here."

"Yeah, me too. I can't guarantee I'll have a lot of time to hang out, but I'm always free for coffee and food."

"It's good to know that hasn't changed. Take care." Justin lifted his cup in goodbye and walked out. Jared sat back down, contemplated his homework, and went back to it.

He looked up after a while to rest his eyes – he really wanted to redraw some of the diagrams in this book, because they were hard to read – and was just in time to watch a really good-looking guy with short medium-brown hair pour some milk into a takeout coffee cup, stir it, sip it, and leave. Jared was a little disappointed that all his hot guy sightings were so brief,

although he was pleased that the Universe apparently had no problem sending attractive men across his field of vision.

A couple of days later he got a text from Justin: *Suddenly have an extra ticket for Airborne Toxic Event on Weds, wanna go?*

Jared thought about it. He hadn't seen a band in a long time, but could he really take off? He had so much work to do. But he could come into the lab after the show, and just stay longer to try and make up for the missing hours. He'd be wired anyway, he may as well put the energy to good use. Or he could put in the extra work before the concert, or over the weekend. He hated having to give up any more of his weekend, but if that was the price he had to pay.

Danneel said he should go. Genevieve wasn't convinced. Welling didn't particularly like the Airborne Toxic Event, so his answer was a fairly obvious "Don't bother."

Welling went home shortly after midnight, and Jared turned the radio on. He didn't think the music or Jensen's sexy voice would help him come to a decision, but anything was possible.

That was the Airborne Toxic Event with 'Changes'. They're playing House of Blues next Wednesday – listen to Mark and Seb in the morning for a chance to win tickets. Maybe I'll see you there.

"Sounds like your favorite DJ's going to the show," Danneel called. "I think the universe is giving you a hint."

"I'm convinced," Genevieve added.

Jared wrote himself a note in his phone: *call Justin about tickets, say yes.* Justin didn't need to know what had made up Jared's mind.

He remembered to call just as he was sitting down in his Friday class, wrote himself another note so he'd remember to call after class, and then completely forgot until he was in the grocery store watching someone answer his phone. The someone was standing almost in front of the Lucky Charms, but he seemed engrossed in his conversation and Jared didn't want to interrupt him to tell him to move out of the way.

"Tell him I can't get him tickets," the guy was saying. "Not even if he – what are you telling people, man?" He sounded amused and Jared could see him grinning. His face was familiar, his voice more so.

Jared squatted down and pretended to study the nutritional information on a box of Lucky Charms and tried to convince himself that he wasn't spying on this guy's conversation. And then a box fell on his head, and the guy was apologizing to him and asking if he was ok and saying into his phone "I just dropped Corn Flakes on someone, I gotta go."

"I'm ok," Jared said, picking up the box that had fallen on him and handing it up. The guy put it in his cart, offered his hand, and helped Jared to his feet.

"You sure?"

"I'm sure. It's just a box of cereal. It's the oatmeal you really gotta watch out for." He put his Lucky Charms in his basket and sized the other guy up. He had a good-looking, almost pretty face – short medium brown hair, freckles, crinkles in the corners of his green eyes. He was a little shorter than Jared, wearing a dark blue coat and jeans and well-worn boots, and his grocery cart contained a few bags of produce, two cartons of eggs, a bottle of V-8, and now a box of Corn Flakes.

The blue coat did it – he looked like the hot guy Jared kept seeing, the jogger in the blue t-shirt who Jared now realized had been the familiar face adding milk to his coffee at the Diesel.

"Ok. Good. I'm really sorry about that." He pushed his cart down the aisle and around the corner before Jared could think of what to say, besides "I keep seeing you everywhere in my neighborhood!" And then it hit Jared who he sounded like.

His favorite overnight DJ. Jensen Ross.

Holy shit.

Jared ran down the aisle and looked in both directions, then looked down the next aisle, but the guy had disappeared. How did you lose someone pushing a cart in a nearly empty grocery store? How was it even possible that Jensen was the hot guy who kept crossing Jared's path? Wishful thinking, clearly. That was just too much of a coincidence to be true. But it seemed like a sign. He called Justin.

"I'll take that ticket to Airborne Toxic Event," he told Justin's voicemail. "Let me know how much I owe you."

Jared was sitting at the dining room table sketching Hot Runner Guy as various potential characters for the web comic when Chad came home, peered over his shoulder, and asked "Who's that?"

"Someone I thought we could put in *Haro*," Jared said.

"Doesn't look like anyone I have in mind. He's someone you saw on the street, isn't he."

"I ran into him at Shaw's. He dropped a box of cereal on my head." Chad raised an eyebrow. "I saw him at the Diesel, too. And jogging around the neighborhood. He sounds like the DJ I listen to at work." The eyebrow rose a little higher. "No, it's not actually him. That would be too weird and coincidental. That kind of shit happens in the movies, not real life." Now Chad was smirking. "Oh shut up."

"Did I say anything? I said nothing." Chad picked up the piece of paper Jared was drawing on and peered at it. "He's kinda hot. I can see why you want to draw him."

"I think he'd make a good cowboy. Or another gunslinger. He's got the potential for a been-out-in-the-sun-too-much kinda face. And anyway, Haro needs some colleagues in the alternate West. I still think we should put more characters in both worlds." He pulled the piece of paper out of Chad's hand and spread it out on the table. The only problem with drawing Hot Runner Guy as a cowboy was that he'd have to wear his hat pushed back so people could see his face. He had a really nice-looking face.

"So he'd be a cowboy in one world and, what, a cop in the other?"

"Social services guy. Like the guy with the van who drives around Haro's neighborhood at night giving out coffee and doughnuts and sandwiches."

"A do-gooder." Chad pulled out a dining room chair and sat down. "Ok. I can run with that. But you just want the same people showing up both places so you don't have to keep coming up with new character designs."

"You know I just draw people I know," Jared said. He'd already drawn Dr Helfer as an administrator at a shelter, and Dr Whitfield as a trapper, not to mention the brief appearances of women wearing both Danneel's and Genevieve's faces, or the crowd scenes where he'd managed to work Welling in somewhere. "I can still mine both our families for inspiration." He'd made his brother a saloon-keeper and his mom a social worker, and Chad's grandmother had made an appearance in one of Haro's flashbacks. Jared wasn't worried about running out of character avatars any time soon.

* * *

On Sunday, even though he had other things to do, Jared went into Allston for Dr Sketchy's Anti-Art School, as Kat had suggested weeks and weeks ago, so he could sit in a bar and draw a live model for a couple of hours. He'd been to Great Scott to see bands a few times in college, and it looked different with artists and a random photographer sitting on folding chairs busily sketching (or photographing) a girl in various stages of burlesque-y undress. The model changed poses every ten or fifteen minutes, which was about what Jared was used to from previous studio sessions with live models, but he was also more used to completely naked models - rather than this girl in her high heels, fishnets, and pasties - or models wearing draped fabric, posing for quiet, earnest artists.

Not that the crowd for Dr Sketchy's wasn't earnest - everyone seemed pretty serious about their drawing - but, well, it was in a bar, and they were encouraged to buy drinks, and there was background music for the model, and after the session was over she and the MC gave out prizes for what they considered the best drawings.

Jared didn't know if this girl was Kat's friend, and he didn't see Kat at all, but he liked

drawing her and it got him out of the house. He probably could have spent that time doing something more productive (reading, studying, trying to organize his lab notes, working on a finished drawing for one of the three people who'd actually pledged eighty bucks for the Kickstarter), but drawing things that weren't *Haro* got him energized to draw things that were.

He went home to find that Chad had taped to the living room wall a timeline of all their commitments to the people who'd funded their comic, plus their commitments to the printer and the printer's commitments to them. Jared pulled a pencil out of the shoulder bag he'd taken to Dr Sketchy's and started adding class and lab commitments as well.

To be fair, he'd always known that he was in for much more work if they got the money to print their comic, so it wasn't as if any of this was a surprise.

"And see," Chad pointed out later, "right here, it says 'Jared introduces himself to his mystery boyfriend.'" He grinned, looking both pleased with himself and aware of what a brat he was being.

"Funny," Jared said dryly. "When are the books being delivered?" Chad had sent the layout file to the printer yesterday.

"We should get the proof copy in a month, maybe six weeks. You'll know when they arrive. The house will suddenly be full of boxes."

"I'm trying to plan ahead."

"That's pretty far ahead. Kick back and relax. You can't start sketching in the books until we get the books." Chad's expression and tone of voice seemed to add *You should know that, so why are you worried*. "We've only got one more update for the current chapter but I think it's too early to go on hiatus. Now you can start drawing for the big rewards. Make the PDF – we could send that out."

"Shouldn't we wait for the proof? What if I have to make corrections to it?" Jared tapped the timeline where Chad had written *T-Day! Stuff face!*, wondering if the lab was going to be open that Friday, and if so, would it be worth it to try and go in during the day.

"Don't stress out, Moose," Chad said, patting Jared on the shoulder. "The fans will be patient with you." Sadie wandered into the room and butted against Jared's leg, her second-favorite way to announce that she needed to either eat or pee. Her first favorite way, of course, was to stand next to her bowl or the back door and bark. "Sadie, not so much."

Jared took her and Harley for a walk, only ran into one other dog-walker – a middle-aged man with a middle-aged cocker spaniel – but sadly not Hot Runner Guy, and by the time he got home, Chad had left. Small favors.

"Don't stress," Danneel told him calmly Tuesday night, "you have your concert tomorrow

and Thanksgiving in a couple weeks and a month after that is Christmas break and you can spend all your time doing nothing. You said it would take six weeks, right?"

"For the proof, yeah. And then we have to check it for mistakes and send it back, and Chad thinks a couple weeks after that before the books show up at the house. And by then it's next year." He counted weeks on his fingers just to be sure. He really didn't have to freak out about the time crunch just yet.

"Aren't you TA'ing next semester?" Welling asked.

Shit. Jared added that to what was no doubt going to be a ridiculous schedule. Danneel and Genevieve could tease him about Jensen Ross all they wanted, and Chad could tease him about Hot Runner Guy, but it was clear Jared was just not going to have time for a boyfriend.

"How do I get myself into these things?" he muttered.

"How many sketches will you have to do?" Genevieve asked from her bench.

"A hundred and thirty-two."

Danneel whistled, impressed.

"That's just the twenty-five-dollar reward," Jared went on. "Add another ten, I think, for the people who pledged sixty-five bucks."

"I'm not in a hurry to get mine, if that helps," Danneel told him. "I mean, once they finally show up."

"And I just got the book," Genevieve said. "So you don't have to draw me anything."

"Turn the radio up," Danneel told her. "If anything will cheer up emo panda here, it's that." She batted her eyelashes at him and he blew her a kiss.

You just heard the first single off Jack White's first solo album, which is scheduled to drop next year. I can't wait. It's gonna be amazing. And before that was "Lonely Boy", a dedication from Mayhem to Moose. It's like 80s radio around here tonight. You guys crack me up.

Jensen Ross chuckled over the radio. Jared promised himself that he'd wake Chad up when he got home to give him the noogie of all noogies. But Danneel was right – Jensen's voice did cheer him up, or at least calm him down.

At 3:30 Jared answered the DJ's nightly check-in question with *Jared is splitting cells and getting psyched to see Airborne Toxic Event tomorrow.*

What a coincidence. Me, too, Jensen texted back. *Not the cells, though. Maybe I'll see you*

there. I'll stand onstage and yell "Jared the cell guy!" and whoever answers will be you. :)

Less embarrassing for you: I'll be the really tall guy who needs a haircut.

"What are you looking so pleased about?" Genevieve asked. Jared just held up his phone, grinning. "Besides that. It's a good conversation, huh? Why don't you just call the guy?"

"You sound like Danny."

"It's a legitimate question."

"I sound like too much of a doofus on the phone. I can get away with being a dork in text."

"You're very strange." She went back to work and Jared looked at his phone, where Jensen had texted *Should I bring shears?*

Shears? Jared replied.

Scissors? If you need a haircut that badly.

Ha! No. I'd never hear the end of it if I let a non-professional cut my hair.

I'm a professional! Just not a professional hairdresser. ;) I'll let you get back to work. Should be a good show tomorrow.

I'll look for you.

I'll be the one who looks like a DJ. :)

That didn't really help Jared, but he liked knowing that Jensen Ross apparently maybe sort of kind of wanted to meet him too. He wished he knew what the guy looked like, so he could at least try to find him at the concert the next night. Jared's height gave him a slight advantage finding people in a crowd, and they even stood on the balcony because Justin's friend Allison wanted to, thus giving him a good view of the audience.

There was no chance of finding the DJ, but Jared did see someone by the bar who looked so much like Hot Runner Guy that he was sorely tempted to approach him. He was stopped partly by the crush of people, and partly by, of all things, the completely unexpected concern that he'd be cheating on Jensen Ross. But by the time he'd convinced himself that that was stupid, Hot Runner Guy had vanished.

The bands were good and the crowd was responsive and the headliner's lead singer closed out the show by telling everyone to go home and make beautiful Boston babies, which made both Justin and Jared laugh, and Jared considered it a good night out, despite his idiotic hesitancy over Hot Runner Guy.

He arrived at the lab wired and exhausted and completely unable to concentrate, and after an hour Welling suggested he take a walk through the building to burn off some excess energy. Danneel and Genevieve both said he needed a nap. So he took all of their advice, pacing up and down the empty echoing corridors listening to the radio on his phone (and passing Dr F once, who waved) and eventually stopping in the lounge with the good vending machines. He knew he'd be hungry later, and it was always nice to have snacks so close to hand. He stretched out on the longest couch, didn't even bother taking off his shoes, and fell asleep to Jensen Ross giving an abbreviated news and weather report in his ear.

He slept for almost an hour, waking up momentarily confused as to why he was lying on a couch in a student lounge. One of his earbuds had fallen out and now he realized he was listening to Aerosmith in mono. He grinned to himself, stretched, readjusted himself and his phone and earbuds, stood up, and went back to the lab.

Welling had gone home and the girls had turned the radio on, and as Jared walked into the lab, Jensen was talking about the concert and introducing a song by the opening band.

"Too bad you didn't see him," Danneel commented. "A rock concert probably isn't the best place to profess your undying love, though."

"Did you check my cells?" Jared asked Genevieve, ignoring her.

"Yes," she said. "I split them too. And reset your alarm." She pointed to his bench. "You have like ten minutes and I have to wash mine."

"You're a treasure."

"I know."

He didn't even check his phone until he went to text *Jared's finally busy! Washing cells!* for the nightly check-in and noticed that Jensen had sent him a message earlier, evidently while he was napping:

Too many tall guys at HoB! Hope you enjoyed the show. :)

Loved it! Jared sent back. Wish we'd seen each other, though.

Jensen didn't answer, but Jared figured he was probably too busy. He could understand.

* * *

Jared sat in his research seminar listening with half an ear as one of the PhD candidates presented a paper she'd had published in a scientific journal. He doodled through her presentation and for the first ten minutes of everyone else ripping into her research, and even though this was what the seminar was for – analyzing and critiquing published papers in a theoretical attempt to learn how to better conduct and write up one's own research – and it

had always been pretty brutal, today for some reason it struck Jared as kind of mean. He knew he'd be up there someday, presenting his research and letting his fellow grad students tear it apart, and for once he just wasn't interested in learning through critical discussion.

"I think I'm burning out," he admitted to Genevieve afterward. She'd sat next to him and had watched him doodle without saying anything, which made him feel relieved – someone else wasn't paying attention either – and grateful, because she hadn't drawn any attention to him. There were enough people in the seminar that he could zone out without anyone noticing.

"You and me both," she said.

"Do you ever wonder if grad school was a mistake?"

"Sometimes." She shrugged. "I think Dr Helfer's letting up, though. Either that or I'm just getting used to her. I met with Dr Ferris yesterday – she's on my thesis committee – and she told me not to sweat it. Those were her exact words – 'Don't sweat it'. So I'm trying not to."

"Oh," Jared said. "I'm not screwing up my project any more than usual, but I still have *Haro*. We're not going to put it on hiatus until we get the trades from the printer. So I'm still stuck to a schedule. Plus, I have to get my whole thesis committee together before Dr Williams will meet with me. I already talked to Dr Whitfield, and you know Dr Helfer's always got an eye on us, but he said it would be better for me to do it this way. But scheduling everyone at the same time is like herding cats. Fucking scientists." He snorted, annoyed.

"I'm going to sound like Danneel and you have to promise not to make a bitchface at me, but cheer up, emo panda."

Jared chuckled. Grace had told him horror stories about her lab, and every single one of them made him glad he worked with the people he did.

It didn't keep him from wishing there was a little less work, though. Especially since there was *still* always someone using the hood when he needed it.

"Hey. Jared," Welling hissed, beckoning Jared over to where he was sitting.

"What's up?"

Welling pulled a little black box out of his lab coat pocket and opened it. Inside was what looked suspiciously like an engagement ring, but with a sapphire in the center instead of a diamond.

"Aww, Tomtom," Jared cooed, batting his eyelashes. "You shouldn't have." He wiggled his pinky. "But I think it's too small."

"Shut up. Do you think Jamie will like it?"

"I'm sure she will. I'm probably the wrong person to ask, though."

"Danneel will just give me advice. I don't need any more advice." He dropped his voice.
"I'm really nervous about this. What if she says no?"

"Tom. Don't be stupid. Why would she say no?"

"I don't know!"

"Don't worry about it. Jamie loves you. Congratulations in advance." He clapped Welling on the shoulder. "And if she won't marry you, you can sic Danny and Gen on her."

They both went back work and a couple of hours later Jared was washing cells and listening to the radio on his phone when Danneel poked him in the shoulder to get his attention. He pulled out one of the earbuds and she said "Gen and I just saw Welling walking up and down the hallway talking to himself. What's up with that? He looks like Crazy Dr F."

"He's gonna propose to Jamie," Jared told her. "He must be practicing what to say."

"But I thought he and Mike – " Genevieve said, flapping a hand to indicate the rest of the sentence.

"Oh, he and Mike, definitely," Danneel said. When Genevieve looked a little confused, she added "Threesome."

"Ohhh."

Jared wasn't 100% sure he wanted that mental image – Tom was a good-looking guy, Jamie was pretty, and Mike had been growing out his hair so he was actually kind of cute now – but it seemed like an embarrassing invasion of privacy to imagine his friends' sex lives. Genevieve and Danneel ran with it, trying to determine what a three-person wedding would be like and how would you seat people in the church – bride's side, groom's side, other groom's side? – and would it throw off the number of attendants to have two grooms' worth of groomsmen vs. one bride's worth of bridesmaids and what if you wanted a really traditional ceremony? And would they just get a room with a king-size bed on their honeymoon? Because it wouldn't be fair to make one of them sleep alone. Jared put his earbud back in and let them chatter. He could hear them over the music, anyway.
Children by the millions wait for Alex Chilton. You're listening to the Replacements on 92.7 WBBR.

Jared's phone battery was dying but much to his great relief, Welling reappeared and started packing up his stuff to leave. As soon as he was out of the lab, the radio was going on.

When the nightly what-are-you-up-to poll rolled around, Jared was alone in the lab and because he was getting tired of texting, he figured he'd actually call the station. He'd done it before, and by now he felt familiar enough with the Dh that calling would be the next logical

step in their relationship. Although thinking of it as a relationship made him a little nervous – he didn't know enough about Jensen Ross to know how that would be received.

But Jensen hadn't seemed at all averse to being friends, at least, and really, Jared just wanted to hear the DJ's voice in his ear, talking directly to him.

"This is Jensen Ross, WBBR. Tell me who you are and what you're doing."

"This is Jared and I'm questioning my career path."

"That sucks. I thought your career path was interesting. Why are you questioning? Too much cell massage? Or not enough?"

Jensen did not sound surprised to hear from him, and in fact sounded almost as if they were just continuing a conversation they'd had yesterday. Jared took that as a good sign.

"Too much lab, maybe," he said. "I don't know. We have to do these seminars where we critique each others' research papers. It's supposed to help us write up and present our own research later on, but it can get really cutthroat and kind of mean. It's not even useful critique any more, it's just ripping someone a new one because you can, because someone did it to you. Or because you know they're going to in the future. I don't think I'm cut out for that."

"You never struck me as an asshole, no."

"So there's that. And lab work's boring, I know I've said that before, and – shit, dude, did I tell you my comic got funded?"

"The Kickstarter. Yeah, I know." Jared could almost hear a grin in Jensen Ross' voice. "I pledged twenty-five bucks."

"No shit!" Jared cried, surprised and thrilled and oddly flattered. "You get a sketch! Tell me what you want me to draw – I'll draw you anything."

"Draw me as a cowboy."

"Seriously? I don't even know what you look like."

"Draw yourself as a cowboy, then."

Oh, now Jensen was just teasing him.

"I'm kidding," Jensen said. "I don't know what I want. I'll think about it and let you know. How many books did people order?"

"A hundred and thirty-two. More, but that's how many twenty-five-dollar pledges we got. I'll have to start sketching as soon as they come in. We're going to put the comic on hiatus

until I'm done, but I'll still have class and lab and next semester I even have to TA. I might have time to sleep."

"That's a lot of work. All I have to do is sit behind a desk and wear headphones and play music. And make ads."

"Ads for what?"

"Station ads. Like, musicians saying 'I'm So-and-so and you're listening to 92.7 WBBR'. I put those together."

"Sounds kind of cool."

"I hate to do this," Jensen said, "but I gotta put you on hold." He sounded genuinely apologetic. "It's time to share the poll results. You want to make a request? Think about it while I do this." And then he put Jared on hold before Jared could say anything.

Genevieve wandered back into the lab during Jensen's poll results, looked curiously at Jared, and then smiled to herself.

"Make a request," Jared told her, pointing to the radio.

"That Adele song," she said. "Rumour Has It."

So when Jensen Ross came back to the phone, Jared repeated the request and added "Play it for Gen."

"Play it for Helfer lab!" Genevieve called across the lab.

"I heard that," Jensen said, chuckling. "Will do."

Jared took his phone out into the hallway so he could continue the conversation without either distracting Genevieve or inspiring her to make cracks about his DJ, and he and Jensen Ross talked for a good half hour about the lab and immunology and overwork and *Haro* and music and what to order that wasn't on the menu at Sooner's, which turned out to be owned by Jensen's best friend. Jensen had to put Jared on hold a few times in order to actually do his job, but Jared didn't mind, and finally Jensen played the song Genevieve had asked for and Jared admitted he should really get off the phone and go back to work.

"Look, man, thanks for talking me down," he went on. "I guess I just got too far up my own head to think rationally about everything."

"Any time," Jensen said. "It was my pleasure. It's nice to actually hear your voice, after all the text conversations we've had." Jared could hear the smile in his words. "Did I ever tell you I think you're the only person who's always listening to my show?"

"I think you've told me, yeah. You know it keeps me sane." Now he hoped Jensen Ross could hear his smile too.

"And you should call me more often and tell me in more detail what you do. I don't get to talk to scientists a lot, and you're fun."

Jared's heart skipped a beat with what he could only call excitement and the recognition of affection. How weird would it be if Jensen Ross had a crush on *him*?

"Aw, thank you," he said. "I think you're pretty fun to talk to, too. But I should go. Cells to wash and split and infect, you know."

"Use your powers for good. I'll talk to you later."

The more Jared thought about it, and the more he replayed some of their texts, the more he wondered if Jensen Ross had been flirting with him all along and he'd just never figured it out. Now that he had a suspicion, he'd have to flirt back.

"You look happy about something," Danneel remarked, after he floated back to the lab.

"He was talking to the DJ," Genevieve said.

"And you're just telling me now??"

Jared could see Genevieve smiling to herself, like she'd been keeping a secret for him.

"What did you talk about?"

"Stuff," Jared said. "Things. The lab. *Haro*. Music. It was a nice conversation."

"I just bet it was." Now Danneel was smirking at him. "Did you profess your undying love?"

"No."

"Did you want to?"

"No."

"Did *he* want to?"

"I don't think so."

"You don't think so!" Danneel crowed. "You are so cute I don't even know what to do with you."

"You could start by letting me do some work."

"I could." She waved at his bench. "Go. Go back to work. Look after your cells." But her expression said she wasn't letting this go any time soon. Jared wondered how long she could keep her mouth shut, and what she was going to tell Welling when she finally spilled.

I can hear Mark and Seb rattling around outside, so sit tight and they'll be in to carry you through the morning. I'm Jensen Ross, your late-night early-morning voice of reason, and it is time for me to go. I'll see you all tonight.

He closed out his show the same way every morning, with the same Kansas song, and this time Jared sang along with the radio, not even caring that he couldn't carry a tune in a bucket. What he lacked in skill he made up for in enthusiasm.

* * *

Jared had been up for all of ten minutes and was looking for clothes that weren't too offensive – he really needed to do his laundry – when his phone barked, indicating a text from Chad.

YOUR BOYFRIEND IS IN THE SHOP GET DOWN HERE RIGHT THIS SECOND, it read. Jared blinked at it.

What boyfriend? he replied.

THE HOT MYSTERY BOYFRIEND. HE READS COMICS. WHERE ARE YOU.

Naked

THAT WILL IMPRESS HIM. DON'T SAY I NEVER DID NOTHING FOR YOU.

Jared tossed his phone on the bed, gave up the search for a clean shirt, grabbed the long-sleeved tee he'd worn yesterday, and got dressed in such a hurry that he pulled a sweatshirt on over it inside-out, which he didn't even realize until he got to the comic shop and Chad rolled his eyes at him and pointed it out.

"You missed him," Chad said. "I tried to delay him but he was in some kind of hurry. He reads *Captain America*, you'll be pleased to know."

Jared sighed.

"Don't make that face at me. I told you he was here as soon as I could."

"Are you sure it was him?"

"You drew his face for me. A whole bunch of times." Chad looked smug. "Even better, he

started a sub so I know his name, and he signed up for the mailing list so I saw his email address, which is jensenross – one word – at gmail, by the way."

"Wait. What did you just say his name was?" Jared was sure he'd misheard something.

"His email's jensenross but his sub is Jensen Ackles, so Jensen Something. Now you can Google him." Chad looked pleased with himself.

Jared's heart was racing. This was too coincidental.

"And you're sure it's the same guy I keep seeing?"

"Yeah."

"Holy fucking shit." He wanted to sit down. He'd been almost running into Jensen Ross this whole time and he *never knew*.

And that meant Jensen Ross lived in his neighborhood. Probably.

Danneel and Genevieve were going to have a field day with this.

"You ok?" Chad asked, concerned.

"I'm not sure. I know him, Chad. I've known him this whole time. He's the overnight DJ on BBR. I told you I listen to him in the lab."

So that *was* him in Shaw's. Jensen Ross really did drop a box of Corn Flakes on Jared's head.

And Jared saw him at the Airborne Toxic Event show after all.

Oh god.

He'd have to tell Jensen they'd actually met in person. But how do you bring that up?

"I managed to take a picture of him for you," Chad said, interrupting Jared's mental flail. He pulled out his phone and showed Jared an off-center picture showing most of a display of graphic novels and part of Jensen's oblivious profile. "I was trying to be sneaky."

"You Kinnear'd him?" Jared demanded. "What if he'd seen you?"

"He'd have said something and I'd have told him I was taking his picture for my housemate who thinks he's hot."

Jared reached across the counter and smacked Chad upside the head.

"You should just hang around here on Thursdays," Chad suggested. "Wait for him to come

in. That way you're more likely to end up with a date with the guy."

Jared couldn't argue with the second half of the sentence, but the first half was a giant no-go. There was nowhere out of the way for him to sit, for one thing, and being in a comic store was too distracting, for another, and at some point he'd really need peace and quiet to get some science read.

And most importantly, if he met Jensen Ross face-to-face again, now knowing what he knew, he'd probably lose what little composure he possessed and turn into such a massive dork that the DJ would never want to talk to him again.

Chad eventually let it go, more or less, and over the next couple of weeks Jared did his reading and worked on his experiments and listened to the radio and texted Jensen Ross and talked to him on the phone and tried to figure out how to bring up that they'd seen each other in person and probably lived in the same general area. He drew comic pages and finished the big incentive drawings for the Kickstarter pledges and wished he could go home for Thanksgiving. The lab was actually open that Friday, and he was sure he'd need the time.

Chad's aunt who lived out in Worcester had included him in her Thanksgiving invitation, and he liked Chad's family, but it wasn't the same.

"I miss my folks," he admitted to Jensen on the phone the Tuesday before Thanksgiving. "I won't get to see them until Christmas."

"I know how that is," Jensen said. "Sounds like you have good friends up here, though."

"Chad? Yeah, he's a good guy, when he's not being kind of a douche. His aunt always puts on a good spread, too. I don't know. I got so much work to do, I couldn't go home anyway."

"At least you get Wednesday and Thursday night off, right? I plan to sleep in. So to speak. And stuff my face."

"That is indeed what Thanksgiving is all about."

Chad drove them to his aunt's house on Thursday so Jared could eat himself into a food coma, and Jared at least planned to spend part of Friday recovering. He could do that and still put in a couple of hours at the lab. Chad apparently had other ideas.

"I did you a favor and got you an early Christmas present, so don't kill me," he said.

"Do I want to know what it is?" Jared asked skeptically. Chad already anticipating homicide was not a good sign.

"Yes. I told your boyfriend about you."

"My what? You mean Jensen? Why?"

"Because you want him! You know you do. And because I am your best friend and I want you to get laid. I mean. I want you to be happy." Chad looked pleased with himself and Jared felt a nearly uncontrollable urge to smack him upside the head. "He came into the store last week and we were talking about *Haro*, ok? I didn't just bring it up. And I mentioned we were closed for Thanksgiving, and he said he had Friday off. And all I did was mention that you, the artist of this web comic that he likes, was probably going to come into Excelsior on Friday. I didn't tell him anything he didn't know or couldn't reasonably assume. I mean, he knows you draw the comic, if he's read enough of the web site he knows you live with me, he knows I write it, you told me you talk to him at work. You already did the hard work yourself. I am just a facilitator." He grinned. "Alona's filling in for Gabe today. Go keep her company. Maybe Misha will bring his kid in, and you can play with him. You can do your lab work tomorrow."

Jared wasn't sure what to say. He wasn't sure there was anything to say. As much as he liked talking to Jensen Ross and thinking about Jensen Ross – especially now that he knew what he looked like - he hadn't quite gotten as far as figuring out a non-weird way to officially *meet* Jensen Ross.

But that was apparently why he had Chad.

"You're welcome," Chad said. "Weather looks good for a run. Take your sketchbook."

Jared took his dogs out instead, mostly so he could think about what to say if he did indeed see Jensen at the comic shop, and what he'd tell Chad if the guy never showed. He walked Harley and Sadie down to the bakery, bought a cupcake, walked them home, ate the cupcake, collected his sketchpad and some pencils and his wallet and phone, and did as Chad suggested.

"Jared!" Alona said, as he walked in. "Chad told me to watch out for you and keep you here if I had to." She tried to look deliberately sneaky and giggled. "How was your Thanksgiving?"

"Worthy of the food coma."

"Are you going to draw me something?" She grinned hopefully.

"Why yes, yes I am."

He pulled out his sketchpad, set it on top of a row of back issues, and announced that he'd take requests. He was interrupted twice by curious customers, once by Alona answering the phone and telling him it was Chad, and finally by a voice he recognized saying his name.

Jared turned and there was Jensen Ross, wearing almost the exact same thing he'd been wearing in the grocery store when he'd dropped Corn Flakes on Jared's head. His cheeks were red from the cold and his hair stuck up in all directions. The corners of his eyes

crinkled as he smiled.

"You must be Jared." He held out his hand to shake. "It's good to finally see your face." When Jared didn't answer, because he didn't know how, because how could he say he'd already seen Jensen's face, Jensen looked confused, as if he'd gotten something wrong, and added, uncertainly, "It's Jensen."

And Jared found his voice, and grinned. "I know."