

# DOUBLE PLAY



JOSHIAH WARBAUM

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Joshiah Warbaum

Joshiah's Written Works

# 2017

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Joshiah's Written Works

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## Foreword

Damn, do I love baseball.

I really can't thank Anthrocon enough, for having a convention that's literally themed around the great American pastime, and I can't thank you readers enough for keeping me going through a tough couple of months.

The baseball season is in full swing by now, and while my White Sox are struggling through a rebuilding year, I can't help but feel like something is just right with the world when the warm breeze of summer is kicking up dust from the infield sand, and the bases are sitting in the middle of the paths, pristine and white, just waiting for the runners to slam their cleats in and make their way home.

It's just a game, to be sure, but for me, it's the kind of game that really is a pastime, whether I'm watching it or playing. I kinda suck in the field (I'm a much better writer,) and I couldn't hit water if I fell out of a boat, but nothing puts me at ease like sitting on the couch, nursing a beer and watching some skilled players get paid millions of dollars to hit a ball.

Something about the whole experience just feels soothing, and when I heard that Anthrocon was doing a baseball theme in 2017, the only thing on my mind was how I could combine my great love of the sport, with my great ability to write smut.

What grew out of the concept was actually not shameless porn, but mostly tasteful erotica that centers on a young player trying to achieve greatness, and his very real, everyday struggles in his love life. Being bisexual, the presence of a female that has him leaning back toward the middle only complicates things further, and a tense, open relationship with his boyfriend is taking away his enjoyment of his one true love: the sport of baseball.

This book has a little something for everyone, whether or not you're a fan of the sport. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it, but without further ado, lace up, get your mitts, and let's play ball!

## Dedications

I'd be remiss if I didn't dedicate this book first and foremost to the late, great Quasi Skunk, one of my very first friends in this wondrous fandom, and the man who helped to introduce me to the furry softball games I still play in. May you rest in peace, Quasi, and thank you for nearly a decade of great memories.

I'd like to thank Rosie, especially, as I often do, but I assure you that she put up with some ridiculous nonsense from me in the process of getting this book finished, and without her, it simply wouldn't be a reality.

Finally, thank you to all of you readers, as always, for keeping me going when times get tough, and keeping me motivated to try my best, even when I can't see the light at the end of the tunnel.

If you loved the game of baseball, you had to love the daily grind, knowing that you were less than likely to succeed whenever you tried to hit a pitch, and further knowing that any little mistake you made in the field would be held over your head, forever etched into a stat sheet.

For a player who didn't have much of a family to go home to, and never quite fit in with the rest of his teammates, life could be **terribly** lonely.

Timothy Franklin was just starting to get used to the grind, even though he'd been playing baseball in some form or another for almost his entire life. Where most children became bored with the routine of baseball at an early age, Tim was born with the special kind of talent that made the game enjoyable, even when others struggled to improve. A mutual love of the game between himself and his father kept him going through his adolescent years, and as a fully grown adult, he was reaping the benefits of being one of the few athletes in the world who played a sport long enough to see natural talent translate into pure, impressive skill.

Sports was all that he seemed to know, and now that he was passing the time by himself between semi-professional ball games, he wished that he'd picked up on **any** other skills in his years.

Even playing with modern technology left him so bewildered that he was often the butt of the joke from other players. "So...uh, Carlos? How do I watch this replay, again?"

"There's a lil' button on the side of the phone, and it makes you stop being arrogant. After you press it, you'll be able to watch videos of **other** people playing the game."

Tim rolled his eyes before Carlos was even done telling the joke. "I'm sorry that I still care enough about making it to the majors that I actually *want* to see replays of myself so that I can get better. We're not all content with settling in here in the minors."

Most people found it awkward, or weird at the very least, to see themselves in a video.

Tim had seen so much video of himself that he was convinced he'd be able to pick his own doppelganger out of a crowd, and that was impressive, given how similar he looked to so many other jackals. A black coat of fur upon his back and

the white spackle that dotted it were almost always covered by a baseball jersey, but one could see the more delicate shades of cream that ran down from the underside of his neck and carried all the way across his underbelly.

Short, kept locks of dusty blonde hung over eyes of deep, calming blue, and though it didn't mean to be, a cocky smirk was almost always resting on his muzzle, to the point that he looked out of place when he **wasn't** grinning about something.

"Who said I was settlin', bro? The hall of fame has a big ol' hole in 'er backside, and it needs a little fillin'! You catch my drift?"

"...You wanna fuck the hall of fame?"

Carlos lifted a paw and slugged his teammate right in the arm, and Tim, knowing he deserved it for what he said, didn't even try to dodge it. He just snickered and rolled with the blow, knowing that Carlos would never strike him with any sincerity.

Their rivalry, one that started in the rookie leagues, simply wouldn't allow it.

Carlos Rivera was a coyote with more of a chip on his shoulder than Tim, and he felt that he had a lot more to prove. He didn't have the grooming of his jackal teammate, and where Tim was a lean, natural speedster, Carlos carried quite a bit more weight around the middle. Tim would be able to literally field and steal his way into the majors, but if Carlos didn't put the bat on the ball, he wasn't going anywhere.

Perhaps the greatest difference of all, however, was their circumstance: Tim had the luxury of playing for the love of the game, and at the AAA level of the minor leagues, he was making plenty enough money to live a fulfilling life. Carlos, on the other hand, got involved with the girl of his dreams in high school, and now, he had a loving wife and child to supply for.

It never ceased to amaze the coyote just how quickly he could burn through the nearly \$300,000 a year that his job afforded him.

"The hall is just waitin' to be taken, Tim-Jim. She's all mine, once I get called up."

"I told you not to call me that."

"It's just a nickname, Tim-Jim. Don't take it so personally."

"Well it's **annoying**, so you should knock it off."

"You got it, Slim-Tim-Jim."

Tim returned fire and slugged Carlos in the arm, drawing nothing more than a snicker from his teammate. Their banter wasn't always satisfying to Tim, but Carlos was the closest thing he had to a real friend on the team, and he knew that beggars couldn't be choosers. If Carlos was willing to put up with his eccentricities, then it was only fair that Tim put up with his playful jabs and jeers.

He didn't expect Carlos to put up with all of his issues, though. That responsibility was pulled onto another being, whether Tim wanted them to handle it or not.

That was just the kind of person that Alton was.



Baseball was a game that did everything it could to stay entrenched in history. It was one of the last sports to give in to the pressures of instant replay, and even then, it used the function in such a way that it was scarcely noticeable, compared to the persistence of other sports that employed it. Rules that had been in place for literally over 100 years were slow to change, if they ever would, and even something as simple as the intentional walk took entire committee boards to review before the players would allow a pitcher to just declare the act, rather than throwing four long, ceremonious pitches that were *designed* to miss.

It wouldn't have come as a shock to anyone that the sport was also one dominated primarily by straight men, and even when the world began to embrace other sexualities, baseball was slow to come around.

Tim was fortunate, and glad beyond that to play in a day and age where the tension of a gay or bisexual player in the dugout just wasn't as big of a deal as it used to be, and while Tim was the latter, most of the other players assumed him to be the former, given his struggles with women.

His lack of success with them wasn't for a lack of trying, despite the unique relationship that he was in.

"Don't worry, baby. You can shake off this bad game. You're my strong, **sexy** man, and you can do *aaaaanything!*"

Naturally, the text message on Tim's phone didn't read quite the way that he heard it, but when Carlos was looking over his shoulder to pass the time in the dugout, Tim knew that he'd be teased about the romantic back-and-forth that he and Alton shared.

"I have to imagine that my life would be pretty boring if I didn't have you around to narrate it, Carlos."

"Admit it, baby. You love havin' me in your life just as much as you love your boytoy."

Tim gulped at the thought, and it wasn't the first time that he'd been caught doing such. "I dunno what I'd do without you, Carlos."

"And what would you do without **him**?"

There shouldn't have been any hesitation on Tim's part to reply, and whether or

not there was, Carlos thought he already had the answer. After all, he'd been out at the local bars with Tim after ball games and seen just how badly the jackal struck out when it came to flirting with even the most desperate women, and though he knew that Tim and Alton shared an open relationship, he often wondered if Alton kept Tim around because he knew that Tim couldn't possibly find anyone else to date.

It wasn't for a lack of looks, and Tim wasn't so oblivious that he couldn't tell when he was being hit on, at least, *usually*. He just had the kind of luck with women that he was having at the plate, that day.

"Batting sixth...your second baseman, Timothy Franklin!"

Tim was hitless for the day in three plate appearances, and the way that the opposition was pitching, he didn't think he'd be registering a hit that afternoon, even if he somehow ended up getting a fifth at-bat. His first two attempts yielded good contact, only for the wind to blow the ball down and into the mitt of an outfielder, and a third trip to the plate yielded a strikeout, after frustration created an overly strong and inaccurate swing.

"I'd probably go up there and strikeout again, Carlos...same as I would either way."

Carlos shook his head and rolled his eyes, knowing how quick Tim was to get down on himself when he wasn't playing up to his own ridiculous expectations.

Those expectations created a routine, as many baseball players had before him, and Tim's was every bit as riddled with superstition as the worst of them.

Every time he left the dugout, he grabbed his bat with his right paw and carried it by the knob. He only flipped the bat up to grip it with his left hand when he was taking his first steps into the batter's box, and he twisted his palms around the handle of the bat three times, every time. No matter how tight or loose his grip on the bat felt, he would swing it from there, and each swing, he'd repeat the very last step, as if he truly believed it affected his ability to get a hit.

After spending three years in the minors being groomed to play in the big leagues, Tim was smart enough to know that the routine didn't do anything to change his ability. It was all about finding that comfortable, peaceful state of mind that made playing the game **so** much easier.

"Strike one!"

He was so distracted by his conversation with Carlos, however, that he barely even felt the breeze from the first pitch, a fastball, as it flew right by him and

into the catcher's mitt. It was a perfect strike, splitting the plate right in half and sitting just about belt high.

Even for a batter who was into the tradition of taking the first pitch, the crowd couldn't help a collective groan at seeing Tim take such an enticing pitch.

The ball was tossed back casually, and Tim shook his head at himself. His love life was complicated, to say the very least, but he needed to keep it from getting in the way of his professional life, if he was ever going to make it up to the majors.

"T-time...time!" Tim yelled and put up his paw, and thankfully, the umpire was feeling generous. The pitcher was in the middle of his stride, but a time out was still given, allowing Tim to turn around and take a few seconds to practice his swing. He adjusted his grip, sucked in a deep breath, and stood back in the batter's box, grinding his cleats into the dirt.

His stance was perfect, his knees were bent just right, and his grip felt comfortable around the handle of the bat. Tim didn't know for sure what pitch would be coming next, but he stood in and watched, still as a statue, as a slider flew by his ankles, low and inside.

"Ball one!"

Something about the sport helped him to relax. Something about being in his rhythm and finding that happy place where he was successful eased Tim out of the rest of the stresses in his life, leading him to wonder sometimes if he was the cause of all of his own problems.

He couldn't wonder long, and even if he had that luxury, he wouldn't allow himself to. There was a pitch coming, and his eyes narrowed in their focus as he kept his head on the ball.

**CRACK!** The satisfying sound of maple wood smashing a ball into the gap rang out across the stadium. The ball landed with topspin in the grass and headed for the wall, and the runner on second was moving on contact, and rounding third base before Tim even made it to first. It was a deep enough ball that Tim was tempted to push for a triple, but in such a close game, he decided it would be for the best to make a hard turn around second, but comfortably trot back to the bag when he saw the center fielder coming up with the ball.

Standing on second base, hearing the cheers of an excited crowd and batting in yet another run, Tim reveled in the moment where everything in life felt right. It was brief, but it was sublime, and the jackal was smart enough to remember that

a moment wasn't great because it lasted.

It was great because it happened, and it helped him to deal with the pain of being stranded at second base when the next batter struck out.

Tim and Carlos were doing what they always did, after losing a close game, and in that regard, they weren't any different than anyone else who did their best at work, only to have a terrible outcome for the day.

The exchange of rounds of beer wasn't the extraordinary part, but they were sticking with another tradition: one that might only make sense to the few, proud players who made it so **dangerously** close to the majors, only to fall just short, for one reason or another.

The regular season was growing short, and some players were already settled into their September roles. The lucky players at the AAA level of the minor leagues often spent their days staring at their cell phones, hoping for a phone call or an e-mail from their agents that said it was their time to have a chance at the big leagues.

As much as the season was nearing a close, however, the night itself was getting ready to end, as well, and Tim and Carlos had to make their way back to the team hotel before it got to be too much later.

"We...we're not getting a call tonight, are we?" Tim asked, as he took another full, deep swig of beer from a handled mug.

Carlos shook his head, though it was hard to tell, if not for the side-to-side flopping of his ears. His face was settled on the top of the bar, and his forehead was wiping up the condensation from the bottom of several empty mugs of beer. "Doesn't look good, man. And we're just hurtin' our chances if we keep on puttin' these things away so fast."

It wasn't easy to play a full game of baseball with a hangover; doubly so if it was in the middle of the peak of summer. The days were already uncomfortably hot, and with black being one of the primary colors of the team uniform, there was little relief to be found, at this level.

The major league uniforms incorporated a lot more white, and just the thought of wearing a nicer, cooler outfit sent a chill down the spine of the tired, tipsy jackal.

"I guess you've got a point, Carlos. No point staying out too much longer...this place is dead, anyway."

It wasn't necessarily tradition that the boys would find the cheapest possible bar in the city and drink it dry, but they did prefer local places, and anywhere that

had a good deal on cheap, cold beer was just what the doctor ordered when the afternoon sun was beating down on your head all day.

They were smart enough to think of their future, in that regard, knowing that they weren't major league players yet, and it was easy to run up a high bar tab if you weren't paying close attention to what you were drinking.

"Well, dude...not entirely!"

Carlos was clearly the more inebriated of the two, but that didn't mean that his eyes were completely blinded yet. He was staring down the bar at a female, sitting pretty on a bar stool and holding a martini glass delicately between her pawtips. Sitting on the left of his teammate, he'd been blocking Tim from seeing anything the entire time, but all it took was a quick lean toward the back of his stool; one that almost didn't end when Carlos was left wobbling, trying not to fall flat on his back.

The flailing of a pair of arms was enough to draw the attention of the woman, and she rolled her eyes as she looked down the bar at the pair of drunken males. She couldn't help a chuckle as she watched Tim desperately trying to catch Carlos, and despite his great paws in the field, the second baseman couldn't keep Carlos from tumbling over.

**WHUMP.** Carlos hit the ground with a dull, heavy thud, akin to a bag of ground beef splatting down on the floor. Tim was only somewhat able to help break the fall, and the bartender took quick notice of the pair.

"Last call!" the bartender shouted out to a small, tired crowd. In the dreary tavern, there were very few who remained on a weeknight other than the regulars, and that left very little monetary motivation for the only person working to leave the place open much longer. "And you two are cut off, so don't even ask!"

The jab felt late and unnecessary to the players, but Tim nodded with a grudge. "Don't worry, I'll get him outta here..." he explained. He was helping Carlos up from the floor already, and the stumbled coyote was chuckling the whole way, though his muzzle shut tight like a trap when he felt a third paw against his lower back.

"You'll have to excuse me, baby, but I'm **happily** married."

It was the same female who was watching before, and though Tim wasn't aware of it, in his constantly oblivious state, Carlos was able to feel her watching them almost the entire night in the bar.

“And does your wife know that you’re out drinking when you should probably be calling her and talking to your kids?” she asked, all while helping Carlos up to his paws. “I mean, if you’re going to *brag* about how *happily* married you are, perhaps you could put your money where your mouth is.”

“Tryin’ to get me back to the hotel room so you can have my buddy all to yourself; is that it?”

The prompt was more of a joke from Carlos, and Tim knew that he was being set up. His cheeks were already flushed from the alcohol that pumped through his veins and filled his body with a false sense of warmth, but a more genuine heat began to creep around under his fur when he finally got a proper look at the helpful woman.

“Jeez, Carlos...don’t put her on the s-spot...like that...”

Tim knew that he wasn’t exclusively a homosexual. There were plenty of girls that he could recall having crushes on in middle and high school, though he was almost always too nervous to make a move on any of them. He was still just as awkward with women as an adult as he was then, and though thoughts of his boyfriend, Alton, were swirling around in the back of his mind, this mysterious lady had just taken the forefront and run with it.

Of course, Tim also knew that beauty wasn’t the only thing that mattered, and though looks could be captivating, bringing his voice to a stumble wasn’t necessarily a sign of love.

“That’s okay, Tim. I’m used to being put through the ringer at a moment’s notice, honestly. It comes with the territory.”

“Okay,” Tim muttered, “Now you’re scaring me. There aren’t any girls that look as beautiful as you do that know me on a first name basis.”

The alcohol was acting as a social lubricant for Tim, who wouldn’t have **ever** been able to come up with a line like that when he was sober. Whether or not it would pan out for him was yet to be seen, but the woman was yet to make a disgusted face or flee, so already, this was going better for him than most of his encounters with females.

“To be fair, if it weren’t for my line of work, I wouldn’t know who either of you were. I heard you two were close, but I thought the others were just making up stories.”

Carlos butted in, as he leaned on the counter to keep himself upright.

“Waitamminute. You know who I am, too?”

“Yes, Carlos. I prefer to stalk more than one guy at a time. I hope your ego can handle that.”

Tim was finally able to chuckle, as he started picking up on the kind of woman she must have been. “So, a professional stalker. I didn’t realize that we were to that level of fame!”

“You’re on the verge, and that’s exactly why I’m keeping a close eye on you, Timothy Franklin. You’ve got great contact, deadly speed on the base paths, and your glove is a tic above average...you might even find other teams coming after you if you can improve your defense!”

Regardless of name, which Tim was still too drunk to remember to ask for, the woman was clearly associated with the sport. Whether she was an agent or a talent scout, he couldn’t quite be sure, but they were having a great conversation, as the few, dim lights in the bar began to turn off.

“I’ve got a feeling that the Hydras wouldn’t appreciate their prospects being scouted this way.”

“Perhaps not, but I’m not breaking any rules yet, Tim. The name’s Vicky,” she introduced herself, sensing that Tim and Carlos might be a bit too scatterbrained to ever ask for it. “I’m scouting, but not just for any old team. A girl has to look after her own best interests.”

Even as the darkness spread in the closing bar, Tim couldn’t pull himself away from eyes that twinkled with the most brilliant jade. The spots upon her fur were starting to blend into the same lack of light, but the smooth, sandy-white base of fur around them illuminated the rest of her body nicely, and plenty of it was on display. Though it was a chance meeting, a pleated skirt and tank top with thin, lacy straps over the shoulder didn’t make for the most professional attire, but Tim wasn’t going to judge, and Vicky looked absolutely stunning in the combination of white cotton above and blue silk below.

She was an ocelot, living the same daily grind that Tim and Carlos were, though her position wasn’t in the field; she was always right beside it.

“And what are your...*best interests*?” Tim asked, clearly feeling the effects of his last drink of the evening.

The jackal knew just how silly his accent must have been, and Vicky couldn’t keep her eyes from rolling once more as she giggled behind a paw and began walking past the pair of males. She’d left her drink at the other end of the bar, and it was swiped away by the eager bartender, who couldn’t wait to get himself



out the place as soon as possible.

“Tonight, they’re getting my tired ass back to my hotel before the sun comes up, and I’m afraid I’m running out of time,” Vicky suggested. “If I stay out any later, these clothes are gonna turn back into rags, and I’m gonna get a lecture from my fairy godmother for flirting with the talent.”

Carlos was half asleep against the bar, and Tim almost left him there as he took a step closer to Vicky, but then paused. His awkward sensibilities were keeping him from getting too close, as he didn’t want to seem creepy, but also wanted to do right by chivalry.

“You weren’t flirting! We were...uh...” Tim trailed off, trying to find any excuse to keep the conversation going. “We were just talking baseball! That’s all! Nothing wrong with a few professionals discussing their craft, right?”

It was an argument that Vicky had heard before, and one that kept her giggle alive, and even added an arrogant smarminess to it, as she stopped and turned at the door. “I think Carlos is all done talking, and while I’m flattered that you’re going to offer to walk me back to my hotel, it’s just a block. I think I can handle it.”

Vicky was used to the runaround of players trying to get under her skirt, and if she didn’t have such a thick skin, she would have given up on the lifestyle years ago.

She had a dream to achieve, however, and she took the constant offers of male company as a compliment and lucky side effect, rather than a dissuading insult.

“He’s...yeah,” Tim admitted, realizing that Vicky had him in check. “He needs to get to bed, but I don’t think I’ll be able to sleep for a while, if you wanted to stay up and chat for a bit?”

Such an offer from a player had a tendency to end with some kind of a confession of love, and Vicky offering a painful rejection. She didn’t sense anything sinister about Tim, however: he seemed sweet and innocent, and seeing how drunk he was, he clearly wasn’t just playing the part. Getting to know him a little better would give Vicky the chance to decide if he was worth pursuing as a contract, and perhaps, it would keep a rising star out of trouble for one more night.

“Tell you what,” Vicky replied, after a conscious pause. “I’m gonna head back to my room and drop off my purse. You take the coyote, go tuck him into his dumpster, and I’ll meet you in the lobby for a quick chat?”

“You mean his bed, right?”

“Yeah. That’s what I said.”

Vicky’s sense of humor brought a chuckle from Tim, who would have to tell Carlos what was said about him when the coyote was more cognizant.

In the meantime, he was just worried about not making a total ass of himself when he chatted with Vicky later, and he wasn’t even sure why.

Getting Carlos into a bed, and keeping him in said bed, was a bit of a struggle for Tim. The coyote was a bit larger than he was, and had a tendency to sprawl across the entirety of the covers, en route to throwing himself onto the floor.

That evening, once Carlos was on the bed in any capacity, Tim was right back out the door of the hotel room, and on his way down to the lobby.

He didn't bother changing out of the comfy, cozy cargo shorts that left a nice, loose bag near his knees, and his t-shirt, carrying the name of his minor league team, the Zippers, seemed like something that would reinforce the casual nature of the meeting.

Even with the alcohol in his system, Tim couldn't calm down as much as he wanted to, and his lower lip was trembling as he stood in the elevator, waiting to head back down to the lobby.

*She's just a girl, you're just a guy, there's nothing going on here. You're two professionals, hanging out because you can't sleep...at two in the morning. That's not weird.*

The situation didn't have to be weird, of course, but Tim couldn't help making things awkward in his own mind. His struggles with women, legendary as they were, could be at least partially attributed to his lack of experience, and for some reason, a perceived difference of the sexes that he was never able to overcome, and one that made his relationship with Alton seem that much *more* natural.

This chat, plain and simple as it was, was going to be about as far as Tim had ever gone with a girl, and he couldn't stop focusing on that, until the door of the elevator opened.

Then, he could only focus on the eyes of jade that pierced right through him, and the casual smile upon her muzzle that was so friendly, it was no wonder that she was easy to talk to. She wore the same tank top of white and skirt of blue, accompanied by black sandals around her footpaws and a golden bracelet around her right wrist. In the light of the lobby, Tim could actually see the locks of hair, just a shade darker than dishwater blonde, pulled back into a messy ponytail with a few bangs left to hang over her forehead.

She looked like the kind of girl who was so friendly that you couldn't help approaching her, but her beauty carried the curse of Tim's youth with it. She

appeared as the type who wouldn't have given him the time of day when he was younger, but her left paw picked up in a subtle wave, and each pawtip bent forward in order as she waited for him to approach.

"You're never gonna steal second base if that's how slow you make your approach, Tim."

With a little time to sober up, Tim's mind was back into overthinking everything that Vicky would ever say, and her words really could have been a teasing jab at his lack of speed on the base paths, or...it might have been a more playful jab at his chances of a romantic encounter with her that evening.

He'd splitting hairs forever trying to decide which one it was, so he just chuckled like a goof and took a seat at the high-top table, sitting in a stool across from her. "I've stolen second plenty of times...shouldn't you know that, if you're scouting me?"

The question felt safe. It was boastful enough to just be playing back at Vicky's jab, without Tim seeming too desperate. He felt like a bit of a dork for being proud of his ability to converse in such a way, but he couldn't shake it, either.

"Not at the major league level, you haven't," Vicky shot back. Her eyes, wide and eager when he approached, began to narrow with a challenging glare, as if she were pushing him to test his abilities, but they were nowhere near a field for Tim to prove himself. "And everything is a little bit harder in the big leagues."

He was sure that she was flirting with him now, and he had no idea how to respond to it.

"Well, I haven't been given a chance yet. I'm good, but I can't steal a base if it's on a field that's a couple hundred miles away."

Whether her statement was bait or not, Tim didn't take it properly, and Vicky's eyes began to settle. "Good point. I don't suppose you've thought about whether or not you want to stay with your organization, though? You're a young talent on the verge of breaking through, and you don't know what the future holds, just yet. You might want to try and score that big contract, rather than settling for a one year deal here and there."

Tim tilted his head just slightly, letting one of his long, tall ears flop to the side as he contemplated the statement. He didn't know how much of it was about baseball, and how much of it was about his love life, but that was his own interpretation of the statement.

He tried not to look terribly sad about it, as he contemplated his relationship with

Alton.

“I’d **love** to score a big contract, Vicky, but sometimes you don’t get the chance for one until you’re already past your prime. You might **never** get the chance.”

“That’s what an agent is for, Tim. You’re about to be in over your head, trying to balance baseball, finances and media coverage. You’ll need a little help to keep your head on straight.”

Tim cocked a brow. After thinking that this was some kind of an improvised date, watching it turn into a sales call was almost insulting to him. “You really think that I can’t handle running a social media account and telling someone how many zeroes to put on my check?”

“N-no! No; it’s not that at all!” Vicky tried to correct herself, though she could see the annoyance in the pits of Tim’s eyes. “You seem like a smart guy, Tim, and you’re more than capable of big league success. It’s just really helpful to have an agent, and...I can promise you that I’m one who actually cares about her clients. I’m not like the other guys who are just looking for the big payday.”

If he were being honest, Tim could have told Vicky that she was the first major league scout to actively pursue him.

If she were being honest, Vicky could have told Tim that it was her dream to be an agent at the major league level, and he would have been her first contract.

Instead, they sat in an awkward moment and glanced down at the table, as Tim thought his move over.

“You must really be interested in signing me to your agency if you came all the way out to Platford just to have a drink with me.”

“That part was a happy coincidence, Tim. I’m scouting a few players on your team, and I respect the talent level of your entire organization, but I think that you’re the player with the best chance to make it in the big leagues...and make it **far**. Almost everyone on your team has the talent to break through in September, but if you sign with me, I’ll make sure that you’re hanging around on a major league team for a **very** long time.”

The promise of financial gain was sure to come when you were a special talent in a major sport, and though Tim was expecting that day to come, he certainly wasn’t expecting it before his first ever September call-up.

The financial world of sports was a fickle one, however, and at the moment, he knew that he could always change agents if he needed to. Vicky could be his foot in the door, and perhaps, such a connection was just what he needed to get called

up to the majors this season.

He didn't know that he was already on the September call-up list, but Vicky knew...and she was just excited for her own big break as she was for that of her potential client's.

"You make it all sound pretty great, but it's also almost three in the morning," Tim pointed out. "Maybe...maybe we can discuss this when I'm not exhausted and still slightly tipsy."

Vicky smiled warmly. "Of course, Tim. I want you to know exactly what you're getting into, if you decide to sign with me."

Behind her smile, Vicky was terrified to eventually have to admit that Tim was going to be her first legitimate client, and she didn't like to think of him as a cornerstone, but she was already imagining what life would be like if she could score an exciting, young talent, and build an empire around it.

Tim wasn't worried about the money, or the fame. He was just thinking about the feeling of freshly raked, major league dirt under his cleats as he took his first at-bat in a real, full sized stadium.

He was hoping that his relationship with Vicky might have been a little bit different than it was, but if this was what their meeting would bring about, he couldn't find a reason to complain about it.

"I feel like there's a pretty good chance, but...give me a chance to think about it. I'll be up early to make it to the stadium tomorrow before our last game out here. Then we're headed back home for another series."

"I'll try to meet you down here," Vicky replied. She fished a business card out of a small, sewn-in pocket upon the side of her skirt, and handed it right over to the excited player. "Here's my card, if you can't find me. I'm sure to answer a call."

Tim looked the card over, and found it odd that there was no address listed, but he didn't bother to question it. He just slipped it into his pocket and smiled, before standing up from the table.

Vicky stood up next to him, and offered out her paw, trying to act the part of a professional.

"I'll be sure to call you either way," Tim admitted, though he didn't realize what he might have been implying by that. "This was...nice. *Really* nice."

"I look forward to it. I hope you end up deciding to sign with us," Vicky said, as if there was anyone else working above or below her at the moment. "And it

was. Thank you..." she trailed off, wondering just how formal she should be with the jackal, before she felt him taking a gentle grip around her paw.

Knots spun around in the pit of her stomach at the touch, and a pleasant chill spread goosebumps under her fur. The "for your time" never left her muzzle, and she just remembered to tightly grip her potential client's paw and give it a firm, proper shake.

Tim felt just as lost in the mix of emotions as she did, and his smile turned uneasy as he tried to deny the small flock of butterflies that roamed around inside of his torso.

He wanted to lean in for a kiss. Vicky felt the same, and yet, their handshake simply came to a close in a quiet pause that ultimately ended it. Tim released his paw first, and took a half step back, pretending that the warmth under his cheek was just from the alcohol.

Vicky thought it might have been something else, and she wasn't sure if she was more excited about Tim's reaction to her touch, or the prospect of having him as her first **real** client.

"I'll...uh...s-see you in the morning," Tim bid her as he stepped backward to the elevator, seeming every bit as awkward as he really was.

Giggling and offering a quick wave, Vicky allowed him to take the elevator up by himself, thinking that she might need the privacy, as well.

So late in the evening, it was easy for Vicky to relax when she made it back to her hotel room. She threw her own back against the heavy body of the door and gripped one of her breasts through the light, thin fabric of her tank top, while careful, curious digits slipped under her skirt and pressed against a growing patch of damp, warm arousal.

Tim would have been beyond words to know what Vicky was up to that evening, but he had a different surprise in store when he made it back to his own room.

“S-slower...take it a l-little slower...”

It wasn't like Alton to surprise Tim with such a sudden visit, and it wasn't like Tim to be sporting such a heavy bulge in his shorts when he came home, or in this case, back to a hotel room.

When Alton was laying across the bed, stripped down to only the fur on his back and sporting a bottle of champagne, it was only a matter of time before Tim was out of his clothes, as well, and he knew that the champagne was only for show.

“I can't help it, Tim. It's been such a *long* time since I've been inside of you...”

Tim knew he should have been focused on the pleasurable sensation of Alton's hips slapping against the smooth, tight curve of his backside, or the unique delight of the ursine's cock against the inner walls of his asshole. He wanted to think about just how pleasant it was to feel drops of precum spilling against the already slippery texture of lubricant, and if he were able to reach under his own body and grab a hold of the base of his canine length, he might have even been able to reach his orgasm.

Alton seemed to be thinking only of his own, however, and the thick, heavy bear atop of the smaller jackal was digging his claws into Tim's sides, clenching him tightly and holding him in the perfect position to help his body along.

Literally pounded into submission upon the bed, Tim gazed down at the bottle of champagne, still sitting full upon the floor. He pushed back with his hips and tried to help Alton reach a little deeper inside of his tailhole, and even though Alton could sense that Tim clearly wasn't as into the moment, he couldn't be asked to slow down, even when Tim literally asked for the very same favor moments before.

“At l-least give me a l-little help up here!” Tim shouted out, caught between the juxtaposition of a delightful pleasure and a mild, tingling pain that rang out in the back of his body. Alton was a larger male in general, and his member was a reflection of that, easily filling Tim to the brink of what he could handle.

The poor jackal was squirming underneath of his larger lover, and if he could just have gotten his paw free, he would have felt the same climactic bliss that Alton felt, as thick, heavy streaks of cum spread across Tim's insides and filled him with a sensual warmth.



“T-too late...I’m cumming! **F-fuck!**” Alton cried out with such delight that Carlos, once unconscious in the next room over, was jarred out of his peaceful, drunken sleep. The bed banged harshly against the wall a few times as Alton forgot his pace and pounded himself into Tim’s haunches. Heavy hips became a blur of dark, chocolate brown fur, and a subtle trail of cream began to spill from the tight, overflowing pucker of the jackal underneath.

Cries of ecstasy were little more than a point of frustration for Tim, who knew that he’d be sitting upright on a towel as the last of the cum leaked out from under his tail, while trying to stroke himself to an orgasm in the middle of a conversation. Even with a little booze left in his system, he wasn’t sure that he’d be able to climax in such a situation, and he’d been forced to try more than a few times before.

It was moments like that, when he could feel the last of Alton’s seed dripping over the back of his sack, that Tim wished his lover was a little more receptive to his needs.

“Y’know, the last horse...*nng*h...” Tim grunted, as he felt Alton pulling back and leaving his asshole wide, open and stretched, “S-still hasn’t crossed the finish line, Alton!”

While the analogy wasn’t lost on the exhausted bear, the larger creature was already turning over onto his side and taking his position as the big spoon, though he looked a little concerned when Tim didn’t immediately roll into the embrace of his open arms. “I didn’t realize you needed that much help to get there, Tim. I could feel you *clenching* like you always do when you’re close...”

“You’re a different species with a **way** larger dick than I’d be used to,” Tim reminded his ursine lover, “So I can’t really help clenching almost every single time you go balls deep back there...it’s got almost nothing to do with **me** cumming, like I’ve told you before!”

Alton wasn’t nearly as insensitive as he came off. He was just the type who was used to being sexually desirable, and as such, he attracted pleasers more than any other type.

Tim was on the level, however, and the lack of give-and-take between the two was starting to wear on the jackal, as he finally did roll over into Alton’s chest.

“I’m sorry that I don’t always remember what you tell me right after sex,” Alton muttered, feeling his mood continue to sour at Tim’s complaints. “It makes me tired. What do you want me to do?”

“Remembering anything I say would be a good start...or listening to me when I say that I could really use the reach around so I’m not trying to sleep on my knot when I have a damned game tomorrow!”

At his point of frustration, Tim wasn’t likely to get off that evening regardless, and Alton was getting terribly annoyed with his post-orgasmic bliss being interrupted with Tim’s concerns. The jackal knew that he was being a bother, rather than enjoying the glow of the moment, but he didn’t feel it was fair to place the blame entirely on him, when his own glow never actually came to fruition.

“*Pfft.* You’re welcome,” Alton rolled his eyes and released Tim, who quickly rolled to the other side of the bed. “I honestly can’t believe you’re this upset, when I came to surprise you! I’m **never** able to make it to stay the night with you, much less see a game! It was like you didn’t even care when I was waiting for you here!”

Tim yanked the tussled sheets up over his lower half as his member began to retreat into a waiting sheath. “I’d rather you be able to actually make it to the game than be able to make it to the bedroom after,” the jackal explained, “And I guess I have to ask for your forgiveness that I’m tired after playing four hours of baseball and running around the town, keeping up with my teammates...my bad. I guess I misunderstood.”

Alton yanked his own share of the covers over and let out a heavy sigh. “Tim, **please** don’t take that tone with me. I know that you’re busy, but I thought you could use a little company, and I really couldn’t make it here any earlier. Why can’t you at least appreciate the effort that I put in?!”

“Because you cared more about finishing than you did about anything else, and that makes your entire logic for coming here feel extremely selfish and cheap?”

Tim wasn’t sure why he had to spell things out so thoroughly for Alton, and he believed that the bear wasn’t really as mentally thick as his body was, but his patience was truly wearing thin, especially when the light of the sun was starting to peer through the partially opened curtains.

He had no idea how he was going to manage to play that day, with a noon start time.

“Well...I...I do have needs, Tim.”

The bear knew that he’d been put into check, and didn’t want to stoke the fires of the argument any further. He knew that even his little quip was going to draw

venom from Tim, but he felt that his own concerns and frustrations were entirely valid; the flight out to see his jackal wasn't a cheap one, and it meant that he had another flight home the next day.

"So do I, Alton, and you didn't have to spend all of that money on a flight to meet them."

As if the jackal knew what Alton was going to complain about, he beat the bear to the punch, leaving him quiet on the other side of the bed. "Well, I'm really glad that I went out of my way to spend my overtime money on a lecture. Who do you guys play tomorrow?"

"Same team we've been playing all week, Alton." Tim knew that the bear was going to try to keep changing the subject if he could, and trying to focus on the real issue at hand was pointless. "Think you'll actually be able to wake up in time to make it to the ballpark to see the game, or will you be pulling a kiss and fly?"

"I..."

Alton trailed off. He really enjoyed sleeping in on the weekends, and he didn't relish in the thought of getting up in just a few hours to make it to the game. "I'll definitely see at least part of the game, Tim. I don't know how you're going to make it through the whole thing-

"Energy drinks. Lots of 'em."

"**But**," Alton cut back in, doing nothing to hide the frustration in his voice, "I'll be sure to come see you play, baby."

Tim could have carried the grudge the rest of the way through the wee hours of the morning, and he thought to make a spiteful jab about how the ticket was free, regardless of the cost of the flight, but he just curled his tail into himself and wrapped his arms around his pillow. "There'll be a free ticket waiting for you at the will call, Alton. I've gotta be up in about four hours."

The bear didn't plan on sleeping anytime soon, and Tim rolled his eyes to the obnoxious, electrical *hummm* of the television set turning on across the room. "I'll keep the volume down, Tim. I love you."

"...Love you too," Tim said, his voice riddled with effort. He knew he'd be playing on empty the next day, and with a scout in the crowd that was interested in him as a person as much as a player, he didn't relish in the thought.

Players who were on the verge of breaking into the major leagues would play through just about anything, to prove that they were worth the investment of an organization.

Tim grew up **riddled** with minor injuries in his life, taking a number of sprains, bruises and cuts on his way through middle school and high school baseball, but he couldn't think of an injury that he sustained along the way that felt worse than playing with a minor hangover on two hours of sleep.

A jackal and a coyote that were friends almost all of the way through the journey were sitting next to each other in the middle of a game that was going quickly in reality, but for the pair of canines, time was *crawling*, and every time the sun peeked out from behind the cover of the clouds, Carlos had to turn his head to keep from vomiting.

"It would have been worth it to lie, Carlos. I can't believe I'm saying it, but it would have been **totally** worth it."

"Ugh...d-dude, not so damn loud. You an' your boy kept me up half the damn night, y'know?"

Tim felt a bashful warmth spreading around his muzzle as he put his face down in the gloves upon his paws. "Trust me, I wasn't in the mood, but he just wouldn't back off...I managed to talk myself into it, but I didn't even get to finish."

Carlos made a long, gross heave with his throat, and it was hard for Tim to tell if he was faking or not.

"Dude, how do you put up with that? Shoulda just ditched on your room and spent the night with that Vicky chick!"

Wherever Vicky actually was, she was hiding very well among the crowds at the ballpark that day, and it didn't help that Tim barely had the focus to play, much less scan the crowd for her face. "I couldn't do that to Alton!"

"Don't you two have an open relationship?"

"Well, y-yeah..."

"And doesn't he sleep with other dudes like, **all** the time?"

"He does-

“And,” Carlos cut him off, “You had no idea he was gonna be there, so if you happened to walk in the room after deciding to do what was within the rules you both agreed to, that would have been his loss for not showing up sooner.”

Tim cocked a brow and gave Carlos a subtle nudge. “That was really concise. Are you sure you aren’t one of those weird people who gets really smart when they get really drunk?”

“I’m not drunk. I’m **hungover**.”

“*Heh*. I guess you have a point, bud.”

Neither Tim, nor Carlos was really paying much attention to the game, and they were lucky enough to be sharing a brief moment in the dugout while they waited for their turns to bat. They didn’t particularly want to stand in and take pitches in their state, either, but Tim was trying to stay focused. There were at least a few people in the crowd that he wanted to impress, and though he wasn’t sure if Vicky was around, he still wanted to give Alton a reason to have shown up in the first place.

Naturally, he hadn’t been able to find Alton’s face in the crowd, either, and in the case of the bear, Tim knew exactly where to look: he picked out the ticket himself, and knew where it was in the park.

“Do you think Vicky would even look twice at a guy like me, Carlos?”

“I think the bigger thing to worry about is whether or not you knew what to do with it, when you got there.”

“It?”

“Her cooch.”

“...Real classy, Carlos.”

The coyote snickered and tightened up his gloves. His turn in the lineup was coming, and though he wasn’t even remotely hopeful to get a hit, he was going to approach the plate the same way that he always did, and go through all of the same rituals.

“I’m just sayin’, bro. I don’t think you’ve ever seen one of those up close, have you?”

Tim sat silent and looked straight ahead. The fur on the tips of his ears threatened to burn with a flustered heat, and Carlos shook his head, albeit gently, as he walked for the dugout exit.

*Not cool, man. It's not my fault I've barely gotten to see a chick naked...I mean, it is, but it's not like I wasn't trying to do more with it!*

If he were ever to tell Carlos the full truth, the coyote would find that Tim had several failed attempts, dating as far back as his early youth when all of the kids were still playing “doctor,” and reaching as recent as his time in college, when he would occasionally be with a female who was a little bit too drunk to consent.

Tim didn't think that being a gentleman and following the law were such bad things, but following those rules meant that he rarely, if ever, had a female with him in a romantic situation where sex could realistically happen. Although it was a very minor motivation, part of his reasoning to get away from his old high school and college was that fame would create a reputation for him; one that would be able to erase the somewhat embarrassing name that he made for himself growing up.

The inner monologue carried on just long enough for Carlos to dive back into the dugout. Frustrated, the coyote tossed his batting helmet against the bench and picked up his fielding mitt, all in one fell swoop.

“Guess we shouldna gone so hard last night if we really wanted to make it up to the bigs,” Carlos suggested. He tried masking the bitterness in his voice by allowing his accent to make his speech sound lazy, but Tim wasn't so easily fooled. “**Lotta** scouts out there right now, man.”

It was the gap between innings, and Tim would be playing defense when he came back out of the dugout, but he felt a renewed sense of motivation to play his very best, as he slipped his pawtips into the confines of his glove. “Defense gets you up to the majors, Carlos. A bat keeps you there. Gotta take the first step if we're ever gonna make it, right?”

“I wish I had your optimism...and your energy. I just can't bounce back the way that you do,” Carlos admitted. The pair slapped gloves in a spiritual high-five as they jogged onto the field together and watched their bullpen pitcher warming up.

The second he could see the scouting section, Tim forgot all about the fact that Alton was supposed to be in the stands just above them. Any guilt in his mind would have been momentary at best, as he held tighter to the grudge of his treatment last night than the dedication of the bear for showing up at all.

The effort by Vicky, to actually go out to the bar and meet with a player that she might be taking a liking to in more than one way, held a much stronger grip on him as the infielders tossed the ball around and got their arms warmed up.

“I know you’re hopin’ that she’s lookin’ at you, man, but if you botch a throw because you’re lookin’ back, you’re just hurtin’ your chances! Stay focused!”

Carlos felt more like a big brother to Tim than a best friend sometimes, but he appreciated the fact that his friend, while sometimes careless, was more mature than he was. Romance had a place in Tim’s life, but at the moment, his focus had to be on the plays at hand, and suddenly, with the possibility of a September call-up looming, the jackal felt like he was playing in his first semi-professional game all over again.

The infield took shape as the inning began, and Tim bounced up and down in place to burn off the jitters. He couldn’t **begin** to remember the last time he had to do that, and as he hopped in place and chopped his footpaws, he took a casual glance around the scouting section, hoping to find Vicky waiting for him in one of the seats.

She wasn’t present, but Tim did notice a quick, half-hearted wave from the seats above, where Alton was **just** arriving to the game.

Offering the quickest wave he possibly could, Tim addressed his estranged lover and turned his attention back to the game. He bent his knees just slightly and punched his glove, waiting for the ball to approach, if it were ever to come his way.

*Three right-handed batters, Tim thought. Probably not gonna see too much action, the way they’ve been swinging today.*

Wins and losses didn’t mean a lot for position players, in relevance to being called up to the major leagues. Pitchers had to worry about such, but for infielders and outfielders, it came down purely to how well they were playing within themselves. Tim was sitting on a fairly impressive batting line, with a .347 average, .380 on base percentage and a slugging stat at .590. The reason so many scouts were looking at him, however, was the fact that he lead all of minor league baseball in stolen bases with 65, and in a day and age when power ruled over speed, guys like Tim were becoming harder and harder to find.

If he could cement his glove as being reliable, he’d have a spot on any team in the major leagues, and his loyalty didn’t depend on a city or a state. He wanted to make it to the top, and he wasn’t all that worried about where he did it.

He was only worried about the 2-1 fastball that was rocketed his direction. The batter waited just long enough to push the ball to the right side on contact, and Tim charged on it and lowered his glove. The ball took an awkward bounce off of the infield grass, but he was ready for the change in trajectory, and managed

to corral the ball in his glove, before delivering a precise throw over to first base; the first baseman barely even had to *move*.

It looked fairly simple on the replay board in center field, but the scouts knew how difficult the hop was to handle, and Tim knew that without a lifetime of practice, he wouldn't have been able to make the play with such apparent ease.

He wasn't sure if Alton even saw the play, as the next time he glanced up at the bear, he was gazing down at his smartphone, and it left Tim to sigh in place as the next batter strolled up to the plate.

***"Psst. Focus."***

Tim simply offered a quick thumbs-up to Carlos and kept his eyes on the batter. *Dunno if you'll ever be a big league ballplayer, Carlos, but you're gonna make a hell of a coach when we're all washed up.*



The local news crews were waiting just outside of the stadium for the players. Minor league baseball didn't draw nearly the crowd or news coverage that the major leagues did, even at AAA ball, but there was still some fame to be had, and Tim, without feeling **too** arrogant, was starting to get used to the lights and sounds.

He stole two more bases that evening to add to his league-leading total, and picked up a hit, a walk, and a run-batted-in, or RBI, in the process. His play was solid, his contact was impressive, and clearly, he was terrorizing anyone who dared to face him in the minor leagues.

The questions would be the same as they ever were: "You think you're gonna get that call-up, this time?"

Tim never knew how to answer it. He didn't want to seem overly confident, but he didn't want to roll over and show his belly, either. There had to be a happy middle ground where he could sound sure of himself without sounding like an arrogant prick, but he just wasn't sure that he could find it, the way that Carlos had.

"Oh, I'm goin' up, for sure!" Carlos told the reporters, but his words were followed by quick, sarcastic laughter. The news teams loved Carlos for his personality, and he loved the camera right back, every single time. "*Naaaaah...* I mean, I might get the call this time, but I'm just playin' every day to play. I love this game. If they think I'm ready, I'm ready."

Carlos was sucking up all of the media attention, and Tim was fairly grateful for it. With the energy drinks and the tension of the game fading, his hangover was coming back in full force, and he didn't feel like addressing the reporters with a pounding headache. He rushed through his shower, dressed himself again and snuck out of the locker room as quick as he could, carrying his duffle bag on his back.

*Just gotta make it to the bus, and I'm home free...I'll call Alton once I'm in my seat, and hopefully he'll be ready to apologize for being such an ass in the bedroom...I guess I'll owe him an apology, too. My attitude didn't really help things.*

The distance between the players entrance and the bus wasn't too far, and there weren't a lot of people actually allowed in the area to slow the players down, but

scouts and agents were always granted access...and perhaps, the best part of Tim's day was waiting for him, just on the other side of the doors toward the charter.

"Playing that well on three hours of sleep and a hangover? You just might be big league material after all!"

Eyes of jade glistened with a hint of gold that reflected the setting sun, and fangs shimmered in the light as Vicky offered her star player a friendly smile.

"I haven't done enough cocaine yet," Tim joked at her. "But I think I can figure out how to handle the rush by Monday, if there's a call up in my future?"

"Sorry, big guy. I'm not supposed to tell you if you did or not...that's up to your manager. I just wanna make sure that I'm in your corner when you **do** make it to the top...because I'm sure that you will, Tim. It's really just a matter of time."

Vicky was trying so hard not to grin from ear to ear. Her fangs were already out in a wide, cheerful smile, and perhaps, she knew something about Tim's future that he didn't, but whatever that was, she couldn't jeopardize his chances, or her own, as far as a call-up was concerned.

She knew how hard he celebrated when there was no reason to go out for a drink, and she worried that he might go just a little bit too far if she told him too much good news.

"I wish I had the kind of confidence in myself that you have, Vicky. I don't think the call-up is coming this late in the season, honestly."

"It's only the second of September. You've still got a whole month left to be brought up for a few major league at-bats, Tim."

"You sound more like a manager than a scout, Vicky."

"*Pfft.* You think they'd let a woman be a manager in the majors? I've got better chances of **playing** in the majors!"

Tim raised a brow and managed a grin. Somehow, he was having a normal chat with an adult female, and he wasn't making a total ass of himself.

*Is...is this what it's like? Is this what it's like to be able to talk to a girl? Who cares if I like her...it wouldn't really matter! This is kinda nice!*

"Got a bit of an arm on you, then?"

"I played some softball in high school, yeah. I don't think I could reach the upper 70's like I used to, but I'd be willing to give it a try if you wanted to play a

game of catch sometime?”

That awkwardness flew right back to Tim, as he looked too far into Vicky’s offer. “Y-you...you’re being serious?”

“Why wouldn’t I be? It could be a lot of fun to see if I can handle a guy with an arm like yours.”

*Damn it...why does she have to keep blurring the lines? I can’t tell if she’s flirting with me or being serious!*

The reality was somewhere in the middle, but that was a place that Tim didn’t know existed, in this conversation.

“Just...uh...h-heh. Don’t blame me if you end up getting hurt,” Tim replied, knowing that his voice was terribly awkward, and that his confident, dry smirk was faltering into a nervous, dorky smile.

Vicky’s expression sharpened to contrast his own, and her wider, overdone smile dialed back into a confident smirk...one that bordered on devious. “Trust me, Tim...I can handle dealing with the big boys. You’ll know that much soon enough.”

*The whole damn world is gonna know it, Vicky thought, though she realized she might be letting the poor jackal on just a little bit too much. But for being such a confident ballplayer, this boy couldn’t be much worse with the women if he tried...and I feel like he’s really trying!*

“Not even giving me a chance to say no, huh?” Tim asked, chuckling awkwardly after he finished asking. “It’s, uh...it’s okay. I couldn’t possibly say no to such an offer.”

The response was polite, at least, and Vicky let out a quick giggle to show that she wasn’t **too** heavily off-put. “I’ll make sure to bring a glove the next time I see you, then. Make sure you’ve got a ball for me...and Tim?”

“Yes, Vicky?”

“Try to stay out of trouble for the weekend, okay? Don’t need another guy like you getting cut down before his prime.”

Tim nodded firmly. “Don’t need to tell me twice, Vicky...and...t-thanks. It means a lot that you actually care.”

Vicky wanted to pry at the hint of saddened emotion that she picked up in Tim’s voice, but she wasn’t sure that they knew each other well enough just yet. Overstepping her bounds cost her a number of connections in the past, and this

one was too valuable to lose, for more than a few reasons.

“Of course I do, Tim. You’re a new friend, but you’re a fast friend...I’d like to keep you around for a while.”

“As my agent?”

“As your **friend**, doofus.”

Giving Tim just the lightest bump on the arm, Vicky made a gesture to the team bus. “Careful...you might end up putting me on the disabled list!” Tim warned her, salvaging his dorky nature for just one more normal sounding moment. It only occurred to him a few moments after just how many pieces of baseball vocabulary could really be used for sexual euphemisms, and he knew that he was blushing under his fur at the same thought. “It was...y’know. It was great seeing you again, Vicky. I’ll be in touch.”

“I sure hope that you will,” Vicky replied, before she let him be on his way. He was still smiling back at her when he started stepping up onto the lifted entrance of the bus...just before he felt a large, heavy paw against his right shoulder.

“**Hey**, Tim. Gonna say goodbye to your other lover?”

Sometimes, Tim wished that the team chaperones didn't know Alton so well. He was able to mitigate the damage publicly, but the fact that there were cameras around meant that the tabloids would be keeping tabs on any drama that they could get their grimy little hands on, and with the prospect of a September call-up dominating his thoughts, Tim couldn't possibly focus on the issues with his relationship.

He was able to sneak onto the safety of the bus after a quick, hushed argument, but naturally, he had to sit at the back of it so that he could talk on the phone without bothering his teammates with the details of the extended argument.

"Seriously, Alton...can we **please** just drop this? I've got a long bus ride until I'm back home, and I'd really like to get some fucking sleep!"

It was awkward to chat about his relationship on the phone, even when Tim confined himself to the back of the bus, but he knew that Alton wasn't going to drop anything, and for what it was worth, he was going to get his two cents in, as well, if the bear wasn't going to listen to reason.

"Well, you're going to make it home before I am. There's a terrible storm right in the path of the flight, and it's bearing down on the airport in a few minutes, so I have to sit through this damned delay, and I'd like a little company!"

"Would it kill you to think of **anyone** other than yourself?"

Alton resisted the urge to throw his phone across the terminal. He didn't figure that it was worth dealing with the TSA, and didn't want to risk ending up on a no-fly list because he was having relationship struggles. "I think about other people, **especially** you, all the time. I'm not even half as selfish as you seem to think I am!"

"You were more concerned with getting off than you were with seeing me, you were more concerned with sleep than you were with actually coming to the game on time, and now, you're more concerned with being lonely than you are with my wellbeing!"

"You're on the bus and you'll fall asleep sooner or later, Tim. I don't think you've really got anything to worry about."

"You know how little sleep I got last night. I'm not sure why it's such a big deal that I want to get some rest, and I don't know why you're being such a whiny

brat, anyway. You at least got to finish...”

“Do you really still think this is about sex, Tim?”

“Isn’t it always?”

Tim could feel the venom pouring through the phone as he waited out the delay between responses.

“Who was the girl, Tim?”

“...Wait. *That’s* what you’re so upset about?”

“You two were looking at each other like you were getting ready to sneak behind the bus so you could fuck each other’s brains out! Do you really think I didn’t notice?”

He knew it wasn’t the right time to, but Tim couldn’t help chuckling into the phone. “Alton...that’s Vicky. She’s a talent scout and an agent. She’s just trying to get into me for some money, you know? She seems to think I really have what it takes for a September call-up, and I think she wants to be in my corner if I make it to the big leagues. There’s nothing there!”

“That might be her cover-

“**Alton**. Relax. Did you not notice that she was standing on the *inside* of the guardrail? You know, that place that normal people can’t get to? She’s been scouting me for a while, and there’s good chance that she’s gonna try to get me to sign with her agency if I make it to the next level. That’s all this is!”

Alton hated being interrupted, but he wasn’t in the kind of place that he could properly vent his frustrations. “I just don’t like the feel of her, Tim. Maybe she really is a talent scout, but I could see the way that she was looking at you. She wouldn’t mind something more.”

“And just why would that be a problem? You fuck other dudes all the time!”

“Yeah, other **dudes**. I thought you were gay, Tim!”

“...Do you ever listen to me, Alton? Like...ever? Or do you just make up conversations in your head, and get mad at me when the things I really say are different than your fantasy? I **never** said I was exclusively gay!”

“I knew it! You **are** interested in her!”

“I never said that either,” Tim replied, and he had to pause, sucking in a deep, heavy breath. “And I’m not going to say anything else. This conversation is getting us nowhere. I’m going to sleep, and if your flight is delayed that badly,

you might as well do the same. Good night, Alton.”

“Don’t you han-

Tim pressed his thumb to the screen of his smartphone and ended the call. He missed the good old days of flip phones, and wished that he still had one so that he could have slammed it shut for emphasis, but that was for the best. Most of the team was already asleep in their seats on the bus, and Tim would have felt like a royal jerk to stir them awake.

Only Carlos was still up for certain, and that was because he had the displeasure of sitting next to Tim on almost every single bus ride.

“So, when’s the reception, bud?” Carlos asked, trying to keep a snicker hidden in the darkness. He knew that this wasn’t the right time to be laughing, but trying to ease a situation with humor was just in his nature.

Tim would have been more receptive to the same, normally. “I don’t know what the hell his problem is, honestly. He shows up, fucks me, doesn’t help me finish, watches the TV with the volume up when he knows I need to sleep, shows up late to the game that he didn’t have to pay to enter, and when I talk to **one** other person, I’m the bad guy. The fuck is that?”

“A sign of an extremely controlling boyfriend,” Carlos admitted. After a few months of beating around the bush with his teammate and close friend, he was getting tired of seeing Tim in a state of distress because of the bear that claimed to love him. “And the kind of guy that isn’t good for you, honestly. If he has that much of an issue with you just talking to a chica, he’s gonna be really upset when you two finally bump uglies.”

“We’re **not** going to do that, Carlos. I barely even know her!”

“I barely even knew Melissa when I first met her, and now we’ve got a buncha rug rats between us. Never say never, Tim.”

“Yeah, but you and Melissa at least went on a few dates and got to know each other before anything happened. I met Vicky completely by chance, and I don’t think she really wants anything serious...I think she’s just putting on the charm because her bosses are telling her to.”

If Vicky were there to hear such, she might have slapped Tim, but it wasn’t entirely his fault: he had no idea that she didn’t actually have any bosses, and was unaware of the fact that she was trying to build her own business from the ground up.

He was also still just a little oblivious to the fact that she had a twinkle in her eye

every time she saw him, and that her body language was telling him to make the first move, no matter how small it might be.

“You gotta learn to give yourself some credit, Tim. She **wants** you, dude.”

Tim’s cheeks began to burn as he glanced down at his smartphone, pretending he had a message to read. “No she doesn’t. She’s just keeping an eye on me until I get called up...if I ever do.”

“Look, I can’t sleep next to someone who’s gonna bring me down all night, and unlike Alton, I actually care about your feelings,” Carlos joked, and he made sure to give Tim a quick jab to accentuate it, “So do me a favor and just relax, man. Your life isn’t all that bad, and at the end of the day, you’ve got two good looking people coming after you, even if one is a little rough around the edges, and you’re too dumb to notice the other one wanting you.”

“Even if she was interested, it’s not like I could get close to her, Carlos. Alton nearly blew a gasket when he mentioned her presence to me...”

“You can’t let him own that double standard, Tim. He’s been running that game on you since day one, and if he’s gonna sleep with every guy in every town that you two visit, then it’s only fair that you at least get to take Vicky on a date and see if she’s really got the hots for you like I think she does.”

Carlos wasn’t necessarily book smart, but he’d done a lot of living for a man in his mid-twenties, and more often than not, Tim was glad to have the coyote, and his level of experience, around for a chat.

“That’s...that’s not a bad point, Carlos. I guess I do need to call her and ask her about her agency, anyway. I’d wanna get to meet her bosses and everything, if she’s really that interested in getting me to sign with them.”

“There you go! That gives you an excuse to meet with her, and it can be somewhere casual so you can feel her out! Maybe it’s a date, maybe you’re just meeting...let **her** dictate the pace, and if things get a little wild and crazy, well... that’s just the way it goes, right?”

Sooner or later, Tim was going to have to get to know Vicky a little bit better, either as a prospective agent, or as someone who would come hunting for him when he was offered a big league contract.

If it just so happened that a meeting about paperwork turned into a little something more, Tim wasn’t going to let Alton stop him from enjoying himself.

“Right, Carlos.”



*“Theeeeere’s my little second baseman,”* Carlos teased, sneaking in a quick noogie on Tim’s head before the jackal had a chance to reach over and slug him. “Now shut up and get some shut eye, would you? I swear, we’re gonna be home before I get any sleep...”

Tim knew that he was going to need a little more time before his mind was settled enough to rest, but he was glad to have a friend like Carlos around to vent to. As he groomed himself and tried to fix his messy headfur, he wondered if Vicky really was interested in him at all, or if everyone around him was just looking into something that wasn’t there.

In the back of his jumbled brain, he quietly hoped that his meeting with her would yield more than a financial contract.

The long, boring process of riding a bus across several states that were little more than rolling hills and dusty plains was finally going to change for Tim, and though he wasn't privy to that information just yet, a certain ocelot was, and she was spending more time than was natural, going over the career numbers of the talented jackal.

"I can't believe this kid hasn't made it up yet," she muttered, as she sat at a small table in the dining room of her apartment. It was right off of the kitchen, or more accurately, it was right **in** the kitchen; the entire building was cramped, and her particular unit was no different. She could hear every conversation that her neighbors to the right ever had, and thankfully, the left side of her apartment butted up to the exterior of the building, leaving her with the illusion of privacy on that side of her home.

Vicky had to pinch her every penny to live the lifestyle that she did, and if she ever broke the illusion, she was worried that she'd never quite be able to crack in to the industry like she was hoping.

"Stormed his way through rookie ball, basically skipped A, one year of AA, and now he's been stuck in AAA for the last two years because some grizzled, old veteran is playing just well enough to keep his spot. If this team is serious about a rebuild, they should have given Tim a chance last year...and if they want an anchor, they should sign him right away...this could **really** be it!"

Jumping up from the rickety chair of her aged dining set, Vicky spun around and danced in place as if no one was watching, swirling the hem of her loose nightie and exposing her panties for just a moment. She was comfortable in her home, but the idea of getting out of the crummy, small apartment and finally cashing in that first, big paycheck was enough to have her dancing around, and she would have jumped up onto the table, if she thought it could support her.

The ocelot was much deeper than Carlos, or even Tim gave her credit for. She was indeed a talent scout, but she made peanuts for her work, and her every attempt to work at an agency left her sitting behind the front desk, playing receptionist and getting coffee and donuts for the big wigs.

She'd been saving her every dollar in preparation for the coming moment, and though she was trying to ignore her romantic feelings for Tim, she needed to be close to him: He was her ticket into the world of being a major league agent,

something very few women had ever attempted, and even fewer succeeded.

“His numbers have gotten better, year after year...and he looks damn good holding a bat,” Vicky murmured, her voice fading away to the pleasant sound of an amorous rumble. She could still remember the way that she threw herself into the door of her own hotel room after her extended meeting with him, and that night, she’d lost count of just how many times she had to clean her digits off, but at the moment, where Tim was oblivious, she was just in denial; “But...I was drinking that night. And I had a few at the park the next day. I’m just seeing things...j-just seeing some really damn hot things...”

She could talk herself down all day, but at the end of each one, she found herself resting her forehead in an open palm. She’d been able to resist the wiles of every baseball player that advanced on her in her entire life, including those who thought that she was the desperate one, but now that a man had come along that was just curious to get to know her as a person, she was having to dial back her desires, instead.

“If...if I can just get him to sign on with me, that’s all I need. I’ll be in,” she reminded herself, as she settled back down into her chair and sucked in a deep, heavy breath. She did everything that she could to center herself as she went back to studying his numbers, and admittedly, she was impressed all over again by the rising trend of his batting average and stolen bases over the years. “And if I can pitch this guy to his major league affiliate, he’ll be getting that call-up tomorrow, instead of near the end of the month!”

Having spent her entire life after high school in the business of all things baseball, Vicky had a few powerful connections in her back pocket, and she was going to have to call in a few favors to get close to Tim before anyone else had a chance to scoop him up. The news that he was getting called up would drop the very next day, and she wanted to be the first one at his door when it did.

***Bzzzzt, bzzzzt...***

Of course, it helped that she’d given him a business card, and thanks just as much to her flirtatious attitude as her business practices, Tim was reaching out to her before she had to find out how to reach him.

“Hello?” she asked, as she picked up the phone. She didn’t know his number, and her lower lip was trembling when she heard the voice on the other end.

“Hey, Vicky. Sorry that it’s kinda late, but...I’ll be back in town tomorrow afternoon, and we have an off day before the next series. I thought maybe you’d want to go have a drink before midnight, maybe? This is Tim, by the way.”

Vicky giggled. “I recognized the voice. Hello, Tim,” she replied, teasing him a little bit as she leaned back in her chair. She did everything she could to keep her composure, even going so far as to fan herself with her free paw, until she picked up a pen with it. She **needed** to write everything down. “I’d love to grab lunch with you tomorrow, if you have the time?”

Nearly bouncing in his bus seat, Tim was every bit as eager and silly as Vicky was, but he had a small audience of people around him that were just praying for sleep to find them. “Y-yeah, I...I could do lunch! Sure! Wanna meet at Vattelli’s Red Hots, little bit after noon, perhaps?”

“I haven’t eaten there in years,” Vicky admitted, “But I guess nothing beats a good old fashioned hot dog. Sounds great to me!”

“Awesome! I’ll, uh...I’ll try not to be drunk this time.”

Vicky rolled her eyes. She could hear Tim’s nerves through the phone, and while it was endearing, she knew that he was struggling to find the right words to say. “I would certainly hope not! Just don’t be late, okay? I’ll be there around 12:15.”

Tim made a mental note immediately, and reminded himself to add it to the calendar on his smartphone thereafter. “Then I’ll be there at 12:10.”

“Chivalry isn’t dead after all, then?”

“It’s only as dead as you want it to be.”

Letting out a very brief giggle, Vicky wrote down a note on the spreadsheet she had open on her table. “If you pull out my chair for me, you’ll make my day, Tim.”

“Duly noted,” he replied, finding a surprising amount of tact came to his words, once the date was confirmed. It was as if all his confidence needed was to get past the risk of rejection before he found his casual stride. “I’ll...I’ll see you tomorrow, then?”

“Looking forward to it. Good night, Tim.”

“Good night, Vicky. S-sorry for calling so late!” He exclaimed, but Vicky hung up before he could finish the apology.

She was too busy dancing her way through the narrow walkway of her kitchen, bumping her backside against the cabinets as she moved, thinking that she was going to win, no matter what the outcome of the meeting was.

“A date with a cute boy, or a meeting with my first client ever...I’m not sure which one is better!”

If Tim was the moth being drawn to the flame, then the flame would trouble, and he knew that was just what he'd be in when he woke up the next day.

He didn't even bother trying to stay awake for Alton, who ended up finally making it out of the airport on a red-eye flight, and now, the bear was going to have to spend most of his vacation day sleeping, in order to make up for the lack thereof.

"And the mighty beast is already angry," Tim thought, able to hear the heavy, stomping footsteps of his boyfriend in the kitchen. "What a fucking surprise..."

He kept his voice to a whisper as he crawled out of bed. Clad only in a slimming, loose pair of black boxers, Tim tried to creep his way over to the bathroom without being noticed, but he knew it would be in vain. Even in the middle of cooking up breakfast, Alton wasn't going to be distracted enough for an evasive maneuver to work.

"Gee...so *nice* of you to finally wake up and join the world of the living! Y'know, since wanting to sleep in is such a crime now," Alton threw Tim right under the bus without even a hint of hesitation. "How are you this fucking fantastic morning?"

"A lot better than you are, apparently," Tim replied, still too tired to keep his snark contained. "I don't suppose that you're making breakfast for both of us?"

"I had no idea when you were going to wake up, so I figured I would just pour myself some cereal. You're a big boy. You can handle cooking for yourself, right? Or do you have to have Vicky swing by and make it for you?"

Tim rolled his eyes and slumped against the wall by the bathroom door. "Way to be a chauvinistic douche and treat me like I'm a child all in the same sentence, Alton. It's not even noon and you're already in rare form."

"Just because she's a girl doesn't make that statement chauvinistic, Tim. I was just saying it as a general point, since I'm sure you'd prefer it if she came and made it for you!"

"Why are you so threatened by her, Alton? Seriously..." Tim trailed off, wishing that he'd just ignored the bear in the first place and snuck his way into the bathroom.

“I’m not threatened, Tim. I just don’t trust her. I think she’s trying to use you.”

“And if a male agent were to have approached me that way?”

“It wouldn’t make a bit of difference.”

“So...this is about me finally seeing my dream realized, and now that I’m going to, you have a fucking problem with that? **Really** wish you would have told me that sooner, Alton!”

Tim and Alton had been on the rocks for longer than either one cared to admit. When Alton made it up to his AAA team two years prior, he needed a place to stay, and found Alton looking for a roommate on a message board. A few weeks in, they showed interest in each other, and before long, they were in an open relationship, with the only real rule being that they always put each other before any outside lovers they had.

Often times, Tim felt like he was the lover that was placed on the back burner, and Alton was worried that Tim was just trying to get away from him by playing the sport of baseball. Their problems were simple, but like many couples, they didn’t communicate well enough to nip things in the bud, and instead, their concerns came out as frustrations boiling over.

Tim couldn’t remember the last time they simply woke up, had coffee and enjoyed a quiet chat together.

“You know I want you to succeed, baby,” Alton replied, throwing out a pet name to try and make himself seem gentler than he really felt, “But...I’m scared, okay? You’re already traveling so much with this minor league team, and if you make it to the majors, you’ll have to move away!”

“What’s wrong with me having to find a new place?”

“That’s how our relationship started. What if it ends because we’re not living together anymore?”

The concern was at least mildly valid, and in truth, living situations were part of the reason that Tim never wanted to settle down so young in his life. He knew that the daily grind, coupled with the amount of travel that he had to do would require a certain kind of person to tolerate it, and the more he thought about it, Alton wasn’t that person.

Worse still, he never even considered how hard it would be for them to break things off, if Alton couldn’t handle that transition.

“I wouldn’t break up with you just because I had to move a little further away,

Alton. It's not like we haven't done the traveling thing for the last year, anyway. We could still do it for a while longer, if we had to."

Tim wanted to bite his tongue. He knew he shouldn't go implying that he wanted to take the next step with Alton like that, but it was early, and his mind still wasn't as clear as he would have liked.

"But would we be able to make it work? I mean...look at the fight we're having over something as simple as a girl coming into your life!"

"**You** started this fight, Alton."

"Actually, **you** started it in the hotel room."

Tim rested his forehead in his palm, and used the gesture to try and rub some of the sleep from his eyes. "You...you are seriously impossible sometimes, Alton. I was mad because you only came to get your rocks off, and then you couldn't even be bothered to help me finish...and to top that off, you showed up late to the game. Everything I was upset about was totally valid. It's not like you really needed to sleep...you could have fucking slept at the game, if you'd just been there on time!"

There was a pause that felt longer than it was, but Tim's fangs began to grit together as he stepped down the hallway, toward the seated bear. "...You weren't sleeping in, were you?"

"L-look, Tim, there was this really hot guy on Ballr, and we were so close by, and-

"Fuck off. I'm leaving."

"Tim, **come on!** Be reasonable about this!"

"It's not just Vicky! Every time I meet someone nice and even think about sleeping with them, you go off the deep end, and I'm supposed to just be okay with you fucking everything that moves because you surprised me at the hotel, thinking only of yourself? Are you **insane?!'**"

"Tim, that isn't a fair comparison, and you know that! I sleep around with other people because that's what we agreed to, and I **always** come back to you!"

Tim turned away and headed for the bedroom. "Yeah, you come back to me to finish, and then fucking fall asleep."

"When you look at other people, you look at them like you want them more than you want me, Tim! I sleep around, but I always keep you as the one I want the most! I'm not looking for replacements; I'm just trying to pass the time!"

“Well, then you should understand why I’m headed out the door, because I’m gonna go pass some time away from you while I wait for my meeting with Vicky.”

“**What?!** You’re meeting up with that feline skank?”

“She’s actually interested in helping me advance my career, Alton, and she isn’t worried about her feelings getting hurt by my success!”

“She’s using you, Tim! Open your eyes and listen to me for once!”

“Oh, I did that just a moment ago, remember? You were too busy getting your cock sucked to come see my baseball game, so now, I’m too busy trying to get into the majors to sit here and listen to you tell me that some girl, who happens to be really nice, by the way...is actually bad news.”

“Tim, I-

“And if she wants to fuck me,” Tim cut Alton off, as he scampered into his clothes and made his way for the front door, “Guess what? I just might fucking **let her.**”

The door slammed behind Tim as he left for his date, and it was followed by a second crash, as a frustrated Alton whipped his cereal bowl at the floor, shattering it to pieces.



“And if she starts to seem uninterested, what do I say?”

Tim made one of the worst mistakes that he could, in that he arrived for the date almost an hour early, giving himself way too much time to think of all of the things that could go wrong, and all of the things that he could **do** wrong in the upcoming meeting.

He still wasn't sure if he should treat it as a meeting or a date, either, though Carlos was clearly expressing his thoughts that it was the latter.

“Just don't talk about yourself too much, man. If this really is a date, then it means she came there to see you, but she wants to know that you're interested in what she has to say, too.”

Wearing rough, old jeans that likely had a bit of a smell to them and a graphic t-shirt with a copyrighted video game character on it, Tim looked every bit like a young man that was getting ready to go out with his friends, but the more he thought about it, the more he thought about the implications of it going well.

*What if she ends up being my girlfriend?* He thought, though such couldn't be the case, if he was going to stay true to Alton.

Their open relationship never had a stipulation on the gender of who was being slept with; it only cared about Tim and Alton being the main players in the game. “I guess I'll just try not to bore her to death. She probably wants to talk about something other than baseball...but I honestly have no idea what else to talk about!”

“If she asks, tell her some things about you! Don't be afraid to show her that you're more than just a second baseman.”

Sitting at a table in the back of the small restaurant so that he'd be able to see Vicky entering, Tim had to resist the urge to jump out of his chair when her familiar form walked in the door. “Oh...oooooh *man*, she's here! I gotta go, Carlos! Thanksagaindudeyou'rethebestbye!”

Tim's hurried response left Carlos bewildered on the other end as the call was ended, and Tim lifted an arm and waved to Vicky as she strolled in the front. A fairly small, dingy building with just a few tables and a counter to order food at, Vattelli's was the definition of a hole in the wall, and Vicky couldn't have possibly missed Tim, but her expression brightened the moment that he flagged

her down.

*Well, it's always nice to be appreciated,* she thought, as she waved back and walked across the small space between them, dodging the tables and chairs along the way.

"It's been a while since anyone looked **that** eager to see me. You were like a kid trying to wave down an ice cream truck!" Vicky teased, and much to Tim's surprise, she leaned right in and wrapped her arms around him in a warm, friendly hug as he stood up from his chair.

His cheeks burned, his body froze, and his mind tore itself between the comforting sensation of her paws upon the slim muscles of his upper back, and the arousing delight of her breasts pressing into his chest.

"Well, y-you...you've brought me nothing but good things so far," Tim stammered through his own introduction, but he managed to calm his voice, refusing to seem so awkward and desperate. "Can you really blame me for being happy to see you?"

The warmth passed right back to Vicky's own cheeks, as she stepped back from the hug after just the right amount of contact. "I suppose not, but flattery doesn't get you anywhere in my world, Tim."

She was able to shift gears on a dime, a skill that she had to develop as a part of her professional environment. Even when she stepped back, it took Tim a moment to appreciate how well-dressed she was for the occasion: small heels wrapped around the fur of her footpaws, and carried a dark, shimmering black upon them, akin to the pencil skirt of the same color around her waist. A white blouse was tucked in and buttoned up, and her collar was neatly folded in place.

She appeared more prepared for a job interview than a date, and Tim couldn't decide if she was wearing the outfit for his enjoyment, or for the sake of professionalism.

The reality was somewhere in the middle, but Vicky could tell that Tim's wheels were turning, and she didn't want him getting *too* distracted right off the bat. "It was just an honest compliment, Vicky," he suggested. "Sorry if it was a little bit too forward."

"Well, for what it's worth, I would prefer to be the harbinger of good news, if I had my choice...and this time around, I do!"

"Does that mean you actually have something good to tell me?" Tim asked, as he took a half-step toward the ordering line, allowing Vicky to walk by his side.

“Or...are you just messing with me, and you’re gonna tell me bad news and just weren’t sure how to say it?”

“I’ve got a few tricks up my sleeve, but I’m not **evil**, Tim. I’ve got nothing but good news for you, and for what it’s worth, I’d like you to be sitting down when you hear it.”

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A pair of chili-cheese hot dogs with a smothering of fries left Tim so full that a small bump was forming along the slim lines of his abdomen, while Vicky carefully ate around a hot dog that was dragged through the garden, and ate only a few of her fries.

There was so little conversation between the eating that Vicky was actually a little bothered by it, and she cocked a brow at Tim, finding his pace to be impressive, if nothing else. “S-so, Tim...do you always eat so quickly?”

A painfully hungry stomach was sometimes just enough to overwhelm nerves, and just for the moment, Tim’s stomach was more concerned with being filled than it was with reminding Tim about how much of a crush he had on Vicky. “Oh, goodness no! I just didn’t eat breakfast this morning, so I was **starving**. Sorry if I ate like a pig in front of you.”

A few tables away, a quiet **oink** of disgust showed that someone took offense to the statement, and Vicky was left hiding her giggle behind her paw as she shook her head. “No, no...you’ve got fine manners. I’d rather you keep your mouth closed while you eat. I guess I was just a little worried about you.”

“Nothing to worry about, Vicky...but thanks.”

“Certainly,” she replied, trying to keep her polite, professional manner at the forefront of her demeanor. “Though you were so concerned with wolfing down your food that you never even stopped to ask what the good news was!”

A rumble of frustration followed Vicky’s comment, and she and Tim turned to see a pig and a wolf, enjoying a meal together and looking rather peeved with their statements.

“Maybe...maybe we should finish this conversation outside?” Tim asked, as he managed a nervous smile. He stood aside Vicky as she shot up out of her chair, and he escorted her out the door, into the dry, desperate heat of the late summer.

If this were actually a date, Vicky would have been tempted to fidget with her ponytail and press her toes together, hoping to entice Tim to lean in for a kiss.

She had to fight her every urge to do exactly that as she rested her arm against the large, black purse against her right hip and hugged the strap with her opposite paw. “Listen, Tim...I’m sorry if I’ve been giving you the runaround about this, but...you **are** getting a September call-up. They’re going to make a press conference announcement about it in a few hours, and a car will be arriving at your apartment shortly thereafter to pick you up and take you to the airport.”

Tim’s lunch threatened to jump right out of his throat at the news, and his eyes sparkled in the sunlight as they grew wide with excitement. “Y-you...you’re kidding! You’ve **gotta** be kidding!” he fell into an immediate panic and jumped in place with glee, forgetting the small mountain of food that was bouncing around in his stomach, until it literally forced a hint of soreness into his belly. “That’s amazing! That’s the best news I’ve heard all day...f-fuck, that’s the best news of **my entire life!**”

To see Tim in such a happy state, and to know that her announcement was what caused it brought Vicky her own little flip of joy in the pit of her insides, and even if she wanted to, she wouldn’t dare to cover up her giggle at his reaction. He really did seem like a kid who’d just received the perfect gift on Christmas morning, and that youthful exuberance was just another item of the growing checklist of reasons why Vicky was falling for him.

That realization, and the knowledge that she should never cross business and pleasure, was keeping Vicky from pulling the contract out of her purse.

“*Goodness!* I had a feeling you might respond that way!” Vicky admitted, and before she could reach out a paw to shake his in congratulations, Vicky felt Tim throw his arms around her upper back and squeeze her into his chest. On her heels, her muzzle pressed right into the underside of his jaw, and her long, thin tail stuck out straight, stiff as a board in the shocking moment.

As soon as she settled, however, and her eyes shrunk back down to normal, she found a certain comfort in the warmth of the jackal, and had to fight back against her natural, primal urge to purr against the side of his neck.

“O-oh, oh man...I’m **sorry!**” Tim immediately apologized, having caught just a glimpse of Vicky’s wide-eyed expression. “I couldn’t help it, I...this is just a dream come true for me, Vicky. This is literally my childhood dream coming true, and I just couldn’t help hugging the nearest person to me...heh...”

“Don’t apologize,” Vicky replied, trying to seem calm and collected in a moment that called for celebration. “I’ve seen plenty of guys get just as excited as you

were, and I've had more than my fair share of hugs. At least you were a gentleman about it...didn't steal a squeeze, if you catch my drift."

The ocelot winked and gave just a quick point to her hip, and Tim nodded with a nervous, eager smile. "I wouldn't dare go in for something like that on a woman unless she wanted me to," Tim admitted. "Thanks for being a trooper about all of that...I'm just so **excited!**"

*Tell him that he can go in for a squeeze if he wants to,* Vicky was screaming at herself in the back of her mind, thinking that this could be the perfect opportunity to get his attention romantically...

*...But she had to stop herself. No. This is his moment. He's just achieved his dreams, and he's so happy, I don't want to add any pressure on him right now. He doesn't deserve that. He's one step closer to the goal...and if I can fish that damn contract out of my pocket, I will be, too...*

He was going to be a professional baseball player. She was going to be a professional agent.

In her heart of hearts, she really didn't believe that there was a next step for them, and though she felt as if she was twisting a knife further and further into her own heart, Vicky swallowed down her crush and kept it buried away, opting to lift the contract from her purse with a faintly trembling paw.

"I'm very excited for you, Tim...and I think you've got the potential to play baseball for a long time. I want to make sure that you're compensated in the amount that you *truly* deserve, and trust me, I'm willing to go a lot further for you than most of the other agents are."

Every time Vicky brought herself a little closer to a romantic relationship with Tim, he felt it, and every time he thought they were sharing a moment, she seemed to shift gears on him and leave him feeling confused.

"W-well, I figured I would at least wait for the call from the general manager before I started going around and trying to figure out who I would sign a contract with, Vicky..."

"No, you're right," Vicky replied, allowing the slightly rounded velvet of her ears to droop somewhat. "It's my fault for jumping down your throat right away with all of this...it's a lot to handle, Tim, and that's why I want to be in your corner. I want you to be able to enjoy this moment with your loved ones and celebrate it properly."

Vicky wore her emotions at least partially on her sleeve, and Tim furled his

lower lip as he noticed her immediate reaction. “Don’t get me wrong, Vicky... I’m not counting you out as an agent. I just thought...n-never mind. You’re right, I should really go give my parents a quick call and let them know the good news.”

“Might as well call Carlos, too,” Vicky added, hoping that a joke might lift the awkward fog that had fallen over the moment. “I’m sure your boyfriend would be excited for you.”

Tim cocked a brow, but then shook his head and chuckled. “*Pfft*...okay, Vicky. I get that we’re really good friends, but Carlos is just my bud. He’s got a wife and kids!”

“Uh, duh...I’m a talent scout, remember? I know all about his family! I’ve had my eye on him for a while, too,” Vicky admitted, though she quickly turned away from the topic of the coyote. “But...I don’t suppose you’ve got a ‘loved one’ to call, then?”

“I don’t know if I’d call him that right now,” Tim answered. Venom dripped from his tongue as he did, and Vicky tilted her head with a concerned gaze. “Selfish asshole doesn’t even want me to make it into the major leagues because he thinks that we might break up or something.”

Filled with daggers of her own decisions, Vicky felt her heart drop right down into a pool of acid for good measure. “I...I see. I’m sorry to hear that, Tim. I didn’t know that you were batting for the other team, so to speak,” she said, and found herself immediately regretting the statement. “I mean...is that why you ended up missing breakfast?”

Tim could have glanced over the comment, but the way that he addressed it was just a little bit of relief for Vicky’s poor, tortured heart. “Oh, I’m a switch hitter,” he replied casually, and Vicky had to curl her pawtips in her shoes to keep from visibly smiling. “Y-yeah...just another fight. Seems like that’s all me and Alton do anymore...he thinks about himself and what he wants, tells me how to live my life, and when I live it differently, he throws a fit...can you believe that he tried to tell me not to come out to lunch today because he thinks you’re trying to use me?”

If not for the fact that Vicky worried she might end up using Tim when all was said and done, the words would have gone right over her head. “That’s a fairly appropriate title for a bisexual baseball player,” Vicky agreed, though her concerns turned to Tim and Alton’s relationship, as she clenched the strap upon her purse a little tighter. “You’re supposed to use the agent, Tim...not the other

way around. It sounds like Alton is just looking out for your best interests.”

“Trust me, he only cares about his own,” Tim argued, and he easily could have gone on and on about his issues with the bear, but he realized that would have been a terrible way to end a date, especially such a fortuitous one. “That’s okay, though...that isn’t here or there. If my making it to the big leagues is really a deal-breaker for him, then that’s **his** loss, and I’m not gonna lose a wink of sleep over it.”

“I’m glad you’re so eager to be successful, Tim. It’s not all about the money for you, and that’s just the kind of player that I want to represent...a man who has a little conviction in this game is a rare thing, anymore.”

“I was born to play baseball, Vicky. Even if I wasn’t making a dime playing it, I’d still find a way onto the field every day.”

“Well, if you give me a chance...I can promise that you’re gonna make a lot more than the rookie minimum,” Vicky suggested. “Your major league team is gonna have the rights to you when you get called up today, and they have to offer you the rookie minimum to start off, but you could request a little bit more. If you decide to hold off for a little bit and really dazzle them with your play, you could easily start off with a two or three year contract at a few million dollars a year...just some food for thought, really.”

Tim managed a quick snicker. “You sound so confident that if I didn’t know any better, I’d say you already talked to someone in the management and got a contract all figured out for me!”

“It’s better to get your homework done early if you can, Tim, and I’m a **very** hard worker. It’s all just speculation right now, and I don’t want to pressure you too much-

“Too late for that,” he interjected.

Rolling her eyes and giving Tim a playful shove on the arm, Vicky continued, “But, smartass...if you’re really serious about signing with me, I just want you to know that the offer is on the table. You go out there and play the game that you love, and I’ll make sure that you get what you think is a fair salary out of it. I’m sure they’d be happy to take you up on that whole ‘play for free’ thing you mentioned.”

“I said that I **would** play for free; not that I’m **going** to!” Tim corrected her, but her knowing smirk defused any frustration that he felt. Instead, he smiled back at her with just the tiniest bit of a grin, and for a moment, they just stood outside of

that little hole-in-the-wall restaurant, each one wondering if their relationship was going to be of the romantic variety, or the business variety.

It could very well have been both, right then, and each one worried still that it would end up being neither.

“Well, you just keep your head out of your ass, and don’t get into any trouble going home. Call your folks, tell your friends, and get ready to play with the best of the best, Tim. I’m proud to be able to be the first to say congratulations... you’ve **definitely** earned it.”

The reality of the moment still wasn’t settling in for Tim, who could feel his stomach doing a series of small flips, as if Vicky’s words made everything real, more than the phone call was going to.

“T-thank you, Vicky,” he replied, barely able to complete the words and contain his emotions in the same breath. “May...may I ask you something?”

“Of course, Tim.”

“Just curious...do all agents take their players out for lunch like this?”

Vicky felt her stomach doing a quick loop in the pit of her abdomen. *He did think this was a date, didn’t he? I knew it!*

“Only once, Tim...twice if you’re re-negotiating a contract.”

“And if there’s a third time?”

“Either you’re retiring,” Vicky said, “Or...you’re playing with yourself, or so the old saying goes.”

Tim chuckled at the joke. “Is that the kind of service you would offer as an agent?” he asked, but before Vicky could finish gasping at his forward question, he stuck out his paw. “I’m kidding, **I’m kidding!**”

“Sorry, but you’re still gonna have to shake your own bat, buddy,” Vicky shot back, her eyes narrowing as a hint of anger took her grin, and yet, she was impressed that he would dare to be so bold. “Though I’ll look into hiring someone to take care of that for you, if you’re so worried about your aim.”

“I can put the ball in any part of the field anytime I want,” Tim pointed out. “You really think I have trouble with *that*?”

Now, the ball was in Vicky’s court, and she was trying to psyche herself up to say something sensual. *Bet him that you’re a better aim. Tell him that you want him to prove it. Say something! Say anything!*



“I guess not...I just hope you remember to wash your paws when you’re done.”

*Nice going, Vicky. Really sexy there.*

“I sure do, *mom*,” Tim jabbed at her verbally one more time, and Vicky resisted the urge to slug him, but she did give his shoulder another quick push.

“Oh, **please**. I’m a year older than you, Tim, and a year wiser. Just because I’m looking out for your wellbeing doesn’t make me your mom.”

“Then what does it make you?”

For a man who was so awkward with women, Tim was finally asking all of the right questions, and Vicky couldn’t decide if she should be flattered with his attention, or frustrated with his perfect questions.

“Hopefully, it makes me your agent,” she decided on the spot to give the more levelheaded answer. “And if nothing else, it makes me a friend...and someone who cares about you.”

“Fast friends?” Tim asked, remembering the statement that they shared only a few nights before.

Smiling brightly at the thought, Vicky nodded her agreement. “The fastest,” she replied, and while she was in close, she went against all of her better judgment and leaned up on her tiptoes. Her claws held onto the sleeve of his old, worn t-shirt as her lips came to brush against the fur upon his cheek, and though she knew she shouldn’t, she hung around just a second longer than what could **ever** be considered formal. “There’s a kiss for good luck, Tim. Do me a favor and don’t waste it, okay?”

Tim’s face was burning with such a flushing warmth that Vicky could feel it against her lips before she even pulled away, and she did her best to hide a giggle behind her paw as Tim gazed out into the distance, mildly stupefied. “O-o-okay,” he stammered out a response, as the crafty ocelot walked right past him, off to her car. “T-thanks again, Vicky...this was...nice.”

“It really was,” she replied a bit more confidently.

Vicky waved from inside of her car as she backed away, and only when she knew that she was out of his field of vision did she allow herself to pump her fists in the air with celebration.

She didn’t see it, but Tim was doing the same as he took a victory lap around the parking lot of the small hot dog joint, screaming into his phone at his parents, “Mom? Dad? **I MADE IT! I FINALLY MADE IT!**”

Living in the spotlight wasn't something that Tim was a stranger to, entirely, but he was absolutely shocked how many people seemed to know his name when he saw it scrolling across the television.

"And next on SportsWorld: Tim Franklin finally getting the call-up that many experts have been saying is long overdue! The young second baseman is going to get a few swings this September, and he'll have a chance to show off the legs that have lead the minor leagues in stolen bases for the last two years!"

In a moment that he wouldn't deny was selfish, Tim barely even stopped in to grab the bare necessities at the apartment. Alton wasn't immediately in the living room when he entered, and in his rush to get to the airport, Tim forgot a number of things that he was sure he was going to regret.

He also couldn't think of any regrets that would possibly stop him from getting on board the plane and living out his dreams.

"I can't believe this...I really can't believe this!" Tim was muttering to himself, and if not for the fact that most of the people on the plane now knew who he was, they might have called a stewardess to do a wellness check on him. "I'm gonna be in Elgin in just a few hours, and then, I might even get to play in front of a sellout crowd! This is unbelievable!"

Living in one of the better minor league cities in the country, Moorsfield, was a good preparation class for moving up to the real deal, but there was nothing that could replace the giddiness in the pit of Tim's stomach. He barely even realized that the plane was taking off, and even with a seatbelt across his lap, he was bouncing in place, much to the chagrin of the lady sitting to his left, and the older gentleman on his right.

"The Elgin Cougars are never gonna be the same when I'm through with them... I can't wait for this plane to land! I've never been so **excited!**"

"That's nice and all, kid, but if you don't sit still, I'm gonna break both of yer legs."

The grizzled, old wolf was shaking his head, tussling the long, gray furs that were combed over the side of his right ear.

"I'd rather you not do that, sir. I kinda need those to make money...hopefully, a lot of it."

“Ooooh, yeah...you’re that kid I just saw on the local news in the airport! Going all the way from the edge of Colorado to Arizona, hm? That’s gonna be quite a change of pace for you, I’ll bet!”

It was amazing how quickly the demeanor of a stranger could change, when they found out that the person sitting next to them was famous, or at least soon to be. “It’ll be a lot hotter...and I’m not gonna have a problem with that,” Tim admitted. He couldn’t help chuckling, even though he knew that the older gentleman wasn’t making a joke.

He could barely control even the most basic of his bodily functions, and at the moment, he was just glad that he’d remembered to use the restroom **before** he got on the plane.

“I’m sure you’ll miss being so close to the mountains before too long,” the old wolf suggested. “Of course, from Elgin, you’ll be able to see the other face of the mountains from your backyard!”

“I guess it’ll be kinda nice to be able to see home, sweet home from the back window of my hotel. I don’t really have a place figured out yet,” Tim admitted. “I...I guess I should get on that, even if it’s just for the month.”

“I’m sure the team will put you up in a hotel, kid. You just focus on playing the game, and having a little fun with it. The next thing you know, you’ll be my age, and you won’t even want to **think** about throwing a ball around...real shame, too. It seems like that’s all my kid ever wants to do!”

“You’re a great dad, then.”

“How so?”

“My dad’s a nice guy and all, but he never wanted to throw the ball with me when I was growing up...so he never did,” Tim replied with another snicker. “The toll his job took on his body meant that we were more likely to watch a baseball game than to throw one.”

“It sounds like you had a pretty good father to me. He spent time with you and did the best that he could, right?”

“Well, he wasn’t too bad, that’s for sure,” Tim admitted. He found the small talk a little awkward, now that his nerves were starting to settle down, but it did make him feel just a little bit of shame for not giving his father a longer talk on the phone earlier. “Hopefully he’ll be able to make it to one of my games, coming up. I’ll pay for the plane tickets and everything!”

The old man nodded and offered a warm smile. “Maybe I should take a little

something for my tired, old arms and see if I can get out there to throw the ball around with my son when this plane lands...sounds like it could pay off handsomely for me in the future!”

“I know everyone thinks it’s lost on my generation, but some of us still believe in hard work, mister. I’ve got a few friends that work even harder than I do... guys like Carlos...o-oh, oh shit, **Carlos!** I forgot to call him!”

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Carlos was a family man, and Tim was sure that the coyote would understand family coming first, when it came down to making such an important call.

That didn’t mean that Tim was expecting him to be any happier than Alton was sure to be; he left town without bothering to stop and visit either one of them, and he knew that he had enough time to at least visit one or the other.

He wasn’t sure that Alton deserved a visit. Carlos deserved a courtesy call, at the very least.

A tall, fanciful hotel in downtown Elgin, Arizona was going to be Tim’s home for the next month, and Tim was too busy being excited to pay attention to the fancy, carved floors of white marble and black lining. He was too nervous about his first game the upcoming day to notice the fine, leather furnishings in the lobby, or the subtle music of the self-playing piano nearby.

It was guilt, however, that left him to ignore all of the modern conveniences of his hotel room and immediately flop to the bed with his cell phone in hand.

“Best friend, or estranged lover? Seems like a pretty easy decision to me,” he talked himself through the moment, and naturally, he decided to reach out to Carlos, first.

One of the men represented a source of comfort and wisdom for Tim to lean against when things were going rough in his life. Incidentally, the other one was supposed to, as well, but that wasn’t often the case between them.

“Come on...pick up, dude!” Tim was yelling into his phone the second after he selected Carlos’ number from his contacts list. He was just on the other side of the mountains now, and he still should have been in the same time zone as Carlos for the moment, but Tim had to remind himself that the coyote was a father, first and foremost.

He could hear the joyous sounds of fatherhood in the background when Carlos finally picked up, as a baby screamed right into Tim’s ear, and the sound of his wife running around and chasing their other child completely blocked out the

rest of Carlos' greeting.

"Uh...Carlos? I think I heard you," Tim said, "But I'm not really sure...it's, uh...it's kinda loud over there!"

"Yeah, no shit, dude!" Carlos yelled back into his own smartphone as he bounced a tiny, screaming coyote in his lap. The constant sound of whiny, desperate yipping was like nails on the chalkboard of Tim's eardrums, and he had to pull his phone away from the side of his head as he waited for the noise to die down. "That's pretty much every night of my life, when I'm not on the road!"

"I can't imagine you'd ever want to go home, then."

"I know it's cliché, but they're tellin' the truth when they say that it's different when it's *your* kids, Tim. Anyway...how's it goin'? You finally made it up to the bigs, my man!"

There was clear, genuine excitement in Carlos' voice, but at the same time, Tim could already hear some frustration in the back end of his reply. "Yeah, Vicky just dropped the news on me today at lunch, right before they announced it on TV! I still can't really believe it!"

"Believe it, dude! That's a dream come true for you...just don't blow it by doing something stupid in your first game, okay?"

"It'll be kinda weird not having you around at shortstop, but I'll try to get used to having a different guy across the bag," Tim suggested. He knew that he'd have to get in quite a few practice reps with his new cast of infielders before he would feel comfortable in the majors, and already, he could envision himself making more than a few throwing and fielding errors in his first full month at the major league level. "But it won't be that way for long, right? You've been crushing it at short; I know they're gonna call you up soon!"

Tim was expecting the occasional pause from Carlos, given the fact that he was trying to wrangle a few young children, but he didn't expect such a long break, and he could almost feel the tension settling against the edge of his ear as he waited.

"Check the numbers again, my man. There ain't no room for me in Elgin right now."

"The roster expands in fall, remember? They've gotta create some more room for other call-ups!"

"They've already made the roster expansion, Tim. They're only calling up

pitchers right now to try and see who's got what it takes for next year. If I'm **lucky**, I might get a call-up next year, and it probably won't be for Elgin."

Tim immediately felt his ears droop back against his head. "Come on, Carlos. You've still got a few chances to break through here!"

"Plenty of good shortstops in baseball right now, Tim. I'm not the kinda standout that you are...between the wife and the kids, I just can't get better at my game like I need to."

Being a young, legally single guy with no kids to worry about suddenly felt offensive to Tim, and he tried not to let his frowning face hit any of the buttons on the screen of his phone. "I'm sure some club will give you a chance, Carlos."

"Yeah...but it's not gonna be with Elgin, Tim."

"Carlos, you d-

"Don't act all sad about it now, kid. You didn't even have **a minute** to swing by the house before you left. Just a quick visit would have been enough, Tim...you gonna try and act like we were such good friends, when you couldn't even stop by for a few seconds and a high-five?"

The frown turned to more of a scowl as Tim was put on the spot, much to his frustration. "You're acting like I'm going away forever or something, Carlos. It's not like I'm gonna be given the starting position next year at second base... nothing is guaranteed! I'll probably be back in the minors at the start of the next year, and things will be back to normal!"

Carlos was a couple of years Tim's senior, and his initial contract with the Elgin minor league system was getting ready to expire. Things could always change on a dime in such an industry as professional sports, but initial prospects weren't looking too good, and after going through his first ever contract without breaking into the majors, Carlos could already feel his stock collapsing, both as a player to be used as trade bait, and as a player who could make it to the top level at all.

He didn't begrudge his family for it, but he couldn't help his frustration at Tim, given the level of friendship that they shared.

"Things won't be back to normal unless there's some kinda miracle, Tim. It's been great playin' with you, kid, but...damn, man. Three years playin' across from you and you can't even swing by?"

Regret was starting to build up inside of Tim, who couldn't believe it, but he actually wished that he'd called Alton, after all. "I'm sorry, Carlos! I didn't want

to miss the flight!”

“No, no...I get it, Tim. This is what it’s been all about, all along. I’m...I’m proud of you, kid,” Carlos admitted, and though there was a quiet grudge in his voice, Tim could tell that Carlos really was happy for him, even if he was having trouble expressing it right now. “Listen, I’ve really gotta put the kids to sleep. You take care of yourself, Tim. Don’t blow this.”

“Thanks. No pressure,” Tim replied, and the sigh was already leaving his lips before the words were finished. “You’ll make it someday, Carlos. I know you’ve got what it takes.”

There was only the quiet, jingly tune of the call ending in Tim’s ear as he tried to encourage his longtime friend, and after such a disappointing conversation, he couldn’t bring himself to call Alton, knowing the way that the bear always overreacted to anything dramatic.

This time, Alton would have had an excuse to be completely furious with Tim, and he was **never** going to be able to focus at the ballpark the next day if the last person he talked to before he stepped up to the plate had nothing positive to say about him.

“Well,” Tim muttered to himself, as he flopped across the wide, soft comforter of the king sized bed, “At least I’ll be able to catch up some sleep...”

Given the few days leading up to his major league debut, Tim needed sleep more than anything else, but the silence of the otherwise empty hotel room acted like an echo chamber for his own doubts, fears and concerns.

The silence was somehow deafening when he finally managed to fall asleep, just before the morning sun broke under the curtains.

Tim wasn't a pessimist, but he was worried that somehow, he would end up being late to his first major league game, despite his preparations to keep that from happening.

Even though he slept terribly, he had an alarm set for several hours before he had to be to the stadium, and there was a full pot of coffee in his hotel room, brewing as he showered himself off and tried to wash the sleep right out of his eyes.

He was so busy rushing through the task of getting himself ready for the first game of his major league career that he didn't even notice that the coffee had been poured into a cup for him, and his immediate reaction was to panic, when it occurred to him that someone snuck into his room while he was showering.

"Look, pal...I'm not rich and famous yet, so whatever it is you wanna steal, go ahead and take it! Just leave me a few pieces of clothing so I can cover myself up until I get my jersey, okay?"

There were no weapons in the bathroom for Tim to grab hold of other than the hair dryer, and as silly as he felt grabbing it, he had no other choice. He reached back into the bathroom behind him and unplugged it from the wall as he turned the corner toward the bed, and suddenly, he was having a moment of déjà vu.

"...You're kidding me. Does everyone in the world know that we're dating or something?"

"With an ego like the one you were just spouting off, I wouldn't be surprised if you'd just told everyone that we were."

Alton was laying across the bed once again, naked as he was the time before, but his expression was just a little bit different, this time around. "I poured you some coffee, and I folded your clothes for you. They're over on the dresser, next to the TV."

"Doing a few extra errands for me so you can sneak one last fuck in before I'm on the road again?"

Tim wasn't giving Alton any kind of a chance, and the bear let out a heavy sigh as he bit back on his temper. "Tim...I-look, I don't know what the future is gonna hold for us. I don't know if we're gonna be able to last long-term or not, and I can't make you stay with me...but will you at least give me a chance to make things right between us?"



“I don’t think fucking me in the ass right before I’m headed to the stadium is going to fix anything, Alton.”

“That’s not what I’m here for, Tim. I had a bad feeling that you’d be really nervous in a new place, with your first big game coming up, so...I thought you deserved a reward fitting of someone who dedicated their whole life to something.”

Alton’s intentions were questionable at the very least, and Tim crossed his arms over his chest before gesturing to the bear with a paw. “So you’re naked...why?”

“Because I knew you would be, and it makes me feel a bit more comfortable.”

“Comfortable for what?”

“I...I’m sorry about how I treated you the other night, Tim. I should have at least given you the reach around, and I’m sure that you’re feeling kind of nervous about the game coming up.”

“Only a metric fuck-ton, Alton.”

“And...I...I thought maybe it...y’know, maybe it would help you if I blew off a little steam for you?”

Tim’s twitched an ear in disbelief. He couldn’t remember the last time the bear did anything sexual that wasn’t selfish, much less offered to give Tim a blowjob with no expectation of repercussion.

“That might honestly help, but Alton-

“Tim, **please**,” Alton cut him off, and the jackal could already feel his eyebrow twitching with frustration at being interrupted. “I’m not asking you to come home, or even keep on dating me. I’m just asking for a chance to fix what I did wrong.”

Tim couldn’t decide what fate was more selfish, but he let out a quiet sigh as his arms fell to his sides. In truth, letting the bear suck his cock would have been just as much about the bear as it was about him, since he went into the act with the pretense of forgiveness...but truthfully, Tim couldn’t stand still with his nerves ablaze, and getting off would be the easiest way to get Alton out of his hair, and calm himself down in one fell swoop.

The very tip of his length began to emerge from the end of his sheath as he took a step closer to the bed. “If you really think it’ll fix anything, go ahead and show me what you’ve got, Alton.”

“You’ve forgotten already?” Alton asked, as he leaned over the edge of the bed

when Tim approached. “It hasn’t been **that** long since I did this...”

“Pretty sure I was getting cobwebs in my pubes,” Tim argued, but his voice struggled to sound sarcastic when the wide, wet tongue of the bear slipped delicately over the tapered tip of his canine length. “And t-that’s a strange way to clean them...”

“*Mnnn...nnn*. I can do a lot more than clean out the cobwebs, Timmy baby,” Alton assured him. Almost immediately, the bear was back to trying to win Tim over, but his skills made it difficult for Tim to pay attention to, as inch after inch of his length began to show itself. The reddish-pink color and vein-riddled texture of his flesh were both unique delights to Alton, who opened his muzzle wider and swirled the flat of his tongue around the tip of Tim’s manhood, as he allowed it to pass into the back of his maw.

He was hesitant to trust the bear, even then, but Tim finally reached out and rested a paw on one of Alton’s ears and held it gently for leverage. “I thought you w-were just trying to make things right?” Tim asked, managing to keep his mind on what mattered, even in the heat of the moment.

Alton was having trouble paying attention to the questions. He was almost *purely* a sexual being, and with his lips sealed near the base of Tim’s cock, it was hard for him to hear anything, aside from the quick, eager pants of pleasure from the jackal above.

*And just like that, he’s back to taking a vacation*, Tim thought, but he wasn’t any better, if he was being honest with himself. He could feel saliva trickling down past the base of his length and drizzling down over the taut flesh that covered his swollen orbs, still overflowing from their teasing the night before. *But it’s one hell of a vacation...*

If he was going to reap the benefits of the act, Tim couldn’t think himself to be any better than Alton was only a few nights previous, and though it felt like an act of insanity, Tim gripped both sides of Alton’s face, pushed forth with his hips one more time...and slowly, he pried himself back, trying to ignore just how deliciously erotic Alton looked with tiny, stringy strands of saliva dangling from the gap between his lips, and the tip of the canine cock he was so lustful for.

“This...t-this just isn’t gonna work right now, Alton.”

“But Tim, y-you...you were enjoying yourself so much! I could see it in your face, a-and I could feel it! Your cock was **throbbing!**”

Tim shook his head and leaned against the wall, having to clench up the muscles

in his stomach to keep his load from spilling over. “That’s not what I mean! This isn’t just about getting off, Alton! I thought it might have been, but...if it was, I would have let you finish...I just need a little more time to think about this; okay?!”

Emotions were running high between the estranged pair, but Alton knew that if he was even going to win Tim back, he was going to have to play things cool, and take a step back whenever the jackal asked for it.

This was perhaps the most difficult time for him to succeed at such, but somehow, the bear knew that it was going to be the most important. His heart was dropping into the pit of his stomach, and his throat was growing tight with frustration, but he gave a subtle, knowing nod and gesture over to the coffee.

“I...I’m sorry. I’d say that I understand, Tim, but I don’t...and I’d rather be honest with you than butter you up. I know you don’t want to be late...and your coffee is getting cold.”

Though it was half-hearted, Tim managed a smile and gave Alton’s ear the softest bit of a stroke. “Thank you, Alton...right now, that’s all I really need.”

“Do me a favor, Tim?”

The jackal was quick to try and pull his fresh, clean boxers on over his still throbbing cock, and though it created a comical looking scene as the fabric stretched out like a tent around the tip, Alton bit back on his laughter, and he didn’t have to try very hard. He wasn’t sure that he’d be able to laugh for quite some time, thereafter.

“I guess I can try to manage one for you, Alton.”

“Well...two, actually: drive safe to the stadium, and...just have fun out there, okay? I know that’s all you’ve ever wanted in life.”

When it was said that way, Tim felt like he was being selfish, but he tried not to let the thought bother him as he poured the coffee into a travel cup and placed a lid on top of it.

“I always drive safe,” Tim replied sharply, “But...thank you, Alton. I’ll give it my best.”

“You always do, Tim.”

Tim was out the door moments later, and Alton, the kind of man who prided himself on his lack of emotions, lasted just long enough for a small stream of tears to drip from his eyes, going unseen as they always did.

Though his heart was in the right place, Alton's efforts did nothing to calm Tim's nerves, and by the time he reached the stadium, the effects of the vitality-giving coffee were already wearing off.

Most young athletes looked a bit more bright eyed and bushy tailed when they took the field for their first attempt at a major league sport. Baseball had an extensive system of minor leagues, so there was a bit more time for the average player to get used to the limelight before they were thrown right into it, but after another poor night of anxious sleep, Tim needed a better pair of sunglasses.

"Good luck, Timmy boy! Give 'em hell!"

"Don't blow it, kid! I've heard you're supposed to be the next Driftwood out there at second base!"

"I've seen your minor league numbers; you're fuckin' **garbage**, kid!"

Though most of the home field fans were supportive, there were a few people who didn't agree with Tim's assumed destiny. He'd been groomed to take over at second base in the minor leagues, and there were a lot of fans, older and younger alike, that believed their current second baseman was still one of the best in the league.

At 36 years of age and slowly declining, no one would have blamed Arthur Wells one bit if he hung up his cleats and called it a career. His batting average at the major league level was .294 for the entirety of his twelve year professional tenure, and while that would have been impressive enough to manage for twelve seasons, he had over 250 home runs and 1,000 RBI to boot.

Hitting from a position that wasn't expected to draw great power numbers, Arthur Wells defied expectations from day one. He lacked great speed, however, and his legs were clearly getting tired of the daily grind, as he just didn't have the defensive range to make all of the plays that he used to.

He was a grizzled, old veteran, however, and even if he knew that his abilities were fading, he was the kind of person who would step down when he felt that he wasn't the best man for the job anymore.

Until Tim was able to prove that he was better, good ol' Art Wells wasn't going to give him even the littlest bit of recognition.

“Are the hometown fans always so...supportive?” Tim asked, as he stood next to Art, who was in the outfield with the rest of the players. Like most games, the fielders were standing out on the grass, practicing a long toss drill to warm up their arms, and naturally, Tim was standing right next to the living legend himself. “I didn’t think they could get away with saying fuck so...**loudly.**”

“The ushers aren’t gonna do anything about it unless he starts throwing blows,” Art replied, his voice matter-of-fact, and his tone stern, at best. “If you’re smart, you’ll just learn to tune it out. Doesn’t matter how well you play...you could be the best player in history, and it wouldn’t shut that guy up.”

“How do you figure?”

“You’re down here, on the field. At the end of the day, you have to put up, or get sent down. He’s just some drunken loser who pays your salary, but if he’s paying your bills, when he tells you jump, you’d better ask him how high.”

Tim never really saw the fans as his bosses, but it was an interesting, truthful perspective. “Real shame that he can’t just be happy for me, though.”

“I’m not happy for you either, Tim.”

“...That’s a warm welcome. *Thanks, Art.*”

“You call me Arthur, kid...and of course I’m not happy for you. The fact that you’re here means that they think I can’t hack it in the field anymore, but I’ve still got the big bat. A good glove will get you up to the majors, but if you can’t hit, you’ll be right back down at AAA faster than the leaves turn.”

It might have been a backhanded piece of advice, but Tim had a feeling it was the best that he was going to get from his new teammate. “I never hit below .330 in the minors. I think I can handle these guys.”

Art laughed, and made a quick gesture toward Tim to his other teammates as he caught a baseball without even looking. “There’s a reason why there’s so many college players who don’t last in the pros, kid. They all think they’ve got it figured out before they’ve seen a single **real** pitch, just like you. Everything up here is faster...**a lot** faster. You’ve seen it on TV, and maybe you’ve played against a major league pitcher when they were on a rehab assignment, but you’ve never seen the real thing. You’ve never struck out looking at a batting practice fastball because a pitcher was tugging you along like a **pathetic little puppy on a leash.**”

Tim couldn’t be sure if Art was just being abrasive to try and scare him away, or if the man was just this aggressive as a result of an entire adult life spent playing

an unforgiving game.

Whatever the reason was, Tim was going to do everything that he could to rise above it. “I guess I can’t argue with you, Arthur...and I’m not gonna try.”

“Oh, no? You’re too good for that?”

“That’s right.”

“Just gonna do your job, if and when your number gets called?”

“I’m guessing you’ve heard all of these lines before.”

“I’m the oldest guy left on rebuilding team, Tim. If there’s an overconfident line that some young kid can spew, I haven’t just heard it before. I’ve got it dedicated to memory, and I’ve probably said it a few times, myself.”

“If you were able to make it work, then I don’t see how I’m gonna have any trouble.”

Tim was creating his own trouble, as Art caught another practice throw and turned to face the smaller jackal. Coincidentally, he was a cougar, and the fact that he was literally the same species as the namesake of the team made a lot of the fans feel that he was the heart and soul of the team, no matter how his defense was struggling.

His arms were also as thick as soda bottles at the wrists, and his biceps stretched the tight, black baseball jersey that strained around his torso. “You really just don’t know when to shut your fuckin’ trap, do you, kid?”

“I’m just used to my teammates being a little more talkative, **Art.**”

Eyes of olive green narrowed, and for a moment, Tim was sure that the tall, thick cougar was going to belt him right across the muzzle, but instead, Arthur shook his head and turned back to face his tossing partner.

“You’re not even worth the effort, kid. I’d give you a week before you’re sent back down for being totally damned useless.”

Tim was glad that his footpaws were trapped in cleats; his legs were trembling, but the metal studs gripped into the grass tightly enough that it wasn’t easily visible. He waited to let out a long, deep sigh of relief until he was in his throwing motion, and naturally, his pawtips were still rattled with nerves.

The ball sailed over the head of his tossing partner, and bounced against the retaining wall along the third base line.

“Yeah...something tells me you’re not gonna be replacing me defensively,” Art

snuck in one last jab, and Tim knew that he had no counter for it. He just shook his head and caught the ball as it was returned to him.

*That's why we have warmups, right?* He thought, and thankfully, the next throw sailed true, landing right in the targeted glove. *No way I'm gonna let myself make a throw like that in the game.*

Whether or not Tim would actually get to play in the game that day was a different story, and naturally, he wasn't all that surprised when he ended up on the bench for the day, having just been called up evening before.

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Tim couldn't remember the last time he sat for an entire game when he wasn't nursing an injury, or battling an illness.

He was expecting it to be terribly boring, but the fact that he was on the roster for his first major league game was rejuvenating the whole sport of baseball for him, and even though he wasn't making any friends in rapid order, he was having a great time just leaning on the rail in the dugout, watching the game from an angle that was exactly the same as the minor leagues, and yet, it was all different, this time.

The stadium was impossibly large, and though there were a few empty seats, Tim could barely hear himself think every time that a pitch was thrown, or a bat made contact with the ball.

Thunderous cheers seemed to surround every single act, from the most routine outs to the most spectacular plays, and as the innings piled up, Tim found nerves creeping back into the soles of his feet once more.

The city of Elgin was completely on-board with the team rebuild, and though they were still mostly young, raw talent, they were flashing leather on the infield and showing an impressive amount of pop when they stood in to bat. Over two decades removed from their last world championship and looking forward to another one in the near future, the fans of the Elgin Cougars had a lot to be excited about for the next few years, and though it felt arrogant to think it, Tim was sure that a few of the fans came that evening to see if Timothy Franklin was going to take his first at-bats in a Cougars uniform.

His lips were spread from ear to ear in a cheesy grin at the idea of standing in the batter's box. He could just imagine how perfectly the sand was groomed on a major league field, and how satisfying it would feel to grind his cleats into it as he made his mark. His ears didn't have to imagine the thundering cries of the

crowd, and he could feel some of the intensity of the field lights in the dugout, creating an artificial presence of daylight in the darkness of evening.

Baseball was a truly magical game to Tim, who couldn't remember the last time he was so excited to be at a game, even one that he knew he was playing in.

That night, he was just hoping for a chance, and though he only had minor league experience, he brought a bat with him that was destroying minor league pitching, and a glove that should have been able to hold its own for at least an inning or two.

There was no way that he'd be replacing Art in his first game, but Tim was a versatile player defensively, and in a game where the current shortstop for the Cougars was already hitless in four attempts, Tim wasn't as surprised as he thought he'd be when the manager pointed at him.

That didn't mean that his smile wasn't borderline creepy when he jumped up from the rail. "Yeah, coach?!"

"Heh. Easy there, killer. You're pinch hitting for Sanders in this next at-bat. You can handle playing a little bit of shortstop, right?"

"Whatever the team needs, sir!"

A few of the other players, while just as young as Tim, were a bit more used to the rigors of the majors, and weren't quite so tender in the feet. They were snickering to themselves and gesturing at Tim as he walked through the dugout, grabbing his bat and fishing his batting gloves out of his pocket.

The moment he emerged onto the field, a few of the eager fans took notice, and people began to point. Even when he felt the attention on him, Tim didn't respond much to it.

His skin was **crawling** with excited nerves, and his lips couldn't help curling into at least a bit of a confident smirk, but he wanted to approach things the same as he always had. The same ritual of fastening his gloves, twisting his grip on the bat and lining up the same way were going to follow, as Tim heard something that was straight out of his wildest, deepest dreams.

"Pinch-hitting for the Cougars: Number 32, **Timothy Franklin!**"

There was an intensity in the voice of the local announcer that the guys in the minor leagues just didn't bring. It was as if they cared that much more about their jobs, and given the pay increase between the different levels of play, it was probably true, to some degree.



Tim cared more than ever about the game of baseball as he walked up to the batter's box, overanalyzing everything that he did on the way. He was worried about his gait, about the way that he carried his shoulders, and about the way that the shaft of the bat was resting on them.

He worried about literally everything he did, to the point that he almost walked into the wrong batter's box when he finally approached the plate.

"Batter up!"

Nerves came down on Tim's shoulders like a steel bar, covered in weighted plates. His knees bent just from the sensation of such a realistic weight upon his body, and he stared down the pitcher with eyes that tried to exude confidence.

An experienced pitcher from the majors, however, could see right through the façade, and Tim was sure that he saw a devious grin spreading over the face of the opposing pitcher, as the tall, confident doberman kicked up his lead leg.

The fastest pitch that Tim had ever seen in the minors was supposedly clocked at 93 miles per hour, and that was with technology of a questionable sense of quality.

He didn't even remember blinking, before he heard the sound of the ball slamming into the catcher's mitt with an unreal velocity, and in the corner of the stadium, right by the tall, yellow foul poles, the radar gun displayed a bright, defiant "97," with flames upon the numbers, just to add a little insult to injury.

"Strike one!"

*Fucking hell. Why did Art have to be right about this?*

No pitch he'd seen in his career, regardless of the angle it was thrown from, the windup that preceded it, or the height of the pitcher on the mound, carried anything close to such speed and quickness. Tim let out a breath, and he had to slow himself down, worrying that a second pitch might already be on the way.

The pitcher worked quickly, but not quite to such an extent. Tim was still able to go through the motions between swings and keep his old rituals intact, but he could hear the crowd starting to rally behind him, and an entirely new kind of nerves were spreading across his body.

Unbelievable strength and intensity filled his arms as he gripped the bat, and he gave the handle one last tight, firm twist with his palms before the next delivery came.

The pitcher seemed to know that the rookie would be overflowing with

excitement and energy, fueled up by the crowd, so a pitch that looked especially slow came next, as a hard, hammering curveball appeared to rise right before Tim's eyes, and before he could stop himself, he swung through it, and the ball dropped right out of the strike zone, as it was designed to.

"Strike two!" the umpire called, and Tim was grateful for the batting helmet over his ears, to help drown out the collective groan of frustration from a crowd that had impossibly high expectations.

*Should have seen that one coming, Tim realized. The order of pitches shouldn't change just because I'm at the majors...if he thinks that I'm dialed in on a fastball, he's going to switch it up and throw a curve. I need to be looking for shit like that!*

Tim winced his eyes shut and tried to drown out all of the distractions. He couldn't keep the energy from the crowd out of his system, but he could at least try to harness all of it, as his knuckles turned white under the cover of his fur, and the batting gloves on his digits.

The handle of the bat threatened to crack under the pressure, if he were to grip it any tighter.

*What's he gonna do...won't throw two curveballs in a row, could come back with a fastball, but there's two strikes, so I shouldn't swing, damn...just keep your eyes on the ball and go for some good contact if you think it's in the zone!*

Tim's mind was reduced to little more than a puddle of his own doubts and fears, and his fangs gritted tightly together as the pitch approached the plate. Rather than the confident demeanor that literally rocketed him through the minor leagues, Tim's expression was one of frustration and anxiety, and as the pitch began to fly past him, his emotions were ready to boil over.

He realized too late what the pitch was, and he tried to adjust his swing for the arc of the ball, but as if the pitcher could read his mind, a second curveball came flying over the plate and dropped. Even if he hadn't swung, the pitch was right in the middle of the strike zone, and Tim's best efforts left him coming up with nothing but a big, embarrassing miss, and a crowd-killing "Steeeeeeeeerike threeee!"

Tim felt just like the cliché cartoons that he'd seen on TV as a child, playing the role of the batter who found there was literally a hole in his bat after he struck out swinging it.

He could just imagine the grin on Art's face already, and he stood in for a

moment after his swing, before tapping the dirt with his bat and walking away from the batter's box.

*You just got outguessed, dude. It happens all the time. Happened to you plenty of times back in the minors. This guy is no different...none of these guys are any different. I just need to remember that I'm every bit as good as they are.*

Tim missed having Carlos around to keep his spirits up, and it was an especially bitter punch in the stomach when he returned to the dugout, and no one was paying any attention to him. A group of powerful egos and young, arrogant minds was creating a team that was talented, but downright **toxic** unto itself, and after just one night, Tim was already a bit worried about how well he would fit in.

He tossed his bat back into the box with the rest of them and took an open seat along the dugout bench, and gazed up into the artificial daylight, wondering what Carlos would have said to him if he just watched such a bad at-bat.

As far as first games went, Tim didn't have much to remember his own by, and unfortunately, his first major league game was just a one at-bat appearance. His strikeout was terribly ugly, and Tim knew better than to watch SportsWorld that night; he'd be all over the news, and be able to see himself striking out with that horrible, awful swing over and over again.

If he'd gotten more than one chance to swing the bat, he might have been able to salvage the game, but the last part of the game he was even relevant to was a routine grounder to his position at shortstop, and an easy throw over to first base that got a batter out when the game was already out of reach.

*An 8 to 3 loss in my first game ever...at least I didn't have much to do with the score,* Tim sat in the locker room and stared at the locker that was now his own, admiring just how fancy everything was at the major league level.

No expense was spared in the recently renovated Cougars Park, and the players were especially lucky for the fact. Benches that were coated with thick, plush cushions made for comfortable seating anywhere in the locker room, and the doors of the lockers were double locked with a padlock, and a custom combination lock.

The doors themselves were a dark, stained shade of oak, and they were thick, heavy doors, carved from authentic wood. The interiors were updated with brushed nickel hangers, and at the bottom, a piece of artificial turf held cleats so that moisture would drain from the bottom, without staining the wood itself.

Naturally, the shower facilities were the least admirable area of the locker rooms, but they were still nicer than anything Tim had ever experienced before. He was too busy sulking in the main locker area to actually shower with the rest of the team, and he didn't much feel like dealing with any potential rumors of his sexuality when he did decide to go clean off, but he was impressed when he finally decided to enter, and found himself surrounded on all sides by wide, arcing shower heads that had multiple settings, and concrete walls between the stalls for the men to enjoy at least some semblance of privacy.

Tim thought that the best thing for him would be a little alone time after such a disappointing experience. He tried to mentally prepare for it, but nothing could quite help him through the letdown of building up to a moment his entire life, only to have it fall dramatically short of his expectations when it finally became

a reality.

“Guess I shouldn’t bitch, though...I’m still making half a million bucks a year to hit a ball,” Tim rationalized, though that didn’t put the spark back in his love of the game. He felt dull, as if everything he was working for his whole life was torn down in the blink of an eye...and in front of a massive crowd, to boot.

There was a familiar face in that crowd, however, and it was one that knew Tim was capable of much more than what he was able to display, that evening. “Only half a million if you still want it to be, Tim. You know that there’s better options out there for you...though you didn’t really do much to help your chances, tonight.”

Tim was already stripped down to nothing more than a towel, acting under the impression that all members of the media and his other teammates were already cleared out of the area. There was no one hanging around that late after a game, and he didn’t figure that his new teammates cared that much about him to stay behind for a pep talk.

His assumptions in that sense were right, but he never would have been able to guess that it was Vicky who was sneaking around the corner of his shower stall, even when his ears picked up on the delightful, enjoyable smarminess in her voice.

“W-wait a minute...**Vicky?! What the hell are you doing here in Elgin? What... what are you doing in the men’s locker room?!**”

“I told you before that I had some connections, didn’t I?” she asked, as she lifted her necklace from between her cleavage and showed off a key. Tim was afraid to ask what she did to get her paws on it, but his bigger concern was the fact that she was wearing the same simple, yet professional outfit from their meeting the day before...and he was clad in nothing more than a plain, white towel of cotton.

“I didn’t figure you meant connections to get into the back of the stadium,” Tim replied dryly, “And that still doesn’t answer why you’re...y’know...in **here.**”

“Wanted to come check up on my favorite client and make sure that he was feeling okay after striking out so badly. Thought you might have pulled a muscle.”

Embracing her inner Carlos and trying to use humor to lighten the mood, Vicky could tell that she was picking at the scab a little too soon. “Don’t worry, I’m fine. My pride is in a wheelchair for the next few days, though,” Tim admitted, trying to play along with the humorous role. “And I’m not your client yet. I

thought we'd been over this."

"You're not, but that doesn't mean I don't want to see you succeed," Vicky assured him. "Fact is that I can be a fan of yours, and be your agent at the same time...or just one or the other, if you'd prefer."

"A fan of mine?" Tim asked, unable to grasp onto the confidence that he dabbled in during their luncheon meeting. "Isn't that just what being a talent scout means?"

He wasn't trying to be funny, but Vicky huffed and managed a cocky smirk. "It's a lot more work than you might think, **punk**. I dunno if you could hack it."

"Pretty sure it would be a walk in the park for me...and you're *still* in the men's locker room."

*Is he...is he really this thick?* Vicky wondered. She didn't know that he was so inexperienced with women, but she was quickly getting the message, as Tim stood in place, not moving his towel, not heading for the water, and still looking like a deer in the headlights.

She'd have to make the first move if she was really going to go through with this, and she gulped down her fear of rejection as she pulled the necklace over her ponytail and set it on the small ledge of the shower wall.

"Yes, Tim, and it's not like I'm here by accident."

"So why are y-...oh...**oh**, that's...y-you're..."

"Uh huh," Vicky replied, unable to keep a sneaky grin from tugging at the corners of her muzzle. "Starting to get the picture, or do I need to literally paint you a Picasso?"

"That'd be p-pretty impressive," Tim replied, sounding every bit like the nervous dork that he really was, "But I don't...don't think..."

"Good. **Don't think**," Vicky stepped in before he could make more of an ass of himself. She reached forward and gripped one of his paws tightly in her own, and those same jades that left Tim speechless every time he gazed into them took a grip on his very soul as she stepped into the stall, trapping Tim between the wall, and his own decision. "Just do whatever it is that comes to mind when you're looking at me like that..."

Unconsciously, Tim slipped right into the breathless, honeymoon stare that he had on his face the very first time that he met Vicky, and now that his entry into the majors was complete, she didn't feel a need to delay things any further.

Tim's lack of experience was another matter, however, and though she couldn't tell if it was that, or nerves that were slowing him down, she knew a great way to test which one it was.

"Standing there and blushing is what comes to mind, Tim?"

A single pawtip trailed down the slim, bare chest of the jackal as Vicky stepped a little bit closer. It hooked into the waistline of his tucked towel, and it waited there, settling just above the twin trails that moved along his thighs and right down into his crotch.

*Do it, Tim. Give in...I can see it...all of this restraint is eating you up inside! Just let it out!*

Beside himself with a painful combination of nerves and an utter lack of experience, Tim forced Vicky to go just one step further, as she gave the towel a firm, harsh tug and tossed it into the empty area behind her.

"N-no, but...I certainly didn't mind that one bit," Tim admitted. His voice was still shaky, and though her expression was burning with lust before, Vicky allowed her eyes to soften on the poor jackal, as she stepped right into his body.

The very tip of his manhood was emerging, acting without his consent and working entirely based on his excitement. Vicky rumbled at first, and began to purr with content as she felt the warm, tapered tip poking and jumping against the slim, toned flesh of her tummy with eager growth.

"I guess not," she agreed, letting out a quick, seductive giggle as the extending cock continued to brush against her tummy. "You're just a shy guy...I get that, but your body isn't hiding anything from me, Tim. It's telling me to take the next step...do you think that I should listen?"

Still struggling with the buildup of sensations from Alton suckling on the end of his cock that morning, and dealing with the emotional turmoil that the moment caused, it was difficult for Tim to listen purely to his instincts, even when his entire body was screaming at him to throw Vicky to the ground and shred her clothes from her body.

That might have been a bit too forward, even for her, and Tim managed to find a little clarity in the middle ground, as he reached a paw back to the wall and turned on the shower without warning. Water streamed down and soaked Vicky's top in seconds, and the sheer white blouse quickly turned translucent, revealing a tight bra of matching white underneath, and a leaving Vicky to giggle and swipe at the jackal for his tricks.

“Trust me...you’re gonna want me to shower off first.”

In truth, Tim was just buying time to get his nerves in check for the main event. He’d never been in such an intimate situation with a woman before, and he had no idea what to do next, even when Vicky ran through the stream of the water and pressed him up against the back wall of the stall.

Lucky for the innocent jackal, the girl of his dreams was willing to help do most of the heavy lifting, so long as he consented to her actions.

A shorter, thicker muzzle squared up against Tim’s own as Vicky sealed her lips against those of the male that she’d been lusting after. One paw was pressed firmly into his chest, still surrounded by the comforting digits of his own, but her free paw was struggling with the fabric of her skirt and white, cotton panties as she tried to push them down with a feverish, quivering palm.

Just before Tim’s eyes sealed, he offered a little assistance, and tugged at the crotch of those same panties just enough to give Vicky the push that she needed. He didn’t have the clarity to know that he should help her with the act, but when her lips sealed so fiercely against his own, things began to come together for him, and sparks flew in the back of his mind.

He didn’t know why he closed his eyes in the kiss. It wasn’t because that’s what people always did in the movies, and it wasn’t like he was forcing some look of passion for the ocelot. They clearly had a mutual attraction...and for just a brief moment, Tim actually felt silly, thinking that straight and gay sex were so different.

On the mechanical level, they might have been slightly different, but at the heart of the matter, it was about an exchange of love and passion with someone who felt the same for you, and the deep, heated pressure of Vicky’s delicious lips against his own was the last clue he needed to see how similar the two acts really were.

Given that mental clarity, Tim was able to turn the tables on Vicky, who stepped out of her skirt and panties, leaving them in the drain...only to be taken from the kiss and pushed up against the wall of the shower. Her breasts were grateful for the bra, saving her from the grout between the tiles, but the warm, soothing water still seeped into her clothes and teased over her nipples as her chest was pushed up against the wall with the rest of her body.

Her rump came to settle in the paws of the eager, lustful jackal, and she lifted her right thigh for him as he lined up behind her body, able to see the slim, narrow folds of her womanhood.



He didn't know much about the ways he needed to prepare a female lover, and he was just in lucky that Vicky had been working herself up to the act for hours before, both mentally and physically. She was on the verge of pouncing him to the ground when she went to get the key to the locker room, and her sex was already slightly pouted and swollen with her need for the male, who was finally taking the bait the way that she'd always dreamed of.

She'd never been with a jackal before, and she couldn't remember the last time she felt so impassioned for a man. Her legs quivered, and her whole body trembled as Tim slipped in a little closer and allowed the tip of his cock to brush against the slick, needy birth of her folds.

This part, the jackal was plenty familiar with. It was just a different kind of orifice, and like the gentleman he was, Tim slowed his pace and finally, he entered a woman for the very first time, pushing his hips forth in a delicate, smooth thrust.

Vicky's claws raked against the wall of the shower as she tilted her head back. There were so few words being exchanged that she was afraid to speak, but she just couldn't help the moans from crawling out of her throat and echoing in the otherwise empty shower hall.

"F-fuck...fuck me, Tim...*please*..."

All told, her moans were passionate, but subdued...an act of control that impressed Tim, even if he wasn't quite sure how loud she normally was during sexual acts. Her voice traveled through the steamy water of the running shower, and hooked the jackal by the ear with a smoky, lustful tone, one that he couldn't possibly ignore the cries of.

Inexperience with a woman didn't mean that he didn't know how to buck his hips, and as they pulled back gently, he pushed in a little bit further on the return. A few more inches of the jackal spilled inside of Vicky as she adjusted to the length and delicious girth of his cock, and she panted out loud once more as she tried to buck her hips against his body.

Passion unlike anything that Tim had felt in **years** was filling the very core of his being, and his paws began to wander on their own, desperate to explore the body that Vicky had offered to him. His right paw slipped up along the side of her slim, toned abdomen and carried along to the underside of her breast, cupping it through the bra and giving it a curious, explorative squeeze. His left paw stayed right around the side of Vicky's hip, but it couldn't help creeping further and further down her body, into the gap between her thighs, to the most sensitive

little nub upon her body.

He didn't know that he'd found her clit until she literally reeled back at him with her fangs, but it was her tongue that made contact, slurping affectionately over the side of his neck.

Vicky knew that the affection couldn't last, but she just couldn't keep from taking things this far. She knew that their relationship was on the rocks, but she didn't want to play the homewrecker to Tim and Alton's romantic life, and perhaps most of all, she worried about breaking that first, most important rule of her business.

*If I let him do this...if I let him finish inside of me...gods, I **want** him to...but if he does...I can't ever take this back. I can't ever escape it...*

The pulse of a man's cock beginning to throb as it neared orgasm was something that Vicky was once very familiar with, and she was terribly fond of it, but when she felt it building, she forced herself to her knees and splashed down into the water around the drain. Her muzzle opened hungrily against the tip, and Tim bucked his hips in shock as she wrapped her paw around the base and began to stroke it.

"Vicky, f-fuck...are you s-sure?"

She winked up at the jackal and bobbed her head, slurping her tongue around the precum oozing tip until she felt a thick, creamy burst of seed coating the rough, textured surface of her tongue.

If Tim weren't already so emotionally strained, he would have enjoyed the moment even more, and that seemed an impossibility, given the way that his hips jerked forward errantly against the muzzle of the skillful ocelot. His entire body shook, and his knees almost gave out as he tried to fight back the desperate grunts of his orgasm, fearing that there just might be someone looking.

"Vicky, I...f-fuck, I can't stop it! It feels so *gooooood*..." his voice trailed off in a low, throaty groan, and though it was purely reflex, his paw gripped the kneeling woman by the tuft of her ponytail and gripped it tightly, needing something to grip onto so that he could soak up every sensation available to him.

Vicky responded in kind, gripping the swollen, thick knot at the base of Tim's cock and squeezing it gently each time she felt a pulse. Her neck bulged out just slightly as the thick, creamy seed spilled into her stomach, and somehow, despite all of the backup from a difficult relationship, the ocelot managed to keep almost the entire yield in her muzzle, save for a tiny, singular stream that seeped out

from the side of her muzzle. It trailed down her cheek and to the bottom of her chin as she smiled up at the man of her dreams, and for just a moment, she allowed herself to bask in the unbridled passion and lust of the forbidden act.

She had no idea how she could bring herself to be his agent and his lover at the same time, and she was already dreading the cold shoulder she'd have to give him the next day to keep him from growing attached.

She could see the emotional turmoil in Tim's face, as his cup spilled over with untold pleasure. She knew that he was struggling with something, and that no matter how she wanted to, she might not be able to help him.

It hurt her to see that look on his face, but it was hidden so well by the veil of his ecstasy that she could hide her own guilt under the veil of her own.

A few games into the month of September, Tim was starting to worry, more than he was starting to enjoy himself.

He still hadn't gotten to start for the Elgin Cougars, only ever finding himself inserted as a defensive replacement in late innings, or as a pinch hitter.

It was frustrating, at the very least, but he hadn't heard from Carlos in almost a week, he couldn't seem to find Vicky, and Alton wasn't answering his phone, no matter what time of day Tim called.

"If your face was any longer, I'd tell you to go out there and start having dinner in the outfield," Art took a cheap shot at Tim's frown, making a joke that was hurtful to the poor jackal...and offensive to the horse, Jed Rhodes, who was currently playing left field for the Cougars. "Being in the bigs isn't all you thought it'd be, hm?"

Tim knew that anything he said would just be turned back on him, but he had no one else to talk to. He wasn't fitting in nicely with his teammates, and he couldn't find the heart to tell Vicky, if he could ever get a hold of her, that he had no interest in signing a long-term deal with such a salty group.

"It's just a little culture shock, is all. Things were a bit more simple back in AAA."

"That's okay. You'll be back there next spring, little guy."

Tim shot an icy cold glare toward Art, but the gesture fell flat, and the jackal knew it. "Trust me, Art...whatever bug crawled up your ass and died, you might wanna shit it out before you take your next at-bat. I've heard it makes swinging kinda difficult."

As always, Art put on a tough front, but Tim was scowling all the way to grabbing his bat, and he carried it out to the field with him, as he stood in the batter's box and awaited his pitch.

His love of the grind was fading fast, without the right people around to share it with.

Thanks for finishing another wonderful literary adventure with us! We hope that you thought this book was a grand slam, and encourage you to read our other works in the future!

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<https://joshiah.sofurry.com/>

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Also, be sure to check out the work of our cover artist, PJ Stormtail, who really knocked this one out of the park! (I'm done with the puns. Promise.) Throw some love their way, and if you've got the money, purchase some of their fantastic art!

<http://stormtail.weebly.com/>