

The walk back to the house, the *second* time, I approached with a lot more apprehension than I had the first time. I didn't know what I was going to find. Would it still be a home to me? Would I *want* it to be? A part of me, an idealistic, naive part of me, wanted to believe I'd misread the situation, that things would be okay once I got back home. But I couldn't just hold on to that. Hope was dangerous in a situation like this, and I tried to keep myself calm as I went over all possible scenarios. Would there be yelling? Shouting? I deeply hoped not. I loved my life with her but...

"Hey," Crypto said next to me, "whatever happens... I'm... uh... here." There wasn't a lot of conviction in... I stopped. Before I went into the really heavy stuff I needed to get some things cleared up, needed to make sure I didn't get anything wrong.

"I'm going to... We'll get to that in a second." I paused, not wanting to *not* acknowledge that. "You're, um, a good friend. Anyway, do you want to be a woman? Like, really really, not seduction-speak-pressuring?" Nod nod. "Okay, good. Does that come with she-her pronouns?" She nodded again. Cool. "What's your name?"

She looked down at her shoes. "You know my name. It's C--" I quickly put a finger to her lips, not wanting her to feel forced to say the whole thing. I knew better than most how hard saying it could be if that's not who she was.

"Before you finish that syllable," I said, "I mean *your* name. The one that doesn't... hurt." She blinked at me in confusion for a few seconds and then her eyes went wide in realization.

"Oh! I-- I heard... I think I read about that... I can choose, right?" She nodded enthusiastically. We'd, of course, talked about that too, legal name changes and deadnames -- as cis boys do -- way back when.

I smiled at her. We had to go back inside in just a moment, but in this instant, it was kind of nice to see her realize that being who she wanted to be was an option. I knew she had a name already picked out. But she had to say it herself. "Go ahead," I urged gently.

"Mona," she said. Something about the way she formed the words made me feel like it was the first time she'd said it out loud in a while, maybe ever, and the smile on her face split into a wide grin. I knew exactly the kind of bubbling, giddy feeling in her belly she had to be feeling in that moment.

"It's nice to meet you, Mona. Sorry to do this all in, like, a hurry. I just didn't wanna keep getting it wrong in my head, you know?" Another excited nod. She was precious like this, and I couldn't help but wonder how wonderful she'd be once she looked more like, well, how she would feel happy looking. Euphoria is, after all, the best makeup.

"You're fine. Are you..." she paused and looked up at me like *I* was the one who had just gone through a major realization about my identity. "Are you going to be okay, going in?" I balled my hands and tried to breathe steadily but reality was setting in again and I was... scared. Terrified. I kept waiting for that moment where my heart would slow down and my breathing would get easier, my hands would stop shaking, but it wasn't coming. I wanted to say 'yes' but words weren't coming, right up until Mona simply slipped her hand in mine and squeezed it once. "You can do this." She paused. "I think. And you're not alone."

"Thanks." Meant it, too. It felt like it should've been a platitude but I genuinely believed her. My breathing leveled out. My heart rate steadied. I had at least one steady hand -- with some help. "Yeah," I said. "I'm going to be okay."

The last bit of the walk went by really fast and the little garden path was suddenly the longest one I'd ever walked in my life. Through the back window I already saw shapes in the

kitchen and I felt my breath shudder at the realization that it was all going to become really, *really* real in just a moment. I reached for the door and felt another light squeeze on my other hand, then Mona let go. Coming in holding hands was probably going to look a little bit weird, even if it was just for emotional support.

I opened the door.

I hadn't exactly been expecting the sight I saw when I came in. I'd expected a rueful looking Madeline, Rama looking like she hadn't just done irreparable damage to someone else's relationship, or even just a large suitcase with my stuff in it.

Instead, the first thing I saw was Rama, sitting at the kitchen table, cradling a cup of tea, her eyes bloodshot, and Madeline leaning against the counter with her arms crossed, staring at the floor with a frown on her face, lost in thought, until I opened the door and her expression softened considerably. Both of us immediately stepped towards each other

"I'm so s--" I began.

"Eve, I'm s--" she interrupted and then paused. There was an awkward moment of silence and then she cocked her head. "Why are *you* apologizing?" I took a deep breath. I wanted to get this out of the way first.

"Regardless of what happened between you two," I said, trying to keep the knot in my stomach from tightening any further, "I want to talk about it with you. I... If you want to... pursue this relationship with Rama... I mean, we'd need to talk about trust..." I had started wringing my hands and after a moment I found it impossible to look her in the face, depending on what she'd say next, what I'd commit myself to. All of that, right up until she took my hands in hers.

"Hey." It's strange how she could cut through my thoughts with a single syllable, but she'd always been capable of that. "What you think happened," she said, "didn't."

"So Rama didn't come on to you?" I asked, looking at Rama, who was still silently staring at her rapidly cooling tea. She hadn't even touched it.

"Well, okay, that part did happen. Pretty much as soon as you walked out the door." Madeline said and I looked back at her, raising my eyebrows. A quiet voice from the kitchen table and the clinking of a spoon against ceramic interrupted my next question and answered it, simultaneously.

"She said no," Rama said. Madeline smiled slightly at her. Well, that changed things. Madeline walked around the table and sat down. I did too, across from her, on Rama's other side, and nodded at Mona that she follow suit. I didn't want her standing awkwardly by the door the entire conversation. She was involved in this mess now.

"I told her," Madeline said, "that I wasn't interested in pursuing any relationships without discussing it with you, first." I nodded and reached across the table, taking Madeline's hand in my own, but then frowned.

"Then what was..."

"She... uh..." Madeline said, and glanced over at Rama.

"I cried," Rama said quietly, almost unrecognizable from the confident woman I'd seen that morning. "Um... dramatically."

"Oh."

"Yeah," she said. "I didn't take it well. I think that's when you walked in on me. Uh... crying."

"Can I ask... why?" I looked at her. At this point, my major worries about my relationship with Madeline seemed to be in order -- with a niggle in the back of my head that

would be addressed in just a moment -- but I also wanted to know what was going on with what was ostensibly just a stranger in my (yay! My!) kitchen.

"Don't have anyone else," Rama mumbled.

"I'm not your fallback, Rama," Madeline said quietly. "You know that."

"I do." Rama stared into her cup. "I just thought..."

"You assumed."

"I did."

"So you two didn't..." I asked, making absolutely sure. Madeline shook her head.

"No. Once upon a time, but Rama didn't want to settle down then. I moved on."

"I didn't," Rama said softly. I felt strangely sorry for her. "I was hoping there was something there... here, still. Someone to come back to."

"Then you talk about that like an adult," Madeline chided, bopping her over the head. "You don't throw out grandiose confessions and expect it to work out. This isn't an Eighties' comedy, we have *standards* now. Communication."

"Yes ma'am," Rama said, I couldn't help but smirk, and Madeline was seemingly in the same boat.

"Are we okay?" Madeline asked me. I nodded, and then looked at Mona.

"I... Yes, I think we are, but I do have to... I *almost* did something... when I thought you'd cheated... that you were going to leave me." Madeline looked at me with glacial patience, waiting for me to continue before drawing conclusions. Fuck, I was the luckiest woman in the world. "I didn't. I needed to talk to you first."

"Heh," Madeline laughed, and then looked at Mona. "I get wanting to find comfort with a friend. Did he--"

"Ah," I said, interrupting, "that's the other part." I turned to Mona with a look, and she nodded encouragingly. I did see her put her hand down, just a little bit closer to me than her hand naturally resting on the table would be. I took the hand, and took her hand in mine and squeezed it. I looked at Madeline. "Encouragement," I explained.

"Not he," Mona explained. "I know we met but uh... I guess I wasn't... who I thought I was." Madeline looked between me and Mona with eyebrows that were slowly ascending, and her mouth curled into a cheeky grin.

"Birds of a feather, huh?" Mona nodded with adorable excitement. "Do you have a n--"

"Mona!" she blurted out, and everyone, even Rama, couldn't help but chuckle at her enthusiasm. She was so happy to have found herself, it was infectious. Meanwhile, Madeline was making the connection.

"So you were planning on--"

"Giving her the kiss, yeah. But that didn't feel right," I said. Madeline nodded. "Not without talking about it with you first, you know?"

"Yeah. Would it feel weird if you did it now, if I tell you it's okay?" Madeline offered. I briefly considered it, but then shook my head.

"It would. I got too close to acting on impulse. Would you want to..."

"I could," Madeline said, "but after seeing you so upset just now, I don't want to add any fuel to any insecurities that could still be playing--"

"I could do it," Rama said softly. "I mean, if nobody minds..."

"I don't mind!" Mona said, perhaps a little too quickly, eliciting slight giggles from us again. "I mean... I get to be... me, right? And Rama didn't really... Like... sure she was a dramatic ass about it--"

“Hey!”

“--but she didn't do anything *wrong*-wrong, you know?” Mona looked at the three of us, and I could see Rama's grateful smile out of the corner of my eye. Mona, having all attention on her, shyly looked down at the table. “I mean, I know it's not my place to forgive her, but I'm saying I'd be okay with it *and also she's very pretty and I wouldn't mind kissing her.*”

“She has a point,” Madeline said.

“And she *did* see me naked,” Rama said.

“Yeah,” Mona squeaked.

“I'm okay with it,” I said, “if you are.” I looked at both Madeline and Mona, and both of them nodded, Mona with a significant blush on her face. “Alright.” I stood up, and the others did too. “Let's make a girl out of you.”

Rama walked -- no, sauntered. Sashayed. *Paraded* -- around the table, and for a moment I saw her get her old confidence back. I definitely appreciated it a lot more now that I knew it was all part of someone who was a lot more vulnerable beneath that surface. She *was* very pretty. I walked over to Madeline and entwined my fingers and hers, and we shared a soft kiss that lingered a little too long to be just a peck, and when we pulled away I realized we were as close as ever. Even after the explanations, it was good to *feel* that we were still us, and I breathed a small sigh of relief. Meanwhile, Rama slowly advanced on Mona, who was starting to maybe realize what she'd agreed to, blushing furiously.

“I'm going to enjoy this,” Rama purred, and wrapped Mona in her arms.