



Allison Babcock's Slow Descent into Madness

CW: The severe self-loathing, psychosexual hangups, and frail emotions of one Allison Babcock. Also includes virgin awkwardness, continental philosophy, and Wonderwall.

Allison had been beside herself for a while now. The brilliant, shining star amongst her pupils had seemed to fade in a cloud of ennui and frustration. Grades are still impeccable, sure, but she could feel the lead she had poured her heart and soul into slowly recede into places far below standard. Too many mistakes writing essays in her flowery flowing penmanship. Uncrossed T's and undotted I's, text no longer as clear and concise as they ought to be.

And when you're the most prestigious pupil on campus, a mere ninety-three percent was a dagger in the heart. It was plain to see that she had slipped far. Ever so slightly, day by day. And not an inch of lost ground could ever be acceptable.

She was Allison Babcock, genius, visionary, she had to be, she must be, she will be. She will be a great woman and live the most lavish life in the most prestigious of positions.

But there is a certain point where steel-willed determination and hard work meets with the hard wall of impossibility, and even Allison knew she was toeing that line a bit too hard.

And it was hard to study when sleep became a luxury and a certain dull pain ached in her temple. The latest migraine came from the graphs and tables and syllabuses that dotted her tablet screen.

The ones she had poured over time and time again this night alone and came no closer to wrapping her frayed mind around.

She took a deep breath, in and out, in and out. A moment could be spared before she tortured herself with the thought of a nineteenth attempt at it. Taking comfort in the soft bed and the enchanting recording of "*Clair de Lune*" on the nightstand radio. Looking out into the midnight sky, a gentle cold breeze from the open window brushing past her.

And for a moment she felt an odd kinship with the calming colors of the fading twilight. She was an elegant and graceful thing, radiant and fair as the full moonlight, wrapped in long hair as pale black and mysterious as the fading ebbs of dusk. Her button down shirt and thigh high socks akin to the pale blue of... the open sky a bit before sunset? And her frilly black skirt was only a bit darker than her hair.

She'd have to workshop on the metaphors a bit longer, she'd usually prefer comparing herself to rolling hills of bright and fresh bloomed lavenders and blackberries or something of the sort. Her bright blue beret even had a fancy pink flower on it, a vision of some vibrant meadow she would much rather be in. There was no harm in waxing poetic about oneself. It flickered a little flame in a self-assured part of her. A little boost to her lately frayed ego. The warm desire to be the kind of thing that could only be described in allusion and metaphors.

And she yearned deep and hard, for a moment that seemed to drag on forever, to drop this enraging project and take up the fountain pen. To instead be stumped figuring the best way to put beauty to a flower bordered page. To think and ponder on all the many things that are worthy to write of in purple prose and regal verse. Just one of many skills she had, but it was the one that could drift her the furthest away from a weekend of drudgery.

Alas, The moment broke down as the colors faded from the sky, leaving only monochrome night. The stars drowned out by the light pollution of streetlamps below.

She let it linger for a few minutes longer. Gently breathing as she stared into the sky, and the gentle moon felt as if it were staring back at her. A silent moment lost in awe of the world until it was hidden once more behind some passing clouds. And, the fitting theme of *Clair de lune* turned to Erik Satie's *Gymnopédie No. 1*.

She wished to wait, staring, until its radiance would shine on her again, but no. She would do her homework, she would do what she needed. She would crunch numbers, compile data, sketch graphs, write talking points and essays. She would do a million-millions of things and be mad all the same. She would hope and plan and prepare, and she would be disappointed again and again by her peers in the student council and volunteer groups. Many an angry email would be sent by her, and not a one would care.

Not to mention the clubs.

Poetry and the beauty of the stars set before the debate club would be casting pearls before swine.

Nay! The disparity was even greater. She thought baby pigs were cute. She blocked out every memory of debate club except the number of extra credits she got from it. That was her fate! to struggle and strive to the greatest heights of achievement and be held back by the idiots of the world. A million-millions of incompetent and bickering fools and morons.

But she wouldn't have to deal with any of them soon enough. No more sneering faculty and stone-brained college bureaucrats, no more rowdy classmates puking vodka mixers in the bushes outside her room, no more pestering, no more bothering. One day she'll be free of it all. With all her wisdom in hand she shall spread her wings and fly, the world her pearl, to be cast before no one.

One day, she might even be free of...

Lauren...

And all of a sudden, it felt like her fanciful little daydream was crushed under a heavy burden. An almost cartoonish sense of whiplash shook her, like her brain had been feeling too much pride and needed to be humbled by a comical falling piano.

Which, fittingly, was exactly how every second around Lauren had felt for everyday they had shared the same campus. The sheer indignities that woman put her through would drive her truly mad one day. A painful nuisance and a painful reminder of a secret they shared in common... A stewing sense of rage was the last thing she needed to feel, even in absentia, Lauren was a plague on the very concept of study and concentration.

knock, knockAllisonAllison

And so maddened by her continued presence, Allison had made her escape, swapping the dorms

for an idyllic suburban home lost in peaceful swaying trees. No one around, no one to bother. In a room that wasn't hers but had been similarly comforting, even with the austere walls of clean beige and motivational posters replaced with a more wild and chaotic place; A place of burning frankincense, loose jackets, cheap guitars and band posters. While it was a place she couldn't stand to be for long, it was an escape. A quiet place, a wonderful little refuge belonging to an old friend of hers.

Mason.

And soon after knocking he awkwardly swung open the door to his room that he so kindly shared; one hand on the door, a stack of notes and a water bottle held under his arm, and a warm and richly scented cup of hot cocoa in the other hand.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Allison-" He said in his low, dulcet, mumbling voice. His voice was a rather nice change of pace, a distraction from the gloom, a familiar presence; And after years in the school choir she would be lying to herself if she didn't find its melodic tone somewhat...
soothing.

"-I've been trying to save up for a new printer so I can keep one in my room... But, you know how expensive textbooks are, *he-he.*"

He ended the sentence with a nervous laugh. A mousy, grungy young man with curly dirty bottle blond hair that covered his eyes and draped down around his neck.

And while he was a far cry from the nerdy bookworm he was just a few years ago, he still carried himself with the same anxious and dorky disposition. Casual, quiet, his days at the gym gave him an athletic build that he didn't show off. Even his weathered brown jacket had a gentle edge to it.

A peace sign, a Celtic cross, a cat rocking a drum set. These were just a few of the many decorations sewn into the mangy thing.

Allison found it somewhat endearing. A punk that wouldn't cause problems was both an oxymoron and very relieving for her. But for how different they were, there was something they had in common, from their time in charity work together to today. Always eager to please. Allison grinding away to get that fancy A+ and praise from the professor, and Mason handing her the warm cup of hot chocolate that she took with gratitude.

"But I made this for you while I was downstairs!" He said with a big dumb smile pointed directly at Allison.

“Hmm, you are quite the gracious host, Mason, thank you.” Allison cracked a dry smile as she mumbled the words, staring forlorn at the tablet ahead. A dead tiredness filled her that only began to fade as she took a first sip of the creamy dark chocolate.

“It's no problem!” Mason said with a huff as he tossed himself backwards onto his fluffy bed and everything else in a loose pile on his desk. “You’ve been awfully miserable all day, it's the least I could do.”

“Oh, how could you tell?” Allison questioned half in sarcasm and half in embarrassment. The last thing she wanted was to be thought of as an incompetent by one of the few peers she had, but it was clear as day.

“If you weren’t, you would've been beaming about finishing it and the next month's assignments half an hour ago.”

“‘*Sigh*’, you're right, I should’ve been done a while ago... it's... frustrating.”

“But it's not about the work, right? It's something else that's bothering you.”

Allison stared blankly for a moment, and took another drink from the hot cocoa. She was feeling better at least.

“Fine, it is something else. It’s... Lauren...”

“Lauren still? What’s she gone and done now?”

Allison took a moment to compose herself, another sip from the mug, another second of stewing in discordant thoughts. She didn’t relish the thought of thinking about Lauren more than needed, that is not-at-all, but the grudge wasn’t leaving her anytime soon. A burden shared is a burden lessened, and to share a burden with Mason...

They used to be a team, as much as she could have one. She was arrogant and aloof, she was self-reflective enough to realize that. And while many deserved it, she had her little team of friends and volunteers and study groups. People that she could only feel bemused pity for at the worst.

Her mind was heading back to her work again, as it always does, unfortunately. Not like she did much else in those days, multiple scholarships came at the cost of most everything else. But despite everything they were still friends. Mason cared about what was going on with her, and Allison cared more about what he thought than her aloof demeanor would allow her to show.

He was the one that invited her over after all. One day she chose to ignore her obligations and only check the notifications personal to her. Congratulations on her latest accolades of winning a few hundred bucks off a math tournament and an invitation to catch up. Someone cared about all the work she did, Mason cared about her...

“*Oh*, what hasn’t she done?” She said with a roll of her eyes, breaking the forlorn stare she was sharing with the wall. “Besides, more of the same vexing imprudence I have come to expect from her every day? Well, you know that she’s one of those... *balloons*... right?” Allison could hardly hide the disdain dripping from the very word, *balloon*. Impish latex things, impudent pneumatic brats.

“Yeah, you’ve mentioned it in passing. Mostly about them being perverse and indecent and, uh, ‘displaying behavior shaming the very seriousness and integrity of higher learning’ I think you said.”

“Exactly right!” Allison said in a triumphant huff, he was merely repeating what she said before, but it felt like the kind of agreement that she desperately wanted to hear. But the minor moment slipped back into despondence as she carried on.

“It’s all so tiring, you know? Every day it’s another blimp making a bloated mockery of themselves on campus, blocking the halls, running up the school’s water bills, comically unsafe handling of air tanks and other equipment, oh and don’t even get me started on how many times I have to peel them off the walls after they... *pop*.” Allison shuddered on the final word, falling back into the embrace of the pillows under her in discomfort and weariness – mug of hot cocoa set neatly on the nightstand first of course. Mason wordlessly shifted another pillow and the rest of the blanket towards her as he waited for her to finish.

“And I think the worst part is how utterly shameless they can be! They think they can just blow themselves up, in public, for everyone to see and...” Allison faltered for a second in frustration and thought, thinking through the words to describe it. The words that seemed to make her blush and wretch in equal measure. “Become big, creaking blimps. Completely... *helpless*... and beet red and *whimpering* and distracting and drifting *weightlessly* and *freely* through the air like they *don’t* have **classes** they need to be studying for and...”

Allison stopped herself there, why was she saying these things? Why could she visualize it so clearly? Her classmates taut with pressurized air rushing through them, filling out their curves and turning them from peer to blow-up doll to blimp to a loud and annoying bang? Why could she hear the teasing and obscene things that were said to them, from them and to each other? Why was her heart beginning to race in a strange and not unpleasant fashion?

Because they were having *fun* and she was not, that's why. But college takes sacrifices and acting like *that* was inexcusable. Not like she was jealous of what they could do and she could not, not like she was missing out, just that they did everything at her expense. Nothing else of course, nothing else... And it was this alone that kept the burning embers of fury crackling away in the back of her mind until it was flashed to roaring life with the kindling that is-

"Lauren." If 'balloon' was said with venom then that name was said with a lacquer of arsenic and lead. "Lauren Hall, *sigh*, what a nightmare she is, every time I have to scurry off to the other side of campus for some disaster it's something to do with her. Lauren that obscene... perverted... shameless... *bore*..."

Mason nodded along in silent sympathy with her, an empathic frown on his face. If his eyes weren't obscured, she could see the puppy dog look he was no doubt staring at her with. And after a silent moment he gently lifted the tablet, slapped shut the dust cover on it and set it to the side.

"Allison..." He said in a low voice, placing a firm hand on her shoulder. Allison felt a sense of shock at the sudden touch. She couldn't quite wrap her head around why, but it felt rather nice. Her whole body felt like it needed a touch, an odd sensuous aching and yearning for something. She briefly considered that she was finally spiraling into madness, but the comfort of the moment wasn't... unpleasant, something nice and personal. Something that wouldn't be graded or run through fifty emails. Just her and someone *roughly* equal to her. Just a quiet and tender moment. With someone she trusted...

"Allison, that is the closest I've heard you come to swearing since you dropped an entire stack of dictionaries on your foot during Finals."

Someone who would worry about her!

"You seem hella stressed out, Allison."

"Stressed!?" Her voice cracked as the word was shouted far louder than she intended snapping at the first signs of respite she had in a while was the last thing she intended, but it's not like she could really control it. "I am the very *definition* of stress at the moment. It's- It's not fair that I work hard every day and at least three hours every night just to-!" Allison stopped herself there, swallowing her words as she stared angrily at another wall and a stand mirror to the side. How angry and tired she looked in that sliver of her reflection. Stupid of her to get to this point, stupid of her to lose her cool, *stupid Allison*.

“Hmm,” Mason pondered over his volatile friend with determination and sympathetic despondence. Being careful and thoughtful was useful for both his studies and his friendships. The question of *‘how do I fix this’*. And the answer came when he ruffled through his pockets and took out two paper rolled little sticks from one. Anger was suddenly turned to confusion as she gave a quizzical glance at them.

“I don't smoke, Mason, but I do really appreciate the offer.” Turning her hand towards them and her head away from his. The motion also conveniently let her hide her embarrassment as she tried to calm herself down.

“I don't either. They're candy cigs! Just gum, paper and powdered sugar. Get to look cool smoking, have the routine, and I'm not coughing up a lung afterward. It's great.” He had the dumbest smile showing them off to her. They did look shockingly like the real deal, so it wasn't wholly undeserved.

“You just carry around candy cigarettes? To look cool?” Allison was completely dumbfounded, and better yet, devoid of anger. The plan worked flawlessly.

“Allison, ***nothing*** is less cool than lung cancer.” The tightened grip and dead somber tone made no secret that he meant that with the utmost seriousness. Allison, of course, accepted his logic completely without question. Lung cancer is indeed very bad, it's really the smartest move to make. *This* is why they were a team.

“I forget how smart you are Mason! Solving smoking! What brilliant ideas will we come up with next?” Allison giddily picked up one of the candy cigarettes with a smile on her face, and Mason smiled too. This was good, she was doing good for the first time tonight.

A white puff of powdered sugar was blown out from each of them. Mason remarked that she already looked like a tenured French philosopher. Dark, brooding, hiding a world of intellectual curiosity behind those rose-pink eyes. Allison couldn't help but be flattered. That would be a wonderful life, spending most of her time in quiet contemplation, puzzling the greatest questions.

And so the conversation turned to a brief discussion of the latest they had learned from the Philosophy department. Continental Philosophy, Analytic Philosophy, Kant, Deleuze, Augustine. Things that most people, and in fact themselves, knew little about. You couldn't just by getting to Philosophy 201 or second-hand from your peers. But they were learning, it was something to distract the mind from other matters.

She made the right choice, Mason was a relaxing change of pace. Candyland version of a punk though he was. But that was all the better to her! And it was also so confusing! He could be so

much more! He could do so much more! Their long years of distance wasn't some inevitable thing. He could very well be bumping shoulders with her at impressive internships and award ceremonies right now if he didn't content himself with being merely average.

"You could aim a lot higher in life if you tried, Mason." She said, waving around her *suave and intellectual* candy cigar for emphasis. It was a question of genuine concern, as backhanded as it was. It took her a moment to realize how that came across. Panickedly dropping the cig and stuttering something, but Mason shrugged and responded before she had the chance to finish.

"There's more important things in life than status and money Allison. I have my bandmates, and there's worse things to major in than veterinary medicine. I'll be serenading the penguins at the zoo with '*Wonderwall*' and you'll get to have a building named after you when you're a billionaire philanthropist." He held out his hands to air guitar out the chords of the song, the sudden penguin-like honking along to the lyrics came as a surprise however. It was truly incredible how well he could control his tone with nothing but inhuman squeaks. Unfortunately he only got to the second '*about you now*' before he had to stop for a breather, not for him but for the woman across from him uncontrollably giggling herself to tears. He'll manage to do the full song someday but he'd prefer Allison to not risk death for it. He's only qualified to do CPR on gerbils.

"*Hehehehe-god-*" Allison choked and spent a solid thirty seconds trying to regain her composure. For the most emotionless busybody on campus and possibly in the county that was a debilitatingly long time. But she managed to bring herself back to her calm and collected self, beaming smile notwithstanding.

"Alright, alright, you're doing well in your field. But the band itself? How many classes did you skip for practice? Surely it can't be that worth it? You could focus more on some useful extracurriculars and networking opportunities like—" A sudden flash of emails, cleaning up campus and a bare knuckle fist fight in the debate club flooded her mind. "-studying in the library!" The sudden realization that she was wasting her spare time wouldn't stop her from interrogating his waste of spare time.

"*Psssh*, you say that, but guess whose band might be getting a cameo in the next *Open Heart* and movie?" He strummed the air guitar a few times to drive in the meager victory. Thankfully no penguin-singing of the opening theme this time.

"I can't help but notice the use of the word '*might*'." And of course Allison was right to think it was a waste. Bragging about a new job while not being sure if you'll get it? He should spend some time in the library. Score 1 for Allison!

“*Pfft*, they’ll give us the part. We’re the best they can do! I don’t think anyone else is even applying.” Score 1 for Mason, he’s certain they’ll get it and he’s cool as ice claiming it.

“*Mmmhmm*, and what are they willing to pay for your contributions, if I may ask?” ...Score 0 for Mason

“Oh, *yeaaahhh*...” He was actually nervous now, a low blow for sure. “They’ve been cagey about that. Apparently, only one person bought a ticket for the last movie's premiere.”

“I see.”

“And said person also exploded in the theater...”

Allison nodded along to this incredibly important information that he was choosing to ignore. Nodding turned to mocking *hmm-ing* and chin-stroking, really making a show of how difficult it was to wrap her head around the problem here. Her ultimate conclusion? “I’m sure it will look good on your work history.”

“I hate it when you try to be sarcastic, Allison. We all have to start somewhere, right?” Mason shrugged, it was something, that's better than nothing.

Allison gave out a tired sigh, and shrugged back onto the bed. The sarcasm was feeling a bit too harsh, bemused pity will do. “It’s just... the somewhere you're looking at is a lot further down from where you *could* be. But, you're right, it's experience... not like my internships are treating me well anyways...”

Mason twiddled with the non-existent tuning pegs of his air guitar in a mental routine turned mind clearing ritual. He decided to carry on with the band-talk instead of letting Allison’s striver moping win. “So we’re doing a song for ‘*Open Heart Two & a Half*’... we recorded a demo cover of the main theme... and a musical number for Beary B-”

“Beary B. Goode? From the TV series? They're bringing him back?” That got her attention. Jolting upright with her eyes wide in shock instead of sagging, sad and tired. Dragging her from her academic cage of misery felt like playing with a yo-yo. But, god-willing, there are at least a few things that can make her happy.

“Yeah, they're bringing him back. The IP changed owners, and they paid his actor, like, a whole season’s worth of unpaid wages from back in the day. And here I thought *Open Heart* wasn't important to such a formal and dignified person such as yourself?” His turn to grill her with quips.

“Well... well... it was something we could get on VHS when I was a kid. I just remember a little bit.” Waving her hand in dismissal as if she didn't just jump out of her skin hearing the name of her favorite character.

“And is that why you have an autographed, limited edition stuffed animal of him?” He asked in the most quizzical tone his monotone dulcet voice could allow.

“Wait, did you find it? I was looking for... a place to donate him! It's just a mangy old thing I got from-” She was panicking.

“Would you want me to try and sew the hole in the left leg for you?” He wouldn't cede an inch to the over serious act. The bear is important to her, nothing else needed to be said.

“Mason! You... you... that would be... very much appreciated, if you did. It's just such an embarrassing thing to still be interested in!”

“Do you regret owning it, though?”

Allison waved a dismissive hand at the question. “Well, I couldn't be taken seriously in any professional setting if they found out I still sleep with a dumb children's toy.”

Mason pouted in mild disappointment. “Allison, for as much as you're worried about me messing up my life, I'm just as worried about you. I was excited to have you here again after a few years, and you're working yourself half to death on...” Mason swept out his hand to gesture at the tablet, and a set of neatly stacked notebooks on the floor, all waist height at least. “God, so much work I can't even tell what your major is.”

“It's just my work ethic, Mason, nothing to worry about.” Her wavering voice sounded like she was trying to convince herself as much as him.

“But you can't even talk about something I know you like without you worrying about it not being professional enough.” Mason took a few seconds to breathe, strumming the air along to the tune of a gentle piano playing faintly on the radio. He hated arguing. “I'm just worried, that's all.”

“Mason, it's... just something I *have* to be ashamed about. You understand how cutthroat white-collar work is! Such immature activities would never be allowed in any self-respecting law firm!” It wasn't as much an argument as it was a plea, a plea to understand her fate. But why accept that kind of future?

“You're allowed it here, Allison, I'm not gonna stop you. Did you think I would?” He stopped strumming the air, stopped distracting himself and gave her his full attention. Eyes piercing right into her own, words twinged by hurt. Did she really think *Mason*, one of the few consistent friends she had... *ever*... would do that?

Yes.

The answer was yes. She didn't have any proof of that, she had no reason to believe that, but she couldn't help but believe it. Deep down in her bones she knew that anything but the utmost prim and proper performance was a sin. The right etiquette, the right interests, the right work ethic, any deviation and he'd be at her throat.

But look at him! The man was a shaggy haired dork who took the time to cut out and replace the brand logo on his stained and oversized jacket with an ad for '*Death Metalists Against Animal Cruelty*' charity. He'd probably sew that stupid teddy bear an entire wardrobe of accessories if she asked nicely enough.

And of course all she could do was slink back like a wounded animal. Being caught being such a sentimental fool for a stupid toy was one thing, saying the wrong thing to defend herself was another. *Stupid Allison, why did you bring that *thing* and why do you act like such a brat?*

He's doing this for you, he's providing this for you, he doesn't have to be kind to you, he doesn't have to spend time with you, what's wrong with you!? He's the one doing all of this for your sake, he's worried sick about you. Maybe he'd be right to yell at you for acting like this! Maybe...

Allison looked at Mason once more, he was worried. No doubt watching her mutter to herself and curling into a ball. How embarrassing, what's the point of getting a degree when she'd be unemployable acting like this!? Stupid, stupid!

But... it wasn't really Mason she was thinking about doing any of that. *God the past few weeks have gone terribly...*

Allison couldn't bring herself to even look at him, but he didn't stop looking at her. He didn't really know what was going on in her head but it was obvious she wasn't doing well. And so he gently brought his fingers against hers, neither retreating in shock or grasping his in return. Gingerly he escalated it to wrapping his arms around her in a loose and cautious manner. It wasn't much, but he hoped it would help.

And Allison didn't deny the act of kindness, as much as she didn't want to admit she needed it. She didn't last too long before she let herself fall to the side and against his chest, giving him the

go ahead to squeeze her tighter than before. He was really warm, smelling incense and pine needles, safe and cozy in his fond embrace. And for a moment it seemed as if a weight was lifted from her shoulders. Her thoughts retreating, heart slowing down to match the soothing thump of his, short shallow breaths returning to normal. Is this what comfort and connection was supposed to feel like?

“I never thought that you cared that much, honestly.” She whispered like a ghost, eerie and scarcely louder than the breeze, still distant despite being nuzzled into his chest.

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know why I thought that. We were just classmates, we did homework together. I wasn’t sure if that meant... something.” It seemed so obvious to her, she was brilliant, that was her value. Sure they spent time together at lunch and talked about books and birdwatching on clear spring days, hearing him go on and on about the diets and songs of every bird that flew by. But no matter how nice it was she never got that shot of dopamine she did from getting a shiny A+. That was something she couldn’t get from her peers. Cherished and valued.

The paternalistic hand of the education system ruffling her hair and telling her what a bright future she had felt far more meaningful to her than anything else. Sometimes when she got extra credit, and when she was really lucky, Mother Dearest would even say that she loved her.

She never really felt loved by... anyone. Academic praise was the only way she knew how to feel it, how to feel worthy of it. Always distant to be the teacher’s pet, had to be the teacher’s pet to deserve anything other than distance. And when she only measured how valuable she was by how many people praised her for work it was so easy to feel dejected and disappointed when they didn’t. So she let it all fall apart... *dumb*.

“Allison,” He held her gently by the cheek to look down into her eyes, his thumb gently brushing away a tear under her eye. She didn’t even realize she was crying but it was hard to ignore now that someone else saw it. That only made her feel worse. “You’re smart, quick-witted, charming when you want to be. You just get so caught up by things. It’s nice seeing you calm again for once...”

“You’re too kind...” Poor, dumb, guilty feeling Allison, cooing into his chest as she tried to stop herself from crying. Good girls don’t cry, lawyers don’t cry, CEOs don’t cry! *Don’t cry, don’t cry, do not cry!* “You’re very smart too Mason, I never admitted it before but I don’t think I could’ve gotten through AP biology without you... And you’re determined and kind and considerate and-” She was starting to cry in earnest now, she waited how long to actually say this instead of admiring test scores? “And it always mattered a lot to me when you actually showed up for any of the school events I tried to do. I suppose I should’ve showed up to your garage band or-”

Allison was cut short again as she tried to force down the growing number of small, pathetic sniveling sobs coming from her.

Mason was still cradling her head in his arms. What an earnest and compassionate man, how little she deserved it, how indignant she was about receiving it. She tried to say that she's fine on her own but she couldn't summon the voice to say it, and nor did she want it to stop. The same needy part of herself that made her rest her entire body into his for a few moments longer.

"You're much cozier than the bear Mason." Meant both as a compliment and another attempt to pretend that stupid toy wasn't valuable to her.

"Happy to help Allison. And unlike the bear I don't have a dead battery on my speaker." He was taking notice of how intently she was listening to the calming **badump-badump** of his heartbeat. "I'll have to see if I can replace that too-- Is there anything else you need Allison?"

"No-no, you're helping more than enough already! Really I'm quite flattered and embarrassed but you really don't... *have* to keep holding me." She said this, looking up to glance at his reaction, still smiling and blushed from the last few compliments, not making any moves to pull away. "So I'll leave it up to you whenever you want to stop!" Still he did not move away. Allison was grateful for that, she should probably tell him that but there's only so much of her aloof reputation she can destroy in one day. Her leaning back in to coo into his chest got the message across well enough anyways. Cooing and forgetting everything else in the world that wasn't on this cozy bed, forgetting why they were even cuddling in the first place. It felt awfully quiet without hearing him speak, always a man of few words, preferring to stroke her hair in wide smiling silence.

"Why were we even talking about Open Heart again?" She said grasping at the last coherent string of memory she last had that night. Hoping Mason would start talking again and saving her from the awkward silence of the nighttime and the risk that the sounds of bad memories would resurface amidst the droning nothing.

"I wanted to bring up something you like, to distract from the homework and the -uh- *other* problem." He pet her on the head for emphasis, carefully setting aside her beret and revealing the cotton candy pink roots underneath. "Ooooh, I really like the dye you used! Never took you for the type to try it but it's a really nice pink. Way better than the cheap fake blonde I got."

"Oh, that's my natural hair color Mason, but thank you! You're the only person to... say anything nice about it..." Allison couldn't even remember the last time she ever had her natural hair color grown out. Mother hated it dearly and paid for good hair dye every few months. One of the few charities she gave out. "In fact I don't think I've ever really shown it to that many peo-" Allison's

heart sank at a sudden realization. He never saw her natural hair before, did he think she was joking? Or did he... know? About her dirty little secret. *Stupid, stupid, stupid Allison, why did you have to say anything at all!? Just pretend it was dyed! What is Mason, your precious friend, going to think now that he knows you're a dumb little harlot? All of this for nothing! That's what! You should-*

"Are you okay Allison? You stiffened up all of a sudden, do you want me to call someone-?"

"No!" Allison shouted in a startled, yelping way. She had no idea what to say really to Mason but she knew what she wanted to say to herself, a plea for anything and everything around her to stop. She could already tell that the moments where she *wouldn't* be panicking would be short and sparse through the rest of the night. Mason was startled too, although his first instinct wasn't to jump away, but to squeeze her tighter in his arms.

The endlessly affectionate embrace was being poisoned by a burning fear. Not a fear of Mason of course, he was a puppydog, he would mean no ill will whether he was responsible for what she feared or not. What she was afraid of is what happens after he lets go, *how* he'll let go. Because good times never last for Allison, it was always chasing one victory after the next and-! The thought of stressing over schoolwork was pushed aside as soon as it bubbled up from her subconscious, but the point still remained; It's only a matter of time until Mason *found out* and all of this *will* be over. She'd be dismissed almost completely from his mind, as she would very well deserve for her carelessness and her... *nature*. This zenith of comfort would be ripped from her, and she'll be back at the beginning.

"S-sorry Mason, my mind is more than frayed tonight and- I don't know what came over me!" She giggled in the most obviously nervous way she could. "Please carry on with whatever you were saying, my apologies."

"Oh, it's no big I was just-" He awkwardly shifted himself into a position more comfortable for both of them. "I was just talking about Lauren again, she sounds like a pain. I don't really see her around that often but I can try and annoy her or something next time I see her."

"Hmmm, how vengeful of you." She had a devilish smirk hidden in his chest but she was too drained to put the deserved amount of malice in her voice. A wheezing chuckle was all she could manage. "I've had this one particular fantasy of deflating her and mailing her away out of state, how does that sound?"

"How -uh- wicked of you!" Malicious scheming was utterly alien to his natural personality but he could take a swing at it. "I was thinking of messing with my amp outside her dorm once or

twice. *Accidental* malfunctions, broken volume knobs, that sort of thing, or putting rocks-

“Legoes, we’ll put legoes in her shoes Mason, it’s the only fair thing we can do to her.”

“Damn, you really do hate her guts. I’ll bite, but not to the deflating thing or however that works. I know how mad she makes you, and you really shouldn’t feel bad for her, but I feel like that’s probably illegal, y’know? It also feels kind of cruel to use that against her.”

“Use what against her, Mason? The fact that she’s a balloon? It’s only fair that if she makes it a problem for everyone else, we can make it a problem for her, no?”

“Well it’s just that, aren’t y’know-”

Her heart quickened its pace to a painful and very noticeable degree, he couldn’t possibly be trying to imply- Oh, oh no.

“-a balloon too?”

Christ, no.

Mason didn’t have a moment to let the question sink in. “**I am not a-!**” She heard herself say it before she realized she was saying it at all. An unthinking animal instinct to deny the accusation. Sheer animal panic consuming her mind. She couldn’t deny it, he already knew. *He already knew*. She was a *balloongirl*. What a ridiculous word, what a ridiculous *thing* to be!

“I am not-” She stuttered, what word to finish that sentence if she couldn’t deny that? *Freak? Pervert?* What she wanted to say was a word that didn’t exist, something ugly, harsh and cruel. Something deep in the subconscious that could sum up what she felt. Whatever the word it could have been, she could not find the voice to say it.

‘I am not, I am not’

Again and again with a weaker voice every time. She tried to wriggle free of the hug but, at the last moment, thought better of it and wriggled *into* him instead. She was looking pinker than her hair ever could, what an embarrassed blushing mess she was. She could try and deny it all she could, she could try and flee, but with how lost and drained she had been having a steadfast friend and cuddle buddy came first above all. She really didn’t want him to see her like this though, not as balloon, not as needy, not as the *not*-dignified version of her that she tries very hard to make nonexistent. All of this even as she indignantly

She felt weak, frail, unnaturally soft. The fault of being a *stupid, dumb, stupid-dumb-stupid air filled toy* of course, but in a deeper and spiritual way too. She tried so hard to take herself seriously but it just kept getting ripped away. Mason was merely the last in a long line of embarrassments and blows to her mental fortitude. Why couldn't she be stronger? Why couldn't they let her be the strong, brilliant, always-right star she was meant to be? Why did she have to *stupid* hobbies and interests and be a *stupid* harlot? Why did she have to cry like a spoiled brat? Why did she have to be so mentally strained that her own *stupid* subconscious couldn't even properly berate her with any insult longer than six letters?

Allison buried her face into his chest and wrapped as much of his warm jacket around it as she could and screamed an anguished, muffled scream long and hard into him until it echoed through his body and rattled all his bones. Scream was maybe the wrong word, it was more akin to the anguished cry or high pitched shriek of a bird of prey that would be ear piercing if not directed into her surrogate pillow.

Now Allison could be calm, slumping and defeated but blissfully drained of building rage and boundless stress. What now? It took her a moment to even look Mason back in the eyes, obviously frazzled by that little... *episode* but clearly not holding it against her. He merely asked "Are you sure you're okay?"

Mason already knew her secret, it was no loss or revelation. She forgot if she told him at some point, she would've blacked out the memory if she did anyways. But the point is, he knew, he knew it before the day even began and who knows how many days before that. And, he still wanted to treat her fairly and tell her how smart she was. No teasing, no mocking, no... worse things. It was calm, the rumbling voice calling out to her in whispered '*are you alright?*'s and the overwhelming scent of forest pine was calming to her. An oasis of comfort, as if her shameful little secret-

"You're not *just* a balloon, Allison. If -uh- that's what you were thinking"

-didn't change a thing.

"It sure does feel like it sometimes!" She said in a bitter tone of a smoldering rage drowned in the cool water of a forest lake. Pine, wood, incense, the subtle scent of lavender still on her hair from this morning's shower. Dreamy meadow, calm midnight, the brushing of the leaves in the cool night's air. The imagined scene calmed her as much as it could.

"I work so hard only to have the things *I* never agreed to, thrown back at me," Still bitter, but dreary, matter-of-factly. "I have to ignore all the perverse simpletons who would like nothing better than to drag me into their strange humiliation rituals. I'm not going to demean myself by

being some helpless... *toy*. I'm going to be important! I'm going to be serious! I'm not going to be... a helplessly full and puffy blimp that can't even move on her own and-" Dreaminess gave way to a sad longing and both were swept away by the sudden flash of imagination. Imagining herself being like that. Eliciting something between a gag of disgust and a sudden pleasant shiver at the imagining of the feeling.

Mason was strong, strong enough to squeeze her tightly at least. Strong enough to make her creak hugging her latex skin, tender enough to dance his fingers around her figure. How disgusting of her would it be to want more of that? More to be held, more to be loved, more of that desperate strain of her body trying to hold itself together. A strain that shifted the pressure inside her to places that were less than unpleasant to her shame and embarrassment.

Maybe a little. But she wasn't so much disgusted by the act as much as the intimacy. Being laid bare before someone, clothes torn to tatters, barely mobile, floating, helpless. Vulnerability was what disgusted her the most, vulnerable physically and mentally to piercing judgement and humiliation. She could be perfect if she could set the standards for her own life, to command how she was perceived to the finest detail. But if she couldn't then she'd just be another worthless airhead in the eye of the ignorant masses.

"There's a lot of awful people out there Allison you really shouldn't have to deal with any of that, and I *will* put legos into the shoes of anyone that makes you-" Allison was trying to listen as she sulked over sheepishly hiding the growing blush across her face. Trying but her mind was overcome with a stubborn thought to shake off. There was only so much that fear and disgust could bury what was wrong with her.

"I'm not a whore." She said with an uncharacteristic vulgarity and tragic whimper. Her mind still reeling with the thoughts of her indulging in the indecent behavior that she'd spent the whole night seething against. The buttons on her top came undone, losing to a chest that grew beneath her hands with every labored pant, her skirt only accentuating a rear that surpassed any method to hide it. What other reaction could there even be?

"Is that something people have told you before!?" Mason said after a deafeningly silent pause. He was not relaxed nor laid back anymore. Frigid for a moment and reanimated only to tap his fingers against her in what little comfort he could carry on with. This apprehension did not go unnoticed by Allison.

"Oh no! It's just hard not to think about!" A little more life in her words, making sure Mason wasn't miserable too was the least bit of courtesy she could offer, and she would expend the energy to do so. "I just uh... It's not a bad feeling, Mason... and it's hard not to feel exposed just as a matter of course. You can't really fit clothes on a blimp and... I'd just be vulnerable and

exposed in front of everyone! And it's scary and humiliating! Way worse than a corporate faux pas or sleeping with teddy bears! It's a nightmare! Like one where you show up to school in your underwear except..."

Allison fidgeted with her hands, tapping against the bed, resisting the urge to refocus her mind. She didn't need composure, or to project an A-Student image. That ship sailed already. She had to say something, she had to say everything. "I keep having nightmares about it, n-not too often! But... I just dream of myself alone and surrounded, with people mocking me for being a dumb blimp and telling me how hot I look as a blimp and that I'm going to explode and that I deserve it and that I'm just a dumb blimp and I'm going to explode and- and I can feel my body struggling to hold itself together and I *like* how it feels so... warm and uh... the word escapes me but it's like goosebumps feeling that spark of arousal going down your spine but it's all over my body and it hurts but it hurts *good* and they're calling me a dumb blimp because I am and how little I deserve anything I've ever achieved because I'm a worthless piece of latex and-"

Allison breathed in to catch her breath, the recollection of her nightmares coming out in a long unbroken sentence. She was crying again even if she tried not to notice it. She cried a lot in private, that was also very unprofessional of her, she should stop that too. But first she had to finish spilling her heart out to the world. Then she can cover it up easier in her more dignified moments.

"I- I want that to happen to me. Not *like* that specifically you know but- I want to be a dumb balloon. I think about it a lot sometimes, how much I'm trying to ignore this little wriggling thing in the back of my head. I don't acknowledge it but I think that only makes it worse because I keep having nightmares of it uh- breaking through all the barriers I put around, I guess that would be a good description. Like no matter what I do I'll always be- *guh*- I already told you all of that. I just can't help but feel like I want that, but I hate it! It's a nightmare! But it feels nice! But it's humiliating! I want to do it but I can't! Because no one self respecting could ever put themselves through that! Because it's humiliating and awful and I feel like I deserve it and then I'm blown to bits and I'm helpless and broken and nothing and a failure and scraps and just swept away like trash because I *am* trash and-"

Allison stopped suddenly, like the fuel fanning the flames of fear inside her air-filled temple ran its course. All gone, no emotions remained of the quaint memory. Thank God! Feelings were weighty and unprofessional! She turned her blank-staring face right around towards the similarly blank-staring Mason and wagged her finger in front of him with a playful *tsk*.

"So no, no one has called me a *whore* before, Mason, so you needn't worry about such things! Except for my mother who has told me, on a few occasions, how disappointed she would be if she raised a whore for a daughter. But that's more of a *hypothetical* possibility so I wouldn't

really count-”

Allison was stopped suddenly, this time by being suddenly pushed down into the soft mattress beneath them, pinned down by the shoulders. Mason was angry, visibly angry, that was frightening, Allison never-ever saw him be anything but mellow. He was also crying, she never saw him do this either. Angry, crying, his eyes bright and full of sorrow. Hovering over her face-to-face in a way that left nothing obscuring the path between them, seeing him go through his emotions in real time with every shifting expression.

“They don’t matter!” He shouted.

“Excuse me!?” She was dumbfounded.

“All those people! They don’t matter! Anyone that’s going to judge you doesn’t matter! Anyone that’s going to say anything like that to you doesn’t matter! They don’t matter! You matter! You shouldn’t live your life terrified of other people treating you terribly, you should be living for yourself! And that means doing some things that don’t fit with what other people want for you, but it’s not their life is it?”

She was speechless, being pinned down and yelled at was a terrible thing to happen. But being pinned down and yelling with her, while a heavy handed form of motivation, was liberating in a way that Allison had never felt before. A taste of freedom she could never allow or say herself. She mattered, and oh did she matter. Nervously giggling to herself like a madwoman. It was so sudden she had no idea how to react, but laughter seemed as good a reaction as any.

“I matter.” She whispered to herself between laughing fits. “I matter!” A little louder. Mason ruffled his hair back in front of his eyes and ruffled hers in much the same way. She had beautiful hair, how awful that she needed to hide it. That only made Allison laugh a little harder, and Mason started laughing too. Infectious, freeing, unserious, like nothing else in the world mattered. And when Mason got tired of holding himself up by his arms and collapsed right on top of Allison it really did feel like nothing else existed besides the two of them.

Allison squeezed tight under the strong arms of her friend, Mason with an irresistibly squeezable balloon under him that probably needed it more than him. Mason thought she seemed happy under him. Allison, to her now-evaporated shame, found herself feeling a little more than happy. Now that she had the liberty to ponder those buried parts of herself her mind turned to how warm and heavy he felt over her. The way his body moved against hers even as they were just cuddling in the linen sheets, pressing into her, rubbing against her. A few truths about herself popping into her mind. She liked being pinned down, she liked being squeezed like this, she liked the

aggressive positivity, she *liked* him, in some flustering way... she never really considered being close enough to someone to feel that way... She should tell him that.

"I'm grateful for you, Mason." She said in a voice firm and resolute if still faintly wavering.

"No worries Allison, I didn't want you to beat yourself up all night. Sorry for yelling by the way, not sure how else I could've gotten that across."

"No worries, Mason. I needed you to be direct about it, that's what I'm grateful for. I don't really get the luxury to '*not worry*' about things, so I needed someone to remind me of that." Polite, refined, cordial, dancing around something deeper she needed to say. "And I'm grateful for the things you say, and the way you... hold me... you make it feel okay to not be... perfect."

"It is okay to not be perfect! I'm sorry if no one's ever told you that before."

"... They haven't, no..."

"You have my permission to be a '*balloon*', if that makes any difference."

It did. Allison could be a balloon, Allison *will* be a balloon if she could muster the last bit of courage to just ask. Taut, quivering, strained, it sounded lovely to her, how much her mind could be changed by the right person. "Would it be too forward to say that it does? I said that I was terrified of being inflated by the wrong person but..." She trailed off her last words into a whisper just barely loud enough that she hoped she wouldn't need to repeat herself, blushing red all the while. "I wouldn't be scared if that person was *you*..."

Mason was stunned! "Do you mean, you'd want me to, like right now?" Shy and most certainly flattered. He spared no time to second guess the invitation as he lowered his head until their noses were about to touch, the warm and quickening breaths felt on their cheeks.

It would be too flippant of her to say '*You're the one who said it!*' even though she wanted to.

To not mar her dignity by ceding her shameful indulgence to the whims of Mason, but this wasn't the time. It would defeat the whole point if she couldn't accept it herself, to cling to the same routine that made her miserable in the first place.

"Mh-hmm," She nodded, a smile as wide and genuine as it was nervous spread across her face. Despite all her fears she was really going to do this, she was *excited* to do this even, if the rapid beating in her chest was any sign. A nervous, giddy laugh shook from her as she took in Mason's much brighter and more confident smile. Kind, strong, smart, bull-headed enough to argue some sense into her, reassuring enough to coax her out of her shell. The person she would be the cute,

helpless balloon for, his balloon, his blow-up doll. She was sure he would use far less possessive and dehumanizing terms but Allison couldn't help but think that way. And still she found the thought simply lovely. If she had no choice in being a doll, if she couldn't shake the psychosexual neurosis she built around it, then the second best thing was someone that would treat their doll well, no?

"You just- I'm just-" Allison swallowed her pride one last time. "Have you ever inflated a balloon before? All you have to do is just take your mouth," She gently brushed her fingers against his lips before turning into a gentle caress of his warm flushed face, the same he had done to her all night. The same he was doing that very moment as he cradled her head in his hands and lifted it closer to himself. "And put it... h-here and-" She guided him by the chin until his lips were hair's breadth away from hers, taking her hand off at the last moment to point at her mouth in guidance he didn't need.

Nothing more needed to be said as their lips touched and Allison closed her eyes in the serenity of the moment. Blissfully warm and enwrapped in someone's arms, head freed from the burden of thinking of anything other than the moment. She draped her arms and legs around him to keep him close and feel every little bit of warmth and tenderness that could come from their shared touch. And that was also before the thing she didn't need to tell him, to blow into her like the cute balloon she was.

It was an odd feeling she never felt before. Starting as a forceful surge of warmth that made its way into her chest and made its way through the rest of her latex body. She couldn't pretend she didn't enjoy it, murmuring a gentle, adorable cooing sound between puff-kisses. An electrifying feeling as she stretched to contain the airy affection blown into her. Of the very few times she has ever gone through this before she'd usually be too panicked to enjoy the sensation in any way.

But she felt like she had all the time in the world as the tender moment seemed to drag on forever.

The tingling in her chest went from a metaphorical to literal tightness, her bra and shirt struggling against the inflating balloons it was meant to contain. She never bought anything that was meant for the unparalleled stretching that a balloon's clothing needed to survive unscathed.

But the struggle felt good, the squeezing tightness pleased her sensitive body and accentuated just how big she was getting. It painted a rather pleasing picture in her head, like she could measure it by feeling alone. Not precisely, but big enough to spread out past the sides of Mason's chest at least. The way the pressure shifted and rocked on top of her was half the fun too. Part of her wanted him to be even more aggressive too.

Aggressively as she wrapped her thighs around his, like she was afraid Mason would drift away if not enveloped beneath a prison of pneumatic pressure. And she was, she was incredibly needy

and would miss the warm and mushy feeling of her legs rubbing together and the adoring figure between them more than anything. She thought it must feel so good for him too, her beautiful, pillowy thighs wrapped around him.

She felt a little selfish thinking about all the things he'd been giving her, the hot chocolate, the support, the coos and shivers down her spine with the caressing and kissing. But she also thought he must feel rather pleased with having an utterly beautiful and breathtaking balloon under him, no? Still, it wouldn't hurt to give him a little more, fair is fair. He was probably as much of a horndog as the rest of campus, maybe half as feral as the guys in her nightmares. Judging the decision based on a nightmare probably wasn't the best idea, but if she was going to show off her ass to someone it was going to be someone that *deserves* it.

The subtle sound of a few shredding fibers in her shirt was the cue that broke her out of that chance, she could solve both those problems at once. Gently pushing him away and out of their serene kiss, little strands of saliva, staring right into their bright, wide eyes. All the cute little things about each other, Mason's fluffy bangs, Allison's cute bird nose. The moment was cut short by Mason trying to find his balance squeezing right into one of her breasts. Her mind was already racing with racy thoughts but the *personal attention* sent her over the edge as her body shivered and she let out a very undignified moan. How cute she looked succumbing to pleasure, the adorable sound, the way she closed her eyes, how her body shuddered. That was seared into his brain more than anything.

He still offered an embarrassed "My bad Allison, hand slipped." Finished off with a nervous chuckle. It paled in comparison to the nervous laughter of Allison giggling like a mad woman. She turned her head away in embarrassment like she wasn't about to strip naked in front of him. Second thoughts, the fact that this was all real, that she really was allowing herself to be this intimate with someone. Too late now, it felt better than the shame did.

Mason was still hovering over her, out of breath and still snickering to himself as he looked at her. The breathlessness was more than worth it with how ceaselessly cute she was shyly hiding away her face. She noticed how hard he was panting over her, from the corner of her eye. She was worried, embarrassed, but quickly buried the awkward moment with some self aggrandizement. "Am I really that breathtaking Mason?" She said with a haughty chuckle and smirk.

"Yeah-" No hesitation, and neither when he squeezed into her again, one hand on her breast and the other through the soft strands of her hair. She didn't need to feel ashamed of the lustful noises she was making this time though, muffled by another kiss on the lips that lingered for a very long moment. Not to inflate her bigger, but just because she deserved it. "You really are."

Mason had never seen her smiling so wide before, or laugh so hard, or blush so bright. That was good, it was something to be proud of. She was happy. And Allison was happy indeed, too happy. She had no idea what to make of the endless rush of dopamine going through her head. “Oh w-well-” she had no idea what to say, she never thought to study for this specific occasion. She had to think on the fly. She arched her back and moved her slender limbs to accentuate her ample curves moving between a few different poses half remembered from classical paintings. All of them suffered from a horribly stiff, silent awkwardness. A still portrait of Cleopatra she was not, her face was too visibly nervous to be for one, and second she still suffered from being a real person and not a still portrait to be admired. No awkward pose could make her a statue, she was still breathing, breathing as hard as Mason down her neck as he moved in to kiss her a third time.

The fabrics on her shirt strained again, she had to do something. She didn't know how to make this ‘*sexy*’. She tried to say something highbrow and flirtatious in some legendary act of romantic poetry, but with her nerves so high she fumbled two different flirty lines into one string of utter gibberish. Neither her or Mason registered that she said anything at all. And with the preface of awkward bumbling out of the way, Allison tried to disrobe in the most regal and dignified manner she could. Emphasis on tried, it was a great struggle to take off her shirt and pretend the way she was running the fabric along her chest wasn't driving her ever more mad. It stretched, it groaned, it snapped and broke and left a nasty tear through the whole middle of it. The taut strung bra quickly joined it with a loud snap as it could contain its prized contents no longer. Three thoughts came to her mind: First is that mother would kill her if she didn't have a good alibi for all the ruined clothing she was bringing home. Second was that was probably how she was gonna end up this night, struggling to its limits before being busted into worthless shreds raining down on the floor. Third was that neither of these things mattered right now, Mason was still watching, still here and wanting to hold her.

She still wanted to try and do more, desperately trying to pull her skirt down and show off the few centimeters of her thighs and rear that it was still covering. It wouldn't budge, there was too much *her* in the way to do anything other than some strained, frantic bobbing up and down to try and squeeze it off, other than ripping it apart of course. This was humiliating, shaking her ass in front of someone was the obvious thing to be embarrassed about, but what stung more was that she couldn't act this out like it went in her head. Allison was always exacting, and here she was faltering at such a critical moment?! She was mad at herself, and the frustration must've been obvious the way he gently grabbed her hands away. Merely holding was more relaxing than it had any right to be.

“You don't have to take it off.” he said, swapping the handholding for nuzzling into her shoulder and reaching around for the nozzle now clearly exposed below the strained skirt. Allison tried not to express anything that would reveal that she was sensitive there too. “I feel like we’re

getting ahead of ourselves a little. We can stop-” He was cut off just as held the cap between his fingers, Allison would hear nothing about being deflated that night.

“Stop?! Mason I can't just stop now! I've already gotten so far! Just-” She tried again, with greater desperation, to free herself from her clothing. The only thing that came from it was a deeper sense of embarrassment. “I can be good at this- I need to be good at this- I *am* good at this!”

“Allison... good at what?” Allison choked up a little, how easily he could see through her! The best way to solve that, she thought, would be to try and stop him from seeing her at all. At least all the pesky emotions so visible on her face, the face she turned away from him and buried into a pillow. She turned back just enough for him to hear her and for her to see how well she could sway her ass back and forth in front of him. She could move as gracefully as a swan but she could not get over the horrible awkwardness of the attempt. She couldn't understand the rhythm of how to move her body, she couldn't stop overthinking about how she must look. *Failing her classes only to fail at being a whore too, just her luck.*

“*Tsk-tsk*, Mason I'm just trying to be a good *balloon* for you, isn't that what *you* wanted?” Allison felt smug saying that. She had to, to bury the ever familiar knot in her stomach she felt with every assessment. The tension relieved a little as her ass squished under Mason's fingers. She loved the intimacy, she loved whatever stress induced mania made her agree to any of this, she hated herself but if she could be loved and admired for this that would make all the difference. *Just being a good balloon for him.*

“Allison... Are you okay?” Allison couldn't think of anything to say, she opened her mouth like she was about to, but just clicked her tongue and tried to keep her cool. “You were about ready to cry about just being a balloon less than half an hour ago and... Do you want to be, uh-, doing this?” Mason against the plastic nozzle again with the most gentle care. “I don't mind either way.”

Allison twirled her hair around, rested her head into her hand, wiggled as much as she could with her limited experience. Anything to avoid having to answer that, to make the choice herself, “I want to be a good balloon.” She succinctly replied after her hesitation.

“Is that a yes to being a balloon or a yes to being good?” Allison just repeated what she said before with a nervous laugh. Mason was honestly exhausted from trying to get to the root of whatever was haunting her, but all good things take time and effort, he was in vet school after all. The effort here is not taking such a non-sequitor as an answer. “Allison, you've been acting really strange all night, I just want to know if this is what *you* want. I don't like seeing you agonize over these things... I never did...”

“*Hmm,*” a sullen whimper of deep thought, relaxing her position, not trying to do anything. “I really have been acting strange, haven’t I? This is very unfamiliar to me as well Mason if you’re worried about-” She gestured vaguely around her hourglass body. “But it felt fitting for the moment. You... Mason, you seem to make the most humiliating things seem okay, like I can just do things without worry. It feels... liberating.”

“But you don’t have to do things you don’t want to, Allison, if you don’t like being inflated then I won’t force you to keep going.”

“Oh, but I want to, Mason!” No point in not admitting it by now, she thought. “It’s just such a hard thing to say... I... Spent my whole life thinking only of how other people felt about me. And it’s really stressful looking over your own shoulder wondering if you’re doing the right thing, if people are going looking up to you or down on you... and around my 19th birthday I realized *what* I was and spent every day after that worrying about how... humiliating it is. But you make it feel... okay, I feel okay being open with you. So I’m stuck between trying not to feel... good... because it’s degrading and humiliating for someone of my reputation. And, really wanting you to tell me how good I am because that makes it all feel... easier to deal with. Does that make sense Mason?”

Mason hugged her from behind, wrapping around her middle, pushing her down against the bed. Did he even realize how sensual he was being? Maybe not, Allison wasn’t complaining either. “Yeah, it does. You’re a good balloon, Allison~”

“*Hehehe*, I am, am I not?”

“The best there is, even!” Mason, for his part, wasn’t completely oblivious to the very un-platonically loving ways he was pressing into her and the things whispered into her ear. One thing led to another, he supposed, too late to not have his friend half nude pressed into the bed sheets. He did actually want to stop earlier, when he first asked. He liked to take things slow, he liked to cuddle on park benches at the zoo and kiss at the zoo. He’d be lying if he said he didn’t *enjoy* the way his hips met Allison’s, but he always got the sense that his carnal desires were much more muted than most others. No, what made him keep going was how undeniably happier he could make her, those flushed faces, those bright eyes, the cute little sing-song chirps she’d hum to herself when happy and letting that feeling sink in. Watching her not stressing herself was a pleasant scene, even if she couldn’t bring herself to experience outside of the comfort of face down in the sheets and letting Mason’s weight push her head deeper into the mattress.

“It's a strange feeling, Mason, that I want you to keep teasing me while also really, really not wanting to be seen...” She said, turning her head to be only half muffled by the irresistibly soft quilt blankets Mason kept around.

“Is it so hard to imagine that it's really not as degrading as you feel it is? That's- uh- not a sarcastic question, I think you look as smart and regal as ever like this~”

“*Ough*, Old habits die hard, Mason, it's... Oh, I don't need to tell you again. Might as well enjoy it despite the humiliation... And you're also *feeling me* more than looking at me so you're not in much of a position to talk~.”

“I guess I am~” He squeezed into her again, harder still. She was a balloon, a dumb toy meant to be squeezed and played with and sent into wild shock with the shifting air pressure rolling around inside her. She bit into the blanket just to stop herself from biting a hole in her lip. The open musing about how degrading it all felt hardly helped ease the pain of her Internal struggle. She didn't feel like she could separate the pleasure from the pain at all, and at a certain point the fear of immobility, disrespect, dehumanization, everything that was involved with being a worthless toy felt like a pleasure in itself. A pleasure that gave her a sick and nauseous knot in her stomach but a pleasure that needed to be fulfilled *now* before the teasing drove her mad.

After a few more chirps and whimpers she breathed out one simple request-

“Bigger~”

“Are you s-?”

“Mason! You cannot be so oblivious as to not realize how much you've been toying with me tonight! I am so horribly nervous but... just let me be a good balloon for you so I can get this out of my system, alright? No more questions, I get a moment to stop thinking and you get to turn the smartest woman you know into a blow-up doll just for your amusement. Doesn't that sound fun~?”

“Is it weird to say that your amusement sounds more fun to me~? You make some cute noises Allison~.” She melted right back into the blankets, a few more cute noises muttered under her breath.

“Y-yeah that works too~... Just hurry up already before I change my mind!” She would not change her mind, and she'd wait patiently as long as he wanted even if she pouted and feigned outrage over it. But he didn't waste any time long enough to realize that. There was a bicycle pump he kept under the bed, then it was inside her with a flick of her nozzle and the slightest hiss of escaping air. No loss that mattered, no loss that wasn't immediately replaced by the first few

plunges of the hose going down strong. And so it was that she was just a balloon on a string now, stuck to the device that would fill her body as much as it pleased. The lack of control in the matter, much to her shame, was more than pleasing to her as well. She never enjoyed it by herself, she never could. Not when it was brought on by allergies, or shifting air pressure, or the rare moment she did it to herself for curiosity's sake. Too in her head, and when she wasn't it didn't feel like much of anything. An empty feeling as hollow as herself.

But this felt nice. The missing ingredient had apparently always been the right company, specifically the right company that she'd want straddling her air filled tummy as it pushed past the expanse of her chest to quickly being the biggest thing on her once slender frame. She did not have a choice on what he would do to her, she did not want to make that choice. But with just a single night of vulnerability she could give up herself up to someone who would treat her write.

Always something done to her, never something she would do herself. Formerly always as a nightmare, but with someone she could feel the warm embers and love and care for it felt like a dream. And if he wanted her to make cute noises she would make cute noises. All the squeaks and creaks and hissing air and breathy moans and coos he wanted. Compared to the demands of her stressful life these were gentle requests she couldn't possibly deny. Her submission was more liberating than she could have hoped for. What a bundle of paradoxes she was.

Mason didn't see it quite the same way, of course he didn't, Allison had way too many hangups about this. But to some degree he noticed how much she liked the most forward things he would do. Squeezing her, pressing her, grabbing her, playing with her like pooltoy one was intending to pop with all one's strength. Not that he wanted her to be reduced to messy bits of warm, flustered balloongirl. Not if she didn't ask for that at least. But it was what the moment demanded either way. Neuroses drowned out with a wave of cute aggression. Allison didn't even try to hide away her blush, she was getting better at accepting this. She was louder and more confident in the jumbled mess of pants and pleading she muttered, the numerous '*thank yous*' mixed in there got the message across well enough at least.

And those pleads were cut short as Mason kissed her again before she even got the chance to complain of how cold the air from the pump was. He could just tell that the more human element was what she wanted. The experience was too overwhelming for her to contemplate, so she didn't. That was the whole point of the night after all. Freed from worry for one loving night. How big was she getting? The measurements didn't matter, she could feel herself grow beneath her gentle fingers until her puffy arms couldn't bend enough to get a good feel. Did her lack of mobility frighten her? She didn't mind, the fear was sublimated into lust and trust, it would be alright. She just let the experience wash over her, getting bigger and bigger until she stopped feeling like a person at all. She was just a balloon, a squeaky oversensitive balloon. And a very much loved balloon, that was something she clinged to as hard as she could. She was loved for at least this one night. And as her latex skin grew thinner as air pushed inside her from both ends it felt like that was all she was filled with and all she was. A balloon filled with love and adoration

more physical than the praise she was used to. A balloon stuffed full and absolutely brimming with hissing, leaking, warm overpowering, body consuming love. A balloon that would only fill more and more until it-

Popped.

That was something that did frighten her, forcing her to open up her sleepy eyes to get a sense of the situation. And it was just in time for her to see the rubber sheen of translucent latex spread across her formerly opaque and almost human skin. Every mark met with her sensitivity turning to the unbearable struggle of the pressure inside fighting to break free, fighting to break her. And what would she be when the dam broke? Worthless trash lining Mason's wall, getting into the dusty spaces behind the dresser and only remembered for how much of a pain it was to clean her up? Poor Allison being such a worthless failure that her greatest accomplishment in life would be letting her friend blow her to pieces? She could reform, she knew other people could. But she never got this far before so how could she really know for certain?

And even with that horrible, fearful doubt she still refrained from asking for it to stop. She wasn't going to blow *yet*. Savoring the moments she had before she really needed to stop. Second by second that moment got closer but still she waited. The buckling of her body under the pressure felt too good to give up. Is this what Lauren felt every day? Or was her mother right and she was just more of a harlot than she'd like to admit? So much so that she was ready to risk detonating just to savor it? Savoring every thread of her being pulled taut to its absolute limits? Yes, yes she was, but she was still smart enough to stop herself at the last possible moment. The last kiss, the last pump, the shaking of her whole body as those threads started snapping, and right before she came undone and became confetti for her friend with benefits she summoned what little wits she had left and let out a meager "*Stop...*"

And Mason listened, and looked over the work he had done. Allison Babcock reduced to a taut quivering orb making soft soothing sounds as the rhythmic contractions of her body squeezed out a last few wild shocks of pleasure down into her core. It was that and how translucent she'd become that made it clear that even a single pump would make her burst. But she didn't, and Mason would make sure she wouldn't. So she could enjoy the blissful feelings she was drunk on and so he got to see his friend of so many years be as happy as she could.

"Sorry-" She meekly muttered, but Mason wouldn't have it. "Just enjoy being a balloon Allison, we can talk for real in the morning. Just enjoy yourself for one night, please?" And so she did. Just creaking in place on the soft bed. She heard the phone ring, probably Mason's, she didn't know or care who it was and neither did he. He just put the phone by her chest and let the good vibrations carry her to sleep.

And all was well.

And on the next day, back at college, Allison had been assigned a few quizzes and assignments. All done and graded before the night was over.

And carrying it back to her dorm she smiled in joy. She grabbed a spare phone from a hidden place under her bed, an old Nokia. Something her mom neither would nor could smash to pieces in an apoplectic rage demanding to know what she was doing last night. That didn't seem so big of a deal now that she only cared about someone else's opinion.

She snapped a photo with the poor camera and sent it to Mason, the only thing that mattered was that the 'A+' on everyone could still be made out. Along with it a humble thanks for '*special life lessons*'

"Nice!" Read his little textbox. "Do you think you'll ever be allowed to see me again or do you think you'll be set with just the one time thing?"

P.S this reminded me of you-" With a picture of a giant ball of rice with seaweed scraps and chopstick made indents in the vague appearance of a head with long flowing raven black hair.

"Being *allowed* has nothing to do with it, Mason. How am I supposed to rule the corporate world one day without bending a few rules here and there~?"

P.S. If you're gonna tease me about being a balloon at least do it as poetry please. I still feel a little weird about last night and it feels more dignified. (●_●❀)"

"Oh! Allison breaking the rules? What have I done! Hehehe, no problem from me on either account. Need to work on new lyrics and build up my punk street cred. The only big question is if we're gonna do that before or after messing with Lauren?"

Allison replied with an evil looking cat with '*muhehehehe*' labeled over it in white text. She smiled as he put a heart reaction under it. Then another, and another, until every color and variety available was stuck to the stupid cat. She was happy, a bittersweet happiness. It didn't long for him to ask again.

"But seriously, do you think we'll be able to meet up again? Ur Mom forced you to send a break-up text on your main phone + sending us weird letters. Idk how crazy she is because dad just threw it in the garbage with the rest of the junkmail but it's looking pretty bad."

It was pretty bad, it was really really bad. The details of her arriving home in Mason's spare clothes were best left unremembered and unremarked. But she could be happy nursing the memory of that calm before the storm as long as she had him here in her little hidden sanctuaries.

“We’ll manage, Mason. I am the smartest person you know after all~. I’ll get a new phone, I can be better at keeping secrets, I can still enjoy having you around in my messages~. It will all work out. Trust me.”

“Of course it will! I just really wish we didn't have to have her breathing down our necks. Tell me next time you want to hang out! Pump or no pump >:).”

“You *are* the pump, Mason ^ _____ ^
I will.”

The conversation ended that day with another gif of two cats kissing. And Allison hoped that she'd get to be free as a balloon in the sky soon enough. Hoping even as the days turned to weeks and weeks turned to months without a chance of respite arriving. Even as the hope and shamelessness faded from her mind and she settled back into most of her old habits. She still checked up everyday with her friend, the one who cared about her enough to indulge in her moment of weakness. That would be respite enough for her.