

Chapter 28 - Thursday Lunch

"Baba O'Riley"

Luis

What the... Becca is hitting me.

She has to be hurting her hands. I need to stop her before she does some real damage to herself.

I looked into her eyes.

SHIT!

She is already hurt. Not physically, but freaking.

DAMN IT!

Why this week?

Why at all?

"Becca?"

No reaction other than the continued wailing and flailing.

"BECCA!"

Her head turned my way for a second.

Feral eyes that will probably haunt me for the rest of my days.

"Shit!" I think came out of my mouth.

Ms Carlisle appeared in that moment behind Becca. She looked at me and tried a sympathetic smile.

"What the..."

She shook her head and her face went sad. The look in her eyes told me to be patient. And shut up. My training took over and I finally took a breath. Well, it was almost a breath. The air made it into my mouth. Maybe.

And another inhalation. It was almost deep, it almost made it into my chest. The exhale was, at best, shaky.

And... another. And... that one made it to my center.

I felt the roots connect.

And, damn, Becca is still hitting my chest. I've got to stop this. Another breath... without hurting her.

Using the Push Hands technique of no more than four ounces of pressure, I placed my fingers around her wrists. Slowly, working with her energy, I moved her blows off my chest and into the air.

Damn! She's stronger than she looks and her energy is all over the place. Properly directed, it would be very powerful.

I absorbed her energy to slow her movements. I could feel her heart. Every muscle moving. All the energy directed wildly into her arms. It was easy to see the confusion in her mind and soul without even looking into her eyes.

As soon as her arms stilled, she whipped her head up and met my eyes. Only then could I plainly see the pain in her soul.

"Oh!" she managed. And then her knees melted and she collapsed.

Joan helped me catch Becca. She wasn't out, she'd just turned into a dishrag. Doctor C appeared at my side. For a large man, he can be too quiet.

Maybe I was distracted.

"What...?" Yeah. What! My new saying of the day.

"I'll take her someplace quiet and talk to her," Ms Carlisle said.

I noticed the crowds looking at us. Most seemed just as confused as I felt. A few angry stares at me, like I had done something horribly wrong. She began leading Becca towards her office. Doctor C pulled me away and towards his office.

Once inside, he had me take the seat I had stood behind on Monday. "Luis, you remember the psychological profile testing we did?"

"Yes sir." Talk about out of the blue.

"And do you remember what your personality type was?"

"The Meyers-Briggs test? Yes. An INTP - Introverted, Intuitive, Thinking, and Perceptive - the architect."

"Someone who lives in the world of ideas. Yes. Do you remember how weak or strong you were on the Introvert rating?"

"Middle of the road Introvert with some degree of Extroversion."

"So, you have need for some solitary pursuits, but don't mind being around people."

"Pretty much."

"Okay. Rebecca is also an I, Introvert. Except she is a very strong one. Almost off the scale. She has to have large blocks of time by herself. I would imagine this week she's had very little time to herself."

"Hmmm... Sleeping Monday and Tuesday night. And, some time in the afternoons when she's in the art rooms."

"Not nearly enough in a normal week, for her. Then add in the stress of this week."

"How did I miss all this?" I shook my head. Then, "Hell, how did you see all this?"

"Well, the easy answer, it's my job. Plus, experience has shown us that psychological backlash due to the Program happens today. In a way, it is amazing she's made it this far without some signs."

"Well, she does crave what she calls 'Cave Time' when she snuggles into my chest and disappears."

"Ah. Yes. That would be a temporary substitute. She needs some time, and soon."

"Lunch?"

"Yes. Ms Carlisle is going to suggest she skip part, or all, of the three lunch periods and go to the art room. She can use Francesca's private studio. We've cleared it with her."

“Good. Should... should I leave her alone for that?”

“You may want to offer to walk her. Don't push.” In other words, stay out of the studio. I may be a dumb jock, but I got that.

“I can do that.” I looked down at my hands. “I feel responsible for not giving her the time she needed.”

“You probably didn't see anything wrong. This morning, her world caved in. I would imagine you're feeling very disoriented yourself.”

I couldn't stop the snort. “That would be a good way to describe it.”

“You almost said, 'No shit!' Didn't you?” I nodded. “After you talk to Rebbecca, I want you to take a break yourself. Use as much of the lunch periods as you need.”

“Uhm... What about the Nakedes?”

“If you were to show up to the first lunch period, you'd find more than one off on a break. Don't worry about it. Ms Carlisle and I will be there and explain that we've granted breaks to anyone needing it. And, offering any that show up the break.”

“Okay. Yet, I feel like I'm letting everyone around me down.”

“A sure sign you need a break. Center yourself.”

The thought of a long Yang form ran through my mind followed by half an hour in the whirlpool. That began to settle me just thinking about it. “Will do.” Then a thought invaded my mind. “Uhm... What was going on this morning? Coach MacFarland mentioned that teachers were waiting in doors and such.”

“We've gained experience with the Program and the backlashes over the years, plus learned from others. We're prepared, but we need to let things play out. To a point. We didn't interfere with what happened with Susan and Rebbecca... Becky. It would take a while to explain it, let's just say we've been watching things develop. Becky's meltdown wasn't unexpected.”

“Why not warn us?”

“Personally, I would have loved to. Yet... Luis, when you're first learning to hit an opponent did you always listen to your coaches about the right way to keep from getting hurt yourself?”

"No." I flashed back to those days. The hard, hard lessons that were accompanied by bruises, cuts, and other damage to my body. And that was in practice.

"Exactly. You learned more by experiencing. As cruel as it seems, the experience of this morning needed to happen. We'll be monitoring it. Yet, I think we did all right. Becky is going to do just fine. Now, how about you?"

"Me?" Wasn't I doing okay? Was I? Hell, fucking, no.

"Yes. You. I've known you for a long time. I'm also an ex-professional athlete. I know your head is not where it needs to be. Plus, as an educator, I know that same head is not doing his normal excellent in classes."

"Caught? Huh?"

"Caught. And, what are you going to do?"

"Take the break over lunch. Center and get my game face ready."

"Good. Now, let's go. Remember, don't push. You may even have to push her away a bit."

Great.

Rebecca

"Becky?" Joan's voice penetrated the swirling fog of emotions in my mind. She had settled me on the couch in her office and taken a seat, being sure to leave some room. She allowed me a long time to just sit and... I guess just be. No pressure. No talk. Quiet. I felt comfortably alone. Almost.

"Y-Yes?" Staring down in my lap just felt so right. Better than walking around naked. My fingers were doing an intricate dance with each other.

"Has Cave Time helped you this week?"

"Yes!" I looked up, with what almost felt like a smile as I looked at Joan. The flood of memories of being snuggled into My Mountain's chest washed over me.

"Is it enough for you?"

"I-I... Uhm... Ah..." Be honest with yourself, Becky. Becca. Your creative energy has been nil this week except for that blast Monday and Tuesday. Okay, a few sparks. But, by now, in another world, I would have done a lot of writing, more paintings. Why couldn't I? I felt a small voice squeak out to Joan, "No."

"Well, we have an easy solution. You get good alone time in the art rooms, don't you?"

"Yes ma'am." Speaking of writing and painting. And that cave that Francesca provided me.

"Why don't you head there now, instead of lunch."

"B-But, what about the Nakeds and..."

"Everything will be fine. More than one of the Nakeds will be missing at lunch. You tend to your needs right now."

"A-And... Luis?"

"Dr. Cavanaugh is talking to him right now and encouraging him to take some time as well."

"But... I hit him."

"And do your hands hurt?"

"W-Well, some." I looked at my hands and realized that they would probably hurt in a while. It looked like I had been hitting a hard wall, but wrapped in silk. Red, inflamed, but no cuts. Actually, no worse than helping Francesca with her marble. Yet, what I did hit me. "W-Will I see him?"

"Right now if you want."

"Yesssss!" Did I really say it that loud?

Joan chuckled, helped me up, and led me into the hallway.

Luis

Dr. C and I exited his office at exactly the same time that Ms Carlisle walked out of hers with Becca in tow.

My Sweetie looked up at me, shyly. There was sadness in her eyes, yet joy in seeing me. I have never felt worse in my life for bringing this pain by not understanding her needs.

Remembering Dr. C's words, I opened my arms, slightly, inviting her into a hug.

She looked a question at me that my body knew the answer to before my mind caught up. My arms opened wider and were instantly filled with my sweetie.

"I'm so sorry..." we both said at the same time. Looking down into her eyes and her seeing into me, we talked without vocalizing. In a second and three eternities, we worked enough out to be able to move forward.

To hell with the PDA policies, we kissed. My heart was exploding as my mind achieved peace. I felt her melt into me. Joining. Being as one.

We'd still be there kissing, or more, if we hadn't heard a stereo clearing of throats from either side of us.

I slowly pulled back, making eye contact again. "Busted."

"Damn. It's detention for us."

"Yep. Locked into a room together for hours."

"Having only to focus on each other."

"Yep. Damn."

"Yes, damn!"

"Okay, kids. Enough mocking authority," came Dr. C's deep, command voice. Becca and I cracked up at the same time. I could have sworn I heard a snort from Ms Carlisle. Oops. Joan. No, in this context, Ms Carlisle.

We finally untangled, took one last long look in each other eyes, shared a brief kiss, and simultaneously said, "See you in a bit."

"Uncanny," said Joan.

"Magical," Dr. C said low enough that he might not have thought we heard him.

We slowly moved apart, souls still talking through our eyes. Finally, our hands broke. Almost refusing to lose contact, the energy exchange persisted long after the loss of touch. With a quick smile to each other, we turned to face our audience.

It took Joan a second to recover, "Am, yes. Okay. Doctor Cavanaugh and I need to handle the lunch with the Nakers and both of you have things you need to be doing."

"Yes ma'am," we both said at the same time.

"Unreal," Dr. C said.

"Amazing," Joan said at the same time.

Rebecca

Lunch?

LUNCH?

A few minutes ago, I was waking up in My Mountain's bed. Then crying... and being supported by Margie and Carmella. Then the strangeness in the car. One of these days I really need to figure out all those buttons.

A freight train hit called Susan. Rosa was there, I think. Yes, she was. She had something to say. I think.

I was melting, melting into the ground. If it had been melting into invisibility, that I would have enjoyed. Yet, my melting seemed to draw more and more people. More and more stares. More and more things I didn't understand.

Feeling so alone in a crowd, with loved ones around. And, not writing. And, not really painting except one, with twenty new ideas and a couple of burning fires that seem to keep going out. And college offers out of nowhere. And my sweetie is distracted. And not losing my virginity. And falling asleep. And Susan this

morning. And my conflicts about Rosa. And Luis. And college. And art. And...

My Mountain took my hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. "Would you like me to escort you to the art room?"

A gentle warmth washed through me. The Ands went away. No, they settled into places, waiting to be resolved, but no longer needing my constant attention. Yes, I wanted him to walk me to the art rooms. Yes, I wanted to do some art. Yes, I needed time alone. Yes, I loved this man. Yes, I wanted to go to college where he did. Susan? Psst.

That was me hating myself. O...Kay... Really?

Y-Yeah.

Oh, damn! I get it now! We hate not a person, but what that person draws out of us. The hate is our fear of that thing in us!

Yes!

"My Mountain, it would be a great... joy... if you would." I looked up and smiled. We locked eyes.

Yep. He's right. Einstein did have this figured out. Who would have ever thought of the great scientist as an incurable romantic!

A grunt and giggle from Doctor Cavanaugh and Ms Carlisle, Joan, intruded.

My Mountain and I walked down the hall in silence. Holding hands. It felt so right.

We arrived at the art room door and he turned to me, "I'm so sorr-"

I put a single finger to his lips and looked deep in his eyes. His pain met my confusion and they swept out into the stars together, hopefully to be fused into something positive for others. I know that much about physics, conservation of energy.

"My Mountain... I love you." And, I prayed. I felt, knew the answer. Yet...

He looked into my eyes. "And, I love you."

I pulled his head down, that massive thing that seemed to weigh nothing, and touched my lips to his. Just as we met, I whispered, "My Mountain. My love."

The world swirled. Yet, in the mix, I saw a path. A path that led to a new painting.

A painting I had to do, now. Now. And he slightly moved his lips.

What painting? What world?

My Mountain melted into me. Me! He was as light as a feather. Just as I was thinking I could dance him around the room, a coughing sound came in stereo.

Luis

After helping Becca mount a monstrous canvas in an easel in Francesca's private studio, we shared a brief kiss before she disappeared into her private world.

As I was leaving, Francesca stopped me. "She'll be fine, Luis." Her hand brushed my cheek. A very Italian thing to do. A mother loving her son. Respect and love.

"I know, thanks." I couldn't help but smile.

"Sorry we broke up the kiss when we came in," she said with a chuckle as I walked out. "We'll care for your *Fottella della montagna*."

"She is my pixie," I chuckled in return. "I guess I am her mountain."

I smiled all the way down the hall.

Knowing that Becca was going to be all right and had loving support if she needed it took a big weight off me. Another huge load lifted when I realized that I had a break as well. An hour or three to center.

The monkeys in my brain immediately started chattering away. Some of them downright squeaking. The Program. College. Football. Friends ignored this week. Friends made this week. East. Classes. Family. Hell, Margie in the Program.

A whole choir was yammering about Becca. Another, smaller one, about not taking enough advantage of the Program and getting relief in every class. Least we forget the finely tuned voices singing about Rosalee. With full pipe organ accompaniment.

Thoughts streaming through my head faster than I could possibly engage and consider. I damned well wished they would choose one key and stick to it!

And, I'm trying to engage the cacophony. Giving it a name. Talking to it. Trying to argue.

I tried rotating my neck and didn't get very far. Imagine that. Not with my shoulders touching my ears.

"Luis!" a voice shouted from behind me.

Plant right foot, turn, bend knees, prepare...

"Shit, dude! Damn!" Phil said taking a couple of steps back. "I never want to see that breaking through the line coming after me."

"Oh, damnit Phil!" In my mind, I saw him in the red jersey that told us defensive types that we weren't allowed to kill them in practice. My fists were clenched, when did I do that? "I'm sorry."

"Just keep up that intensity for East."

Breathe. Don't kill our quarterback. Kill their quarterback.

Breathe. "Working on it, believe me."

"Dude, you need some stress relief."

"That's where I'm headed. Some T'ai Chi and a whirlpool instead of lunch. Hopefully, that will..." What would it do? Oh, yeah, find center. It wouldn't solve the thousand problems running around my head with the billion questions attached to them.

"I hope so. I'm worried about you. Your head isn't where we need it. And we need everything we can get for tomorrow night. Remember, not only is this game about local pride, this game is critical for a lot of our players and their chances at a good college, or college scholarships at all."

"Phil, you know I respect you. Yet, the only thing holding me back right now is a vision of you wearing a red jersey. For that, I apologize."

"So, what are you going to do?" His eyes darted left and right, instinctively looking for running lanes or a place to dump the non-existent ball he normally held during the game.

"They've excused me from the Program for the next three periods. I'm going to use it to... I don't know. Be?"

“We'll talk before practice?” His eyes tried to bore into mine. He was getting his game face on. Shit. Where did I leave mine?

“No problems.” And I'll be glad to sell you ocean front property in Colorado. It's just a short walk across those dunes to the beach.

“Then, go to it. Remember who you are. A force. A leader. Part of a great team.” And, he walked away, leaving me standing there shaking my head. What was left of it. On one side, more monkeys than grains of sand on a beach, chattering away senselessly about everything and nothing. On the other, a dozen choirs that would make the Mormon Tabernacle one look small, singing their songs of woe about an issue I needed to address. The Game. The Team. College. Becca. School. Becca. Parents. Friends. Becca. Sanity. Grades. Becca. Rosalee. Becca...

“ARRRRGGH!” The echo from the empty hallway was not the answer I was seeking. I had a brief sense of feet running away down the other corridors. Damn. Just what I need. I'm supposed to scare the shit out of the other team, not my friends and fellow students.

The first door I encountered was the typical push-bar affair. I'm glad they have heavy duty hinges, yet I'm afraid they'll be replacing those tomorrow. And that it had that little pane of glass with the wire mesh in it. Damn it. I bet that is expensive.

Somehow, and without too much more mayhem to animate or inanimate objects, I made it to the weight room. One corner of the room is equipped with gymnastics pads on the floor large enough for three or four people to work on martial arts as needed, or tackling and blocking practice. It was perfect for T'ai Chi as well.

I stood facing the corner. Feet shoulder width apart. Automatically my body aligned in the classic starting pose. Knees slightly bent. Arms down by my sides, relaxed, palms inward, fingers slightly curled. The weight on my feet perfectly balanced between them and over the length of my bare feet.

Without thought, my breathing deepened. The voices chattering away. The choirs singing. Who the hell brought in the pipe organs? Do they really need to be doing dueling organists right now? And not a single one of them E. Power Biggs.

My breath continued to deepen, requiring more and more of my focus to make it smooth, even, and to pull all in that I could and expel all I could. The magic ball at my core began to spin, hesitantly. I ignored the monkeys. Just noise. Only noise. When I didn't pay any attention to them for a dozen breaths, they got pissed off and found another part of town.

Automatically, years of training coming into play, I slowly sank into my knees, my hands coming up into position, feeling the energy ball. Somebody must have taken a chainsaw to the pipe organs, because they weren't playing any more.

As my hands moved through a pattern that, to some, looks like moving a beach ball around in front of you, my right leg automatically moved out and back, sliding on the floor. Never losing my grounding, which became stronger in every moment, I became a new stance and moved the energy, thus my opponent is forced to consider another view of life.

Were the same people with the chainsaws now gagging the choirs?

When the arms move in, the breath moves in. When the arms move out, the breath expels. Turn, slide, move. Excruciatingly slow, yet muscles never tense. To tense a muscle requires relaxing it before it can be moved. A waste. Let the energy build inside. Arms, legs, fingers, toes, knees, and such are only for sensing the other's energy. Channeling it into the Earth. Retrieving it 1,000 fold and returning it. Let the Chi do the work. The body is a vessel for the energy.

Yet, each movement is a defense or attack with an opponent. As my teachers taught me, when doing the form alone, see the opponent. When working with an opponent, be alone.

Slowly, with a series of cleansing breaths, I came back into the start position. It also happens to be the end position. I was in exactly the same position in the mat as where I started.

Looking up at the clock, I saw the twenty-five minutes had passed. Perfect.

I was in touch. My mind was still. I was relaxed, yet very aware of all the power in the Universe and my ability to call on it and channel it as needed. I tingled. Yet...

Suddenly I was very tired. A good tired. The one that comes from properly using your energy, not the mindless rattling around in a maze looking for the promise of a piece of stale cheese. At the same time, the week had worn me down.

The rebuilding muscles from Tuesday's excesses needed to be tended to. They were almost there, fully grown with new layers of fiber that will make me stronger tomorrow. They just needed some TLC.

The rebuilding of my emotional and mental state needed tending as well. Good thing that one thing would tend to all, in this moment.

I moved into the wet room, gliding on my feet. Maintaining my roots into the

Earth as long as possible. Each move designed to progress without over-extending, without over-reaching. Staying within my balance and power at all times.

Ah, the wet room. To the music box. What should it be? I didn't care, I pulled a flash stick out of the box and stuck it in. The music filled the tiled covered room as I sank into the monster, stainless steel, swirling pool.

The fast, repeating synth sequence of The Who's "Who's Next" first song started. 'Out here in the fields,' sang Roger as I sank into the tub. The hot, swirling water did it's best, and it was a great job, to relieve the soreness in my muscles and joints.

'We're all wasted!' came the chant as my mind finally emptied.

Rebecca

That glorious empty, off white space stared back at me. It was huge, taking all my vision. I could see the individual threads of the fabric woven together, even with the sealant closing the minuscule gaps.

The Program. Damn. I've been naked in school for almost four whole days. Amazing that most of the time I really haven't noticed it. Well, those times I have have been very tense. Naked. Without clothing? No, more than that. Without protection of any kind. I guess when an entire society is accustomed to it, it fades into the background. That's what a nudist resort must be like. After the initial reaction, the nudity just fades. I guess that is the difference. Nudity versus nakedness. One is people without clothes. The other is people being without protection.

Is that what the Program is designed to do? Leave us without protection? Is that just my cynicism cranking up into high gear? I'll reserve judgment for the moment.

I looked up at the canvas and realized that I had put a rough background on it. What was I painting? I'd had a flash of a painting earlier, now where did I put it? I stepped back and took in the whole thing. I tried to see what was wanting to emerge.

Nope. Nothing.

What the heck is that? Looks like woods. Maybe. A school hallway while tripping on drugs? It would get my vote. I put the brush down and checked the surface. Still wet. I grabbed my palette knife and began scrapping off the paint. The broad, dull edge making short work of the clumps of colors. Yet, some stayed behind. The colors blending.

Stepping back again, I took another look. Jackson Pollack meets Andy Warhol. In a head-on collision at 300 miles an hour, maybe.

Luis. Oh! My! God! Luis. My Mountain. One positive to the Program, yet what a hell of a week it has been. How could he stand me now? I tried to beat him up earlier. My hands still hurt. I wonder what he sees in me? He would let me hit him and be so gentle, so kind, so loving, so... Damn it. I don't want to cry. I don't cry. Invisible Girl doesn't cry!

As I went to wipe the tear from my left eye, I notice I had a big brush in my hand. The kind used to paint walls. Or put Gesso, the sealer, on canvas. As in cover up what was there! It's a stark white and able to hide anything underneath.

Well, my modern art non-masterpiece was gone. Only some slight textures from the brushing and scraping were left.

Rosa! How did that happen? What happened? I mean, I'm attracted to her and all, but how does that effect my relationship with Luis? What am I going to do there? Is there a future? Is it something I want? Something more than Luis? Would I lose him over it?

I was getting so twisted up, I stomped my foot. That made the small brush in my hand fall. Good thing, as I was about to start pulling on my hair.

I'll just have to talk to Luis and then Rosalee. I definitely can't make any decisions about this by myself.

I bent to pick up the brush from the floor, except it wasn't there. The large brush was. Oh well, another failure painted over. The texture was getting interesting, I'll say that.

College. Yep. That time to really start thinking about it. What the hell happened yesterday? Suddenly I'm being recruited to colleges with great art programs? Was it because of Luis? Could be, but then again, I think I smell another Italian scheming.

I'm learning. People under-estimate the Italians. Make jokes about them. Yet, Western Civilization wouldn't be worth a damn without them. The art world would

suffer. I'm beginning to like, okay, love opera. I want to go see one. I want to travel to Italy with Luis. I want to experience the Slow Food Society up close and personal. I want to walk in the steps of the great philosophers and painters. I want to understand My Mountain. And the scheming, Machiavellian teacher that I'm pretty sure made those calls yesterday happen.

I looked at my right hand and realized that I had a "medium" brush in it. Something I use for feathering. Not something I do until I've gotten a section of work done.

Stepping back, I looked at the canvas. This time I had started in the middle.

Well, I can see the beginnings of a large space. Very ordered. Perfect perspective. The initial outlines of columns, patterned and decorated panels. Shit! I'm channeling Nicola Pisano! I guess that is the cost of using the studio of an Italian sculptress. But, the Baptistery of Pisa and it's pulpit? So geometric. So... ornate. Who says the Baroque period was the most over-detailed that still felt right and looked good?

Last night. Okay, I've used shit and OMG. I've cried. Been angry at myself. Apologized. Beat myself up. Been told everything was fine. Been loved. Supported. Totally freaked out? Oh yeah.

Damn it. Wait. Used that.

What's a new phrase I can use? Come on girl, you claim to be a writer. Think of something.

Back off, bitch. You know I don't work that way. I need my space. That's why I'm here.

Talking to myself. Over the edge.

I've spent no time writing. Not even in my head. Much less on paper, which I've done everyday since I can remember.

I threw my hands into the air. The big brush in my hand threw Gesso all over everything, including me. That pulled me back to the canvas. Now stark white again. Yet, some very interesting textures patterned the formerly flat plane.

Hmmm... That looks like... Yeah. Maybe. Perhaps... Hmmm... My hands found the palette, the right brush, and the proper tubes of paint without me looking. Still staring at the textures, the brush began moving with a life of its own.

College. I'm too young to think about college. I haven't even experienced high

school. I think. Or, maybe this week I have. Would my teachers, professors, be better in college? Would I have to put up with this week, every week through four or more years?

That's enough to make me want to go screaming into the woods.

The woods. I haven't been walking through the woods in a while. Well, this week at least. Those lovely patterns and shades, constantly changing. A breath of wind and a new scene is exposed. A single step and a whole new perspective appears.

I stepped back from the canvas and looked. Gee. Surprising. A woodland scene.

It feels nice, but...

Nope. Not really what I want to do with this canvas. What do I want to do with this canvas?

I had definite ideas earlier this week. What happened to them? What happened to the flash I had while in Luis's arms? There is a painfully simple answer to that. The Program. And, all its attendant... shit? Yes, shit. Bullshit. Cow shit. Horse shit. Troglodyte shit. Shit. Shit. Shit.

A tear formed as I remembered the attack by Will. As I went to wipe it, I noticed the big brush covered with Gesso in my hand. Another blank canvas with more complex textures stared back through watery eyes.

As I stared, the Program went away. My love of Luis beat in my heart. My commitment to my art began flowing through me. A vision of what this canvas was capable of. What I was capable of. What I needed to tell, although I couldn't put it into words. Francesca's insistence that I stretch myself...

The world collapsed and expanded at the same time. Paints appeared on my palette in the right sequence and amounts. The right brush appeared at the right time. The questions, issues, and events of this week just faded. Left like the texture every time I Gessoed over this canvas.

A quiet song came into my head. I focused on the sweet, soft melody while my hands went back to work and the room faded.

Luis

I wasn't wasted any more. My joints felt good. My muscles relaxed and stronger than before.

Better, my mind was still.

I was able to pull up Becca in my mind and feel warmth, love, and happiness. I was able to think about college and feel that I was moving in the right direction. Rosalee... I don't see it as a problem. If Becca wants to be involved with her, fine. I liked her, but not in the same ways. It would be Becca's decision. And, that felt right to me.

East floated into my brain. I felt the right side of my mouth rise up in a smirk. "Their center is dead meat. Their quarterback will experience hell like he has never before. Their running backs will receive only pain and negative yards if they enter my ground."

Jamaal came into the locker room as I finished at the sink. "Well, well, well. It would seem the cornerstone of our defensive line is back."

I turned toward him, my muscles relaxed, but more than ready to go. A growl started at my toes and rose through my body.

"Well said. I've never heard you so articulate before. However, I would suggest you reserve that for our opponents tomorrow evening." His smile took any possible bite out of his words. Then he winked, nodded, and went on about his business.

I was ready.

The walk to the cafeteria was quiet. Thankfully. It was thirty minutes into the second lunch period, so everyone was already in class or having lunch. The normal buzz of the cafeteria grew as I approached and its familiar, comfortable waves washed over me as I opened the door.

I made it through the line in record time with my tray loaded down with my high carb, high protein meal. It's hard to call it food, but it's edible. Today, it was just necessary. My body needed it. I would eat it. Most likely, I wouldn't even notice it going down.

The Naked Table was easy to pick out. I internally groaned at the thought that the table held the bare essentials.

The walk to the table was filled with other students acknowledging me with head nods and smiles. No stares. Gawking or otherwise. Maybe the Program has “adjusted” people to casual social nudity. Maybe people were just too freaked to respond. Maybe it was support.

Dr. C and Ms Carlisle were there with only half a dozen of the Nakeds. The table was very quiet and subdued as I approached. Ginny was the first one to notice me.

“Coach!” She jumped up, ran around the table, and hugged me. With all that this girl has been through, her being here and hugging me blew me away.

“Coach!” Shirley, Chris, Jane, and Sherry all shouted as they joined the group hug. As we started to break apart, Rosa slithered into the gap and molded herself to me.

She stared into my eyes as I gave her my game face grin. “God! I'm glad I'm not wearing East's colors!” And she kissed me. Not a Becca kiss, but I wouldn't turn it down on a cold day. “The three of us need to talk, soon.”

Why is it when women say anything that involves three words: We, Need, and Talk; that the male mind only registers fear and dread? “Okay,” I answered slowly.

Smiling, she gave a short laugh. “No, it's nothing bad. What is it about guys when a girl says that?”

“Experience?” Every guy around nodded their heads, causing the women to laugh.

“Glad you could join us, Luis,” Dr. Cavanaugh said.

“Thanks, Dr. C. I'm feeling much better.”

“Good. Have a seat, enjoy your... food.”

“It isn't my mom's cooking, but it will do.”

“Very little is your mother's cooking, Luis,” Ms Carlisle added.

“Tell me about it. And, she expects me to cook to her standards.”

“Physicist, athlete, and master chef. You're going to make some woman very happy.”

“Or several,” laughed Rosalee as the rest of the Nakeds sat back down.

"I'm too young to be hearing this," said Ginny, pretending to blush. The giggles gave her away, though.

We settled down as Dr. C and Ms Carlisle continued a check in with everyone that I had interrupted. It gave me time to inhale the protein and complex carbs piled high on my plate.

In a perfect imitation of "Animal House", Ginny said, "Just keep your hands and feet away from his mouth."

Chris dropped into character, giving a near perfect imitation of Greggie, "Don't you have any respect for yourself?"

"This is absolutely gross. That boy is a P-I-G pig!" Sherry intoned in perfect Bab's voice. I had a quick flash to her, in character, saying, "*Greg, honey. Is it supposed to be this soft?*"

"See if you can guess what I am now," I said in the best John Belushi recreation I could. I only wish I could cock my one eyebrow that way.

"Before we start a food fight, I suggest that we end this now," Dr. C finally said. You could hear a huge laugh getting ready to rumble out at any second.

"Naked Animal House!" Shirley shouted.

Half the table had seen "Animal House" more than once. The other half was curious and asking questions. Thankfully, this gave me a chance to consume the rest of the food in front of me. Such that it was. For a heaping plate of my mom's veal, her pastas, fresh veggies cooked just perfectly, and the never ending supply of bread that is to kill for, well... I'd kill for. I hoped the training tables at USC had better quality food. At least something with taste.

Okay, I'd made that decision. Now, to wait for the official offer letter. Better call and see, first. When I receive it, give them a verbal commitment. I know that a few years ago there had been some problems with the NCAA concerning USC, but I felt confident that they had been addressed when the then-Athletic Director and some of the recruiting staff left.

Conversation around the table stayed light and flowed, well, mostly flowed. There still was the undercurrent of the missing Naked's. Dr. C and Ms Carlisle kept the conversation going and kept interjecting topics that were as far from the Program as possible.

"So, Luis. Ready for East tomorrow?"

I stared back at Dr. C for a moment. Put on my game face grin, this particular one was reserved for quarterbacks just before I ate them. "Yep."

"Damn!" was all he could say, as a shudder went through him.

"I would say," said Chris in an absolutely horrible Posh English accent, "It would appear that the old chap is quite prepared to engage in manly sports with a serious rival."

I just turned my grin to the junior, who is our top pitcher on the baseball team. A fastball that would suck my clothes off, if I had any on. I put in my mind that I was at the plate, bat up and quivering. I had already dug in for leverage on my swing. Then, I bored my eyes into his.

"Shit!" His body jerked. "I'm glad you don't play baseball. I wouldn't want to face that."

I closed my eyes. *'I'm with friends,'* I said to self. *'Self, listen'.* Breathe. Yes, one more. Five more. Yes. Calm. There's that spot. Open eyes. Give friendly grin to Chris.

"Wow. Thanks for... I don't know. Changing?"

I turned the calm me towards Dr. C. "Amazing. You are centered now, aren't you?"

I bowed my head slightly while maintaining eye contact. After a second he did the same. Respect given and received.

The conversation returned to the Pep Rally, when I learned we were off the hook for the earlier promises about our suggestions on the Program. It was only a mild reprieve. Next week would be fine. Like, Tuesday. Ah, a modified request. No problems. It did look like I was going naked for at least one more week, probably a lot more. I won't give up that promise.

As we came to the end of the three lunch periods, Ms Carlisle suggested I walk by the Art Room before heading to my next class. Personally I thought this was a grand idea.

We broke with the Team cheer. Again, the missing members very much on everyone's mind. Me with Becca and Margie. And Paul. And Tim, Mike, and...

I walked towards the art rooms, my mind getting more active with every step I took. The monkeys going crazy with the open space I was giving them. With

every new voice in my head, my feet got heavier and heavier. My heart responding. In one way, it wanted to beat faster, since I was going to see Becca. It wanted to beat faster and harder since I didn't know what I would find. A girlfriend or...

I walked into Francesca's larger classroom. The easels spread around the room. I could hear pounding, hammering, and general violence against stone coming from her private studio.

I peeked through the window in the door and saw a dust covered smock-clothed female swinging a huge hammer, aimed perfectly at the head of a chisel. I realized in that moment how strong she really was. The massive hammer hit. The chisel removed a massive section of marble that looked just like a cock and balls. My cock and balls!

Did I just imagine the maniacal chuckle?

*** End of Chapter ***

“Baba O'Riley” by The Who. Sometimes improperly known as “Teenage Wasteland”

Coming soon : Part IV (Thursday) - Chapter 29 - “The Letter”, the Joe Cocker version.