

DUETS

By Rose Po

My mouth tastes like old pennies and I am stuck between sleeping and waking. A dreadful sense of urgency keeps me from fading back into the warm night, but a vicious throbbing in my head warns against waking. I try to figure out what is worrying me but the numbness of my lips apparently extends to my wits. *Numbness of the mouth, a metallic taste...*

I hate hospitals, that smell -- part antiseptic and part things I don't want to think about. There is a reason I'm not a PM. But, here I am sitting on a hard metal stool, inhaling that vile stench while holding Gage's hand.

Earlier, I went to talk to the guys, in part to give Gage some privacy while the nurses and Brackett finished up with him and mostly to give DeSoto a few minutes alone with his partner. When I came back, I helped Dixie roll Johnny, now in a hospital gown and strung with tubes and wires, on his side and held him while she slid some pillows into place. When she was done, she pushed me down and placed my hand over John's limp fingers. *I'll get you for this Gage.*

I list my symptoms, trying to figure out what sort of mess I have gotten into this time. In that timeless dreaming just before you wake, all manner of strange possibilities explode within my mind.

I thought when they gave you antivenom, you got better. But Johnny doesn't look any better than he did when he passed out. His entire leg is swollen. A tray of syringes, medical instruments and sinister-looking tubes sits ready by Gage's head and Dixie is checking his vital signs every fifteen minutes. Despite Brackett's promises, I am afraid.

I wish Gage would wake up, tell me to go play in traffic or some damn thing. He doesn't move and John is never still. That is what first made me notice him. He bounced around the station like a nervous cat -- absolutely maddening when you are trying to study for the engineer's exam. I started harassing him just to drive him to the other end of the building -- didn't work.

Now, Dixie is talking to me, offering reassurances while she again checks Johnny's vitals, and telling me they'll keep him in ICU for the next day or two. I mumble back at her, but I'm not really listening so I don't know if what I am saying makes sense.

Two people are talking about me, but I can't understand what they are saying. I just hope they'll stop, their voices are making my right leg throb from my toes to my armpit. I wish I could remember what happened.

Dixie sticks a needle in Gage's arm, filling tube after tube - first with a red top, then blue, then purple, then orange... I've seen things on responses that I lack the words to even describe, yet have kept right on working and cracking jokes. Silly to let these few tubes of blood bother me. But, as she lays them on a towel-covered stand, a rich red against white, I turn away, queasy.

The Cap leans his head in to tell me we're going to have to go back into service in a few minutes. His entry gives me a chance to cover my squeamishness. I forget I am still holding Gage's hand.

In the darkness something strikes at my arm, piercing my skin. *Shit! The rattlesnake!*

When I look back, Gage is so pale, like that milky Italian coffee my sister's snooty college friends drink. I thought for sure, we had lost him on the ride in. His hands were so numb he couldn't hold the transmit key and kept losing contact with dispatch, while mine shook so badly that combined with the bouncing of the engine, I couldn't work the damn Swayer extractor. When Gage let the radio drop and didn't move anymore, I thought my incompetence had killed him.

If my body were working I would leap from the bed screaming, as the adrenaline surges through me. As it is, it is all I can do to twitch my fingers and pry my eyelids halfway open. Dixie is holding my right arm, putting pressure on a fresh venipuncture. My other arm is resting on a pillow and Kelly's huge, hairy mitt covers my hand. As I try to reconstruct the events that have led to Chet holding my hand, my stomach does a backflip. I am sick.

Gage throws up. I scramble out of the way, but Dixie is fast. She gets a basin and cleans him up. When she is done, he lays gasping, his lips trembling. We lock eyes.

Dix holds a basin while I vomit. When I am done, she slides me back against the pillows. I feel like death. Chet is staring at me, stricken mute. I meet his gaze and we silently agree that I never saw him holding my hand.

The Cap comes back into the room. "Come on Kelly," he orders. Roy shuffles nervously in the door; his face tells me Johnny is not yet out of the woods.

I look back at Gage, his eyes are sliding shut, but I can still see a knowing twinkle. He will be all right because he now has something on me. "This'll teach you to forget your HT," I huff at him while standing up. But, he is already asleep.

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