

Man in the Mirror

a Short Story

by Josh Closs

It was another late spring Saturday morning at Ernie's Cafe. At most of the tables, the conversation flowed as easily as Ernie's coffee and coffee-adjacent drinks. But most of the tables didn't have treasure hunters following a magic map seated at them.

At the moment, Kendra was staring at her friend Jessie, shocked by both what she said and that she was considering the plausibility of the idea.

"...You're kidding, right, Jessie?" Lauren said, watching Kendra's expression run through a gamut of emotions after Jessie's suggestion.

"No, I'm not," Jessie said. "And I wouldn't joke about something like that. It's a perfectly valid solution."

"It's a perfectly *illegal* solution," Lauren said. "Not to mention the moral ramifications! Do you really think Tom deserves it?"

"Uhh, have you been listening to our conversation for the last fifteen minutes?" Jessie said.

"Uhh, I was ordering for the last five, when it must have taken a drastic shift," Lauren said.

Jessie sighed. "He's manipulating her. Which is absurd, because if there's one person in the world I wouldn't want to turn on me, it's Kendra. You could snap him in half without a second thought!"

"She could, but she wouldn't," Lauren said, now taking Kendra's hand and looking into her eyes. "Kendra. I know things are bad right now. I know you might hate Tom right now, and yeah, that's valid. But does that mean you're really considering what Jessie suggested?"

Kendra, for her part, shook herself from a reverie and looked between her two friends, and then around the sun-drenched coffee shop. The three friends had been coming to Ernie's Cafe for Saturday morning coffee for years. Around her, Kendra heard the buzz of friends and family discussing idle matters that probably wouldn't matter by sundown.

Kendra envied them.

"Kendra? You... You're not gonna kill Tom, are you?"

Lauren was waiting for an answer, patient as always. Kendra couldn't believe she had to even consider the question. A little over a year ago, Tom was the man of her dreams, and they'd just begun treasure-hunting together. Now, she was trying to decide if it was so bad that she needed to kill him to get away from him.

On the other hand, if she did nothing, then she'd still be trapped in this cycle, and she didn't know how many more revolutions she could survive.

In these circumstances, as in general, Kendra figured the best option was to tell the truth.

"I don't know," she said. "Does he deserve it? Yes. But am I comfortable with being the one who does it? Not right now. That may change when we get there, though."

"You'd want to know beforehand, right?" Jessie said. "You said this is gonna be a trickier trip than usual."

Kendra nodded. "I think that's what the map says, yeah," she said. "It's not crystal clear, but..."

"Unlike this," Lauren said, holding up her necklace. "Haven't caught a red light since you gave me this thing. Seriously, I can't believe that you're a for-real treasure hunter, Kendra! I mean, I can believe that it's you out of the three of us, but I didn't think that was something people do anymore!"

"People don't usually find magical maps in their college libraries," Jessie said. "God, I wish it'd been one of us that found it with you instead of Tom. Never trust a super-senior in a freshman-level course."

"I volunteered for it," Kendra said, shrugging. "I thought he was cute and that he needed help. Both of which, unfortunately, were true."

"And you were looking in the library for materials to complete that ridiculous assignment, and..."

"And they found the map, Lauren, yes, it doesn't need to be repeated for the thousandth time," Jessie said.

"Some of us were even there," Kendra said with a wry smile. "We placed our hands on the map at the same time, and it came to life."

"And when the two of us looked at it, no matter what we did, it was blank," Lauren said.

"Damn magical artifacts," Jessie added.

"Honestly, it's been fine until the last few months," Kendra said. "He had been a pretty good boyfriend, and his treasure-hunting's gotten way better from where he started. But..."

"You said he's been secretive and weird with the money?" Lauren said.

"Yeah, but I think he's just dumping it all in cryptocurrency or whatever," Kendra said. "It's his half of the haul. He can do whatever he wants with it. That's not the problem."

"So what are the deets? C'mon, spill!" Jessie said.

Kendra took a steadying breath and a fortifying gulp of coffee. "A few nights ago, I told Tom that I wanted to take some classes over at the community college for credit. Try and at least get my Associate's, since I only got a semester done before I left, and he wrapped up his Bachelor's. When I did, he got really withdrawn and grumpy. Just kept saying 'no.' I suggested I audit some classes to get a feel for being in an academic environment again. 'No.' I asked him if he'd tell me why. After a moment... 'No.' It's not because we're doing anything with our evenings; he's always parked in front of the TV, playing *Destiny* or whatever. So I'm apparently not allowed to use my own money to schedule my own life. I have to wait on his beck and call."

"Why not just sign up anyway?" Lauren said.

"He uses the car during the week," Kendra said.

"There is such a thing as public transit," Lauren said. "Or one of us could maybe take you? You have options, Kendra!"

"Yes, you do," Jessie said, bobbing her eyebrows.

"I'm not going to leave him in a cave to die!" Kendra said, instantly realizing that her voice was a little too loud.

Of all the things to be caught yelling in public, that's better than a lot of possibilities, right?

Jessie sighed. "Right. You think you can still smooth things over with him. You think this'll eventually get better. Or maybe that you can find an amenable way to end your relationship. Is that right?"

Kendra nodded. "I know now, Jessie. I've thought about it, and I know. Tom doesn't deserve to die."

Jessie nodded, taking out her phone. "I didn't want to show you this, but there's a side of Tom you don't know, and I'd be a bad friend if I didn't tell you," she said as she handed her phone over to Kendra, open to a string of text messages.

5/26

Me

heyyy i have a friend who said
youre cute. wanna meet up?

Buttface

Sorry, where'd you get this
number?

Me

jessie. she said she knew you
from college and that you
might be single?

Buttface

Oh. That's... Actually, yeah.
That's kinda weird, but yeah,
I am looking to start meeting
new people again.

Me

cool cool, you are single then?

Buttface

I will be soon. I'm not sure she
knows it yet, though.

Me

yikes, harsh!! you wouldn't do
me like that, would you?

Buttface

No, don't worry about that. It's
a special circumstance with her,
lots of complicating factors. I just
need to tie up one loose end and
I'll be ready to move on.

Today

Buttface

Hello?

Kendra handed Jessie's phone to Lauren. "So you see my point?" Jessie said. "He needs to die, right? Slowly, in a dark and dirty cave?"

Kendra watched Lauren's reaction. "...What does he mean that he needs to 'tie up one loose end'?" Lauren said.

"You know, don't you, Kendra?" Jessie said.

Kendra looked at her friends. "I can't believe he'd kill me," she said. "But yeah, he's definitely up to something."

"And what are you going to do about it? Are you going to leave him to rot?"

"Oh, no," Kendra said, grabbing her purse and rising to her feet. "I have a much more direct method in mind. I just need to run a few errands before we leave tomorrow and I'll be all set."

Eight days later

The morning sun shone bright through the bay windows of Ernie's Cafe once again, filling the sleepy shop with a feeling of anticipation and coming greatness as it bounced off the '60s-inspired decor.

Most folks were still in church; Lauren would usually be there herself, but Kendra news won out this week. (She went to the Saturday night service the night before instead.)

For Jessie's part, she was working on her French press latte and trying to warm herself up. "Geez, they always keep it so cold in here," she said, pulling on her hoodie as she double-checked her texts to be sure that Kendra wanted to meet today. Their usual meeting day was yesterday, but Kendra had said the trip back was taking longer than expected.

In the eight days since Kendra and Tom left for their latest adventure, there'd been radio silence except for one cryptic text sent the afternoon before: "Plan went perfectly. Meet us at Ernie's on Sunday at 9:30."

The door opened. Jessie and Lauren watched Kendra and Tom enter the cafe, walking side-by-side. The state of the treasure-hunters was unexpected on both counts; on the one hand, Tom was still alive. On the other, Kendra didn't look like she hated him.

From Jessie's standpoint, these were both shocks to the system.

"Hey," Lauren said as they approached the table, exchanging confused glances with Jessie.

"Lauren!" Kendra said, spreading her arms wide for a hug. This wasn't going at all how Lauren had expected; she couldn't remember the last time she had hugged her friend. "And Jessie, thank you for everything. Your help was so important in helping

me see the truth. Let's grab a table with a fourth seat, OK?" In stunned silence, Jessie and Lauren complied.

"Tom?" Jessie said, finally. "You... Feeling OK?"

"Better than ever," Tom said, unslinging a backpack from his shoulders and setting it down next to his seat. "And... Sorry for who I was before. What I did was inexcusable, and I hope you can begin to forgive me."

As unexpected as Kendra's transformation was, Tom's was a miracle. Here he was, Jessie's candidate for Douchebag of the Century, showing genuine remorse for his past actions.

"What happened to you two?" Lauren said.

Kendra and Tom shared a look and smiled. "Should I tell the story?" Kendra said.

"If you're up for it, Kendra," Tom said. "I'll help out where I can."

Kendra nodded. "I'm game. But go get me a smoothie or something, yeah?"

"What kind?"

"Surprise me?"

"Ooh, a blank canvas..." Tom said as he walked away.

Jessie watched as he went up to the counter, not realizing her jaw was agape. "OK, what the hell happened out there?"

"That's the story, isn't it?" Kendra said.

Seven days earlier

"You want some trail mix?"

Kendra didn't hear Tom's offer. She was lost in her own thoughts, gazing out the passenger window at the towering trees as they passed by.

The drive out to the cave had been more eventful than they'd hoped, what with the flat tire on the pickup.

Followed by the argument about how to put on a spare tire. (Kendra was right, for the record.)

Followed by the decision whether they should take it to a mechanic and risk questions about the map.

Followed by the scheme to hide their gear in a hotel room while the truck was in the shop despite Kendra's protests that they didn't have enough money for one...

It was, if nothing else, an eventful drive.

"Ken?"

Kendra shook herself out of her reverie. "Hmm?"

"You want some trail mix?"

"Sure," Kendra said, grabbing a handful from the bag outstretched in Tom's hand. Looks like he had already picked out all the chocolate. Of course.

"So, we should be able to pretty much drive up to the entrance, right?" Kendra said.

"Should be," Tom said. "Oh, hey, and I've got a surprise for you after we get this haul. Don't let me forget, OK?"

Kendra studied him out of the corner of her eye as she chewed the de-chocolated concoction in her mouth. "A surprise, huh?" she said through a mouthful of raisins and peanuts. At least they still agreed on GORP composition. Granola is for breakfast. "You wanna tell me right now so I can focus on the task at hand?"

"No," Tom said with a sly grin.

"Of course," Kendra said.

The drive continued in silence.

Kendra felt the weight of her mother's pistol in her backpack, resting on her lap.

She'd kept it hidden from Tom so far.

Would she find the right moment?

How do you know when the right moment is for something like that?

Yeah, text-cheating is bad, and being a douche is bad, but is it punishable by death? Even if he was trying to kill her, did that make it right?

"Ken."

"What?"

"I said, we're here."

Kendra now saw that Tom was pointing towards a small opening in the mountainside, small enough to be ignored by most passersby. Even if they did see it, they wouldn't find anything noteworthy inside unless they had the map. Some sort of power within the aged parchment made the cave inside transform into a labyrinth of traps and tricks, designed to challenge and perhaps kill those who sought the treasures within. Kendra wasn't sure where the map originally came from, but she had always found it to be a reliable, if obscure, guide.

Unlike Tom, Kendra thought.

"You coming or not?" he said, halfway to the cave entrance, holding the now-glowing map in his hands.

Kendra didn't know who made the map or why it had chosen her and Tom to do this. She didn't even know if they *had* been chosen, or if it was just coincidence. She didn't know if they were the first owners or the thousandth. And she still didn't know if Tom deserved to die.

But she did know one thing.

As she watched Tom slide into the cave and felt her skin crawl, she knew that one way or another, things had to change. Because for the first time, Kendra admitted it to herself.

She hated Tom.

And waiting for him to change wasn't going to cut it anymore.

Seven days later

"OK, don't peek," Tom said, placing a cup hastily wrapped in napkins in front of Kendra, a straw sticking out the top. "The surprise is half the fun, right?"

"So you're both... alive," Lauren said as Tom took a seat.

Tom smiled. "Lucky for me. And yeah, from your perspective, I can see why you two wanted me dead. My old self was unacceptable. I'm just glad Kendra gave me the chance to change my ways."

Kendra gave him a side-eye smirk. "You're not the only one who needed to change," she said. "Relationships are complicated enough as it is without magical treasure maps, and we went so long without listening, just *listening* to each other, y'know? It..."

"It sucked all around," Tom said. "But things are better now, right?"

"Yeah," Kendra said, a timbre of relief carrying through her voice.

From Jessie and Lauren's experience, this was when Tom would usually coerce some form of physical response from Kendra — a kiss, or at least an embarrassed blush from his teasing. This time, he was content to sip his drink and let Kendra be Kendra.

"So the plan didn't work?" Jessie said.

"*Your* plan didn't work," Kendra said with an eyebrow waggle as she took a drink of her mystery smoothie. "Mine worked better than I could have ever dreamed. Ooh, strawberry! Great pick, Tom."

Seven days earlier

"Take my hand!" Tom called out, reaching down with one hand as the other held his end of the rope.

"This sucks!" Kendra screamed, scrambling to grab his hand. "This fucking sucks!!"

Finally finding a connection, Tom held onto Kendra's hand. "I've got you!" he yelled as he pulled her onto the rocky ledge, leaving her as a collapsed pile as she attempted to gather herself.

"Oh my God," Kendra said, panting for breath, doing everything she could to not reach for her backpack.

Tom was also gasping for air, but only between laughs. "You should have seen your face!" he said.

"Was it covered with a look of sheer terror and betrayal? Because that's definitely what I was feeling!"

"It wasn't that bad," Tom said.

"You dangled me over a pit of spikes, Tom!" Kendra said. "And then you let the rope slip a foot or two! As a *joke*! You... You could have killed me!"

"I had you!" he said. "You know I've got you, right? It's not like I'm gonna betray my partner."

Kendra stared at him, dumbfounded. She looked back over into the pit of spikes. "You could have killed me."

"I think the spikes would've done that, actually," Tom said, still sputtering out a few laughs.

"Listen to me, Tom," she said at last, not able to bring herself to make eye contact. "Don't ever do that to me again. OK?"

Tom picked up on the change in her voice. "Yeah. ...Sorry. I thought we needed a little laugh or two. We used to do that kind of thing all the time, so..."

"That... That was a different time," Kendra said.

"Yeah?" Tom said. "What was so different about it, Ken?"

Kendra considered answering, but she couldn't find an answer that wouldn't just make things worse. "Never mind," she said, standing up. "C'mon, let's go."

Kendra led the way into the next chamber, which at first glance looked rather plain — a narrow room with a large mirror in the middle of it, positioned so that Kendra saw her and Tom's reflections as they entered the chamber.

However, a moment later, the archway behind them was sealed by a stone door sliding into place, and all the light in the chamber disappeared, including from her flashlight.

In the darkness, Kendra heard the sound of vague scuffling and shifting behind her; by the time she turned around, the light returned, and there were two Toms standing in front of her.

"...Well," she said. "Isn't this fun?"

Right-Tom looked over at Left-Tom. "What the...?" he said. "Is this supposed to be a joke?"

Left-Tom rolled his eyes. "Yeah, I'd censor myself from saying 'What the fuck,'" he said. "That *definitely* sounds like me. This isn't hard, Ken. Let's just get this over with, yeah?"

"I don't even know what 'this' is yet," Kendra said, now reaching for her backpack. "Like, what am I supposed to..."

"Ah, behind you," Right-Tom said, pointing to the mirror.

Kendra turned around to see a message appear on the face of the glass, written in an eerie purple light.

*Two partners enter, joined by a third!
One must decide, and be assured —
Which of these twins is their partner true?
That choice, adventurer, is left up to you.
Whichever is real, you have detected,
With a kiss shall be elected.
If your choice is right, a path appears,
and the false one present disappears...
But if you err and lie believe,
The false one's seed you shall receive...*

"...Eesh, that 'seed' business sounds gross," Kendra said. "And they really rhymed 'appears' and 'disappears'? They had how long to make this thing, and they come up with that?"

"OK, so you need to kiss me," Left-Tom said. "This is easy enough, right, Ken? Let's just get it over with."

"So romantic," Kendra said, turning around to face them again. "Hell, maybe I should just kiss the fake one and start adventuring with him instead."

And this gave her reason to pause.

"...Actually," she said. "Actually, that might not be such a bad idea."

Right-Tom grinned. "That's right. I can be everything he's not, Kendra. I can listen to you. Respect you. Show up for your little sister's high school graduation."

"Seriously, what the fuck?" Left-Tom said. "I'm still the real me. And there's no way you're gonna leave me in here."

"Why not change things up, Kendra?" Right-Tom said. "This weak, pathetic loser could never protect you. He could never love you. He's too scared to do that. I can. C'mon, kiss me."

Both Toms approached Kendra, causing her to remember a particularly bad dream she had a few months ago and prompting her to take a step back. “Now hold on,” she said.

To Kendra's surprise, Left-Tom stopped. Right-Tom didn't.

She looked at this fake, still approaching her, and weighed her options. The real Tom had shown that he wasn't out to kill her — or, at least, not by dropping her into a spike pit — but that didn't mean all was forgiven. On the other hand, this... whatever they were, now approaching her step by step, was no sure thing either. They had an upsetting hunger in their eyes.

The Tom she knew had his problems, but at least she knew he was human. She wanted to forgive him. But so far, he'd made that impossible.

“Wait,” she said, now reaching for her backpack.

“You know it's me,” Left-Tom said.

“And you know why that means you should kiss me,” Right-Tom said.

“Stop, right now!” Kendra said, pulling out the pistol and pointing it back and forth between them. “If you're not going to give me the time to make this decision, then I'm going to take it. Got it?”

Both Toms now stopped, Right-Tom a few feet closer than Left-Tom.

“...You're carrying a gun, Ken?” Left-Tom asked.

“You know my Mom gave me this the day I told her about this,” she said. “This whole... Whatever it is. She said, ‘I don't like it, but if nothing else, keep yourself safe, Kendra.’ And that's what I'm doing. I'm keeping myself safe. From whatever your 'surprise' might be.”

Left-Tom blinked several times. “That... I'm not trying to kill you, Ken,” he said. “That's the last thing I'd ever do.”

“Bullshit,” Kendra said, her finger inching towards the trigger. “That new girl you're texting? That's Jessie. She showed me the texts. God, how are you this stupid?”

“I wasn't gonna kill you!” Left-Tom said. “Please, Ken, I was just... I don't want to hurt you, I swear to God! I was just looking for someone else to go out with on a date or two after this is over! See other people, y'know?”

An impossible silence filled the air as the last reverberations of the words echoed against the stone walls.

Kendra needed three or four tries to find her words.

“...You want to see other people?”

“Yeah,” Left-Tom said. “That was... part of the surprise.”

“You... You don't love me?”

“Love you?” Left-Tom said. “Ken, I adore you. I worship you. But I'm terrified of you. You've always been better than me at everything. In the beginning, I thought I had some chance to keep up with you, but for the last year, I've just been hanging on for dear life, scared shitless the entire time. You deserve someone a million times better than me, but I couldn't bring myself to say that in those words. Because I thought you'd reject me wholesale, and I couldn't give up adventuring. Treasure-hunting and finding honest-to-God magical artifacts is a dream-come-true for me, especially with you by my side.

“So I pretended. I acted like I had what it takes to be your boyfriend and your adventure partner. And I really do think I'm getting better at this part, but being your boyfriend? I just... God, I look in your eyes, Ken, and I see disappointment. Betrayal. Hatred, even. It's what I deserve. And I'm sorry. You deserve better. And I hope you'll give me the time to make this right.”

Kendra was speechless.

She stared at Left-Tom, slack-jawed, her arms going limp by her side.

Which is pretty bad marksman form. Her mother would be disappointed. (But what else is new?)

While she was distracted, Right-Tom ran up and grabbed the gun from out of her hands and turned it on both of them in turn, doing a rather convincing impersonation of an oscillating fan. "Right," he said. "This isn't how I wanted this to go, but either one of you kisses me, or both of you stay here forever. Because you'll be dead."

"Uh-huh. This is subtle," Kendra said, cool and collected.

"I'm done with being subtle!" Right-Tom said. "I've been trapped in here for centuries — millennia, maybe, I can't tell anymore — and now, you two waltz in here, figure it out in two seconds, and I'm forced to stay here. I'm done with it, OK!? I'm getting out, one way or another!"

"Ken," Left-Tom said, "whatever he is, he has a gun, so let's hear him out, OK?"

Kendra smiled. "You're too easily scared, Tom," she said. "After all, he probably can't leave if we're dead."

"I only need one of you," Right-Tom said, grinning. "And I think I'll deal with the one I'm already acquainted with."

He turned the gun on Kendra and squeezed the trigger. Tom, to Kendra's surprise and his, leapt in front of the path of the bullet to save his adventuring partner as the gunshot rang out, landing as a crumpled heap on the ground in front of her.

Except that there was no bullet.

Right-Tom, perturbed, squeezed the trigger three or four more times, creating a cacophony of noise, but no injuries.

"...The hell?"

"You think I'd bring live ammo into a sacred cavern?" Kendra said, chuckling. "Blanks. I had meant to scare Tom with them — have some big dramatic confrontation with him or whatever — but this is way better. ...Yeah, in retrospect, that plan sucked. Thanks for punching it up. Oh, by the way, Tom," she said, helping

him back to his feet, “sorry for doubting you. You just jumped in front of a gunshot for me! I mean, that doesn’t make up for everything else, but...”

“It’s a good start?”

“Yeah,” Kendra said, brushing some of the dust off his shoulder. “A good start.”

“I think we’re both due for a little mental respite,” Tom said, continuing to dust himself off. “We’ve been defining ourselves for so long as both treasure hunters and partners that we don’t know who we really are anymore. Maybe... Maybe we just need a break? From both of those aspects of our lives?”

"Was that your surprise?" Kendra asked.

"Part of it," Tom said.

"Is 'Part of it' the new 'No'?"

"No," Tom said, grinning.

"Alright, alright," Kendra said. “In any case, you're right, a break is a good place to start. We'll see how things go from there. I'm glad we settled that.”

"Me, too," Tom said.

“Um,” Right-Tom said.

“Oh. Right,” Kendra said, turning to him. “Listen. I could pummel you into submission, and I think you know I’m right, but I’m tired and really would rather not. So you can either help us out or you can ignore us; either way, we win. Got it?”

Right-Tom’s shoulder slumped as he dropped the pistol to the ground, landing with a pathetic clunk. “Got it,” he said. “I... I just wanted to get out of here.”

Tom and Kendra shared a look. “Couldn't you...” Tom said. “That is, couldn’t you just... leave?”

Right-Tom scoffed. “Would if I could. That mirror holds me here. As long as it’s intact, I’m stuck here with it.”

“Could we break it?” Kendra said.

"You? Break a magical mirror, built by master craftsmen toiling for—"

Kendra pulled out a piton and her rock climbing hammer and, covering the exposed skin on her face and neck, made a sizeable crack in the mirror. A moment later, the glass dissolved into a puddle of magical goo, leaving behind an empty frame.

"...Ah," Right-Tom said, looking at his hand as it melted before his eyes. "Yup, that did it."

"Sorry," Kendra said.

"Don't be," he said, his face oozing into a sideways smirk. "Freedom is what I wanted."

"That's what all of us want," Kendra said. "Good luck on the other side."

Right-Tom attempted to form words, but by then, his mouth had merged with his right bicep, so all he could manage was an affirmative-sounding gurgle as he dissolved into a puddle of goo. As he lost all discernable shape, a stone slab on the far side slid away, revealing the passage to the next chamber.

"...So what do you think would've happened if you'd kissed him?" Tom said, looking at the puddle.

"I don't want to think about it."

"Fair," Tom said. "And same, actually. So. Now what?"

Kendra looked over to him. "Now we grab the treasure and get outta here," she said, beaming. "And I go sign up for some classes at the community college."

Tom stared at her for a moment. "No," he said.

"Excuse me?"

"No, you can't go sign up for classes at the community college. Because... I already did it for you."

Kendra blinked in stunned silence a few times. "*Excuse me?*"

"I wanted it to be a big surprise after this trip," he said. "I... I wanted to make this how we ended our dating relationship. And maybe our treasure-hunting relationship, if you want. That's why I

didn't want you to sign up. I'd been saving up money to get you all set for the fall semester. Twelve credit hours of gen-ed requirements. The professors don't suck according to my *Destiny* pals, and I've got textbook money all ready to go, so you'll be ready for whatever you want to do next."

"...Are you serious?" Kendra said.

"Yeah," Tom said, a sly smile creeping across his face. "I'd show you right now, but I don't think I have signal in here."

"Tom, you asshole, are you serious right now?"

"I thought you'd be happy," Tom said.

"Of course I'm happy, you jerk!" Kendra said, wrapping him in the truest hug she'd ever given him. "I'm just... Why'd you keep it secret!?"

"I thought it'd be sweet!" he said. "And... I dunno, I didn't want to admit that this was gonna end, Ken."

Kendra winced at the nickname.

"...You hate it when I call you that, don't you?"

"I do. I truly, deeply do."

"Got it," Tom said. "I'll try and do better from now on."

"Thanks, Tom," Kendra said.

"No problem, Dra."

Thwack.

"Ow!! Hey, hey, I was kidding, Kendra!"

The Present

"...Wow," Jessie said. "So, what cool treasure did you get?"

"That's your first question!?" Lauren said.

"Well, yeah! That's the next logical question, right?" Jessie said.

"Oh, and not, 'How are both of you doing after all of this?'" Lauren said.

"Fine. Kendra? Tom? How are both of you doing after all of this?" Jessie said.

"Better than ever," Kendra said, smiling as she slurped up the last of her smoothie. "Right, Tom?"

"Right," Tom said. "And also, we got some really cool shit."

"See, I told you!" Jessie said.

Tom grinned, reaching into his backpack. "First up, for you, Jessie, we found this," he said, pulling out a silver bangle with intricate geometric engravings across its entire surface, both outward and inward. "As far as we can tell, it acts as a personal thermostat, making the air around you match your desired comfort level. I don't know if it'd work in extreme temperatures, but..."

"But you mean I can finally bust out my cute tanks even though every shop ever blasts their A/C when it's more than seventy degrees out? Hell yes!" Jessie said, taking the bangle and sliding it on. "Oh, yeah," she said as she took off her hoodie. "That's awesome. Thanks, you two!"

"You bet!" Kendra said. "And for Lauren, we got..."

"Ta-da!" Tom said, pulling out a plain-looking brass ring.

"Not very flashy," Lauren said. "Which isn't a bad thing."

"Exactly," Kendra said. "When you wear this ring, people who would otherwise randomly come up and talk to you on the street will leave you alone and mind their own damn business."

"Oh my gosh," Lauren said. "This is the best present ever!"

"Aw damn, wanna swap?" Jessie said.

"No way. I love the A/C," Lauren said, slipping the ring on her left pinky. "What'd y'all get for yourselves?"

"Oh, just a few things..." Kendra said.

"We also got some gems that're being appraised right now. Non-magical as far as we know, but they'll help cover expenses for a while, until we're ready to treasure-hunt again. Oh, and there's... Huh, what's this? Did you see this when we were collecting the loot, Kendra?"

"What is it?" Kendra said, watching as Tom pulled whatever it was from his backpack.

It was a car key.

"...Oh my God?" Kendra said. "Tom, are you kidding me right now?"

"I'm trying to prove that I'm sorry," he said. "And it is used; it's got twenty-some-odd-thousand miles on it. It's what I could get for the money I saved, along with six months' rent for my own place. But it runs beautifully, and it's yours if you want it."

"You really don't want to face her wrath, huh?" Jessie said.

"After a year from hell, she deserves it," Tom said.

"But what am I gonna give you?" Kendra said.

"Well, I have an unusual request, actually," Tom said. "My conduct towards for the last year has been atrocious, and you deserve better. Actually, anyone would deserve better; you deserve a million times better. It wasn't until I saw that false version of me offering you everything I couldn't that I realized how badly I've fucked this up. You almost picked a monster over me, and looking back, I can't blame you.

"I just have one request of you, Kendra. If we do ever partner up again — either romantically or treasure-huntingly — the minute you see me take you for granted, call out my crap and don't take one more step until I apologize. If that happens, I swear

it's only due to ignorance, and I'll do everything I can to see your side instead. Because you deserve someone who's in your corner all the way to the moon and back."

Kendra was verklempt. "That's... Thank you, Tom. I mean, agreed, Tom? I'm not sure what direction this transaction is going, but... Yeah. Yes. Of course. And I hope we will work together again eventually."

"And if she doesn't want you, I'm next in line," Jessie said.

"Don't you have him in your phone as 'Buttface'?" Lauren said.

"Uh, yeah. Butts are great," Jessie said.

"...Fair," Lauren said.

"You wanna see your new-to-you car?" Tom said.

"Is that even a question?" Kendra said, rising to her feet. "C'mon, let's go!"

"Right," Tom said, following her out of the shop. "Let's go... huh. What do I call you? 'Partner' doesn't fit anymore in either sense."

"How about my name?"

Tom nodded. "Got it. Let's go, Kendra."

"Do you know how good it feels to hear you call me that?" Kendra said. "It's like the 'Ken' you were talking to was just some..."

"Doppelganger?" Tom said. "Yeah. I know the feeling. And it sucks."

"Right," Kendra said. "Glad we're on the same page, Tom."

The End

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