

Marcus usually did his best work while killing time. At the moment, he was lounging in a soft armchair outside Jacob's office, slumped low enough that his long ears were draped over the back like a pair of long, white socks. His hair was bound in a tight bun between them, aside from a few strands dangling over his eye. In his right hand he held his cell phone which was plugged into his earbuds. The media player looped his newest demo track every fifteen seconds while Marcus mumbled to himself under his breath, feeling his way through possible lyrics. His left hand was buried in a bag of Doritos he'd gotten from the vending machine in the hall. It was the third bag of snacks he'd eaten since sitting down ten minutes ago.

*"You runnin' back-and-forth all through my mind, but there's no-thin' left for you to fi-nd, cause I've done all that I can to keep youuuuu out,"* he sang to himself, bobbing his foot in the air to the beat. Marcus ate another pair of chips and allowed his hand to unconsciously land on the slight dome of his belly, absentmindedly exploring the new shape. It was just starting to show, especially underneath tighter shirts like the one he was wearing that afternoon. It made more sense to call it a 'bump' than a fully formed 'baby belly.'

*"And the next time you're up in my brain, you know things in there won't be the same...Shit."*

Sitting up, Marcus glanced at the orange Doritos dust on his fingers that he'd inadvertently transferred to the white fur of his lower stomach in three streaks. He grumbled, brushing it clean with the back of his other hand, and tugged his shirt lower to make sure it wasn't visible. Pulling it tight just made the dome in his midsection that much more visible, but Marcus found he didn't mind that.

*"You know things in here won't be the same..."* He continued from where he left off, slipping lower in the chair and stretching his legs across the carpet. *"Once I finally...hm...Once I've fin-a-lly... no...After I for-got...hrmph."*

Marcus plucked one of the earbuds out and rubbed the bridge of his nose. He dug for the rest of his Doritos, but after finding the bag empty, he tipped his head back and poured the rest of the crumbs into his open mouth. The young rabbit had always been on the skinny side and usually ate only one or two meals a day, but he'd gained a voracious appetite over the course of his first trimester – ironically accompanied by frequent morning sickness. It was only recently that his body had finally accepted the existence of another life inside it and slowed down on the nausea. The appetite, though, remained as strong as ever.

He wiggled himself upright in his chair and was about to return to the vending machine for fourths, but stopped as another person entered the room. It was a tall, nervous looking ferret man who, despite his height, had a wide-eyed face that made him look a good deal younger than he really was. He was wearing a white button-up shirt with the sleeves rolled to his elbows, but even that was a good deal more formal than the rabbit's undershirt and gray hoodie.

"Oh thank God," the ferret sighed as he laid eyes on Marcus. "You're on time."

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"You're never on time."

"Only for *your* meetings," said Marcus, smirking. Nicky was Marcus's reliable but high-strung agent. They had both been small-time when they first met, but Marcus had become Nicky's most successful client and had represented him when he first signed to Harmonia Records. Marcus appreciated Nicky's honesty, but the ferret had bad habit of fussing over him like he was made of fine china – now more than ever.

"You're okay, don't stand too fast," Nicky said, holding his hands out as Marcus pushed himself out of the chair.

"What, are you gonna *carry* me in there?"

"No no, Just...be careful." Nicky scratched the back of his head as his eyes flicked to the rabbit's stomach. Marcus was getting used to that. "How are you feeling?"

“Better. A lot better.” Marcus stretched his arms over his head, the hem of his shirt rising up slightly and staying there. “I think I’m all the way past the pukey parts. Now I’m just hungry all the time.”

“Yeah, that’s...I guess that’s to be expected.” Nicky rubbed his hands together and awkwardly chewed his tongue. He was the first person outside the family Marcus had told about the baby. The two of them had met post-transition, so his agent had always known Marcus as male, but the pregnancy was obviously throwing him. It didn’t help that Nicky had a new son of his own and was likely comparing Marcus to his wife. He wasn’t worried; Nicky would come around in his own time.

“I think I’ll have a new track by next Monday, by the way,” said Marcus, quickly changing the subject to something more familiar. “Might be single-worthy, but we’ll see.”

“Sit on it, even if it’s good,” said Nicky, an authoritative tone coming to his voice. “If you keep releasing every track you make as soon as it’s done, nobody will buy the album.”

“Fine, fine,” Marcus sighed, leaning against the arm of the chair and rolling his eyes. “I just wanna get it all together by the summer. I’m thinking one track a week, minimum.”

“Don’t rush it, people can tell when you do. Take your time while you’ve got it.”

“Well...” Marcus clicked his tongue and patted his rounded bump. “I can’t really wait *too* long.”

“Oh uh...Yeah, sure.” Nicky flapped his mouth like a fish a couple times, struggling to find the right words. It had never exactly been a secret between them that Marcus was trans, but he’d never had to address it in such a ‘direct’ way. “Um...Just take it easy, okay?”

“I’m alright, man! Don’t walk on eggshells around me, that just makes it weirder.” Marcus tucked one of his dangling dreads behind his long ears and slipped one of his large feet out of his flip flop to scratch the side of his leg. He rarely wore shoes.

“I’m not walking on eggshells, I just...don’t want to say the wrong thing.”

“If you’re that worried about it, you won’t. I’m not any different than I was a few months ago.” Marcus paused and tapped a finger on his stomach. “Well, fatter.”

“You can...hardly tell,” said Nicky with visible strain. Marcus pursed his lips and raised an eyebrow. Sighing, Nicky continued. “Alright, it’s getting obvious. People are going to start guessing if we don’t come out in front of this soon. Wear baggy shirts to buy us some time.”

The double-doors at the end of the hall swung open together, causing Marcus and Nicky to both jump. Standing in the threshold was a burly, wide-shouldered basset hound in a white button-up similar to Nicky’s, but worn with far more confidence. He had a stubble of gray around his muzzle and looked like he had been very muscular once upon a time. Despite his width, he was nearly Marcus’s height and locked eyes with him first.

“Sorry about that, fellas. Had to dot some I’s and cross some T’s that couldn’t wait.”

“You’re a busy guy,” said Marcus with an easy smile. Nicky didn’t say anything. He was violently intimidated by David Jessup, the current president at Harmonia Records. Marcus wasn’t, but he knew the value of staying on his boss’s good side.

“Not too busy to get in some face-time with the talent, though.” David approached Marcus with long strides and gave him a firm handshake that struck the rabbit as maybe a little *too* macho. David met his eyes, making a concerted effort not to look down at Marcus’s stomach. It was obvious that he knew.

“C’mon in, I got a whole office waiting that’s a hell of a lot more comfortable than this...” David paused as his eye drifted to Nicky, a barely-perceptible frown crossing his lips. He quickly replaced it with a friendly grin and leaned forward to give him a handshake. “David Jessup, how ya doin’?”

“Uh, hi. Nicky...Nick Gonzales, Marcus’s agent. We’ve...met before.”

“We have?” David’s eyes widened. “You’re kidding me.”

“Nicky’s got one of those faces,” said Marcus, striding past the two of them and patting David on the shoulder.

He’d only seen inside the president’s office a couple times in the past. Though it was only furnished by a desk across from two armchairs, each one was clearly worth about as much as Marcus’s car. Behind the desk was a large window rising floor to ceiling and overlooking the city. Marcus briefly caught the urge to step close to it and look down, but remembered he’d only just recently stopped vomiting and didn’t want to tempt fate. He turned to watch Nicky and David enter the room, noticing the doorway was decorated with gold records – at least one of which was Marcus’s. They were carefully arranged so David could see all of them while sitting at his desk.

“Like the view?” David asked while closing the double-doors. “I don’t like to lean back in my chair, sometimes. Makes me think I’m gonna fall through the glass.”

“You mean those things don’t work like wings?” said Marcus, pointing to David’s long, floppy ears.

“You would know, bunny-boy.” He gave Marcus a playful flip of his ear as they passed one another. David fell into his chair with a sigh while his guests took the pair of armchairs. The instant he sat, Marcus spotted the bowl of candy on the corner of the desk. He normally left it alone, but felt a powerful urge to grab as many as his fist could hold. He settled for five.

“Well. Let’s get started,” said David with a sigh. “First, lemme congratulate you! We’re all excited as all hell for you and your family.”

“Thanks, so are we.” He knew this was an HR-friendly formality, but Marcus couldn’t help but beam and rub a hand across his bump. “I’m due around late April, early May.”

“Fantastic, fantastic,” said David, his smile more rigid than usual. He sighed through his teeth and drummed his fingers on his desk. “I *do* wish you’d let us know you were trying.”

“Why’s that any of your business?” said Marcus, leering.

“It’s not, It’s not,” Nicky quickly interjected. “It’s more about keeping everybody in the loop when you’re planning on big life changes.”

“Exactly,” said David, wagging one of his thick fingers at the ferret.

“I’m just not going to sit here if you two starting telling me I did something wrong.”

“Nobody’s saying that.” David stalled by reaching across his desk and plucking a butterscotch from his candy bowl. “...I just wish you’d *told* us first.”

Marcus rolled his eyes and unwrapped one of the candies before popping it in his mouth. The email he’d gotten from David mentioned they needed to discuss ‘PR options,’ whatever that meant. As he drummed his palm against his developing belly, Marcus was determined not to let either he or Nicky bully him. The rabbit was in a good position: his contract was nearing its end. If David wanted Marcus Blackhare to re-sign with Harmonia, he needed to keep him happy.

“So here’s my question. Maybe more of a suggestion,” said Marcus around the candy on his tongue. “What’s your strategy when one of your female artists announces a pregnancy? Why can’t we just do that?”

“Well it’s...” David leaned back in his chair, swiveling in place as the plastic creaked. “I don’t think it’s a strategy that would work well with your *image*.”

“My image,” Marcus repeated, suspicious.

“That sort of edgy, progressive...uhh...*masculine* look you put out,” David continued. “I just don’t see it fitting well with the usual press junket we do for that kind of thing.”

“Then what about the other male artists?”

“Mm...No, no, that’s not really the best look for you, either,” said David. “It’s a bit *traditional*, if you know what I mean.”

“I don’t think I *do* know what you mean,” said Marcus, his frown deepening. “So I’m *too* masculine to say that I’m pregnant, but not masculine *enough* to say that I’m going to be a dad?”

“Marcus, c’mon.” David gave him a practiced smile and held his hands up. “You knew this was going to be touchy.”

“And I expected at least *one* of you to have my back!” Marcus said, glancing between both David and Nicky. The ferret had barely said a word since sitting down.

“We *do*. We *are* behind you,” Nicky said. “David and I just think we have to play this... carefully.”

“Harmonia is all the way behind the Ell Gee Bee Tee Que Ay Plus community,” said David, repeating the exact byline from the label’s website. “We get it, but that doesn’t mean everybody out *there* gets it.” He pointed out the window to the view overlooking the city. “It’s not in our interest to alienate anybody.”

“I’m already *out*, David. I’m open about who I am, it’s not a secret. Do you really think there are millions of homophobes out there listening to my music?”

“I don’t know, but the homophobe dollar is just as good as everybody else’s.” David’s jovial, friendly persona slipped as his voice deepened. Marcus used to think that the man was hard to anger, but he was simply good at hiding it. By the time you noticed him getting frustrated, you were already there.

“I think what he means,” Nicky interjected to fill the silence, “is that more *apolitical* people might be turned away if we come on too strong.”

“I’m not being political!” Marcus snapped, raising his voice to Nicky. He put his hand to his bump. “My baby is not a *statement!*”

“Look, you have a strong base with Ell Gee Bee Tee Que Ay Plus fans-”

“You don’t have to say the *whole* thing every time.”

“You’ve got your fans, and they’ll stick with you, but they aren’t enough on their own. You’ve got to think about everybody else. There’s no sense in turning away people who might-”

“Who might think it’s *weird*,” Marcus said, his tone sour. “I get it.”

“Don’t say it like *that*,” David sighed. “You want to start a family, have your own baby, that’s your life. But you’ve got a public life, too. Sometimes you have to make sacrifices from one to help the other.” He leaned against the desk and hooked his fingers together before saying the most honest thing Marcus had heard all day. “That’s the business, kid. Get used to it.”

There was a tense silence between the three of them. Finally, after what felt like a long wait, Marcus sighed and pushed himself to his feet, tugging down his shirt.

“Where’s the bathroom?”

“Back out the hall, first doors on the right,” said David, pointing through the double-doors. “They’re gender-neutral,” he added.

“I’m thrilled,” said Marcus with a flat stare before turning and marching out of the room.

Once the doors were shut, David let out a groan and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

“Christ, what a shit-show,” he said, muffled under his hand. “Did he tell you he was planning on getting knocked up?”

“No, not until after he did,” said Nicky.

“Of course not. Of course he had to just go and do it. Fucking musicians. Like toddlers, every one of them.” David drummed his hands on his desk. “How do you think we should play this?”

“Well I...don’t really know.” Nicky cleared his throat into his fist. “I was just thinking of stalling for a while, not saying anything.”

“That’s short-term, maybe. But long term? Once he’s, you know...” David leaned back and mimed a large circle from his chest to his hips.

“Well, Marcus *is* pretty open about his gender. Going public with the pregnancy might not change anything.”

“Uh-uh, it’d be a fucking disaster.” David shifted forward and held his arm out, parallel to the desk. “He’s trans, but not *too* trans. He looks like a guy, talks like a guy, acts like a guy. People can buy

that. But once you tell people he's *pregnant*?" He tipped his arm down, hand toward the desk, and mimed a plane crashing. "That tips the scales, puts it in people's *faces*. Now they don't know *what* to think."

"Um...Maybe."

"There's no maybe to it, I know how this is gonna play out. All we need to do is stall for as long as we--"

David stopped as one of the double-doors swung open and Marcus entered, back-first. He had his phone in both hands and stared down at it as he walked, stopping only at the back of his chair without sitting down.

"We were about to call search-and-rescue. Thought you must've fell in," David said, chuckling.

"Uh-huh," was all Marcus said, his fingers still dancing over his phone's keypad.

"My wife practically lived on the toilet after the second trimester," David continued. "Listen, I don't like the way this is going. There isn't any sense in keeping your baby a secret, I wanna hear what *you* think--"

"It's already done," Marcus interrupted, still not looking up from his phone.

"What's done?"

Marcus swiped up on his phone with his thumb, tapped the screen, then passed it to David. It was a post made five minutes ago on Marcus's Twitter account. He'd taken a waist-up selfie in the bathroom mirror, lifting his shirt up to his sternum and showing the distinct, furry curve of his stomach in profile. The photo was captioned 'New project in the works, due next April' and tagged with *#BabyBlackhare*. It already had over a hundred likes and seventy-five retweets.

"Wait. No. Hold the fuck on. You can't do that."

"I just did it."

"Take it down."

"Don't have to." Marcus reached over and plucked his phone out of David's grip. "I'm contractually allowed to post anything I want to my personal account, including personal projects that are legally distinct from what I make for the label." He slipped his phone into his pocket and gave his bump a firm pat. "This is a personal project."

"I don't give a shit, we weren't done talking. Take the post down."

"Legally, I don't have to. So I won't." Marcus stretched lazily, reaching his arms above his head, and gave David and Nicky an easy smile. "I think I'm gonna go grab a big lunch. I'm eating for two, after all."

He gave David a sly wink and headed for the door with a bounce in his step. Before shutting it, he stuck his head through the crack and said, "Oh, Nicky. You're fired. Later!"

David and Nicky were left alone in the office together. They met eyes for a brief moment, the ferret's terrified shock meeting the canine's beady-eyed scowl.

"I'm just...gonna go, then..." Nicky slinked out of his chair and tried to make as little noise as possible on his way to the door.

David, alone, fumed in silence at his desk, chewing on the tip of his thumb. After a long while, he muttered 'God damn it' to himself and opened his laptop to the official Harmonia Records Twitter account.

'Everyone at Harmonia is thrilled to congratulate Marcus Blackhare on his pregnancy announcement and stands behind the bold statement he makes for LGBTQ+ artists everywhere...'