

Pet Shop Break-In, part 1

—Transformation Guy 3 in collaboration with hulksmash31

Troy, Gabe, and Ross stumbled down the dark street. Their arms were wrapped around each other's shoulders and they moved together three-wide. Off-key and out-of-sync they sang a vulgar version of a Blink-182 song from the bar; it became less recognizable with every verse until Troy and Gabe were making up a Fall Out Boy song and Ross was performing...well, even he didn't know. But what they lacked in skill and being understandable they made up for with enthusiasm. Their voices rose and fell every time they passed a street light, as if energized by the light.

Their singing devolved into happy slurring and stopped when Troy stopped the group. They stood in front of a dark store with two of the group wondering why the third had stopped their happy parade. All three stared up at the blurry sign, putting all the effort they could into reading it.

New Life PetShoppe. Troy had wondered since his freshman year if legends about it were true. Maybe it was the beer talking, but tonight seemed like a real good time to find out, like, really good. Great even. "Guys!" Troy shouted. Gabe and Ross jumped, the sound startling them when Troy broke the silence, "Let's a-go in. We should get some souvenirs from tonight."

"Ross tried to keep our bottles from the bar, but you didn't want to keep anything then." Gabe said.

"Those weren't our first beers, we dropped those and they spilled. Ross was

taking a beer bottle shaped sign off the wall.” Troy said.

“It was just the extra-large beer I ordered.” Ross corrected.

Troy shook his head, “Whatever, I say we buy something from the pet store everyone always talks about.”

“But it’s haunted.” Gabe said.

“Ghost are like leprechauns and people who like New Jersey,” Troy said, waving off his friend’s concerns, “they don’t exist and if you see one it’s probably just a midget.”

Gabe considered it and rubbed his chin as he did so.

“Plus everyone knows alcohol is just holy water for ghosts, that’s why churches serve you wine.” Ross added.

Gabe liked the reasoning and nodded, “That is true. Alrighty, I’m in.”

Troy took that as his cue and strode up to the double doors with all the grace of a drunk ballerina, which was half-accurate. “My friends, welcome to a world of pure imagination.” Troy said and pushed on the door. It didn’t move, so he tried pulling. Again, nothing. He stared at the directions attached to the glass, “Does that say push or pull?”

“Pulse.” Ross else answered with agreement from Gabe.

Troy tried the doors in both directions again but nothing. “Don’t these people want our money? This isn’t how you run a business.”

“Aren’t they supposed to be open while the sun is up?” Ross asked and pointed at the light behind his shoulder.

“That’s not the sun, it’s a street light.” Gabe corrected.

“Shit, they’re closed. Come on, I have an idea.” Troy said and marched the group around the building. He found an employee door at the back, but it too was locked. He kicked it in frustration and found that while it had been locked, it hadn’t been shut.

“It’s this illegal. Breaking and entering and entering and stealing and breaking—“ Gabe asked.

“Not if we leave money for them.” Troy said.

“And we didn’t break anything.” Ross added.

“Come on, we only turn twenty-twenty-one once...and it’s when we’re twenty-almost-one.” Troy said, leading them in.

Inside, the store was dark. Only the glow of animal enclosures broke the murky-blackness. Row after row after row of shadowed shelves formed a labyrinth of caves stretching into the endless shadows. Dimly lit faces of stuffed

animals and cartoony chew toys stared at them like a hoard of goblins and gremlins.

A dog deep in the store began howling. Quickly, it was joined by a cacophony of birds imitating the sound. Awakened by the noise, more dogs joined in, as well as the mewing of cats and frantic scratching of rodents.

“Yea, hey, we love you all too!” the group called back.

No one had any real plan and their wandering quickly separated the group.

Troy was an athletic guy, pretty average in looks and body. With a head of blond hair and piercing blue eyes, he was attractive in a youthful way. Something accentuated by a lack of body hair that swimmers envied and the lean athleticism of a runner, if not a serious runner.

As he wandered, Troy, no matter how he got side tracked, always wandered generally in the direction of the dog stuff. He couldn't remember why, but he knew he wanted to see the dog stuff if he ever came in here.

A row of aisles perpendicular to the store wall contained most of the supplies. Bones and treats capped the ends of the shelves. Troy looked down each one as he passed them, seeing by the light of the dog pen past them and against the store's wall.

The first ones he passed were filled with bags of kibble and treats. Though more than enough alcohol and bar snacks currently filled Troy's stomach that they held no appeal to him. Not that dog food normally appealed to him anyway. It just held a normal amount of appeal, which was none.

Then was the chew toys and stuffed animals. Troy hurried past those two isles, feeling like every creature was turned toward him even every googly eye was following him. It was worse than when stores make big shelf of just Elf on the Shelves for Christmas.

The final section was the grooming and care supplies. That seemed like a good place to get a non-creepy souvenir. Troy browsed the beds, brushes, accessories before finding the collars. That was what he wanted. People wore collars, right? And not in the kinky way either.

He found a navy-blue one to match the uni color and fastened it around his neck. Luckily it fit perfectly first try, since he probably wasn't coordinated enough to undo it. When the metal, bone-shaped tag landed against the top his chest, he felt good. Very good. Happy and energetic. Almost forgetting, he then checked the price, fished in his pocket, counted out the money rounded up to the next dollar, and accidentally left twice the amount in place of the collar.

Then he noticed the dogs all crowded at the wall and staring at him. He counted them as he walked toward the pen's glass wall. Too bad he kept loosing count somewhere in the range of sixty-eight and decided that whatever the number, there were definitely three or more.

As Troy approached, the dogs started getting frantic. They were pawing and scratching at the glass and howling sorrowful howls. Dog would push dog out of the way. Others jumped up on their hind legs and tried to climb over the tall divider but had no such luck and discovered another dog had taken up position below them. One big, lean dog in the back stood still save the movement of its head to follow Troy's collar and keep an intent, angry gaze on the leather and metal accessory.

"Woof woof too." Troy replied as he approached the dogs, "Don't you all look so happy and good. I wish I could get in there and play with you all. Really I shouldn't be in here, but I'm not hurting anyone right now."

This did nothing to calm the dogs mania. If anything, it worsened it. Not that Troy noticed as he kept talking to the dogs. Until he noticed the engraver over beside the pen. Suddenly the dogs were outside his notice as he approached the machine.

Troy reached a hand back and scratched at some golden hairs on his neck before working on the collar's fastener.

Gabe was the middle of his two best friends in most ways. Middle in height, middle in looks, middle in muscles. Not that he didn't pull it off well with his close cut, dark hair and his square face giving him a solid jock/frat boy look.

The reptiles had been the closest to their entrance and so where had gone.

The aisles alternated between double-thick walls of reptile tanks and normal shelving of supplies so people could look at the animals and their supplies without changing aisles. He passed lizards, turtles, frogs even though they weren't reptiles...

The last aisle held snakes and snake supplies. Being the end of this little island of light, Gabe decided to just buy something from there. He needed a new desk lamp back at the dorm, so one of the reptile lamps should work. Gabe found a shiny, metallic-green lamp and fished out a wad of cash from his pocket. He tried to count it but quickly got frustrated and just slammed the whole wad in place of the lamp. It was more than enough. Then he turned to the snakes.

Most were sleeping under their lamps or in their burrows. But one on the bottom row was curled up with its head raised and pointed at him. It's ruby scales shown like jewels in the light of its tank. Meanwhile, it eyed the lamp in Gabe's hand.

"Hey buddy, aren't you just so pretty." Gabe said.

The snake flicked its tongue out at Gabe and bobbed its head at the lamp in his hand.

"Oh, you want another light? You can't have this one, its mine, but here." Gabe placed his lamp down and found a red lamp. He bent down on the floor and found an outlet on the tank. After plugging it in, the back of Gabe's hand touched the bulb as he was aiming it and he let out a curse as it burned, leaving a bright, red spot.

The snake lowered its head at the curse.

“Don’t worry buddy, I wasn’t yelling at you.” with the light aimed, Gabe stood back up and grabbed his own lamp, “There, you like that? That better?”

The snake raised its head again and flicked out its tongue.

Gabe smiled and looked at the burn. It didn’t look bad, just red and flakey skin. That gave him an idea and he chuckled. If the lamps are so hot, maybe he can use it to prank Ross and set the papers on his roommate’s messy desk on fire.

Ross didn’t know where he was or was going. He was the biggest of the three with short, brown hair, unshakable stubble, and strong features. A former linebacker in high school, his size was strong bulk not just fatness and something he was proud to keep up even if he no longer played.

So he just walked and ended up in the bird section. The birds had given up mimicking the dogs by then and merely soaked like mad when Ross came into view. They were in a handful of large, towering cages arranged in a circular-ish formation at the center of a box of shelving. Smaller cages with individual or pairs of birds were fitted into the shelves sporadically between the food, cage furnishings, and hygiene supplies.

Watching them fly about in mass in the cages was like watching a swarm of

rainbow fireflies. Bright feathers of every color formed a shifting painting. A loud, panicked, shifting painting.

“Keep it down, will you.” Ross said, clutching his head. Then his stomach rumbled and twisted. He had the worst proportion of alcohol-to-food and this latest twist made him desperate for something to add before he hurled a liquid mess.

Ross looked around and spotted the sacks of bird seed. After a moment’s hesitation and another flip of his gut, he shrugged and ripped open a bag. As soon as the first handful hit his mouth, the birds stopped squawking, “That’s better you bird brains.”

As he walked away, one of the birds, a black cockatoo with a bright-red head squawked, “Pay.”

“I’m going to pay for the seed, you dumb bird. Sheesh, did they train you to say that anytime a customer grabs something?” Ross said and walked looking for registers. There he left money for the seed on the scanner. That was good, he didn’t steal anything.

As he continued to wander and munch, Ross was unaware of the white feather now mixed into his hair.

Troy woke up the next morning curled into a ball on the floor of someone

else's dorm. His clothes were dirty and he was still wearing the navy, leather collar with his name crookedly engraved on it.

Then his phone started to blare, though buried underneath him, Troy was the only one that had his head split open by it. He had to jerk to free his head from the floor where dried drool had stuck him to it. The balled up jacket he had used for a pillow came with him as he sat up and stayed stuck for some long seconds before its sagging overcame spit's adhesive power.

He fumbled in his clothes before finding the offending device balled up in his jacket. Not in a pocket but loose. Finally, clumsy fingers silenced the noise.

Silence helped Troy's headache but it certainly didn't stop it.

He groaned and rose. His mouth was dry, his body ached, and he just wanted to go back to sleep, even on the floor. But he remembered setting his alarm for as late as he could get away with, so he'd just have to suffer through his first hangover in class, thankfully he had one of the huge, general education classes first today and then a break until after lunch to compose himself. Unfortunately, that general education class was biology, his bane even on a good day.

Looking around, Troy didn't recognize his stuff and his heart began to pound like it was going to burst. Then he saw Ross and Gabe and realized he must have slept in their room. That calmed him, but he felt more exhausted and miserable for the panic. He nodded to his sleeping friends and left.

The bright, white, industrial lights of the dorm's hall burned his eyes. Troy

let out a whimper as he recoiled and shielded his eyes. With his eyes squinted, looking down, and shielded, Troy staggered down the hall to the stairs. He passed another upperclassman, one a little older who chuckled in recognition of Troy's suffering. Troy whimpered back at him.

When Troy reached his second-floor dorm, he knocked irregularly before shoving the door open and trudging in.

"I'm in the bathroom, be out in a minute." John called over the sound of running water.

"Sureee." Troy called back. He jumped when the door slammed shut behind him and then recoiled as he got a facefull of light. He backed himself into the door and slapped the wall beside himself with shut eyes until he flicked the light off. With that relief, Troy went grabbing a fresh set of clothes and putting his backpack in order. He didn't question how he could see so well in the dark.

The bathroom door opened, but Troy didn't realize what that meant until John flicked the lights back on, "What are you doing in the dark?"

The light made his head split even worse, and just as it seemed to be easing off. Troy didn't answer but frantically and with a whine, he scampered into the bathroom and shut the door.

Once inside, his first instinct was to turn off the lights but he decided to endure it. He'd be subject to them as soon as he finished in there and might as well get used to the pain in hopes of building some tolerance. And at least the lights in

the bathroom were dimmer.

Now being in here after hearing the water from John's activities, the thirst was hitting Troy hard. He glanced at the toilet...it was clean. What?! No! He wouldn't drink water out of toilet no matter how thirsty it was. He wasn't some dog.

Troy hurried to the sink before he had any other disturbing thoughts and turned the water on cold. He splashed his face a little and felt better, then stared at the cold, crisp water running. It looked so go...and people did this all the time...

Troy angled his head and moved his mouth to the stream of water. There, he lapped the water up like he downed beers the night before. As Troy drank, his tongue lengthened and flattened while widening, letting him reach the streams easier and take more into his mouth with each in-and-out.

Once he drank at least as much water as he had alcohol, Troy stepped back and let out a refreshed sigh. He panted as he stared at the mirror, his long, dog-like tongue hanging down past his chin, not that he noticed or was focused on anything at all. All that mattered was that his thirst was gone and his headache and other aches were lessened.

He snapped out of it after having zoned out for...he didn't know how long. He slurped his tongue into his mouth without noticing anything odd besides it feeling a bit large in there. Probably just part of a hangover, he reasoned. With that, Troy hurried through his routine and threw on his fresh clothes. As he changed shirts, Troy felt a new prickle across his back and the back of his neck.

He turned and looked in the mirror and went wide-eyed.

Hair. His back was hairy. It looked like a middle-aged man's back the amount of golden-blond hairs that had sprouted seemingly overnight. Troy reached back and ran a hand through it all; it was real, and trying to pluck some proved they were his. With trembling arms, Troy pulled the new shirt on, feeling the prickle as it rubbed each hair...but he didn't have time to fret.

Last he tried to take off the dog collar, but every time he thought he had the clasp it just didn't let him and he had to start over.

Finally Troy gave up, he didn't have time to fight it and if he adjusted his shirt, it could pass as the collar of an undershirt. Worst case scenario he would say he lost a bet. With that plan he stepped out.

John was in the room relaxing. The bastard had a class a half hour later so could take his time. "Morning! Pass out somewhere else?" John asked a squinting Troy in too happy a voice, "Is that a dog collar on your neck?"

Troy shrank and growled, feeling all the new hairs rise, "It's a souvenir."

"From what, Drinks with Dogs?" John couldn't hold his laughter at that.

Troy blushed and another growl escaped his lips, "Look, our bottles all got busted so we stopped at the *haunted* pet shop."

"Aw. Look who grew a pair of alcoholic balls." John said. "Whose a good

boy?” John reached and started scratching behind Troy’s ears.

Troy wanted to bat John’s hand away, but when the scratching started he just melted. His posture relaxed. His tongue flopped out and he panted with a smile on his face. Even his foot started tapping and leg bouncing. Neither of them noticed the yellow fuzz growing into fur and coating his ears. Nor did they notice his ears stretching longer and broadening into flat flaps and flopping over. In the end, neither of them noticed that Troy now sported the floppy ears of a golden retriever nor how their fur blended almost seamlessly into the hair on his head.

Troy jerked away, “Dude? What are you doing, I have to get to class?”

He was already stepping out the door when John answered with a frown, “Just having fun with my b— you.”

Gabe groaned and shifted in his bed when Troy’s alarm had gone off but didn’t stir. It wasn’t until Ross’s alarm blared that he actually woke up. He found himself laying on his stomach the wrong way in the bed and feeling like he was under every blanket in the dorm. As he extracted himself from the layers of blankets to the sound of the alarm, he remembered why he had so many. It was freezing in the room.

Despite the cold, he left the relative warmth of the bed and grabbed Ross’s phone off his desk. Gabe didn’t turn off the alarm, he just walked with stiff legs and hips that didn’t want to let them spread over to Ross sleeping in his bed. He

stood over the snoring Ross and dropped the phone on his face, “Wake up sleeping beauty, that alarm is giving me migraine.”

As he did, Gabe caught the back of his hand where the lamp had burned it. It was red, but the wet he could say was that the skin was peeling like crazy and that was usually a good sign. What he was less sure of was how much area was peeling. It wasn't just the burned area but the whole back of his hand, the fingers too, and even a little past his wrist. He'd have to worry about that later.

Ross stirred and rubbed his bleary eyes, “Wha—oh.” He fumbled to shut off the alarm, finally doing so with the phone upside down. “Sorry, but it's called a hangover.”

“Whatever.” Gabe said, walking back to his bed with the same stiff gait and wrapping himself in one of the blankets, Ross's that was commandeered last night to be specific.

Ross forced himself to toss the sheet off and get up. As she stretched, he got a whiff of himself, “Oh shit, I still stink of alcohol. The professors won't like that, I need a shower fast.” Not only that, but he didn't have time to suffer his hangover either, just had to ignore it and push through.

Gabe sniffed the air, “I don't—” before he could finish, his tongue flicked out of his mouth and he caught a whiff of what Ross referred to, “Yes you do, fuck, my hangover's easing just from the smell.”

“It's not that bad; besides, you...” Ross trailed off when he saw Gabe's

tongue flick out again. Just for a second, but his tongue looked too narrow and pointed and Gabe crinkled his nose when he did it, “Bro, are you flicking your tongue out like a snake.”

“No.” Gabe said, furrowing his brow and flicking his tongue out again. Once more he crinkled his nose at the stench of cheap beer before it went down and after it came back up.

“You are, you just did it again.”

Gabe waved him off, “Whatever, go wash the smell off you, bird brain.”

“Bird brain?”

“You stole the bird seed last night.”

Ross looked over and saw the open, partially eaten and slightly spilled bag of seed under his desk. Faint memories came back and played on his face, “I paid for it.”

“You left money in a closed shop, morally you’re ok but I doubt legally. Now hurry up, I want to get under the hot water and feel better.”

“Hurry.” Ross repeated in something closer to Gabe’s voice than his own. He went and knocked on the shared bathroom, when no one responded he took it as empty and went in leaving Gabe cold as he wrapped his blanket tighter.

Inside the bathroom, Ross stripped and hurried into the shower. While washing his hair, he found some big, wide clumps of hair that wanted to stick up. He did his best with them but figured he'd fix them in the mirror afterward.

He found similar feeling clumps on his arms, but those he could see and they weren't hairs. They were feathers, small, white feathers. What had he done? Fight with one of the cockatoos at the store last night? At least there were only a handful on each arm, he must not have done more than shake it and not pluck it. He must have sweated too, because they were still stuck to him. Ross tried to brush them off but all he did was ruffle them. So he tried to pick one off but the end was stuck so hard it pulled his skin and hurt. Fine, he'd just have to deal with them. Cover them with a light jacket or a long-sleeve shirt.

Ross hurried and finished up in the shower and with a towel around his waist he stepped out. Before anyone tried to use it, he grabbed his underwear and shorts and pulled them on. There, now he was decent if he had to share.

That taken care of, Ross store up to the sink and the mirror to assess the feathers. The sparse spotting of them on his arms, now dry, they looked almost attached...like the hairs that grew. And his head. Ross saw in the mirror that those clumps of hair were indeed clumps of feathers, There were a few clumps in a line like a white-and-yellow mohawk at the back of his head...or a birds crest the way they began backwards and curled forward into crescent moons pointed forward. He pulled on them, but like the ones on his arms they felt attached.

He didn't have time, unfortunately and hurried to finish getting ready. He emerged from the bathroom and Gabe rose to take his place. "All your's" Ross

said as he grabbed a jacket and his books.

“Thanks.” Gabe answered.

As they passed, Ross caught Gabe flicking his tongue again. This time it didn’t even look human but like a snake’s. Small, for the mouth anyway, narrow, split and pointed, and light pink. Ross paused before they shut their respective door and parted, “See you at lunch?” He needed to talk to the guys.

“Yea.”

With that, Ross raced off to class. Occasionally his stride was broken by a hop, but he didn’t notice.

Troy struggled to concentrate in class. He felt like people were staring at him since he stepped into the classroom. Unfortunately, he wasn’t able to hide and lose himself in the large mass of seating. No one was whispering about him, so that was something at least. But what was wrong that they stared?

Apparently it’s wasn’t too bad because the professor didn’t seem to notice and began the lecture like usual. Yet his fellow students seemed as focused on him as they did the professor. Troy tried to ignore them, which was easier than he expected because his tailbone was bothering him in the desk. No matter how much Troy wiggled and shifted he couldn’t get it to stop. Finally he reached back after an odd, annoyed look from the professor and moved his waistbands which

alleviated what had become a pain.

Of course, that meant Troy was once again fully aware of the eyes on him. When he caught the girl next to him staring long after he caught her eyes and glared back, “What’s so interesting?” he asked.

She stammered a bit, “Huh, oh, nothing. It looks good, you’re good, boy.”

“You’re staring at something, you and everyone else. So what looks good?”

The professor slapped the board with a ruler causing an echoing crack. “Cut down the conv—cut out the conversations please, otherwise you can scram.” the professor said with a confused look like he couldn’t find the right words.

Troy did. He tried to concentrate but between the continued odd looks and the sun on the grass outside, he struggled to catch half of what the professor said. Instead he wanted to be outside where he could run and move, or at least get away from everyone’s stares.

He had to settle for getting some of the energy out by bouncing his leg. Though what really alleviated the pent up energy he suddenly had was wiggling his butt too. With that, Troy found himself able to focus enough to get through the lesson.

With a worried frown, Troy was the first one out when the professor finished. And boy did he run out, out and straight to the restroom. As he approached the urinal, he thought about how to approach the topic with Gabe and

Ross at lunch. Something felt really wrong, even if no one could place what. What really convinced him of this was when he fell in the urinal's stall and realized he had cocked one leg up and over against the partition to relieve himself only to lose his balance halfway through. He didn't even realize he had done that, let alone why.

The guy that helped Troy up chuckled and said, "Really getting into the part there."

Gabe's shower had helped. He'd cranked the hot water all the way up, well past scalding and turned the bathroom into a sauna. And it had felt so good, he didn't even question when it didn't burn him in the slightest. Since he didn't have class till the afternoon, he'd stayed like that for a long while, just enjoying being warm again for the first time since getting back last night.

In the shower, he scrubbed at his flaky hand to make sure it was clean and to get the dead skin off before it became an issue. Well, it certainly came off, and in huge, semi-transparent white flakes on the wash cloth. The new skin underneath was fresh and raw, slick and smooth, and pale tan with wobbly strands of black instead of any kind of pink until it reached the good skin on his arm.

Gabe frowned at it and his forked tongue flicked out. Something didn't seem right. His skin shouldn't be black like that, doesn't that mean dead tissue or something. It didn't look dead and rotting, but he'd keep an eye on it and go to the clinic if needed.

And unfortunately, he did need to get out of the shower sometime. The hot steam that filled the bathroom meant it was comfortable, but not as much as the hot water had been. Though he hurried through the rest of the routine since the temperature was quickly dropping. Once finished, he grabbed his stuff so he wouldn't have to come back to his dorm before class and headed out.

The morning sun was approaching noon and shone bright. It wasn't the warmest of fall days but it felt so good compared to his freezing dorm. He'd just walk around and find somewhere to relax and maybe do some coursework until he met Ross and Troy for lunch. If the cafeteria was cold too he'd have to talk to them about eating outside.

Unfortunately, Gabe was having trouble walking and everywhere comfortable near his dorm was chilly from the shade of the big trees. He had to press forward even though he felt like his legs just wanted to tuck themselves under himself as much as possible instead of making any stride bigger than a shuffle. He forced them to move but it felt like he was limping with both legs.

There was a fountain with some benches and nearby tables not far from the main campus circle that Gabe decided on. He took his seat at a bench in the sun since all the tables were in the shade, though it meant the breeze occasionally misted him. After enjoying the sun a few minutes, he pulled out his binder and got to work.

There weren't many students around, most were inside either in classes or the dorms at this time. There was a girl at one of the benches that kept eyeing

Gabe. When he noticed, he thought he might get lucky since she was being all shy and stealing glances. So he smiled and waved, but didn't notice that his tongue flicked out at the same time. That made her even more nervous, but she did her best to politely return the gesture. Figuring he'd let her get ready and approach him, Gabe returned to his work. Instead she grabbed her stuff and scurried off with one, last, nervous glance. Gabe frowned and returned to his work.

A little later and the classes let out resulting in a ten minute flood of students before the drought returned. During that time, Gabe noticed some of the other students were going through a lot of trouble to stay away from him. Either walking in wide circles around him or going the long way around the fountain instead of us walking in front of him. If they noticed him looking at them, they'd duck their heads and walk faster.

After the crowd was gone, Gabe pulled out a couple of granola bars he kept in his backpack and started on one of them. Though as he ate, his mouth felt odd. His tongue felt too small for his mouth even if its sense of taste was stronger. His teeth too. Some of them felt too sharp and long, but most felt too small. Smaller than they had been. It made chewing troublesome and only got worse as he ate; by the end of his second bar, he was tearing off hunks and swallowing them whole because it was easier.

Lost in his work, Gabe didn't realize the next period had ended too until the crowd returned. More people it seemed were keeping their distance, but that might just have been him paying attention this time. A punk guy he didn't know, however, came up to him and asked, "That's cool on your hand, what's it for?"

Gabe looked up at him, confused, “What is?”

“That. Looks like snakeskin.” the guy pointed at Gabe’s hand where he’d washed the dead skin off and had the tan underneath. Now the odd colored skin was halfway up his forearm with dead skin falling off.

“Just fresh skin.”

“Naw, I know what that looks like. So is it like a glove or a tat sleeve? I’d like to get one myself.”

“I don’t know what too tell you, I burned myself last night and this was what was there when I cleaned it up.” Gabe said, his tongue flicked out too.

“Oh, I get it. Must be body paint and you’re doing something with the drama club, what with the fake fangs and tongue.” the guy said. He was unbothered by Gabe’s look of confusion and continued, “I heard they’re gonna do Paradise Lost, are you the snake?”

“I really don’t know what to tell you, that’s my skin and I’m not wearing any prosthetics.” Gabe threw his arms up for emphasis.

The guy backed off and held up his hands placatingly, “Alright alright, I get it if you can’t talk about it. Sorry to bother you.”

Gabe grumbled half-hearted a goodbye and decided once the crowd had passed that he should go see about meeting Ross and Troy at the cafeteria. He

packed up and started his slow, double-limp walk with his legs preferring to rub together than anything else.