

“This has gotta be some kind of joke...”

I muttered to myself, incredulous, as I navigated the expansive wish list attached to the raccoon’s equally expansive YipYap profile. It was mostly clothing, mostly from brands that I had never heard of, but there was nothing shocking about either of those things. Just one look at the guy was enough to indicate that he had expensive tastes.

Despite that, three hundred dollars for a belt that looked like the business end of a tape measure was a bit too rich for my surplus store blood.

Feeling older by the second, I continued to scroll and click through the list of shirts, shoes, and accessories until it started to discourage me; I was pretty quickly getting to a point that I was going to show up to the restaurant empty-handed, and the kid would just have to deal with that.

“He probably wasn’t serious anyway.” It wasn’t as if he’d turn around and walk back out of the diner if I didn’t show up with tribute in hand, after all. I knew that his fans bought him things, but-

I caught myself after a minute, and it took me a moment to suppress a stupid grin. It was silly of me to think that I was any different than the legions of fans that 4 Stroke undoubtedly had, and so far, the entire process of getting to know the raccoon had been an exercise in getting ahead of myself every step of the way.

The whole prospect was exciting, but I needed to settle down a little bit.

Scrolling through that goddamn wish list was definitely the biggest dampener I could put on my mood, at least, and it took a seven-hundred dollar pair of foam sandals to knock me completely out of the situation. Kid was crazy if he thought I was throwing around that kind of money on a perfect stranger.

Even if that perfect stranger was attached to the best ass I’d ever seen up close.



With a sigh, overwhelmingly defeated by 4 Stroke's disgustingly expensive tastes, I was just about to close the window and end the depressing exercise when I saw something a little different near the bottom of the list; something from a department store that I recognized, but more importantly, something with only two numbers in the price listing. I scrolled down a little and found myself grinning again at the sight of a toy amid the jewelry requests. It was a green, plush triceratops that stood on all fours, stocky and imposing, covered with that short, peachy fuzz common among stuffed animals.

Apparently, its name was "Tank". Hard to pass on something like that.

The decision to purchase the gift was an easy one, and I even went so far as to splurge on shipping to make sure that it would be delivered in time. Aside from the occasional beer and my weekly indulgences of Mexican food, I rarely ever spent money on frivolous things, and the little bit of spontaneity felt good to my old, stagnant soul. It was nice to get the blood flowing again, especially to something other than my privates.

Lord knew I didn't have any trouble with that lately.

I found myself excited enough that I was having difficulty sleeping later that night, despite working out some tension in the shower before getting my diapers on for bedtime. I could hear the plastic of my disposables, as well as the protective sheet on my mattress, crinkle every time I moved, and the noise was doing a good job of reminding me of just what was in my future.

"Don't blow this shit, Adams."

Sleep eventually came, and work followed it the next morning. I did my best to keep my mind off the coming evening, but time seemed to crawl. There was nothing to be done about a slow day on the dock, and there's only so many games of Sea Lion Solitaire you can play on your tiny phone screen before it starts to drive you insane.

"Headed home, Tank. Make sure you lock the warehouse before you go anywhere."

Saved by the boss.

I looked up just in time to catch the set of keys being tossed my way, and I was about to answer with my own goodbye, but the boss was somehow already halfway across the building by the time I realized what was going on. I could relate.

By the time I got home, there was a package on my doorstep, and I couldn't stop myself from grinning and drumming my fingers on the door in anticipation. It was still a little surreal to think that I had plans that evening, and with an actual person, not just John Wayne and a gallon of strawberry ice cream.

Unwrapping the package with my pocket knife was similarly exciting, and the first thing that struck me about the triceratops was that it was a good deal bigger than I was expecting it to be. Taken out of the box, it stood comfortably wide, and about two foot long from the horn on his nose to the tip of his tail. I lifted it up, gave it a heft in both arms, then before I realized what I was doing, gave it a hug against my chest.

It smelled like strawberries, which reminded me that I needed a damn shower before my date. Nobody wants anything to do with a man that smells like a gym sock.

Feeling a little stupid for cuddling the stuffed dinosaur, and increasingly self-aware of just what kind of situation I was getting myself into, I put the toy aside and disappeared into the bathroom to rearrange my head and scrub the grime out of my fur.

Hot showers are a good way for me to get my head on straight, and this one was damn near hot enough to cook me up for dinner, so by the time I was wrapped in a towel and lightly damp, I felt like I had chased most of the gloom out of the corners of my brain.

Lots of people make friends online. Lots of good things happen to people who make friends online. Odds are good that 4 Stroke isn't an axe-murderer.



“Hate to see the price tag on that murder weapon...”

I chuckled to myself, then bared my fangs in a sudsy snarl for the mirror and rinsed out the rest. I even went so far as to trim up my beard and sideburns a little, carefully edging along my jawline and pruning away the bit of white that had been inching closer and closer to my neck seemingly by the month.

Looking over my barren wardrobe was an exercise in futility, but at least there wasn't much to agonize over. Most of my clothes were for work, or random consolation gifts that the military had sent me over the years through various outreach programs, so my choices were pretty limited.

In my best pair of jeans and boots, I was still doing up the last couple of buttons on my shirt, triceratops tucked under one arm, as I left my little slice of heaven. Tank, the other one, rode shotgun in the truck, and I was on the highway out towards the edge of the Breaks in a matter of minutes.

The Classy Cactus was defined by an absolutely huge neon sign that stood probably twenty feet over the actual building. A glowing saguaro with a fancy hat and Hollywood sunglasses, appropriately named. The parking lot was mostly empty by the time I pulled in, a fact I found myself largely thankful for, considering the nature of my visit.



“So much for the dinner rush...”

I felt myself starting to get a little stressed out again, thinking too much about what was supposed to be a casual meeting between new friends, and I tugged out the collar of my shirt as if to let some of the steam out of my body. It worked a little, and I peeled myself out of the truck, with my new dinosaur buddy in tow.

At least feeling ridiculous about carrying a triceratops was distracting me from the more pressing issue of meeting a raccoon from the Internet, who might be an expensively-dressed axe murderer.



I stood near the front counter for a couple of seconds, just long enough to feel stupid when I noticed the ‘Please seat yourself’ sign. With those words of wisdom in mind, I took my dinosaur to an out of the way booth and slid in to keep an eye on the front entrance. My heart was really starting to pound, and I checked my phone roughly thirty times over the next couple of minutes, anticipating (and almost hoping for) a cancellation notice from the raccoon.

“Can I get you something to drink, hon?”

That was almost the end of me. Death by heart attack.

“Oh, uh—” I quickly composed myself with a minimum of stuttering, already feeling heat in my cheeks again. The waitress was a smiling older badger that looked a little like my boss. “Just a sweet tea for now.”

“And your friend?” She asked, and I squinted in confusion, looking across at the empty seat on the other end of the booth. Was I having a stroke?

She motioned to the dinosaur sitting on the table, her grin broadening.

“He’s, ah…” I chuckled, redder now, but pretty amused. “He’s still thinking about it.”

When she stepped away, still smiling, my heart nearly leapt into my throat when I saw the raccoon at the entrance to the diner, impossible to miss for his gold jewelry and ostentatious fashion sense. He looked up from his phone just in time to meet eyes with me, and he grinned in the way that I had become accustomed to – but certainly not immune to.

I stood up, feeling like I might pass out, as he approached, and held my hand out for a shake. He looked down at my hand for a second, then back up at me, before grabbing it and giving it a squeeze.

“Nice to meet you, Tapout.”

And that was it for me.

