

## The Many Worlds Declivity

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# The Many Worlds Declivity

by [Aestera](#)

## Summary

When her usual booze bender proves ineffective as a memory wiper after a messy break up with Leonard, Penny seeks solace in Sheldon to numb the pain. She's perplexed by his new erratic behaviour and manic obsession with alternate timelines, but oblivious to the fact that he's slipping off the deep end, and taking her with him.

## Notes

This is set right after S3E19 The Wheaton Recurrence, in a canon divergence where Leonard takes the breakup a lot harder and moves out. Felt obligated to give my two favorite characters an arc and ending they deserved, since Canon sucked balls.

There will be some sporadic mentions of drug use, alcoholism, physical injuries and childhood abuse from chapter three onwards, thought I'd flag it here first, so please proceed as cautioned. Do comment—they truly brighten my day—and as always, thanks for reading!

# Chapter 1

Penny's apartment is empty. And worse still, quiet. The constant flow of indecipherable jabber from 4A that never seemed to cease has faded into memory. Every creak seeps through the building's thin walls, and it always brightened her evenings when she caught snippets of Sheldon's tirades or Howard's creepy regales as she attempted to microwave undercooked pasta, before giving up altogether and crossing the hallway to grab a takeout box from their table. Leonard always bought her share even on nights where she told him she wouldn't be joining them. There were stray pizza boxes and shards of glass from wine bottles littered all over her wooden flooring. Maybe if she made the place look like a typhoon had just swept through it, Leonard might come back to tidy it up like he did the night after she moved in. He would knock at her door, sheepishness etched into his every pore, wringing his hands with furrowed brows. She would throw her arms around him and it'll be okay. They'll be fixed. She just needed to wait.

She's sprawled out on her couch. A total wreck. Hasn't looked into a mirror in days, she probably looked worse than the time Sheldon got her hooked on *Age of Conan*. It had been two weeks since the disastrous incident at the bowling alley, when she and Leonard had that awful argument which caused him to move out. He had been sulky and unbearably passive aggressive for days after she refused to tell him she loved him. She planned to say it at the bowling alley, but was dumb enough to let Will Wheaton of all people get to her. The look of desperation and confusion on Leonard's face after she yelled at him was like a sucker punch to the gut. Everything was going wrong. Her career couldn't end because it never started. Her time spent with Leonard and the guys was her only solace. And now it was all ruined.

She's completely hammered, barely able stand. It's been years since she had last chugged down a bottle of Merlot and chased it with another of Cuban rum. Making dinner was out of the question, she could barely whip up mac and cheese even when she was sober. Right then, a knock on her door. She leapt up and immediately slumped back down on her couch.

"Leonard?" She slurs. No response.

Getting down on her stomach, she army crawls to her front door, opening it with both hands with help from her teeth. No one, except for a lone Chinese take-out box, chopsticks balanced diagonally on its lid at a perfect forty-five-degree angle. The hallway is silent, except for the low drone of the *Battlestar Galactica* theme song emanating from 4A. No, it couldn't be. Sheldon? He never got take out by himself. But he would have to now, since Leonard isn't living with him anymore. She grabs the box, shuts the door and digs in, too wasted and hungry to wade through the possibility and implications of Sheldon Cooper doing her a favor without her having to renounce her dignity and endure ridicule for days on end.

Each replay of that disastrous night of bowling brings new details to the surface. It was mostly a blur of emotions. Then the warmth Sheldon's shoulder, the soft cotton of his shirt against her cheek. She closes her eyes and focuses. Pre-game cocktails. Bickering with Leonard in the car. Bowling. Three strikes in a row. Will Wheaton. Her finally snapping. She made it out into the hallway before breaking down. She was about to stumble into the ladies

when she felt cool fingers on her elbow. It was Sheldon, who retracted his hand swiftly right as she turned around.

“Penny—”

“Sheldon, for God’s sake!” She shouted. “Can’t you see I’m—”

“Leonard was being an asshole.”

She had never heard him swear before. “What?”

“He was asking you to lie to him.” His voice was level, unlike hers, and something about it calmed her down slightly. “To tell him you love him even when you don’t mean it.”

“So you’re an expert on love now?”

“I’ve never claimed to be one. But human attraction is formulaic at its best, dreadfully vacuous at its worst. I’m a scientist, Penny. I observe, if nothing else. You avoid eye contact with Leonard even when he’s gawking at you. You limit lip contact to a friendly peck, presumably in fear that allowing his tongue access into your buccal cavity would encourage more attempts at coitus. And most noticeably, you’ve dodged every attempt to be alone with him, even going as far as to invite Wolowitz along to attend an ill-advised bachelorette party at your friend Kim’s house.”

She sighed and sunk against a wall, pulling her knees up to her chest. “You noticed all of that?”

To her surprise, he pulled out a Batman picnic blanket from his crossover bag, spread it out on the space next to her and sat down. From his back pocket, he retrieved a pack of Kleenex and handed to her.

“Thanks.” She blotted at the mascara and stray fake eyelashes all over her cheeks. “And you’re wrong. I do love him, it’s just...complicated.”

He frowned, stealing a glance at her. She could almost see codes and graphs swimming in his irises. “Does love not constitute a desire for physical proximity and intimacy? Just when I think I’ve gotten a grasp on social etiquette and convention; an anomaly inserts itself and completely dismantles my meticulously crafted algorithm.”

She wracked her brain for a convincing explanation, a feat under Sheldon’s scrutinizing gaze. “I think I’m more comfortable loving him from a distance. You know, sometimes people just need some breathing space. A relationship can be one of the most exhausting things you’ll ever go through.”

“Then why do people do it? Doesn’t bungee jumping or watching a harrowing film provide the same amount of stimulation?”

Despite herself, she laughed. “We do it because we have no choice, Sheldon. Believe me, the day we evolve into your kind can’t come any sooner.”

“Don’t flatter yourself.” He cracked a rare smile. “The Neanderthals were still attempting to communicate through cave art when they died out, I suspect sapiens will still be playing beer pong and pin the tail on the mating target when the sun reaches peak expansion and inevitably engulfs all life.”

Without thinking, she moved closer and rested her head on his shoulder, turning her head slightly so that her forehead pressed against his pulse. He stiffened, but didn’t push her away. He smelled like talcum powder and hand sanitizer, a hint of vanilla smothered by the heavy disinfectant. Throughout all her ups and downs, Sheldon was her one constant. She couldn’t pinpoint precisely when his incessant door knocking and scathing commentary on her every move had become so integral to her ability to get out of bed every morning. He was the only person who could talk her back into herself. When some guy had broken her heart, she felt like she had just been detonated within. Bits of heart gummed up on her azure walls. Then he’d knock at precisely 11am and she would open her door. He would stare at her for exactly three Mississippi before launching into whatever new vexations he had with mundane life and she would be whole again. Not patched up but as if she’d never been shattered at all.

Just as Sheldon began to relax, Leonard appeared from around the corner, frazzled and out of breath. Sheldon convulsed, his shoulder socket almost giving her a black eye. He peeled her off him and scooted to the far wall, wrapping his arms around himself like he’d just been electrocuted.

“Oh, this is just spectacular. You tear out of there like you’re on fire and I scour the entire compound in complete panic about the possibility that you’ve gotten yourself run over by a truck or something and I find you cozied up with *him*. You, my girlfriend who winces whenever I put an arm around her is literally two seconds away from making out with my psycho roommate.”

She stood up, eyes stinging from tears that were threatening to well up again. “Leonard, it’s not what you think.”

“We were just discussing your deficiencies.” Sheldon quipped, oblivious to the fact that his roommate was seriously considering throttling him.

Leonard scoffed, a rough and ugly sound. “*My* deficiencies? Well, guess what. Is it so hard to believe that your chauffeur and Penny’s errand boy is sick and tired of being treated worse than the steaming week-old garbage in General Tso’s dumpster? You think the fact that you have Asperger’s gives you a free pass to waltz into my girlfriend’s apartment and into her bed at 3am because you have the flu and unresolved parental issues? You’re really a genius, you know that. PhD at sixteen? That wasn’t a fluke. You preyed on her masochism from day one, bit by bit, while I fawned over her like an idiot. And then pulled out your trump card when she felt I was suffocating her. Brilliant.”

“Leonard, stop it.” Her voice was weak and she was starting to feel faint. She barely noticed when Sheldon stood up and shielded her with his body. He towered over Leonard, obscuring her view of him. He was always hunched over his laptop, she never noticed how tall he was, or how terrifying he could be when he was mad.

“If you’re suggesting in any way that I might have the slightest interest in pursuing Penny as a romantic prospect, you are deeply mistaken. If you have any plans on pursuing psychology—the village idiot of the sciences—when your career inexorably reaches its long due demise, I suggest you forego all premature preparations. You are an inferior physicist and drawing on Penny’s recent laments, an abject lover to boot. Penny has tended to me when illness rendered me immobile, and now I am simply repaying the favor by serving as a pillar of logic and support during her emotional toils. As for the manipulation you accused me with, I have not once pressured her into doing anything against her will by using our friendship as bait, whereas you have spent the last few days doing everything in your power to get her to spew out three meaningless words that you believe would bolster your frail ego. I believe you owe her an apology.”

Sheldon remained perfectly still as he spoke. Pallid skin closer to marble than flesh. His voice remained calm and steady, but from her vantage point she could see the rise and fall of his shoulders as he took in timed, measured breaths between each point. And did Sheldon say friendship? They were neighbours, staircase companions. Acquaintances who shared a bed platonically a grand total of two times.

Leonard took two steps back. He opened his mouth then closed it. “Whatever. She’s yours. I’m getting away from you before whatever incurable mental ailment you possess that makes you so infuriatingly intolerable mutates and becomes contagious. I’ll stay with Raj until I find someplace else hopefully on some other continent.”

He left. Then Sheldon drove her home in her car. At two miles per hour. They didn’t speak the whole way back, and trudged up the stairs in silence. He reached for her elbow again just before they parted ways, but she shrugged him off, shutting her door behind her. That was the last time they spoke. She traces circles on the empty takeout box, back against her front door. It suddenly occurs to her that today is Friday. Chinese takeout night even if hell froze over.

Lieutenant Zac’s voice blares from the TV across the hall.

## Chapter 2

The next morning, she feels surprisingly better. She took an Advil in pre-empt for the hangover. The room only sways slightly when she stumbled to the bathroom. Her neck is slightly stiff from being slumped over the arm rest of her couch. Her shift today would run from ten to four, followed by an audition later in the afternoon. It was for a play centering around a couple in the 70s living in lower Manhattan and would be debuting in New York. She had pored over the script a few times over within the last week but breaking into her character, Laine, grated on a few nerves, considering that the bulk of the play revolved around her turbulent relationship with her husband, Jack. As an actress, she knows personal mental health was paramount in taking on a role, but she couldn't turn this one down. The character was made for her. She mouths her lines while working the French press. Two hard raps on her door shatters the reverie.

"Penny."

She hovers a hand over the door knob, running a hand through her hair and taking a deep breath. She hasn't seen Sheldon since the night at the bowling alley. If it weren't for the occasional wrong mail or the clattering of beakers in the night, she would have assumed that he had moved out. She checks her reflection one last time in her wardrobe mirror before opening the door.

"Hey, Sheldon. How are you doing?"

He's dressed for work, a signature comic book shirt over a plain long sleeve paired with pressed tartan trousers. Hands wrangling the strap of his khaki cross body bag, knuckles white. He's unusually skittish, and there were dark circles forming under his eyes, accentuated by his pale skin.

"Very well. I trust you had a substantial breakfast?"

"What? Err...yeah, I guess. Not really a breakfast person." His attempts at small talk were getting better, even though she could still sense that he was breadcrumbing her to his preplanned whims.

"Excellent. I wouldn't trust someone with low blood sugar to operate a moving vehicle, especially considering the amount of concentration it requires to navigate morning traffic." He pauses, waiting for her to connect the dots.

"You need me to drive you to work?" She sighs.

"Now that you mention it, that would be lovely. The route you take to work passes the university, doesn't it? It wouldn't cost you more than roughly thirty seconds to turn into the drop off point. As of yesterday, I've been officially banned by the bus company for breaking into vehicles at night to spray Lysol onto the seats."

"Of course. It's the least I can do. I mean, it is partly my fault that Leonard moved out."

“Leonard’s reasons for moving out cannot be directly ascertained, but I suspect his unmet exigency for approval due to his mother’s neglect has caused irreparable damage to his frontal cortex hence impairing skills involving planning and decision making. Your rejection of his affections was merely the match in the powder barrel, as my mother used to say.”

“Look, I know he’s your friend, but I couldn’t lie to him. I hope you understand that. And I hope this situation with Leonard doesn’t change anything between us.”

He waves his arm in exaggerated gallantry. “We do what we must.”

“I’ll just grab my purse and we can get going.”

They trek down the stairs, shoulders bumping every so often. She wonders if he had ever lived alone, and what that must be like for him. Howard and Raj had probably deserted him temporarily, and she couldn’t help but feel terrible that she had instigated this rift between them. She steals a glance at him. He isn’t looking at her, but rather watching each step, taking extra care not to fall. He’s being uncharacteristically mild today, choosing to ask about her auditions rather than grilling her over the state of her apartment.

“I have an audition later today actually. The play will be in New York if I get the part.”

They get into the car. She finally fixed the check engine light, much to Sheldon’s relief.

He side-eyes her. “If your previous track record of auditions is anything to go by, I assume the plot follows another asinine domestic cage fight between two highly intoxicated people that usually ends with a scantily clad woman dousing her disheveled, cheating spouse with cheap wine?”

“Pretty much. But the script seems pretty promising. It’s called *As I Lay Awake*, written by some dude that won a Tony last year. The Nobel prize of my world.”

“A prestigious award it must be then.” He fiddles with the glove box. “I suppose I could make the time to catch a viewing of it.”

“Seriously? You’re telling me you want to fly to New York just to sit through three hours of moping and binge drinking?”

“I have a back log of stipulated leave that I must clear, and now that the annual week-long paintball-laser tag combo extravaganza is temporarily postponed, I have a fair amount of unprecedented free time on my hands.”

She’s stunned, but keeps her eyes on the road. Sheldon Cooper was offering to accompany her to New York to watch her play? He had always made a huge fuss whenever she rehearsed her lines too loudly or changed the topic whenever she went on about it during dinner. He notices her silent astonishment.

“Leonard’s recent outburst has made me reflect on my...misalignments with many aspects of the social world. Perhaps immersing myself in an artform that represents the apex of its repulsivity would incite a breakthrough of sorts. When pondering Weakly Interacting mass



particles and their relation to dark matter, I find it useful to blindfold myself when performing menial tasks.”

Since Leonard was out of the picture and her mum was probably drunk out of her mind back in Nebraska, a week in New York with Sheldon seemed almost appealing.

“Yeah sure, that’d be fun. It’d be nice to see a familiar face in the crowd.”

She pulls up outside the campus drop off point and he gets out.

“I’ll see you back here at six sharp,” he reminds her curtly. “Try not to be tardy.”

With that, he turns and walked stiffly towards the physics building.

She sticks her head out of the window. “Hey, I almost forgot. Thanks for the take out last night. You left it at my doorstep? That was really sweet.”

He speeds up, giving no other indication that he heard her.

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There are roughly ten other blondes, excluding her, in the waiting room. The girl next to her, Chelsea, was perky and from Nebraska as well. When she leaned in to wish her good luck, she suspected they were wearing the same strawberry scented lip gloss. For some reason, it makes her livid, kindling an urge to simultaneously burst into tears and smash a hole into the concrete wall behind her. She had been to dozens of auditions and had seen so many different clones of herself, except taller and prettier. What did she have to offer that they didn’t? What set her apart from the horde of wide-eyed girls from small towns who moved to L.A. to pursue the same ridiculous dream of being a film star?

She didn’t have an answer to that before she met Leonard and the guys. Their constant awe when in her presence made her feel she was the most beautiful woman in the world. But Sheldon was different, he acknowledged her beauty but wasn’t fazed by it. He coaxed out a different side of her—a temperament she never knew she had and words she didn’t even know was part of her vocabulary. Despite his constant mockery, there was always a challenge in his eyes, an eagerness for her to hit back. Hard. Then a shift into quiet satisfaction when she did. They would continue bantering when the other guys had turned their attention back to the TV, the distance between them closing without either of them realizing it until their chests were inches apart. To him, she wasn’t another disillusioned peach from the west. She was Penny. If she was being honest with herself, her heart always stuttered when Sheldon answered the door instead of Leonard. She looked for signs that he was pleased to see her, but he never gave anything away. And now she had promised him that they’d be going to New York together in the fall. She isn’t planning on letting him down.

“Next.” The grouchy assistant pokes her head out from of the room. “Penny, right?”

“Yep, that’s me.” She extends a hand that was waved away.

The row of casting directors stares at her like she was a specimen on a petri dish. The man on the far left speaks first.

“Alright, Craig here will be playing opposite you as Jack. Scene twelve from the top.”

A tall buff guy walks into the room and took his mark next to her. He’s decent looking, with grey eyes and a five o’clock shadow. They did the scene and she thought it went well. But when she sneaks a peek, the panel looks about as enthused as toddlers at a string orchestra. When they finally let her go, she realizes that she only has five minutes to drive back to the university.

“Hey.” Craig sidles up to her. “Wanna grab a drink?”

“I would. But I have to pick my friend up from work.”

Craig raises an eyebrow. “Your boyfriend?”

“No—”

“Then you don’t owe him anything.”

She gives him a once over. Once upon a time, she would have been all over him. Her old self felt so close, but simultaneously unrecognizable. She shrugs, by way of an apology.

“I gotta run.”

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“Where have you been?” Sheldon grumbles as she pulled up.

“Sorry, the audition ran a little late.”

“Did your watch freeze or was the switch from digital to analog too much for you?”

She rolls her eyes at him. “Get in and shut your trap.”

“You’re in a foul mood. Did your audition not go as expected? But then again, with your extensive resume of porno cameos and a single pithy toothpaste commercial, blatant rejection would be the expected outcome.”

“Hey, what happened to ‘Mr. I’ll-fly-to-another-state-to-see-your-play-Cooper’ from this morning? I’ve got a sledgehammer in the trunk that hasn’t seen action in a long time.” He raises his hands in mock surrender and she runs a red light. “The audition was a bust. I met ten other of my doppelgangers in the waiting room and I was the last one up. How do you think it went?”

“Mitosis is still limited to cells and bacteria. Although, human cloning is a possibility in the next two centuries.”

“Listen, do you think I’m a cliché? Do you feel like you’ve met me a million times before actually meeting me?”

“As you know, I am a firm believer of the Many Worlds theory in quantum mechanics, which dictates that there are an infinite number of universes existing simultaneously. By this logic, we have met, are meeting, and will meet an infinite amount times. But it is only *you*—or more accurately—only versions of you that versions of myself is coming into repeated contact with, not anybody else.”

She smiles. “That sounds almost romantic.”

“Your tendency to allocate meaning to scientific facts would create that illusion.”

Just as she backs into the parking lot, her phone chimes. She almost drops the phone after reading the text. The audition panel was inviting her for a call back.

“Oh my god! I got a call back! They actually liked it!”

Without thinking, she sprints over to the passenger side and flings her arms around Sheldon. His hands close on her lower back, keeping them both from toppling onto the grass. There it was again. That talcum disinfectant scent that was somehow as intoxicating as cologne. Unconsciously, she winds her fingers around the string of his windbreaker, pulling him closer to her.

“Penny, my ribs are about to cave under the gargantuan strength of your apelike arms.”

“Sorry.” She pulls back. It might have been her imagination but his alabaster skin is slightly flushed.

“How about that, huh?” She grins, scanning the text message again. “We’re headed to New York.”

“Seems that way.”

“Hey, I’ll make spaghetti with that marinara sauce you like to celebrate. You’re going to have to help me run lines for my call back scene. Drop by in an hour’s time.”

Before he can respond, she dashes up the stairs to her apartment and shut the door. Everything is exactly how she left it this morning, but the very air in her apartment felt different. Lighter. This could be her big break. Her name in gold lights all over Broadway. She hums the rift to ‘Hit Me Baby One More Time’ as she stirs in some leftover bacon into the sauce, cracking open a fresh bottle of Chardonnay. Like clockwork, two raps sound on her door at half past seven.

“Come on in.” She purrs, leaning against the door frame. The wine was starting to kick in, and was already starting to feel pretty tipsy.

He looks at her disapprovingly before stepping in and surveying her apartment. “I should have known you would use this rare joyous occasion as an excuse to intoxicate yourself to the point of incoherence.”

They chat about work during dinner, exchanging stories about their strange colleagues. She laughs as Sheldon described his more elaborate past pranks on Kripke and several others who he felt had wronged him. Warmth spreads from stomach to chest. As he breaks off on another befuddling tangent, she muses over what these random dinners mean to him. A Bath and Body Works candle sits burning on the window sill next to them. The wine glasses are out, albeit his is filled with sprite. She was attracted to him upon sight, but soon realized he was completely impenetrable. And yet, he is the most fascinating person she had ever met. While dating Leonard, she nurtured a noxious delusion that he would one day emerge from his world where reality was murky, and turn to her with light in his eyes; brimming with a newfound clarity.

After dinner, she badgers him to do a scene with her, even going as far to promise to drive him to work and the comic book store for the rest of the year.

“Come on, Sheldon. I really need someone to feed me the lines.”

“Penny, if I had any interest in pursuing the arts, I wouldn’t have spent ten years of my life on two doctorates and a masters in particle physics. In fact, you and I wouldn’t even have met as I would currently be playing hookah and sleeping in a weed den with all the other Julliard graduates.”

She hands him a copy of the script. “Just read out Jack’s part, okay? It’s easy. Just mimic what I’m doing.”

He turns his attention to the script, giving it a brief once over then putting it down.

“You don’t need it?”

“I have an eidetic memory.” He reminds her. “You may begin.”

She shimmies her shoulders, slipping into Laine’s character. “What do you want me to say? That I was happy in this dog gone marriage?”

He looks her dead in the eye. “You should have told me right from the start you were sleeping with him. You’re no woman. You pummel everything you touch. I shouldn’t let you near any glass, you’d slice your hands to ribbons.”

She’s stunned. Sheldon’s take on the character was completely unexpected. Jack’s character was supposed to be burly and insipid, but when Sheldon spoke his lines, there was a new splintered quality to the words, a soul-deep sadness. The character morphs before her eyes. Fragile and fiercely intelligent, desperate to salvage a relationship but somehow ended up making things infinitely worse. Crap. She had completely blanked. She clears her throat.

“Sure, I fucked him. Sue me. But I didn’t for single second—” She circles around behind him, bringing her lips right up to his ear. “Stop thinking about you.”

Sheldon jerks away from her. “I don’t think I’m comfortable with this, Penny. This…pseudo charades, if you will, really isn’t my forte. I’m afraid I’ll have to excuse myself.”

“Ugh, I’m sorry. I improvised that last bit.” She starts but he already made a beeline for the door.

“Thank you for dinner.”

He shuts the door behind him and she listens to his footsteps padding across the hallway, a part of her wanting to run after him and...what? When she read through the scene again, she realized that it ended with Jack and Laine making out followed by an implied sex scene. She was too wasted earlier to flag it before they started. For Sheldon, the line between truth and fabrication; simulation and reality is a thin one, and should be treaded with caution. And yet, she can’t stop herself from wondering what might have happened if they got to the end of the scene.

“Shit.” She mutters to no one in particular.

# Chapter 3

## Chapter Notes

Trigger warning: mentions of drug use, alcoholism and physical injury

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The following morning, she wakes to her jarring pop-ballad alarm rather than Sheldon's knocking.

She checks her phone only to realise she had missed a text from him stating that he didn't require transport for the week. And another informing her in block print he had arranged for a private car to shuttle him to and from the university. She face palms. She drives herself insane sometimes. Why the hell did she even get him to help her with her lines? He had looked at her with unabashed shock and horror when she drunkenly came onto him as Laine. There was even a hint of betrayal, a look so foreign that she could barely envision the appraising warmth veiled with mock contempt she had gotten so accustomed to. For a second, she thought that he might have been fighting back tears. She hadn't seen him since that night. Sheldon was off lately. He stared off into space when they were together, even meekly nodding and feigning interest when she went on about trite celebrity gossip. And offering to accompany her to New York was cherry on the cake. Leonard's absence must have been a bigger blow than she'd anticipated, but there wasn't much she could do to mend the situation. All her calls went straight to voice mails, and she never bumped into him even when she paced up and down the stairs for hours.

She looks down at the cake she was attempting to bake as a distraction. The concoction of eggs and flour was splattered all over her counter from the violent whisking. Dealing with Sheldon reminds her of the thousand-piece puzzle her parents had bought her when she was ten. She spent weeks getting only halfway through before smashing it with a box hammer out of frustration. Afterwards, she spent every night examining each individual piece to see if they were damaged, because she knew that the next day, she'd be right back at it, chipping away at something that offered little to no promise or quittance.

She goes to the call back, does another scene with Craig and gets handed the role right after. Apparently, sparks flew when they were together, and she smiles like she felt it too. But for some reason, the ecstasy isn't even fleeting. It isn't there at all. Her first big break and all she could feel was numbness. Sheldon had infiltrated her life, but did he have to trespass into her thoughts as well? As she gathers her things and heads for the door, Craig high-fives her and bugs her for a drink, a rehash of the many suave seduction routines she had been forced to witness. She declines, trying not to roll her eyes. Were guys always this obvious? Did she always have this dude-specific telepathy? Or was it something that Sheldon instilled within her, a subconscious training like his experiment with the chocolates, filling her with the same superiority that came so naturally to him.

Instead, she drives to the nearest Walmart to pick up a crate of pre-mixed mojitos, then cruises around Pasadena with the top down until the sun is a cotton candy swirl of pink and blue and she is one more sip away from being an official road hazard. She can't go home just yet. Another night spent sitting in front of the TV pretending to care about the *Real Housewives of Atlanta* then turning it to mute so she could eavesdrop on what Sheldon was watching next door would be unbearable. She hangs out at a Taco Bell, nibbling at a quesadilla until after Sheldon's bedtime before finally heading back, taking extra care to tiptoe up the stairs. As she turns her key, she realizes that 4A's door was hanging ajar. Her heartbeat skitters, hot pulse in her ears. There couldn't have been another robbery, not after he had installed the infrared motion sensor and wired the building's alarm system to the nearest police station.

She tiptoes across hall and peeks in. The TV and Xbox were still in their designated places, but the bookshelf had been tipped. At least five white boards had been defaced with illegible formulas scattered all over the floor, along with some stray take out containers. Bitter dread pools in her stomach as she approached the eerily silent, moonlit bedrooms. The apartment flag was now tacked to Leonard's door, inverted to mark his absence. A clatter in the bathroom. She jimmies the locked door.

"Sheldon?" She yells. "Open this door right now."

It swings open. Sheldon Cooper looms over her, clutching the wall for support. Her hand flies to her mouth. A nasty welt above his right eye seals it partially. He's clutching his ribs in a way that made her think that his facial injuries were the least of it. There's a syringe in his right hand, and at first she thought he might have been in the middle of an experiment gone awry, until she catches sight of the small pack of white powder on the sink, accompanied by a lighter.

"Sweetie." She manages. "What the hell—"

"*Sweetie*." He spits. "You don't know how much I despise that term. You only used it when Leonard was around, to infantilize me and cement his position as the alpha male. Well, he's gone now, so you can drop all false pretences."

"What happened? Did you get into some kind of accident?"

"Oh, you mean this?" He gestures to his face, the sudden movement almost causing him to lose balance. "Some of Kripke's thugs found me. He never forgave me for foaming his miserable rathole of a lab along with the Board of Directors. All the equipment in there had to be sent in for maintenance, stalling his research for a considerable amount of time. My association with Leonard was my only line of defense. When they realized that we were currently at an impasse, they cornered me on a side street."

"Kripke, huh? I'll throttle that weasel."

"A fitting vengeance has already been organized, Penny. I don't need you to entangle yourself in my battles. Brilliance begets envy, like moths to a flame. One shouldn't complain."

When she reaches out for him, her hands are shaking. He doesn't wince or duck out of reach when she ghosts her knuckles over his swollen eye. He just stares at her. Stares through her. She decides not to mention the heroin on his bathroom sink.

"I'll get out the first aid kit." She grabs his arm, tugging him out of the bathroom. He stumbles, but she catches him just in time. She slings an arm around his waist to hold him steady. His hipbone digs into her side. She doesn't remember him being this bony the last time they hugged.

He let her take his hand and guide him towards the bed. She douses a cotton ball in antiseptic and presses it to his temple. He doesn't wince or complain, instead he reaches under his pillow and pulls out a notebook. He opens it and hands the book to her. She frowns in confusion, he never showed his work to anyone, especially not someone like her who could barely comprehend this mess, much less copy it. Messy equations and diagrams, his illegible way of making the world legible. She expects no less, but the look on his face suggests that this means something more.

"I've been having dreams. Usually during peak REM, my brain conjures up playbacks of memory, rarely new content. Of course, I know that dreams are merely electrical brain impulses that pull random thought and imagery from memory, but these ones I've been having are rather worrisome. They've been about my work. About the choices humans make and how they ripple outwards towards all the existing parallel worlds. In this state of REM, I've been given access into these parallel worlds. An implausible phenomenon, no doubt, but I cannot neglect their persistence and validity."

"They're just dreams. You've been worked up lately."

He shakes his head fervently. "I'll attempt to explain this in layman terms. Every choice you make creates one or more choices. The Many Worlds theory dictates that when a choice is selected in an any event, the other unchosen options morph into branches within other realities where versions of you opted for those choices instead. But in these dreams that I believe to be a rare transcendence into a state that I might never inhabit, I've met other versions of myself and gotten a glimpse into those parallel worlds. After you dumped Leonard, I've always assumed that there would be versions of you that didn't. That comforted me in a way. In other universes, I would still be living with my best friend, even if I was not in this one."

He pauses, gauging her reaction. For once, they are completely on the same page. She nods, signalling him to go on.

"But my parallel selves have informed me otherwise."

This is insane. It was just some thought experiment, like that Schrödinger's cat that Leonard told her about. This was probably residual effects from all the recent trauma he had been experiencing. Her eyes dart back up to the welt on his temple. Perhaps it would be safer to take him to emergency room to rule out a concussion.

She decides to play along. "Are you saying that in all versions of that night we went bowling, I never told Leonard I loved him?"



“In essence, yes. There were versions of that night where either Wolowitz or Koothropali had absented themselves due to separate chain events unique to that particular timeline. Most surprisingly, Will Wheaton was absent in some of them as well, eliminating the possibility that his presence altered the final outcome. Hence, this led me to a conclusion that has confounded me for weeks. The only constant variables were you, obviously, and myself.”

She sits back, lost for words. She thinks back to that night. Standing in front of a shattered Leonard while her eyes drifted traitorously over his shoulder, locking on an oblivious Sheldon examining a bowling ball for any signs of sabotage. Her words came back to her, so clearly that she could feel the weight of them in her throat. *I'm sorry, Leonard. You don't deserve this.* It takes her a moment to realize what Sheldon is asking her now, blue eyes incandescent in the half dark of his bedroom.

“Of course, after the first night, this state did not reoccur and to regain this newfound ability peer into the other universes, I was forced to seek assistance from opioids.” He adds sheepishly. “When my neurochemical and limbic activity were overly stimulated, I found that I could easily slip in and out of that state.”

“Is this your way of saying you relied on external stimulants to block out the pain of losing someone? If so, I'm proud to say that you and I have never been more alike.”

He is still waiting, earlier words meant to smooth over the awkwardness and giving her time to think. She chooses her words carefully, knowing that whatever comes out of her mouth next would set the course for whatever it was that stands between them, stubborn and resistant.

“I swore I wouldn't lie to Leonard, even if that meant hurting him. That goes for you too. I liked Leonard, but I didn't love him. I knew he was broken and angry like me, and meeting his mom only confirmed it. I wanted someone that worshipped me, because it was hard to feel like I was worth anything after failing so many times. I thought finding a guy who did that would be enough, but it wasn't. And you—”

He leans forward; eyes wider than she had ever seen them before.

“You gave me such a hard time when we first met. I couldn't help but think if we were in high school, we'd be sitting on the opposite sides of the cafeteria. Opposing ends of the social hierarchy. When I tried to flirt with you, you'd insult me in a way that cut more than anything my dumb exes said. Remember how you got me hooked on *Age of Conan*? It seemed like every time I stepped into your world, I took things too far. Screw moderation. And you know me and alcohol, I'm a hopeless addict. And then we spent more time together and I realized that being away from you felt like— ”

Withdrawal.

“Being around you terrifies me.”

She takes a shaky breath to collect herself. He is so close that his breath tickles her ear. She runs his words over her mind. They were the only constant in every timeline. Was this just his way of expressing his feelings for her without showing his cards? She knows that Sheldon

Cooper is arrogant, possibly the most arrogant person she will ever meet, but there is no way he could be arrogant enough to delude himself into thinking that fate moulded itself around him.

“I’m scared too.” He says softly, in an imperceptible tone. “What are your thoughts in regards to this?”

She can’t have this conversation now. She is drunk and he is high. They are on his bed and the lights are mostly out. Dangerous territory.

“I think what we both need now is some sleep. Things will be clearer in the morning. They usually are.”

He leans back into the stack of pillows, features rearranging into a familiar smugness. “Let’s hope this clarity you seem so hopeful about isn’t dampened by your trademark morning hangover that usually renders you even more inarticulate than usual. You reek of artificially flavoured convenience store liquor.”

She kisses his cheek, lobs him with a bolster then shuffles out the door. “Goodnight Sheldon.”

## Chapter End Notes

References on Many Worlds Theory research:

<https://www.quantamagazine.org/why-the-many-worlds-interpretation-of-quantum-mechanics-has-many-problems-20181018/>

# Chapter 4

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

*Sheldon Cooper always assumed rage to be a construct.*

*Sure, there were many times when the taunts from the thugs at middle school struck a nerve on a particularly bad day. Or when his friends insisted on testing the boundaries of his meticulously calibrated rules. But he reminded himself that he was immune. That his seemingly human façade of flesh was just a cover for the iron and cogs that whirled underneath. You could break the man, but the machine was immortal. He lived each day with that shield that he had forged with his mind, and surprisingly his friends and colleagues caught on to what he was doing. When the insipid term “robot man” fell out of Wolowitz’s mouth, a cool triumph had surged through him. He had managed to separate himself from the failings of the rest of humanity. Partitioned himself from the pain, confusion and mayhem that plagued others around him.*

*He often dreamed of suspending his consciousness long after his body had wasted away. The body was so weak. Locked in eternal opposition with the mind, he had to allocate precious hours to tend to it. Feed it and rest it. And yet, sometimes it ached for something not of the physical world. This amorphous hunger that lurked in the recesses of his mind like a virus, hijacking the compartments and codes that contained vital information and analyses gleaned from his eidetic memory over the years. This intruder that only revealed itself through physical signs—twitching of the fingers, racing heartbeat, dizziness. He wasn’t merely irate. He was furious.*

*The sensation first emerged as he watched Leonard pack up his possessions into cardboard boxes. He couldn’t understand why a termination of sexual relations between Leonard and Penny should result in him having to suffer. Finding a roommate that adhered to the agreement he had spent weeks writing and finetuning was a feat in itself, and Leonard had proved himself to be both useful and amicable for the most part. His fatal flaw—one that Sheldon had noticed since the first day—had been the final detonator. He didn’t see why Penny had been the last straw for Leonard. She wasn’t starkly different from the women of his previous engagements. She had symmetrical features, a proportionate body and silky tresses. And more confounding still, Leonard seemed to believe that he and Penny had begun an affiliation unbeknownst to him.*

*(He often thought back to the time where she first waltz into their apartment, scanned the haphazard sprawl of quantum mechanics on his board and declared him a genius without the least bit of comprehension for what was written. Still, he had buckled with the compliment. The invader had thrummed through his bloodstream, mocking.)*

*The parts of his days that deviated from his pre-planned schedule were somehow always spent with her. Some otherworldly force tugged him out of his mornings of oatmeal and doctor who, and like an affliction similar to sleepwalking, he found himself at her door at eleven sharp, racking his brain for a topic of conversation in the seconds after he had*

*knocked (seemingly out of his own volition) and before she came bounding over to open it. Wide eyes and overly-sweet raspberry body spray and chaos. She'd smile in a way that even he could discern was hopeful, and he would smother the budding symptoms of his internal invasion with a spiteful comment. Her brows would crinkle in confusion and he would retreat back into himself.*

*The opioids were merely a way of repressing the various receptor sites in his brain. Sleep was becoming elusive and he found himself dozing off on the edge of a breakthrough. A sharp pain had embedded himself in the space between his ribs and lower stomach. He researched on recreational drugs and finally settled on the infamous drug of illusion—heroin.*

Endorphins flood the space between nerve cells and usually inhibit neurons from firing, thus creating an analgesic effect. When endorphins do their work, the organism feels good, high, or euphoric, and feels relief from pain. Like an evil twin, the morphine molecule locks onto the endorphin-receptor sites on nerve endings in the brain and begins the succession of events that leads to euphoria or analgesia.

*It was fairly easy to obtain from his connections within the chemistry department in Caltech. The first jab was fairly unpleasant and he vomited twice. The second and third were tolerable. The fourth was an epiphany. Morphine diffused from the bloodstream, seeping into brain. His bathroom floor felt like the warmest, cosiest cocoon. The visions of the alternate existing realities emerged, clear as day. He could peer into any of his choosing, turn back time and make the right choice a million times over. Then he noticed Penny's refusal to conform to his Godly manipulations, always choosing to dump Leonard despite every new variable he imposed on the timeline. From his view in the clouds, he noticed her hazel eyes coming to rest on his distracted form for a brief second, before storming out of the bowling alley. Whenever his eidetic memory stirred, he would reach for the needle, filling himself with the drug until he could no longer see the expression on her face, on Leonard's.*

*When Leonard had shoved the last of his boxes out the door, he did something he'd never thought he'd do. He asked him to stay. Without Leonard, the eight square meters that sat between 4A and 4B would dissipate. The door signs would merge. There would be no telling where either began. Was this internal assault on his senses a prelude for the larger physical infiltration that was to come? Leonard turned around to face him, expression indiscernible. Then to his surprise, he smiled. Facial expressions were always disconcerting, but something in him knew that Leonard's grin was caustic rather pleased.*

*"It's always been you, buddy. Right from that first day. She only came over when she knew you were around. Used some dumb video game as an excuse to sneak into your bedroom long before I got her into mine. And the best part is, you weren't even interested."*

*"Leonard." He had hazarded. "Are you implying that the possibility of both you and Penny existing in my life simultaneously is nullified from this point onwards?"*

*"Are you saying that you're interested in her?"*

*"That remains ambivalent."*

*“She’s going to get tired of this soon, you know. This demented cat-and-mouse chase the two of you have going on.”*

*“The fact that you have reduced Penny and I to animals doesn’t elevate you in the manner you perceive, it merely draws further attention to your adolescent anguish.”*

*“You won’t make her happy. That’s all I’m saying.”*

*The door shut. He sank down on his desk chair; the glow of his monitor the sole source of illumination in the room. Something within him began to unspool. The fire started from the base of his spine, spreading across his back then shooting up his neck. Images of blood and gun fire danced in front of him in the dark.*

## Chapter End Notes

A/N: Sheldon's POV will always be flashbacks whereas Penny's POV is in the present, hence it is italicised.

## Chapter 5

Rehearsals began, and Craig wasn't about to let up. Penny forces a smile as he sashays about during their read throughs, trying to find any excuse to touch her. He's sweet but has slightly eerie—mannequin perfect features, a feline suave, and steamed pressed linen shirts. Not even a sliver of the chaos she had become so accustomed to. She knows her line delivery is mechanic, but she can't bring herself to care. She merely nods at the notes the director constantly hands her, her thoughts conjuring up images of Sheldon, gaunt in the slant of moonlight, cutting heroin with a steel ruler. Life occasionally got tough for everyone, and people racked up a few habits here and there. But not Sheldon. His body was a sacred vessel that he guarded from contamination and injury with a near manic paranoia. The devil on her shoulder whispers that maybe she's the problem. That she shouldn't have drunk so much in front of him. Shouldn't have alluded to the fact that one could poison themselves out of grief. Shouldn't have pronounced toxins as antidote. Maybe she should have stayed away from him. If she did, he might still have a roommate. He wouldn't be coming home to an empty apartment, while she sits alone in hers, the silence more stifling than ever.

But she likes what had blossomed between them in Leonard's absence. Without Leonard's constant intrusion, she is finally able to see Sheldon as he is, untainted by the constant mockery that Leonard made sure to hurl his way at every opportunity. From that first day, Leonard had gaslighted her into believing that he was the only viable option between the both of them, and she had convinced herself so, suppressing part of her that was drawn to his bizarre compatriot. It was easy to dub Sheldon as the weirdo, the butt of every joke, even the ones that weren't funny and sometimes downright cruel. But she was no saint either. She had fashioned Leonard into a liminal buoy she used to observe the guy she truly wanted, a doorway into his world. Yes, she wanted Sheldon. More than she had ever wanted any other guy. The distance was a blessing, she could finally admit it now. She knew that her and Leonard were doomed to failure the second they got together. She didn't love him, and no amount of begging or guilt tripping could dredge up feelings she simply didn't have. And the horrible truth of it all was that even without his humiliating objectification of her and unrelenting micro-aggressions, she still wouldn't have loved him. He was and always had been the white noise that buzzed between Sheldon and her, a mere blip on their stratosphere.

"Hey, I saw you the other day at The Cheesecake Factory. Was hanging out with a couple of buddies. You work there?"

She startles, nearly jumping out of her skin. She looks up to see Craig staring quizzically at her from across the stage. He has on a white singlet under a black bomber jacket. Her eyes skim the bulge of his prominent biceps—a reflex—and his smile widens.

"Yeah, it was sort of a side gig. You know, until this whole acting thing took off. I mean, this break might not go anywhere, so I thought I could use it as a fallback."

Craig takes a step closer, slightly stunned that she had said more than three words to him. "Cool. You look really good in that uniform."

“Nah. Yellow isn’t my color.”

“Did your boyfriend tell you that?” He smirks and she sighs. Back to the million-dollar question.

“I’m single right now. Freshly out of a relationship.”

“That’s interesting. So am I. What do you say to Mexican tonight? It’d be nice to be served instead of you know, serve for a change, won’t it?”

She had many dinners with many different men over the years. Before accepting a dinner invitation, she would always envision a hypothetical version of the night, basing it on her impression of the guy. With Craig, there would be sloppy burritos followed by tequila shots. Dumb jokes and easy laughs. A drive-in movie where he would feel her up through her cheap polyester dress. Her five-inch heels would hurt her feet. She would sleep with him just because he paid for dinner and said she was beautiful. She’s almost bored by this sequence of events, and they haven’t even occurred yet. When had she become such a skeptic? When had simplicity turned into something to be mocked?

“Sure.” She says, just to prove to herself or the universe that the old Penny was still in there.

But somewhere within, she curses the lithe scientist that had the audacity to waltz into her life and upend her measurement of happiness. Absorbed her world into his so that they both spun on the same axis. Replaced Friday night clubbing with Dungeons and Dragons. Soccer games with paintball matches. Carnal groping with timid half-hugs. Sex with coitus. Flirty stare-offs with warm, perceptive glances. Blind lust with neurochemical reactions. Her huge, overwhelming reality had shrunk to the size of a marble that she could inspect between two fingers. In many ways, he *had* proved the existence of another universe.

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Dinner with Craig goes exactly as she expected, except for the last bit. Instead of drunkenly slipping into his apartment at the end of the night, she pecks him on the cheek after a post-date latte and walks a triumphant three blocks home after midnight. It was progress. Baby steps. But it all falls apart when she unlocks her door to the dank darkness of her apartment. Musty day old laundry and unwashed dishes. She collapses onto the floor, shaking. Somehow, she had wired her body to anticipate another one on top it after a huge dinner and a couple of drinks. She had never left a date hanging when sex was on the table. Never turned a warm body away to curl up into her cold sheets.

Sheldon would be asleep now. So vulnerable. She still had that spare key. She could slip into his bedroom. Climb on top of him and rip through that plaid cotton. He wouldn’t turn her away. Would he? He had hugged her twice, close enough that she felt his heartbeat thump against her ribs. She had been with enough guys to know which ones wanted her just by giving them a once over. But Sheldon was inscrutable. And insane. They wouldn’t hook up. They would collide. And it would be devastating; disintegrating. Reach for the bottle. Alcohol was her confidant, her only ally when everything else had deserted her. Two shots of vodka. Blue eyes. Boring into hers. Tequila with a crust of salt. Piano hands on her waist. No.

No. More vodka. A slug of gin. Could this kill her? She would have to find out. She gurgles, her throat starting to burn. Black.

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The next morning, the two solid raps on her door seem like a hallucination. During her worst hangovers, the world slips underwater. They don't go away when she smothers her head with a pillow. When she finally drags herself out of bed, Sheldon takes a startled step backward when she swings open the door.

"Oh. Sheldon." She cringes at her zebra print tank and tousled bed head. "I wasn't expecting you."

"Penny, I would like to invite you to an event." He blurts.

"An event?"

"Yes, as you know I receive many annual accolades for my achievements. I received word this morning that I am this year's recipient for the J.J. Sakurai Prize in Theoretical Particle Physics, awarded by the American Physical Society. I apologize for the inebriated debacle that was the previous awards ceremony you attended. Nevertheless, I have always found your presence...comforting amidst the unavoidable distress that is the obligatory speech I have to give."

She grins. "So you're not planning on subjecting us to another elements song and bonus strip tease?"

"That is the plan."

"Damn, that was the only thing that kept me awake throughout that snooze fest. You've got some moves, Moon pie."

She takes in his wide, innocuous eyes. Long fingers death-gripping his bag strap. Then she remembers the pact she had made with herself. Stay away.

"Sure, I'd love to come. I'm kinda seeing this guy, his name is Craig. Is it alright if I bring him along?"

He squares his shoulders, a visible deflation in his gait that he tries to mask. "Isn't that the invertebrate with the penchant for starfishes who amused us with his non-ironic commentary regarding lasers blowing up the moon? He was satisfactory as superman despite his mental limitations."

"No, that was Zack and we're not speaking anymore. Craig is an actor as well. He's going to star opposite me in Broadway."

"Oh, the humanities." Sheldon mutters. "Very well, if you must. The ceremony is tomorrow evening at seven. Just let the security at Caltech know that I invited you...and your friend."

He turns abruptly and makes his way down the stairs. Penny folds her arms and leans against her door frame, puzzled. Inviting Craig was a test, to see if Sheldon would insist that the



invitation was extended only to her. That it was something more than just a friendly request for companionship. But he made no attempt to persuade her go alone. And more disturbingly, Sheldon had seemed so confident about giving a speech. During the previous awards ceremony she had attended, the wine he downed reduced his inhibitions, to the point where he had lost all sense of propriety. Now, he is jittery and exhausted, his usual quips less biting than usual. Something in her curdles. Sheldon Cooper was a glass with a false bottom. There were things about him that she probably would never know or understand and—recent events considered—didn't particularly want to.

## Chapter 6

As soon as Sheldon leaves, she shoots a quick text to Craig asking him if he'd be willing to be accompany her to a friend's 'science thing'. She winces as she hit 'send', recalling the disastrous run in Zack had with the guys, Sheldon taking the lead in the mockery. They had demolished him, and Sheldon locked eyes with her after she chided them, wondering he had successfully made the gulf apparent. He had, and the dating sphere had never been the same since. Craig has proven himself to be significantly more intellectual, but compared to Sheldon, he may as well be a lab monkey learning how to doodle. Her phone chimes. An enthusiastic affirmation with a heart emoticon. Why was she even doing this anyway? Manipulating a guy into confession the second she caught feelings for him was so typical of her. Her self-worth had always been so intrinsically tied to her dating score card, a biproduct of her high school days. The origin story of how she became the ultimate jerk magnet was a long and convoluted tale. But Sheldon could barely tell a lie, let alone decipher her attempts at making him jealous. He would probably assume that she wasn't interested in taking things further, and that would set them back years, abolishing what little progress they had made in the last few weeks.

She spends two whole hours getting ready, longer than she would for any date. And she doesn't bother trying to convince herself that even a fraction of the effort was for Craig. She digs out the gold backless satin dress from the back of her closet that Sheldon once glided a finger across, tracing his knuckles over the side zipper while they waited in line for a conference Leonard was hosting. Reaches for the only perfume she owned that doesn't trigger his sinuses. Tugs on the four-inch heels that she wore on a clubbing night where she stumbled home drunk and tripped over a sleeping Sheldon curled up on the stairwell after another fight with Leonard, resulting in an awkward wrestling match that sent her into hysterics while Sheldon barked out her three-strike sentence—a month long banishment from his apartment they both knew wouldn't last a day.

Craig is pacing around the lobby when she finally makes her way down, slick in a button up and dress pants. He holds an arm out wordlessly and she takes it, and he leads out to his car. She offered hers, but he insisted on driving. The guilt is boiling over. He thinks this is a date and she had given him every reason to think so. He's sullen, something clearly gnawing at him.

"So what's the deal with you and this Sheldon?" He asks.

"I moved in across the hall about three years ago and sort of dated his roommate. I told you about Leonard, remember? Short, glasses, dorky."

"Sort of?" His forced aloofness is starting to piss her off.

"It was rocky. More offs than ons if you know what I mean."

"Because you screwed his roommate?"

She turns to him in disbelief. "Excuse me? Where is this even coming from?"

“When you texted me, you didn’t mention that this ‘science thing’ was an awards ceremony dedicated to kissing your genius male neighbor’s ass.”

“So that’s what this is about? You can’t stand the fact that some other guy can be successful within ten feet of you? We are so taking separate cars back because there is no room in here for us both and that ego.”

“No, this is about the fact that you told me to wait in the lobby rather than at your door.”

“Now you’re being ridiculous. I thought you’d care enough to want to support someone who has been there for me for years before you showed up. But I guess I was wrong.”

She has half a mind to tell him to pull over, but they are only one traffic light away from the university campus, windows lit in gold. She had never seen it at night, it looks so regal, fit for a place that housed the world’s leading minds. People who actually had the power and intelligence to make a change in the lives of others. Would she do the same someday, or just remain a supporting face in the crowd? Craig slaps the car keys into the valet’s gloved hand, and they march towards the ballroom. She grabs two glasses off a tray and downs them. This evening would be entirely intolerable sober.

“Let’s meet this champ, shall we?” Craig declares, just as she catches a glimpse of Sheldon making his way towards them, dashing in a suit. It’s hard to believe he owns a tuxedo, let alone one that is so perfectly tailored to his wiry frame and not a garish shade of green or purple. He seems evasive, shifty. When she squints, she realizes that she’s right on the money. He hides behind a wall, covertly stuffing a pair of lab gloves into his back pocket before approaching them.

“Penny, I’m glad you could make it.” He nods at Craig. “I see you’ve brought with you physical evidence that natural selection is indeed biased.”

“What’d you say to me, asshole?” Craig raises an arm but she smacks it down.

“Sheldon, I’d like you to meet Craig. Craig, Sheldon.”

“So you’re the neighbour?” Craig asks.

“Indeed I am. Penny appoints a substitute, if you will, whenever a potential mate deserts her. She isn’t particularly scrupulous during these episodes, so you can understand why I am not congratulating you.”

Craig’s eyes darken. Unlike Zack, he isn’t absolutely clueless. He caught the gist of Sheldon’s insults even if he didn’t fully fathom the depth of them.

“The only reason why my fist isn’t connecting to your jaw this instant is because you’re the star of the show tonight, and I’m not about to show Penny up.”

Sheldon remains impassive, hands folded primly behind his back. “Connecting *with* my jaw.”

“Sheldon, I’m warning you.” She hisses. “Play nice.”

He glances at her, and she flinches at the look in his eyes. He isn't angry. She had witnessed his tirades countless of times. He was psychotic and flailing, a raving mad man that was more likely to cause harm to himself before he carried out the threats he vowed to exact on others. Worlds away from this stoic stranger who could annihilate someone by scanning through a person's catalogue of weaknesses through pure deduction, cherry picking which ones would hurt the most. This was an emotion she didn't even know he was capable of.

She holds her glare and finally Sheldon averts his gaze, shuffling his feet and edging back towards his usual gait. "I apologize for my earlier behavior. Perhaps the glass of wine I had earlier wasn't the wisest decision."

Craig nods, a hesitant respect towards the unexpected gesture and she inwardly heaves a sigh of relief. They were bound to despise each other, but at least the warfare could begin after the ceremony. These last few weeks had been stressful enough. She didn't know what she would do if Sheldon started a fight with her co-star and made him quit before opening night. Then it dawns on her. Sheldon's odd temperament. A barely restrained rage. Was he upset that she had brought another guy to the event? A dark part of her reveled in the fact that she had hijacked the mainframe and coaxed out a primality she never knew he could exhibit. She didn't want to be a trophy, but she did want to be desired. Fought over like she was something precious that could be lost.

Just as she is about to drag Sheldon away for a private chat, he pulls a flask out from his jacket, filling a glass with its contents—a clear liquid which he hands it to Craig.

"Consider this an offer of truce for my previous misdemeanours. They were uncalled for."

Craig eyes it suspiciously but accepts it, clinking the glass against her champagne flute. Her stomach knots when Sheldon glances at his watch. As if on command, the clear liquid turns a dark inky blue just as the rim touches Craig's lips. She blinks, failing to believe what she had just seen. Craig yelps and jumps back, swearing loudly, the glass slipping from his grasp. The shatter turns several heads, loud chatter and acapella laughter coming to an abrupt halt. A few chemists cheer. Astrophysicists roll their eyes. A waiter scurries over to sweep up the shards. Sheldon grins at his handiwork, using the newfound attention to breakdown his little gag, like a magician at the end of a show. She isn't sure what she's feeling anymore. She should be angry, but all she can think about are wizards and alchemy and gaudy elixirs and how this nightmare feels more like a fairytale than it should.

"Bazinga. Here's a little treat for the chemists here tonight. A simple trick known as the clock reaction, in which one combines sodium, potassium or ammonium persulfate to oxidize iodide ions into iodine. I was worried the timing might be off, but fortunately my estimated predictions factoring in meaningless small talk and pleasantries were accurate."

"That's it. This jerk is gonna get it." Craig swings a fist but Sheldon dodges it. He grabs Craig's arm and twists it, leveraging on the elbow joint so that his wrist is the point of pivot, easing the pressure off his bicep. She sees the math reeling behind his deep set eyes. He's probably calculating how many degrees it would take to sprain the limb, and how many more it would take to break it.

"Stop it! Both of you!" She yells, bashing her purse against Craig's shoulder.

The room pixelates as Craig shoves her off, sending her tumbling to the floor. She had a few shots before Craig picked her up and mixing the champagne wasn't a good idea. When she gets to her feet, Sheldon is gone and Craig is seething, white shirt stained blue. The room is silent and gawking. Before she can make a run for the exit, he seizes her arm and drags her out to lobby.

"Craig, I'm so sorry. I had no idea he was going to do that."

"Was this your plan all along? To use me as some scapegoat for you and your friend's little prank? He could've poisoned me. You were probably in on it. That's how you get off. Getting scientists to do your bidding for you. You're a pathetic whore."

He's yelling but she can see that he's hurt. Confused from all the mixed signals. And it's all her fault. She can't explain this. Can't explain Sheldon. The multitude of feelings that she been suppressing for weeks, now finally rising, thick like bile in her throat.

"Are you in love with him?"

She opens her mouth, then closes it. They stare at each other for a moment. Craig laughs, a barking cough. Then without warning, smacks her across the jaw. The blow sends her stumbling on the slippery marble flooring, but she keeps her footing. That was it. One thing she knew for sure was that in Nebraska, no one walks away from a fight.

"Oh, you're gonna regret that, pal."

She feigns injury, waits for him to get close then knees him hard in the stomach. Tugging off her left stiletto, she's seconds away from ramming the heel into his eye socket when an explosion goes off. It sounds more like a pop, followed by a rattle. A controlled blast. The other guests come tearing down the ballroom stairs. She's tugged into a sea of bodies, Craig lost in the pandemonium. The cops arrive once everyone is safely out in the carpark. She pushes through the crowd, yelling for Sheldon. She catches him slinking through a couple of disheveled tenured professors, catches hold of his sleeve before he sneaks away.

She tugs him to a secluded corner, folds her arms across her chest. "I'm guessing that little stunt was your doing?"

"I will neither confirm or deny. All I can say is that silver nitrate, magnesium and a sprinkling of H<sub>2</sub>O is not a good mix."

"Oh my god." She jabs him in the shoulder. "Why the hell would you do that? People could have gotten hurt."

"I saw your little tussle with the invertebrate from the chemistry lab window. Bearing witness to such boorish behaviour was sickening in itself, not to mention that I would have to care for you if you had gotten seriously injured."

"I can handle myself."

He pauses, kicking at the gravel. "I don't doubt that. Consider this a display of masculine chivalry which I'm sure will be a nice deviation from the previous proceedings of the evening. And you might want to ice that lip when you get back."

She rubs at the bruise forming on her lower lip. Craig had clocked her good. She was going to have to make a report to the director, provided that he didn't quit first. Sheldon seems antsy, shifting his weight from one foot to another. He had saved her, no matter how much she hated to admit it. A calculated retaliation that involved test tubes and chemicals rather than bare fists. What she had witnessed was a clash of egos, except one party was fighting fire with combat level lasers. Would Leonard do the same? He always needed to impress with brawn rather than brain. He would overestimate his physical abilities, get thrashed by someone twice his size then sulk the rest of the night, leaving her to pick up the pieces.

"What about your award?"

He shrugs. "I'll pick it up on Monday. At least now I can skip that speech."

Despite herself, she steps forward and wraps her arms around him. He tenses at first, then places both hands on her waist, fingertips brushing her spine. His nails dig into exposed skin and she gasps a little. The explosion was just a little distraction. He knew it wouldn't hurt anyone. She hopes.

"Penny, I have another request to make." He mumbles into her hair.

"Go ahead. You've got me all buttered up now with that little act of heroism."

He pulls away, straightening his tie. "Excellent. I assumed appealing to your primal feminine instincts would make you more agreeable to this next proposal. I thought we might continue that little thought experiment I shared with you the other night. Since Leonard has departed in all known universes, I'm sure all our alternate selves have taken the opportunity to attempt to deepen their acquaintances, only to realise that our friendly rapport still stands at a moot point. If we followed suit, I can collate the results and prove to Leonard that his trepidations regarding our affiliation are extraneous. He can move back in, and we can all put this little mishap behind us."

"Are you asking me out on a date?"

"I suppose I am. Is that not the social convention to test compatibility?"

She bites at her bruised lip, fighting back a smile. It's contagious, and his eyes light up the way they always did at the few inside jokes they shared. Moments of absurdity that fell between their polarities. Sheldon Cooper was asking her out on a date on the premise of a daring hypothesis she intended to pummel to pieces with nothing more than her hands and lips.

"Next Saturday's good for me."

## Chapter 7

She calls in sick for the next few days, after the welt on her lip turned a nasty shade of green, mottled purple veins spiraling down her right side of her chin. She filed a report against Craig and the director of the play informed her that his understudy would be taking over. The only thing she had to look forward to was a date with Sheldon on Saturday. But with each passing hour, she starts to regret taking him up on that offer. They might be jeopardizing their friendship without even knowing it. They were both at their worst. She didn't get a chance to ask him if he was still on heroin, and she hadn't been able to last an hour without a drink for the last few weeks. Recently, she had begun experiencing sudden blackouts, closing her eyes to take a nap only to wake up hours later, assuming minutes had passed when it had been hours.

The past few days had been a continuous, fitful dream. Love Island droning in the background, a bottle of gin clamped between her sweat-pant clad thighs, drifting in and out of consciousness. There would be food on her door step like clockwork at five-hour intervals. She told him that he didn't need to do that, but Sheldon insisted that he needed to ensure she was alive for the date slash experiment. He had offered to drive her home that night, but she needed some time alone to think, and took a cab instead. It would be too reminiscent of the night they went bowling months ago, when everything fell to pieces. A single knock on her door.

"Sheldon?" She calls out. No response.

Still, she runs a comb through a few split ends and smears on some lip gloss. Peeks into the closet mirror to make sure there aren't any stains on her top. When she opens the door, she's stunned to find Leonard standing there, a bouquet of lilies in his hand.

"Hey." He says, stuffing them in her hands a little too frantically. "Sorry they're wrapped in plastic. I guess I can add pollen to my list of kryptonite."

"No, they're lovely. I'm just...surprised to see you." She ushers him in, fills an empty Merlot bottle with water and plunks the flowers in. She pinches herself a few times to make sure she isn't still lucid dreaming. He was really here.

"You look good." She says. "How's work?"

"Thanks. And you know, same old."

Leonard's distracted, taking stock of the row of assorted liquor bottles and overflowing trash bags. He's looking for signs that another guy has taken his place. A stray muscle tank or bottles of aftershave. He has no idea that he's been replaced by someone who's traceless. Practically scentless. A lanky, infuriating genius who has always been by his side, a faux ally, watching her from the shield of his friend's adaptability and hoping he'd fail.

"So, rough few weeks, huh?"

“Yeah, I’ve been so busy I’ve barely had time to clean. And let’s face it, I wouldn’t even if I did.”

They both laugh even though it sounds forced. He knows she’s hiding something.

“I’ve got good news.” She starts. “I’ve been cast in a Broadway production based on a book. It’s called *As I Lay Awake* and will be debuting in New York two months from now.”

“Oh my god, that’s amazing.” He hugs her, a little too tightly. “So you’re going alone?”

“Well, I’ve sort of asked Sheldon to come along for morale support. We’ve been spending some time together and he’s been really sweet.”

His face falls and her insides knot. She should have expected this. Things were probably still tense between them, if they had even spoken at all.

“Never thought I’d hear you say ‘Sheldon’ and ‘sweet’ in the same sentence.”

“But you can totally come too. And Howard and Raj. The more the merrier, right?”

But Leonard shakes his head, turns away from her and sinks down on the couch, staring into space. She folds herself into the space next to him, contemplating if it’s appropriate to touch his shoulder.

“I just didn’t expect the both of you to be buddying up after everything that happened.”

“Leonard, we broke up. That had nothing to do with Sheldon.”

He leaps up and whirls around to face her. “It had everything to do with him and you know it. The second you stormed out of the bowling alley, he went running after you. Don’t you get it? He played me. For years he made my life hell by playing the woe-is-me genius that was above all basic human etiquette and right when we hit a road block, he waltzed right in and made me look like crap. In front of you. The girl I want to marry someday.”

He’s breathing hard, hands on his hips. She’s never seen him so worked up before. And he just said that he wanted to marry her. She has to choose her next words carefully.

“Leonard, we had problems in our relationship that were just too large. I didn’t love you—” He winces at that but she presses on. “And I just couldn’t stand lying to you anymore. You were pressurizing me and I needed to get out. You were infatuated with me and it wouldn’t have been right of me to lead you on. You thought we were soul mates when we just neighbors. Any blonde waitress could have moved into this apartment and you would have been smitten with her.”

“I wasn’t infatuated with you. I was in love with you. You were the one.”

He’s waiting for the scene he had built up in his head to play out. He would come over with flowers and apologize and she would give him another chance. She pleads him with her eyes not to make her say the words. He doesn’t budge.

“But you weren’t the one for me.”



The words hang in the air. Leonard doesn't scream or cry or throw a fit, his usual methods to get her to cave. He just stands there, staring at her face for what feels like hours. His eyes don't drift down to her chest or hips like they usually do in their mid-argument staring matches. Instead they come to rest on her swollen lip. Suddenly self-conscious, she reaches for her ice pack to cover it up.

"I dropped by Sheldon's earlier before you. He mentioned that the both of you were going out this Saturday. Pretty convenient for you that option b isn't too far away. I didn't plan on stopping by your place after that, but I guess the masochist in me wanted to see if you'd break the news even if I didn't ask. And you didn't. So please, don't humor me. Don't act like I'm insane for holding this against him."

She doesn't expect that. Her words come out soft, weak. "It came out of nowhere. He just asked me. And I—I wanted to."

"Were you just stringing me along from the start? Did you use me to get to him?"

"Of course not! How can you even think that?"

"Because this doesn't make any fucking sense." He picks up an empty wine bottle and flings it across the room. It shatters over her sink.

She steels herself. "It doesn't. But the relationships that do never really work out, do they? At least to him, I'm a person and not a prize."

"Don't put this on me. I did everything right. I treated you like a goddess."

"Because you thought I was beautiful!" She shouts. "And that meant everything to you and that was as deep as it went with us."

"That's because when men aren't groveling at your feet you crumble!"

She stares at him, stung. This was a new low, even for him. "*You* groveled because you knew that was the only way you could ever get me to sleep with you."

That silences him and she pushes on.

"I didn't bring it up because I don't owe it to you. I'm not trying to get back at you so you can get your head out of your ass. What happens between me and Sheldon has nothing to do with you. And he wasn't trying to hurt you. He's got it in his head that we'll be doing some social experiment to get you to move back in."

"Penny, considering the amount of credentials between Sheldon and I, I think it's pretty well-established that neither of us are idiots. He knew perfectly well what he was doing."

He steps forward, cupping her cheek in his hand. She jerks away just as his thumb inches toward her lip. Then he turns on his heel and struts out the door, closing the door softly behind him.

# Chapter 8

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

With the shades drawn and lights turned down low, Penny pores through multiple volumes of high school physics textbooks bought in bulk at the second hand bookstore. Glasses askew and pencil between her lips, she ponders a question she never thought she ever would. How does one charm the scientist without understanding the science? Sheldon had assured her that he didn't care about her qualifications, unlike Leonard, but she knew that they wouldn't be able to get far if they both weren't prepared to put in an insurmountable amount of effort. Hell, Sheldon might play it cool, but she suspected that he had a copy of *Smalltalk for Dummies* hidden in his comic stash. She isn't used to thinking. She always believed that life was about moments, little miracles that didn't need to be dissected. The calmness of yoga, sand course against her feet, the warm rush of anticipation when the cute bartender winks at her.

Life was constantly overbearing as it is, and when she wasn't trying to numb the pain of the past, she was trying to drown out anxieties about the future. She couldn't spare time to think about the bigger questions. After several interactions with Sheldon a switch had flipped. She realized that doing the opposite—turning her attention outward—may be the breakthrough she was looking for. She doubles down on quantum mechanics, his area of research. She pulls up some online lessons, takes concise notes. Learning was so much easier when she had a source of motivation to keep her going. She won't ever be that clueless girl again. The mess she was during Sheldon's mock physics class, bursting into tears when confronted with the depth of her ignorance. He might as well have been speaking Greek when he explained how to calculate velocity. She vowed from that day on to do everything in her power to learn the rules of his world, and then bend them.

The words on the screen are starting to smudge and coalesce. All she can think about is her front door that leads to the carpeted hallway that leads to 4A that leads to...what? Sheldon staring at his unfathomable board of equations like a puzzle only he could decode. Lost in a dimension that he locked everyone out of, even those as astute and gifted as him. There were so many times when she had her eyes trained on his slender back, waiting for him to turn around and gaze at her like he did when she asked if he was a genius. Like he was taking her apart, atom by atom. He doesn't know it, but he's is a marvel on his own, a living paradox. He goes on about how physics encompasses everything, and yet he wants it to be solely his. It isn't the universe. It isn't even a library. It's a box. His favourite wooden box that he keeps hidden under his mattress, its secrets buried within it, waiting to be unveiled with his signature panache and shared among the worthy.

She nods off with glasses hanging askew off her face, graphs and numbers interlaced with fitful half dreams of a disembodied pair of ocean blue eyes.

\*

Two raps on the door. Followed by silence. She smiles, touches up her lip gloss, and lets him wait for a few minutes. It's a fond reminder of all the times he pounded on her door at ungodly hours and she how she stalled on the other end just to annoy him. She wonders if he ever had other intentions in mind, but chickened out when she opened the door, shielding himself with his laptop and a demeaning remark. His tone always leaned more towards cavalier rather than snide, like he was exchanging pleasantries. And now she's looking at the wall mounted mirror in her living room, her black velvet bodycon dress looking shorter and more desperate by the minute. Another two raps. She opens the door, and gapes.

He has on a dark blue button up paired with charcoal slacks. Black dress shoes. Hair slightly mussed. The dark colours look better on him than his usual mismatched neon. They made him look important, accentuated his features and served as an unspoken reminder of his position as one of the foremost scientists in his field, a fact that was constantly overshadowed by his many eccentricities. He carries himself differently, adjusting his cuffs and scuffing his dress shoes. But there is also a new lilt in his step, as if he had been temporarily released from all that divine purpose he clung to with a stubborn firmness; claimed as birth right. He's just a guy in a sleek suit, parading the secrets of the universe on his fingertips, standing in front of a girl who wants nothing more than to enlighten him in a wholly unexpected way.

"You look great." She tries to keep a casual tone.

"You seem stunned. I thought I'd flick through a men's fashion magazine to gain a brief understanding of appropriate courting attire. If your expression is any indicator, my judgments were equitable."

She can't help but scoff, a half-laugh. "I'll say. You know this is insane, right? The both of us standing here. About to go on a date."

"Proximity increases probability, Penny. The fact that you've lived right across the hall only served to boost the probability of this current predicament."

She scoffs. "Predicament? You make this sound like an unavoidable inconvenience."

He takes a step closer, eyes on the linoleum. She saw that his left hand was quivering before he shoved it into his pocket. Their eyes met; a dare. Every glance they shared always was.

"Unavoidable, yes." He says slowly. "But an inconvenience it most definitely is not."

For some reason, tears well up and she bites them back.

"Smart ass."

"I've been called worse."

She sighs. "Can you guess how I'm feeling right now?"

"I'll hazard one. Though I am intellectually superior in all aspects of existence I have not achieved clairvoyance. Yet. Further evolution cannot be ruled out."

She narrows her eyes and he bristles. "You're angry."

“Bingo, Sheldon. Any guesses why?”

“Not at the moment.”

“We—this is not inevitable. We’re here because we both want to be. So don’t give me any crap about alternate realities or this isn’t going to go anywhere.”

He shoots her a sly smile. “What if I told you that in one universe, we’re curled up in bed right now, post-coitus?”

“Then I would say you best play nice if your plan is to catch up our other selves.”

He hands her a form. “My plan is the antithesis of that. Now let’s get down to business. I need to you fill out this pre-date questionnaire. It documents your current physical state to eliminate any possible signs of arousal that might lead to ugly consequences later.”

She scans the form. It was a multiple-choice questionnaire. The first question reads: ‘how would you describe current your heart rate?’. She checks ‘above average’ and he snatches back the form.

“Are you sure that is the answer you’re going for? I can bring along the heart rate monitor I stole from the cardiac arrest ward if you need a more accurate measurement.”

“No, it’s beating pretty fast.” She grabs his hand and presses to her chest. “Above average, wouldn’t you say? If you wanted a different response, maybe you should have worn looser slacks. I’m only human.”

He flushes, and she bites back a laugh. “This won’t do. I’m going to have to fill it out for you.”

“Brings back memories doesn’t it? Like the time I dislocated my shoulder?”

“Oh, yes. A truly unforgettable evening featuring tranquilizer-grade painkillers and abominable fondling, against my will if I might add.”

She slips her fingers through his and he doesn’t pull away. It feels strange to be walking down the same flight of stairs they did every day, every trek accompanied by different—but no less strange—conversation topics and shifting emotions. They head over to Senñor Paolo’s, the only Mexican restaurant within the vicinity that was Sheldon-approved. Sheldon complains about the ‘epileptic’ neon lights at the entry way commemorating Mardi Gras night while they wait for their host to show them to their seats. The host eyes their formal attire and then stares quizzically at the clip board in Sheldon’s hand. She forces a smile and slips the guy a twenty-dollar bill, jutting her chin towards the window seat.

She nudges Sheldon as they are ushered in. “Light is made out of something called photons, isn’t it? The hotter the object the more photons produced.”

He stops walking for a moment, sniffs and scribbles something down. “That is correct. You’ve come prepared I see.”

“I was worried that we wouldn’t have much to talk about.”

The host ushers them to a table near the back with a stunning view of Hollywood boulevard and quickly place their orders. As soon as the server leaves, they stare at the oak table, avoiding the other’s eyes. She thinks for a moment that this might be a mistake. Perhaps they should have just gone out on one of their platonic dinners instead of putting so much pressure on the evening.

“Penny, while I appreciate the sentiment, subjecting yourself to a crash course on physics isn’t going to improve or jeopardize our friendship. We both have our personal pursuits that occupy most of our time and I think it’s best that we focus on them. And if past interactions are any indication, you and I can sustain a conversation for many hours uninterrupted.”

She takes a sip of wine. “Still going with the whole friendship thing, huh?”

“I thought I made my intentions for this evening perfectly clear.”

“Look, Leonard isn’t going to move back in with you. He dropped by my place after yours and we got into a huge argument about how I chose you over him.”

“But that’s absurd. I’m doing everything in my capacity to allow the both of you to resume the amorous relations he prizes above everything else. That’s the reason I designed the questionnaire and asked you out.”

“That’s not how things work in the real world, Sheldon!” She shouts and a few patrons stare. She lowers her tone to an aggravated whisper. “I’m sorry. I just—I know it’s hard for you to understand but Leonard is mad with the both of us, because I told him I have feelings for you.”

Sheldon’s eyes widen, and soften. Clenches a fist on the table. “Do you?”

She reaches across the table to unclasp his fist, slipping her hand into his. “Yes.”

Then he yanks his hand away. “Numbers, Penny. Numbers don’t lie. Leonard is a scientist; he’ll need statistical data. You’re going to answer this questionnaire and by the end of it, you’ll realize that these feelings you claim to have for me are nothing but a rush of endorphins spurred on by your recent abstinence from coitus and alcohol, intensified by these wacky flashing lights that mimic an environment your brain associates with stimulation.”

“Wow, I’ve never had a guy turn down my feelings before so I’m not sure how to react to that. Still, I have enough experience in this department, unlike you, and I’ve developed a pretty accurate bullshit meter. So here’s a hypothesis for you. I think you’re so eager to prove me wrong so you won’t have to admit that you have feelings for me too.”

The waiter arrives with their food and they lean back into their chairs, arms crossed and fuming. Wordlessly, she tucks into her tacos and Sheldon does the same, though he mainly just pokes at his guacamole. A few bites in and she caves.

“Fine, I’ll fill out your stupid questionnaire.” She snatches the paper and pen. “Question two. Do you experience unusual physical symptoms when in close proximity to subject in question? Considering I wanted to jump your bones the night I found you all bruised up and again at the awards ceremony, I’ll have to check yes.”

Sheldon grimaces but doesn’t respond. She realizes that this quiz is more than some silly experiment to piss her off. It’s his final attempt to mend things with Leonard. Words can’t be trusted, there will always be room for misinterpretation and tonal errors. But numbers are exact and clear. In their years together, she never really took notice of how much he relied on Leonard both physically and emotionally. She had come between them and this was her chance to fix it, even if meant being dishonest again. But it was just a piece of paper he wanted to shove in Leonard’s face. They both knew where the night was headed, and nothing could put a brake in it now.

Does the notion of a removal of the subject elicit feelings of anguish?

Has your daily functioning and thought processes been impacted by frequent and intrusive meditations regarding the subject?

Do you view the subject as a potential mate?

She checks ‘no’ for the rest of the questions and hands it back to him. He scans through the answers and tucks it back into a folder in his bag.

“Thank you for your cooperation.”

“You’re welcome.” She sighs. “Look, I don’t know about you, but I’ve been waiting a long time for this. For us to finally try to give whatever this is a shot. Can we start over?”

“I’ve been waiting a long time for this too.” He blurts.

She quirks an eyebrow. “How long?”

Sheldon leans forward and rests his chin on his crossed fingers, a posture he tended to assume when he had to admit an essential truth that was a bit too revealing, that made him want to use condescension to mask a lack of composure.

“The day we met you. Leonard invited you over for Indian food. You said I was a genius without the even the most minimal amount of comprehension for the material you were commending. Though we had only made the briefest acquaintance, you had faith that my work was of impeccable quality, which for some reason stimulated my motivation to work on it. The next day I had a breakthrough regarding the isolation of atomic nuclei from their corresponding electrons, turning the Born-oppenheimer spoof into viable supplemental research. Prior to that, I had never considered that emotions were directly linked to productivity.”

She grins, leaning forward and mimicking his posture. “It was just a gut feeling. I knew you were something special the second I laid eyes on you.”

“And as our relationship strengthened and developed, I made many new internal discoveries. My mind and body eased into an amicable tandem. It was overwhelming at first, seeing as this was in contention with my professional revelations, but I enjoyed the challenge.”

“I liked the challenge too. I’ve never really gone toe-to-toe with anyone until we got into the tiff that ended with my lingerie hanging off the telephone wire.”

“You didn’t win that one. I conceded.”

“Lose. Concede. What’s the difference?”

After dinner they take a stroll up sunset boulevard where the Chateau Marmont gleams in the dark. She tells him about the significance of the hotel and about Josh Belushi and Bette Davis and he listens to her go on about the macabre rumours with a genuine interest. He doesn’t pull away when she slips her arm through his, although his shoulders stiffen a little. A group of college guys catcall her from an outdoor bar, but apologize after Sheldon casts a stern glare their way. When conversation peters off into a comfortable silence, she sneaks a glance at him. She never noticed how pronounced his cheek bones were in the dark or how his glacial eyes dimmed into indigo under street lamps. She wonders if he had ever considered himself good-looking. He probably never did, and that only made her want to tell him herself.

“You’re a really attractive guy, Sheldon. I mean, you’re fascinating obviously. But you have the looks to go with it.”

“I’m grateful for the compliments, Penny. But if my understanding of dating conventions prove sound, is that not something one says after coitus? To show gratitude for the act?”

“It’s also something one says to *get* coitus.”

“Don’t push your luck.”

She laughs. “I’m just kidding. We’re taking it slow, remember? Baby steps. Not gonna mess this up.”

He takes his hand out of his pocket and slides his fingers through hers. “At the start of the evening, I estimated that there was a 58% chance of this experiment going awry. Now it’s up to an even 80%.”

“I take it that’s Sheldonesque for ‘I really like your company’. Leonard will just have to get used to it if he moves back in. If he ever does.”

The mention of Leonard visibly irks him, and he firmly steers away from the topic. “I would like to take you to Griffith’s observatory. It’s my favourite place in the city, other than my place of work.”

“Uh, sure. Sounds romantic.”

At this hour, the observatory is almost empty, save for a few stray tourists. Sheldon takes her on a guided tour along his favourite exhibits. They spend the longest at ‘The Ribbon of Time’, which documented humanity’s evolution to the current day. He enthusiastically

explains that galaxies congregate in clusters and these clusters themselves are clustered in strands that form webbing, the very fabric of the universe.

“So kind of like a spiderweb? It’s intricately woven and yet every piece is functional and equally important.”

“Exactly.”

He ushers her to the public telescopes. “You might enjoy this little tidbit. Way up above Earth’s atmosphere lies a gas cloud made out of alcohol a thousand times larger than the diameter of our entire solar system. That’s equivalent to 400 septillions of beer.”

“Wow. A trip to space with Howard’s looking pretty good now. Maybe I’ll take him up on that offer.”

She smirks as he rolls his eyes. She peers into the telescope at the twinkling mass. How did the world look like through his eyes? Would it be more beautiful to see behind the curtain? To witness the wheels and gears spinning? Would it be selfish to keep him tethered? Mold him into a functioning normalcy, a partner in life. Sometimes she thinks he might disappear into the folds of space and time, launch off into the supernovas, break the sound barrier. Leave her forever.

“Looks pretty lonely up there.”

“Penny, dark matter constitutes 85% of the universe’s mass, yet emits no light. Recently, there has been a discovery of ultra-light particles that transcend the standard model of particle physics, termed axions, that are streaming out of the sun, but yet mimics the traits of ‘cold dark matter’. Axions despite their nature, have been considered as the leading candidate in dark matter composition.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that light can take a disguise. The dark may never know it was a part of it all along, even though it had been so essential to its survival.”

He takes a step closer to her. “What I’m saying is that it can be pretty lonely down here too.”

“Don’t I know it.”

“But you seem to have it all figured out. Your social support network appears to be more than adequate.”

“Trust me, it’s all an illusion. I’ve never dated a guy who looks up at the sky and says anything more than ‘the stars are pretty, huh? Wanna fuck?’”

“Penny, let’s not defile this space with crass language. This is the nerve center of human discovery, a museum of our voyages into the unknown.”

“Fine. No words. I guess I’ll just do this then.”



She throws her arms his neck and crushes her lips to his. His hands grip her shoulders, before sliding down to her elbows. It takes him a while to ease into it, but when he does, he curves his mouth around hers, lips fitting into a deadlock. She contemplates edging his mouth open with her tongue, but decides against it. The sudden exchange of fluids might freak him out. But she can't resist tugging at his lips a little with her front teeth, which makes him whimper. He's breathing hard when he finally pulls away, adjusting his tie that she had unconsciously loosened.

"We should head back now." He says.

He's silent throughout the ride back, breaths still ragged and hard. He fumbles with his jacket pocket like he's looking for something, but gives up when he can't find it. She inwardly bashes herself. She should have known better than to take such a huge step on a first date. A peck might have been too much. But had he kissed her back, so passionately that she had forgotten who had initiated it. He takes the stairs two at a time, and the door slams as she reaches the second floor. She lets herself into her own apartment, kicks off her heels and slumps down on the couch, grabbing the half-full bottle of merlot. It's only when she's towel drying her hair later that she hears the crash coming from 4A, followed by a thud that sounds exactly like a body hitting the floor.

## Chapter End Notes

Sorry this chapter took so long guys! I wanted to get their first date just right and also I had to do research on all the relevant details like the observatory etc. But I really had a ball writing it, and it really made me wish there was a canon episode like this. Next chapter will deal with Sheldon's dependancy on drugs and will probably be split POV. Comment and let me know what you think and as always thanks for reading!

# Chapter 9

## Chapter Notes

First part in italics is a flashback to when Leonard visited Sheldon before Penny in chapter 6.

*Sheldon had begun to dread the cold seep of reality when the drug began to wear off. With the heroin in his veins, he was closer to the indomitable creature that he had aspired towards. He could ruminate about his growing attachments to Penny without allowing untidy sentiment into his daily responsibilities, and roleplay different situations in the alternate universes that he was privy to. In one, they were playing scrabble and she was one letter away from the winning word 'mimosa'. In another, they were married. In another, they had gone to Comic Con together, dressed as Jon Crichton and Aeryn Sun from Farscape. Soon, it started to feel like this was the only universe one where they weren't an item. He was sorting through his inventory of maces on Assassin's Creed when two raps sounded on the door. He stared at the dartboard hanging on it for a moment, frowning. Penny was working a late shift and he didn't order take out that night. Burglars wouldn't have the decency to knock. Slowly he turned his attention back to the monitor, hoping that the perpetrator would give up and leave.*

*"It's me." Leonard called from the other side. "I know I should have called first but it was kind of a last-minute decision."*

*He got up and peered into the peep hole to ascertain that his hearing hadn't diminished, much like his memory in the recent weeks. It really was Leonard, face partially obscured by some white flowers. The few weeks apart felt like several lifetimes all compressed into one, as if he had been drifting around in endless limbo. He was suddenly overwhelmed with menial tasks that he had forgotten existed until brought to his attention by mail, like paying the gas bill and fixing the radiator. His eidetic memory had woefully depleted, and his journal entries had shifted from detailed anecdotes on work related affairs to descriptions of Penny's daily clothing choices and lengthy analyses of their conversation topics.*

*He opened the door, and the bouquet of lilies made their attempt at a handshake even more awkward than it would have been if he had come empty handed. But botanical specimens were often linked to feelings of regret and anguish. Perhaps Leonard had finally come around.*

*"Leonard, while I'm glad to see you, aren't flowers as a prelude to an apology strictly reserved for romantic partners?"*

*"I'm dropping by Penny's later. These are for her."*

*“Perfectly sensible then.”*

*Leonard plopped down on the couch, wrung his hands together, then got up to stand by the fridge. “Look, I feel terrible about how we left things.”*

*“It troubles me too to be despised by my best friend.”*

*“I don’t despise you.”*

*“You might after you hear what I am about to say.”*

*Leonard paused at that, a thread of anger stitching into his features. “Are you saying that things have changed between you and Penny since we last spoke?”*

*Social convention dictated that a warm beverage should be offered before delivering bad news. “Can I offer you a mug of tea?”*

*“I don’t want tea. I want to know if you’re screwing my ex-girlfriend.”*

*“Penny and I have not engaged in coitus. Recent advancements in our relationship include her accompanying me to an award ceremony, where I asked her out on a date. I intend to have her fill in a questionnaire that will serve as tangible and undeniable proof of our permanent status as friends, rather than potential mates. Penny was kind enough to oblige. Hopefully, that will ease your concerns.”*

*“You asked her out on a date?!”*

*“Yes. But an anti-date would be a more accurate term, as what we’re hoping to achieve is in direct opposition to the objectives of a traditional date.”*

*Leonard slammed a hand on the fridge door, startling him. Therein lay the problem of the constant mutable force that was human relations. How was he supposed to unravel the root of Leonard’s anger when he had carefully tailored every word to incite a joyous reaction? The intruder within him hummed a triumphant, sordid tune. If his intentions were purely based on Leonard’s benefit, why had he shoved his left hand in his pocket so he couldn’t see it tremble? Why was every nerve and synapse betraying him now? Why was his body in complete revolt against the neat borders that had kept him functioning all these years?*

*“You seem—”*

*“She wants to be with you.” The lilies fanned out on the coffee table, forgotten. “Don’t you see? God, I’m such an idiot. It just—It wasn’t supposed to end up like this.”*

*He felt a throb under his ribs. “Are you implying that I’m not a viable contender? Compared to you, my genetic material is far more desirable to any logical female. I’m taller, possess perfect eyesight and am more established than you in the academic field.”*

*“Yeah, but you’re crazy. So that evens it out.”*

*He stepped back, and the room tilted a little. The pain under his ribs was growing and he walked towards the window to be closer to the Blu-rays, a reliable source of comfort. The electric blue spines blurred. Heat prickled the back of his eyes and he felt like he'd been transported back in time, to the humid space in the interior of a bolted locker, waiting for someone to come and save him. Leonard's glare made him feel naked somehow, and he tugged at his sleeves to make sure his track marks were covered.*

*"Perhaps I wasn't being perfectly honest with you before. I let my sentiments over our friendship cloud my intentions, and I was hoping that we could salvage what we had. But now I see that it's impossible. I care about Penny deeply. From this moment henceforth, I will be courting and pursuing her as a romantic mate and will treat you as an adversary if you were to make any advances on her."*

*He wanted to take the words back as soon as he had said it. Leonard glared at him, a stare so gorged with acrimony and disgust that he had to turn away. He attempted to help gather up the flowers, but Leonard had beat him to it, hastily scraping the flowers towards him. One tumbled loose, but when he bent down to retrieve it, the door had already slammed shut.*

\*

Penny calls for an ambulance before crossing over to Sheldon's apartment. Images of the heroin sitting blatantly on his sink sends bile up her throat. She was a coward, not saying anything then because she was afraid it would push him away just as they crossed a significant milestone. And now she's paying the price for it. She picks the bathroom lock with a hair pin, but her hands won't stop shaking. After a few minutes of futile jiggling, she bashes the door open with her shoulder. He's lying face down on the marble tiles, coat jacket discarded on the bed. The sink is empty, no narcotics to be found anywhere. He must have passed out from an accumulative reaction to previous hits. She was no stranger to drugs herself, though she had confined herself to strictly recreational ones, heroin was unfathomable to her. She opens one of his eyes and shines her built-in phone torch at his pupil; it dilates, which means that he's semi-conscious.

"Sheldon, I know you can hear me. The paramedics are on their way."

He doesn't respond, but his head lolls slightly to the right when she turns him over, cradling his neck in her lap.

He's semi-lucid when the paramedics arrive, clutching at her sleeve as they take his blood pressure and before administering a naloxone injection. Mid-jab, his eyes flutter open and his body starts convulsing so hard that they have to strap him down. She stays by his side, keeping one hand on his shoulder and the other on his forehead. He loses consciousness again, and they resort to using the defibrillator. She winces and digs her fingernails into her palm each time they yell 'clear' and jolt his middle with adhesive pads. He surfaces again, permanently this time, the shallow rise and fall of his chest finally allowing her to exhale herself. This wasn't happening. The shy, fiercely brilliant scientist she had met and gradually

fallen in love with was gone, replaced by a terrifying archetype that belonged to the rough side of town. Someone that made her want to avert her eyes and run the other way. When the heart rate monitor pushes into the green zone, she begs them to treat him here, knowing how much he hates hospitals, and they move him to his bed and check his breathing one final time.

“His condition has stabilized, no cause for concern.” The head medic, a stout middle-aged woman tells her. “Just make sure that he keeps hydrated and doesn’t move around. He should be fine by morning.”

“Thank you so much.”

“Are you his wife? Girlfriend?”

“We’re neighbours.” She says lamely.

“Does he have a history of drug abuse? Or any mental disorders I should about?”

“No, he’s just been having a rough few months. His roommate moved out and they were pretty close.”

She nods knowingly, taking in her pajamas before glancing at Sheldon’s formal attire. “My colleague just ran his driver’s license through our system. He has high level clearance to dangerous machinery at Caltech. I’m going to have to phone this in.”

“Look, this is just a one-time thing. I’ve known him for years and I can totally vouch for that. Can’t you make an exception?”

“Can’t be too careful, miss. You keep an eye on him.”

After they’ve left, she sinks down on the bed next to him. Tears prick at her eyes, and she stifles her sobs against the front of his shirt. She had no idea that losing Leonard’s friendship affected him that much. He always belittled Leonard and treated him like he was disposable. But then again, she wasn’t privy to a huge portion of their interactions, and had witnessed only snippets of an extensive and complex puzzle of a friendship. She thought of his reaction when she had kissed him—a terrified animal desperate to retreat. But he had kissed her back for a few milliseconds, leaning into the kiss and gasping a little because he had forgotten that he could breathe through his nose. She had cornered him into an impossible cul de sac, made him choose between her and his best friend. He wouldn’t be able to move on without fixing things with Leonard. He’ll always be there, an unspoken barrier between them, a blight in their budding relationship. And she isn’t sure if Sheldon will ever stop punishing himself.

She presses a kiss to his forehead. *I could love him*, she thinks, *I just don’t know how. But I could learn. We could both learn.* They were taking such a huge risk, gambling an already rocky friendship for new intimacy, a word that was foreign to him and until recently, meaningless to her. She didn’t trust herself to lead him into this new terrain, teach him to bridge the space between words and touch when she had always done everything to keep the two apart. Could was the operative word in their relationship. They were always teetering on the edge of something, relying on shared smiles and witty retorts to cushion the fall whenever

either of them lost control and things got out of hand. Both too afraid to take the leap. What would she do if they lost it all? Pressing forward despite everything pointing towards the contrary. She nestles closer to him, lining up her pelvis against his, hoping to nudge him awake. He may just be looking for a warm body to press himself into and she's taking it too far. Then he turns his head and nuzzles his nose into her neck. Her hands wander; fingers tracing the swell of his biceps, grazing across eyes and lips, slipping under his shirt to covertly dance across his waistband.

He stirs at that, shivering under her touch. He mumbles something, it might be her name. Then he clenches the hem of her tank top, nearly ripping the fabric. His knuckles are searing hot against her stomach, and when she turns his head to face her, a trickle of blood is smeared on his upper lip.

"Sheldon?"

He opens an eye, half-lidded. "Thank you. For staying with me."

"You're bleeding."

He touches a finger to his nose and stares at the blood, expressionless. He grabs a Kleenex off the nightstand and dabs it away. He was always so squeamish about blood, almost passing out when she accidentally punched him in her sleep when they were all fighting over the One Ring prop piece. Now he barely even blinks, careful not to get it on his sheets.

"Sheldon, promise me you'll sign up for rehab in the morning. I should have said something that first night when I came over, but I thought you had it under control. But tonight, when I found you, I thought you were—I thought I'd never see you again. If you make me go through that again, I don't think I'd survive it."

He looks at her. *Really* looks at her. Punch in the gut stare that makes her throat feel like sandpaper. "I promise."

Then, to her utter surprise, he leans forward and presses his lips to hers. She reciprocates, angling her head to increase the pressure, but still giving him room to pull away if he changes his mind. He doesn't, but rather, places a hand on her exposed hip. She pulls back for a moment to press a kiss to his neck, slinging her arms around him. When they face each other, she can see the certainty in his eyes, the epiphany that had enveloped him. She lets him remove her clothes and helps with his, attempting to pull his belt off with her teeth while he rolls his eyes. She realizes then that she doesn't have to put on an act with him, doesn't have to sell a fantasy. He wanted her, unbridled and raw, simply because she was. It's an awkward fumble of limbs, not unlike their many playful tussles. They take it slow and keep an open dialogue, and he soon learns her rhythms.

When they kiss again, all breath and tongue and with him inside her, her thigh muscles start to clench and she arches her back to keep from cumming too quickly. She waits for him, for his thrusts to speed up and loosen simultaneously, his climax spurring hers. Sex was always about the during, but with him, it's the after where the magic really sets in. Pressed skin to skin under the sheets, talking about everything and anything. She tells him about the time her cheerleading squad had ditched her at taco bell after a match and she smoked her first joint

with a bunch of stoners outside. He counters with laments about his Dad's alcoholism, and how the mere sound of glass bottles on the counter top unnerves him. She dips into anecdotes of her notorious revolving door of boyfriends, and how at every point in her relationships she had wished the guy had simply hit her so she had a reason to break up with them. He admits that he lit sage and eucalyptus candles during sleepless nights because they smelled like her shampoo. When he finally drifts off, she peers out the window at the watery dawn, the emergence of white gold and strident reality sending a chill down her spine. She pulls the sheet over both their heads and prays that in the daylight, everything would stay the same, even though nothing was anymore.

# Chapter 10

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Leonard is about to turn into Rodeo drive when he sees Penny crossing the street. His first instinct is to honk, but stops, afraid he'll startle her. She's dressed in a dark cropped hoodie and sunglasses, suspiciously inconspicuous. He wouldn't have noticed had it weren't for her hoodie riding up for a split second, exposing the flaming heart tattoo on her lower back. Since their breakup, he only saw her at grocery stores on the occasionally Sunday, filling her cart with protein bars and vodka. He always followed her for a little while, stalling in the aisle next to hers, nothing in the realm of stalking. He just needed to see if his absence had taken a toll on her, but she didn't appear any different. She wore less makeup than usual, and he could have sworn her eyes were slightly puffier, but it might have been from her usual lack of sleep. No concrete evidence of the cataclysmic crater he hoped he had left behind. Sheldon was with her once, and he had pep-talked himself about approaching them, just for the satisfaction of watching them spring apart and squirm as they tried to lie that whatever was going on between them was still platonic. To assure himself that he wasn't going crazy. But he was a coward his entire life and that time was no different. He peered out from behind a pile of cabbages as they perused the cereal aisle, Sheldon snatching each box from her hands and reading out the fibre content. It was nothing out of the ordinary, Sheldon had accompanied her to get groceries countless of times even while they were still together. But as they joined the checkout line, she shot him a flirty glance, stood on her tip toes and kissed him on the cheek. To Leonard's utter astonishment, Sheldon responded by drawing her close to him, resting his chin on the top of her head.

When the traffic light flashes green, he follows her, making sure to keep at least two cars between them. She ducks into a slate grey building due for renovation. His curiosity peaks and he parks nearby and gets out, putting a cap on from the glove compartment, trailing closely behind her. She takes the stairs to the second floor and slips into a room with beige walls filled with middle-aged housewives and balding men in pressed business suits. A young woman with a clipboard summons everyone to the circle of chairs in the middle. There is a pithy spread on the far table consisting of Dunkin' Donuts and bottles of soda. Penny is sitting next to the moderator, hood lowered but sunglasses still on. This couldn't be what he thinks it is. Then he sees the sign on the door. Alcoholics Anonymous. He goes down the stairs and waits in the alley next to the fire escape. Just as anticipated, Penny emerges an hour later from the stairwell, and he grabs her by the arm.

"Leonard?" She rips off her sunglasses, shock morphing into humiliation. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"I saw you crossing the road." He admits sheepishly. "You were dressed so...differently than usual. I thought something was up or you were in trouble or something, so I followed you."

"Oh my God, you followed me? This is fucking creepy, Leonard." She drags him deeper into the alley, away from the swarm of exiting alcoholics. He isn't sure if she's embarrassed to be



spotted by someone she might or she just doesn't want to be seen with him.

“What was I supposed to do? You haven’t returned my calls or texts. I know we aren’t together anymore, but you can’t stop me from worrying about you.”

She sighs and runs a hand through her hair, looks at him like he’s someone to be pitied. “I’ve been a little preoccupied.”

“Does Sheldon know you’re going to AA meetings?”

“No,” She admits. “I didn’t want him to worry.”

“He doesn’t even know you have a problem, does he? That’s funny, cos when we were dating, I once found you face down on the toilet seat, the ends of your hair drenched in toilet water.”

“We both know what he’s like. He’s...fragile. He won’t understand.”

“My point is, you didn’t have to pretend with me. You didn’t have to protect me from the worst parts of you.”

“I know, and that’s the thing I missed the most about us.” She reaches for his shoulder and squeezes it. “But Sheldon and I, we have something that’s beyond words. Beyond anything I’ve ever felt before. I think I love him and saying that out loud makes me feel like it’s real and breakable and I want to take it back now because I’m so scared of fucking this up.”

Her voice breaks mid-ramble and Leonard turns away, a dull heat blooming across his stomach down into his solar plexus. Times his breathing and counts passing sports cars as she gasps through her sobs, trying to collect herself. He might have offered her a tissue and some semblance of consolation if she were crying about some other guy, not his ex-best friend that she had left him for. Not Sheldon fucking Cooper PhD, capital P for pain-in-the-ass. They had an unspoken agreement that Sheldon would always play the part of the socially maladjusted friend, oblivious to his role as an averse wingman, only tolerated because he made whoever that stood next to him seem like the obvious choice. He was never meant to take the spotlight and go after the girl, leaving him in the dust while he was at it. He was partly stunned; she had never been so vulnerable in front of him. It made him want to better, try his hand at being the good guy for once, even when there was nothing to be gained.

“Come on.” He takes her by the elbow and ushers her into a nearby café. “I’ll buy you a cup of coffee.”

The waiter hands her some napkins as they take a seat, eyeing him suspiciously. Why was he always the bad guy even when he was trying to be good? Why did everything always blow up in his face? Maybe he shouldn’t try anymore. Sheldon barely did anything and got everything. He won. He’s taller, better looking, able to work out the math for any far-fetched conjectures he sprang upon him, and is now dating the girl he loves. Penny calms down visibly after a few gulps of espresso, and he reaches across the table to grasp her hand. Fights back a smile when she squeezes his fingers back.

He tries to lighten the mood. “So can I get any details on the seduction of Sheldon Cooper? Memoirs from the woman who traversed territory no woman has dared to before?”

She narrows her eyes at him, and he holds up two hands in mock surrender. She usually knew when he was teasing, and always quipped back in mock anger. But now, she stares at him with an expression that can only be described as predatory vigilance, unnerving when paired with the softness of her other features. Under the warm recessed lighting of the café, he sees that she’s lost a couple of kilos under that loose-fitting hoodie, leggings looser around the thighs than before. There are new bags under her eyes that weren’t there when they last spoke, and she constantly breaks eye contact to peer out the window. He stuffs his hands into his pockets so he doesn’t squeeze his glass mug so hard that it shatters.

She fidgets with her sleeve, eyes fogging up again into that faraway stare. “Leonard, don’t take this the wrong way, but I don’t want to talk about my relationship with Sheldon with you. Having said that, what we had meant a lot to me. Without you, I would never have dared to open myself up to him or even figured out how, and we wouldn’t be where we are today. That’s why I think I owe it to tell you that Sheldon has started going to rehab.”

His jaw unhinges at that. “Rehab? Like for drugs?”

“Yeah, he overdosed recently, I made him go. I wanted to call you, but I didn’t think you wanted to get involved.”

“Wow.” Leonard blinks twice, scratches the back of his head. “Wouldn’t have pegged him for a user.”

“That’s the point, Leonard. Whatever went on between the both of you, he’s taking it pretty hard. Do you have any idea if this has happened before?”

“I met him only after he received his doctorate and he’s been pretty much the same since. He told me some stuff about his childhood when I first moved in, his dad’s alcoholism and all that. We didn’t really have heart-to-heart chats if that’s what you’re asking. He mostly bragged about how he flew through high school and college. Now that I think about it, he might have intentionally used that as a diversion, to create the impression that that particular period of his life was so fleeting that nothing significant could have possibly happened.”

“There were red flags, I just—I just ignored them because things were going so well.”

“Did he seem more agitated than usual? Pulling all nighters? That’s never a good sign.”

“He set off an explosion in the university’s chemistry lab during an award’s ceremony and everyone had to evacuate. In my defence, my date was kind of a jerk and hit me. That got him pretty pissed and he went a little too far with his retaliation.”

Leonard frowned. That didn’t sound like Sheldon. He was petty and mischievous and more than a little diabolic but he was never violent. “It’s not out of character for him to lash out when things don’t go his way. I don’t think it’s anything to worry about. Maybe some time away will do him some good. And he’s got you now, doesn’t he? I’m sure the two of you can figure something out.”

“You’re still his best friend, despite everything that happened. I can’t take your place. He was having a fever dream of some sort the last time we Skyped. He thought I was you for the first few minutes and spoke in Klingon until I threatened to clear the DVR of all the recorded shows.”

That makes him snigger. A caustic bark of a laugh. The whole situation was just completely whacked. Penny and Sheldon, his worst nightmare had finally come true but he never really thought about the problematic minutiae that their union would instigate. He wants to probe her further, keep the conversation focused on Sheldon. How far she’s gone with him. How deep she’s fallen. Maybe if he knew the sordid details, he could convert anguish into rage and focus it on her. Maybe it’ll be easier if he learns to hate them both. He has to bite his tongue to stop himself. It’s like masochism is built into him. He always needs to destroy any semblance of stability before it was taken away from him. Break before it’s broken.

“Could you maybe call him?” She asks in a tone barely above a whisper.

“I’ll think about it. We didn’t exactly leave things on a high the last time we spoke. You know, this is all really hard for me too. Thinking about you with him and knowing that there’s nothing I can do to get another chance.”

“I know.”

“I just want to tell you that I’m sorry. For screwing it up with us. But I’m trying to move on, because clearly you have. I’ve started seeing someone. Her name is Jess and she’s doing her masters in psychology. We met at a Trojan war costume contest. Howard dared me to go up to her and you know, it just sort of happened.”

His previous spark of hope from their entwined fingers diminishes when she lights up and shucks him in the shoulder, grinning.

“Oh my God! A psychologist? Good for you. You get the real deal now, instead of me in a polyester lab coat over matching lingerie.”

The mental image of their wacky past role plays makes him grin, wistful. “Yeah, she’s great. I think I could love her in time. But...not now. Not just yet.”

She places her other hand over his and for a moment he can almost pretend that nothing had changed. “It hasn’t been easy for us, Sheldon and I. There’s so much stuff to figure out. Every day is a new challenge. And somehow I think it’ll be like that for the rest of our lives.”

“In it for the long haul, huh?”

“As long as he’ll have me. I just don’t want you to think that I ditched you and rode off into the sunset with him on an ivory steed.”

“Well, if we’re going with that analogy, you would be rocketing through a traversable wormhole eons into the future on a Daedalus-class battlecruiser.”

They laugh, a long and hearty one that fills the room. She steals a sip of his soy matcha latte. Jess was fun and charismatic as well, not to mention they had an insane amount of shared interests. But she hadn't met Sheldon yet, which meant that there was a huge part of his life she would never know about or understand, something that he wasn't ready to let go of. She wouldn't understand why he needed to sneak off occasionally to meet up with his ex-girlfriend to reminisce about his ex-roommate. Wouldn't understand why the past was so important to his sanity, and if he was being honest, neither did he. His pocket vibrates. A text from Jess, asking where he was. He decides to be honest and shoots back: *Having coffee with Penny*. She replies almost instantly, asking if she can drop by and join the fun.

"Erm, Jess is asking if she can drop by and hang with us for a while. Do you mind?"

"No, of course not. I'd love to meet her."

A few minutes later, a girl with a cropped pixie cut struts into the café. Her eyes linger on the lip piercing and sleeve of tattoos adorning her left arm, but beneath that tough exterior are kind eyes and a warm smile that widens further when she spots Leonard. She bounds towards them, and Leonard swoops her up in a hug, pressing a kiss to her cheek. Over Jess's shoulder, Penny is watching them with an unfathomable expression. Absentmindedly, she wraps her arms around herself, fingers digging into her hip like she's trying to conjure up the ghost of a hand.

Jess holds her hand out and Penny takes it. "Penny, right? I've heard so much about you. It's great to finally meet you."

"Nice to meet you too. Leonard just filled me in about you minutes ago actually."

"You're the aspiring actress, right?"

"Yup, I've got a gig coming up in New York. Leonard's mum is a psychologist too, did you guys get the chance to chat?"

"Yeah, she came by on a visit and actually crashed our second date. I hope I can offer some redemption on behalf of all psychologists around the world."

"Oh, no apologies necessary. The woman may seem like handful but she's pretty tame after a few shots of tequila."

He slips an arm around Jess's waist as she takes in Penny's dishevelled appearance, clearly disturbed by the fact that she was still so luminescent even with zero effort. Or maybe that was his imagination, projecting his feelings onto Jess. He rubs her shoulder as she speaks, hoping to distract her from a full psychoanalysis that he would have to listen to later. He shuffles his weight from one foot to another as Penny and Jess plaster on fake plastic smiles and attempt to make small talk. He never had two ex-girlfriends in the same room before. Hell, these were the only two serious girlfriends he ever had in his entire life. He and Penny exchange looks when Jess raves about how last week's paintball game with Howard and Raj was legendary. They had their first fight after a game, when he questioned her about why she covered for Sheldon when she was supposed to be his defense. In retrospect, that should have been an admonition that everything was soon about to unravel.

Conversation peters out and Penny says she's got to dash, rehearsals starting in ten minutes. He watches as she leaves, her phone singing out a corny Top 40s hit just as she ducks out of the café. She answers it, hand caught in mid-wave, her goodbye to him already forgotten. He can't hear anything through the barrier of frosted glass between them and over Jess hollering at the barista for a to-go cup. A smile creeps across her face in a way that's both effortless but controlled, joy and heartbreak etched into her lips; he knows she's talking to *him*. And he can't do anything but stare at the small of her back until the passing crowd obscures her retreating form, and Jess tugs him away.

## Chapter End Notes

I really debated whether or not I should include a chapter from Leonard's POV, and I decided to in the end because I wanted to show the frustration on his part. I feel he's often been shoehorned into the 'villain' by Shenny shippers, and wanted to give him a voice in my story. On another note, I just watched *The Flight Attendant* on HBO Max and Kaley's great in it. Her character has some alcoholic tendencies too which really gave me some much needed inspo for the next few chapter, which will be considerably darker.

## Chapter 11

Sheldon had never considered himself a particular tolerant person. Whenever he brought up that particular sentiment, his peers would guffaw and go on and warp his mild neutral internal observation to a ridiculous superlative. He was well-versed enough now in the ways of sarcasm to know that they were mocking him. To survive the toils of the rehab center, one needed far more than tolerance. They needed the white hand of—if the whole concept wasn't complete crock—divine intervention. His first two weeks in rehab were fairly tolerable. The other inhabitants were fairly meek and he mostly kept to his bunk. Sometimes new people were brought in, dusted in fine white powder that his ultra-keen senses quickly picked up on. He would inhale deeply, a vain attempt to draw the fine cocaine particles into his lungs, and that would be enough to keep him going for a few more days. He called Penny almost every day, and made sure to text her when he didn't. He didn't have access to the Sci-Fi channel due to the center's limited cable, and continuously asked Penny to record every new episode of *Osmosis* and *Doom Patrol* or sometimes even had her turn her laptop to the television in her apartment so he could watch it live. He made sure to start their conversations with questions pertaining to her health and wellbeing, even bringing up the fact that her complexion was sallower than before. She assured him that she was fine, and it was probably just the crappy camera quality, but he still told her to consume more ascorbic acid nonetheless. On a particularly late evening, he had groggily pressed a hand to the spot in the screen where her cheek was, momentarily forgetting that they were facetimeing instead of having an actual conversation in real life. Startled by the coolness of the polarized glass brushing against his fingers rather than the warmth of her skin, his brain began to register the separation for first time. But rather than reminding him, she pressed a hand to the screen too, and told him she loved him.

On Wednesdays, he was forced to sit together with the rest of the insipid inhabitants and discuss their progress and plans for their new lives. His new life wouldn't look much different from the old, except with more solitude. He was the proverbial X in this equation, the coefficients and variables had deserted him to congregate in the other side of the equal sign. All he had now was a female that they had once vied after. No, she wasn't simply a female. She was Penny. She made everything that he had stubbornly deemed gibberish vaguely comprehensible. She carved upon portals both in the physical realm and his mental space, portals into new worlds they would explore together. He bit back a retort about being trapped in a bad lifetime channel special when he was handed his 14-days clean badge, a small inkling of pride rippling through him. A part of him didn't even know why he had relapsed into opioids. The first time he had turned to opioids was during the second semester of his master's programme when he had faltered slightly in Advanced Statistical Mechanics and failed to achieve the stellar grades he had expected. No one had known about it, not even his mother. He thought it would be harmless to try again. He was older now; he would have better control. But for once, Sheldon Cooper had miscalculated. It seemed like the past two years has been a series of misjudgments and miscalculations. Femtometer by femtometer, Penny had transformed him into the type of person he despised more than anything in the world. Someone who'd betray his friends and neglect his work for the affection of a single female.

The third week was possibly the hardest thing he'd ever endured in his entire life. His system had finally detected the missing opioids in his bloodstream that it had come to rely on, sending it into freefall. He begun sweating and shivering simultaneously, the plummet fusing with the rise. When he lay down his spine felt like it had been snapped in half and glued back together, every sip of water a spindly rock shoved down his gullet. Tonight, he falls back on a tried coping mechanism: a complete severance with his body. His mind untethers itself from his mortal form, relinquishing its ties with the nervous system. He is no longer human. He is an alien prowling the corridors of the rehab center, the room blurry due to his vision apparatus having altered itself for life on an active plate planet closer to the sun. He glides his prehensile tentacles across the cold linoleum floor, radaring for active signs of life by activating his solar pheromones. Pain is no longer part of his vernacular—his form held together by electrostatic shock and mental control rather than flimsy anachronous skin.

Then his phone rings, grafting his spirit back into his vulnerable sapien vessel. The pain didn't abate while he was away, but rather, amplified tenfold. He picks it up with shaky hands, wincing as he jabs at the answer button on the touch screen.

"Sheldon? Are you alright?" Penny's voice. He closes his eyes, the sound alone calming him. "I was so worried when you didn't call at your usual time. I hope I didn't wake you up."

"No, you didn't." His voice is hoarse, barely recognizable even to himself.

"You sound terrible. Is everything okay?"

"Everything hurts. My whole body is just so...sore. The analgesics I have been given are insufficient."

"You're just going through the symptoms of withdrawal. It'll stop soon, I promise."

"I don't think I can do it, Penny. Not alone. Not here. I think I'll be able to tolerate it better if we were co-habiting."

"You have to stay in rehab and get better, Sheldon. I can't be with you if I don't know for sure that you've beaten this."

"Please. I just want to be with you."

He knows he's begging and hates himself for it. He listens to her suppress her emotions on the other end. She's weakening, unravelling. "God, you don't know how much I miss you right now. It was the worst thing ever. Having to see you off to rehab right after we—" Another shuddery gasp. "I hate sleeping alone."

"But I can't be selfish. I won't be. You come first now, Sheldon. And I'm ordering you to fix yourself. And come back to me in one piece."

He tries to protest but is met with a dial tone. He stares up at the ceiling until the fluorescent lights begin to undulate.

\*\*\*

Penny breaks down right after she hangs up on Sheldon. She grabs a pillow in an attempt to muffle her sobs like she did whenever she had an argument with a guy over the phone but didn't want to Leonard to hear her crying and come over. Then she remembers that 4A is empty, its occupants on such divergent paths, one thriving and the other on the warpath to self-destruction. It was hard to believe that four months ago, they were all sitting on the couch eating Chinese take-out, caught up in idle banter. There were so many times in her life that she had sat on a couch, dazed into numbness by the fact that she had actually chased away or ruined every single person around her and had to build her social circle from scratch again.

The day started out fine. Leonard had invited her to hang out with him, Jess and the guys for a paintball match and then dinner. Howard and Raj were glad to see her, and she them. Raj had come pre-prepped with a thermos of liquor and could talk to her without restraint. Howard made an effort to limit himself to only two compliments regarding her ass. But even that seemed false. Leonard had undoubtedly filled them in about her relationship with Sheldon but she had no idea how much they knew. The conversation steered to work, and Howard and Raj bragged about their paper on gravitational lensing that they pitched to NASA, which might land Howard a scholarship for his PhD at Caltech. She hugged them in congratulations, but they were visibly less enthused about physical contact from her. They seemed to be appraising her with new eyes, as if wondering about her sanity. Was she really the same hot blonde simpleton from Nebraska they thought they knew if she had fallen for Sheldon Cooper?

Jess was surprisingly chatty after she opened up about her struggles moving to L.A, and gladly teamed up with her against the guys for paintball. She had tactical prowess, just like Sheldon, but their rhythm was off due to unfamiliarity and she couldn't help but wish that he was at her side, their synergy practically telepathic. Despite knowing that Sheldon was in rehab, the guys still talked and laughed as if nothing was wrong, which made her sick inside. She shrugged out of Leonard's grasp when he tried to ask her what was wrong. He grabbed her wrist, a feral expression shadowing his features. It was then that she realized his motive of asking her out. He wanted her to forget about Sheldon. He still wanted her to be in his vicinity even if they couldn't be together. Wanted someone to share secret flirty looks with over his girlfriend's shoulder. To turn her into nothing but more than a booty call, like he was for her. She made up an excuse after dinner and hurried back home in the drizzle. Her landline beeped as she opened the door. Three voice mails from Stacy, her older sister.

*"Hey, I just wanted to let you know that the baby is due in about a month. It's a boy. I heard from mom that you're going to AA meetings. I don't know how things are like for you in L.A., Pen. I know they must be rough if you're having drinking problems again, and I feel you. But this isn't high school anymore. You can't just knock off someone's tail lights and blame it on the keg stand you did last night. What I'm saying is, I don't want you around my kid until you've got your shit together. And even when you do, I think I'm gonna need a buffer period to make sure it sticks. I hope you get better, Pen. For your own sake. Heard you've scored yourself some genius guy. Do it for him too."*

The message ends. "Fuck." She muttered. Her mom never had understood the meaning of confidential information.



Then she called Sheldon, because she needed someone to talk to. She might never get to see her nephew. She had never wanted kids herself, and was all prepared to spoil her sister's kids silly. And now she would be that relative they never spoke off, who went so far off the deep end that they had to cut her off. After she's all cried out, she grabs a blanket from the closet and curls up onto the couch. There's no way she's sleeping in her queen size bed tonight. Just as she's about to doze, three knocks sound on her door. The raps are soft and ghostly, and for a moment she thinks they might be the wisps of a dream, or perhaps a memory. So many memories of doors swinging open and closed at different speeds, matching the temperament of their owners. Stuttering heartbeats and bashful smiles. Her logical mind takes over, and reminds her of the gun in her bedside table. She slips it into the waistband of her pajama shorts before slowly opening the door, hearing a weak 'Penny' just as her hand touches the doorknob.

She sees his silhouette on the carpeting before she sees him, and quickly puts the gun away. Sheldon is leaning against the door frame, deathly pale. It's a horrible throwback to the night when she first found him cutting heroin in his apartment. There's a hint of a five o'clock shadow around his jaw, and his eyelids look like they've been pummeled into the darkest shade of plum. His lips stand out, rather than being chalky like the rest of his skin tone, it's a bright cherry red. He smiles when he catches her staring, biting his bottom lip in a way that was so terrifyingly atypical she almost slams the door shut in his face.

"Sheldon." She manages. "You shouldn't be here."

"You said you wanted me," He slurs, pushing past her and slumping against her breakfast bar. "Here I am."

"This isn't funny. You have to get back to rehab."

His eyes clear for a moment as they fall on a half-opened bottle of vodka she had downed earlier in a moment of weakness. She blocks it from his sight with her body. She had started experiencing bouts of nausea a week after going cold turkey sober, and spent every morning dry heaving into the toilet. The episodes had gotten so bad that she started downing a shot per day, just to tide over the symptoms. If she could rewire her brain into seeing alcohol as medicine, maybe she wouldn't relapse. The poison would become the cure. But with each passing day, it was getting harder to stick to a single shot. Harder to see the long-term goal over the immediate temptation.

"Leonard would never let you sleep alone. I won't fall short of him. I won't be the deplorable runner up, taunted by the masses..."

"Stop it." She grabs him by the shoulders and shakes him. "This isn't you. Come on, I'll drive you back."

He maneuvers around her and grabs the side of her face, planting a sloppy kiss on her lips just before she shoves him away. He sinks down onto a bar stool but his elbow slips on the damp counter top, sending him crashing to the floor. She rushes over and wraps her arms around his middle, lugging him towards the couch. Her hand accidentally slips under the hem of his shirt as she climbs on top of him and wrestles him into an inclined position, swinging his long legs over the arm rest. The sudden skin to skin contact makes her shiver, her pulse

accelerating. Alcohol and sex for her was two sides of the same coin, to be devoured in equal dosages. An abstinence of one led to a deeper craving for the other. Sheldon perks up like a predator that just smelled blood, and they lock eyes. She's hovering above him, faces inches away from his, her heartbeat thrumming in her ears. He slips a hand under her t-shirt, cupping her breast through her bra. Slowly, he dips a finger into her bra cup and circles her nipple, making her gasp.

She realizes it then. When they had sex, Sheldon had categorized her every whimper, every moan. A data entry system linking action to corresponding sound. What he was doing now wasn't simply a seduction routine meant to distract her from sending him back to rehab. This was a deity bending a beset devotee to his whims. He knew her weaknesses dwelled in her physical body and planned to use every bit of it to show her how much power he had over her. How superior he was compared to her. How he could use sex as a weapon because he had transcended, his body a mere vessel to carry out a higher purpose. And nothing had ever turned her on more. She's already soaked when he tugs her shorts and underwear off, easing a finger, then two into her, thumb firm on her nub. She thrusts into his hand, swearing and shuddering as he stays silent, keeping a steady rhythm. Her orgasm hits like a bomb, fire and ice threading through her bloodstream. Seething through her teeth, she drags a single manicured fingernail down his arm, drawing blood.

When the endorphins wear off, reality begins to set in again. She was in a relationship with someone that needed a form of help she wasn't nowhere near qualified enough to give. He watches her appraisingly, satisfied with his handiwork. Inwardly celebrating his victory. He doesn't realize how much he has shared with her over the years, how she knows his weaknesses just as well as he knows hers. She gets up and makes him a mug of earl grey and a grilled cheese sandwich, which he nibbles on with a dazed hunger. She strokes his hair and presses a cool compress to the red ringed tracks marks on his arms, then to his forehead and neck. Hums 'soft kitty' into his ear when they're watching television, and holds him so tight that her lungs ache.

"I love you, you big whackadoodle." She says. "Never forget that."

"I love you too." He murmurs back, eyes drooping close. The sleeping pills she had crushed into the tea was already starting to kick in.

When he's completely out, she manages to sling his arm around his shoulder and stumble down the four flights of stairs, keeping a firm hand on his waist. She trips a little on the second fall but cushions his fall with her own body. It takes her a while to get them both up again and reorient themselves. Her hands are shaking so vigorously that it takes her a few tries to buckle him into the passenger seat, but she thinks nothing of it. Its only after she starts up the guns the engine and speeds down Euclid Avenue towards the freeway that the rainbow spots begin to clot over her windshield that she remembers the vodka she had earlier, souring in her stomach. Her grip on the steering begins to loosen, and she realizes that it's the sweat on the palms that is causing the slip. A tremor runs through her body, heat pricking down her limbs as she tries to focus to road. Just get to the highway. Suddenly, a jolt of pain shoots down her spine and she convulses, jerking the wheel left before letting go of it completely as the car does a full three-sixty, the vehicle taking on a life of its own. On instinct, she climbs

into the passenger seat and shields Sheldon's body with her own as sudden impact knocks the wind out of her and a spray of glass pierces her back. Then the lights go out.

## Chapter 12

The harsh fluorescent lights are what pulls her out of a dream state that she's convinced is the afterlife. She remembers the squealing of the tires, her foot jamming against the brake, then glass on her face. Pinpricks of pain all over her back. She remembers her body enveloping Sheldon's and his head bashing against her chest during the impact. She lifts an arm—a phantom limb—to shield herself from the light but it only gets brighter. Voices pierce through the bubble. Medical jargon blaring across from all angles. The beeping of a heart monitor. Then silence for a while more as she drifts off again. When she finally opens her eyes, a masked nurse in scrubs is leaning over her. She realizes that there's a glass oxygen mask over her mouth that's obscuring her speech. She runs off to get a doctor and who shines a flashlight in her eyes.

“Patient is responding.” He says. “Remove the respirator.”

“Where's Sheldon? The guy who was with me.” She asks, but her voice is weak and raspy.

“Dr. Cooper is rehabilitating in another ward. We can ascertain that he might have a mild concussion from the head trauma which might result in some short-term regressive memory loss. We can't be sure until he has regained consciousness, but his vitals are unscathed so there's no need for worry. When the paramedics found the both of you, your body had sustained most of the impact, which led to two broken ribs. Your right abdomen is numb from the anesthetics and there are several shallow cuts over your back from the shattered windscreen, so try to lie on your side as much as possible.”

“I need to see him.” She tries to get up, but the nurse holds her down.

“You're in no condition to walk right now. I can assure you that he's in the most capable of hands. Your presence will do nothing for him at the current moment.”

The ward slowly comes into focus as her vision clears. She has a throbbing headache, but other than that everything seems to be functioning. She flexes her fingers and toes to get the blood flowing in her extremities. The room is pastel with minimal wall art, which she fixates on as the doctor goes on about several administrative issues. Sheldon was hurt and it's all her fault. No, he was in a coma and they had no fucking clue when he was going to wake up. She glances out of the window to see what floor she's on. A high one. Maybe she'll throw herself off. She wanted nothing more than...to not be anymore. To not have to think or feel or want. She downs the vitamin water placed next to bed but her throat still feels dry. Her blood runs cold when a familiar thirst creeps over her, one that has to be staved off rather than quenched.

“We attempted to contact your family but they are all out of state. Aside from Dr. Cooper, you've listed your other emergency contact as Dr. Leonard Hofstadter. He should be on his way right now.”

“Oh god, you called Leonard?” She sinks back into the pillows, covering her face with her hands. “Crap.”

“Is he no longer an acquaintance?”

“No. It’s just that things are complicated between us. And I was doing so much better the last time I saw him. Last night was a mistake and I don’t want him to be disappointed. To fucking pity me. To bring his new girlfriend along and lord her over me when I—”

She stops short when the nurse and doctor start backing away, realizing that her voice is a few octaves away from hysterical. She scratches herself trying to rip out the IV in her arm. Screaming in frustration, she juts a leg out and kicks down the morphine drip stand.

“Miss, if you don’t calm down we’re doing to have to sedate you.”

She sucks in a breath and folds herself back into the sheets. “Fine. I’m calm. Just get out.”

“I just need to ask you more question.” The doctor says. “What is your relationship to Dr. Cooper?”

“He’s my boyfriend.”

The footsteps slowly retreat and fade. When she opens her eyes after what feels like a century, the room is empty. The anesthesia is starting to wear off slightly and she can start to feel the throbbing pain in her side when she inhales. It occurs to her that this is the second time in her entire life that she’s been hospitalized. The first was when she broke her arm falling off the cheerleading pyramid. Her friends had signed her cast and it was more of a joke than injury. This was...nothing like she had ever experienced before. This wasn’t her. She didn’t know who was behind that steering wheel. The same person who had fucked her intoxicated boyfriend before drunk driving him back to rehab apparently. The events were slowing piecing together as emotions. She mainly remembered wanting him so badly. Needing him on her and all over her and in her. She didn’t feel safe alone with her thoughts. When she opens the bedside table, there are only some loose paracetamol pills, bottles of water and her cell. She dials her mom’s number, something she had sworn she’d never do again. To her surprise, it doesn’t go to voicemail.

“Penny? Is something wrong?”

“Hi mom. As a matter of a fact, something is.” She sighs, her mom’s standard phone greeting had turned from snide premonition into reality. “I got into an accident.”

“But you were in AA. You told your sister you were getting better.”

“It’s pretty bad. I was with Sheldon. My boyfriend. He’s in a light coma, according to the doctors. But I’m just so worried. I didn’t know who to call.”

Her mom pauses for a moment and she cringes. She can feel twenty-five years worth of disappointment flooding the static space between them. To be fair, she had never given her mother much to be proud of. Her mother had often joked that she was glad that she had dropped out of community college before she got knocked up and stuck with being a single mother. Their relationship was tense at best, but she was the only person in her family who had successfully gotten and remained sober.

“I thought you were better than that.” Her mom finally says. “Hurting yourself is one thing, but dragging that innocent boy into your reckless ways is more than irresponsible. I didn’t raise you to be someone that made someone else suffer for your unhappiness.”

“I know. I guess I’m calling because I feel so guilty but I have no one to apologize to.” Her voice breaks but she keeps it steady.

“There’s nothing you can do now. I think you should stay away from that boy until you’ve gotten yourself together. Two matches don’t spark, they implode.”

As much as she hates to admit it, her mom’s right. The worry that has been plaguing her these months with Sheldon finally articulated. She loved Sheldon, more than anything, but that didn’t mean that they were right for each other. She was as temperamental as he was hot-headed. Dramatic as he was passionate. She had given it a go, and things just weren’t gelling together. She was due to fly to New York to a week anyway, maybe it was the perfect opportunity to spend some time apart and reevaluate the relationship from afar.

“I also wanted to congratulate you on your Broadway debut. It’s huge. I wish I could be there. But your father isn’t doing too great, and I can’t leave him.”

“Oh, yeah. Of course not. Just hearing that from you means a lot.”

“And more thing Penelope. Please call if there’s anything you need.”

“I will. Thanks mom.”

After her mom hangs up, she texts Leonard about Sheldon’s condition and tells him to drop by and visit him if he wants, but that she’d prefer to be alone for now. He still leaves some chocolates and a stuffed teddy bear with the nurse, which she snuggles to sleep.

\*

On the morning of her discharge, the nurse informs her that Sheldon has regained consciousness and has seemed to have retained most of his short-term and long-term memories. She slips back into her street clothes because she couldn’t bear it if they were both in hospital gowns. There was only room enough for one of them to be vulnerable, the other needed to hold it together. She inwardly breathes a sigh of relief when she sees that he’s sitting up, bright eyed and alert despite the bandages around his head. He’s staring into blank space when she opens the door, tinfoil wrapped bacon and scrambled eggs untouched. His head jerks toward the door creak as she enters, his right eye twitches slightly and he clutches the coverlet closer to his chest.

“Hey, Sheldon. It’s just me.” She says as if she’s consoling him. As if he’s forgotten. “How are you feeling?”

He turns away. “We were in a car crash.”

“Yes. And it’s all my fault. I just want to tell you that I’m so sorry. It was incredibly reckless of me and I put you danger. But I swear to you, it’ll never happen again.”

“Penny, I don’t believe that I’ve told you how my father passed. He was inebriated and driving above the speed limit with headlights off. An eighteen-wheeler keeled into him and totaled his vehicle with him in it, and he was dead before the paramedics could get to him. I was writing a paper on high-neutrino reactions when my mother got the call.”

Her heart plummets. “Oh my god. I didn’t know.”

“I’ve made it abundantly clear to you many times how I felt about your frequent alcohol ingestion. And now I’m sitting in a ward having sustained injury to my hippocampus and frontal cortex. But unfortunately, my eidetic memory still remains. While unconscious, my memories and imagination overlapped, and I was trapped in a very lucid dream where I was in the passenger seat with my father during the night of his death.”

She sinks down on the edge of his bed. “Sheldon, I told you I feel terrible. There’s nothing you can say that will make me feel any worse than I already do—”

He cuts over her in a half-shout. “I just can’t understand why the people who claim to love me insist on traumatizing me over and over again. My friends have deserted me even though I’ve expressed to them my dislike for solo living. You have nearly killed me despite our recent intimacy. I don’t know who I can trust anymore. At least the opioids provided me with the peace I crave so desperately with the torture that is being alive in a tumultuous duality—a world that reveres but rejects me.”

He accidentally knocks the plastic cup off his tray and it clatters to the floor. They both stare at the splatter of orange juice on the grey linoleum. Sheldon is breathing hard, scrunching up a paper towel in his hand. His voice was strangely emotionless.

“You shouldn’t have left rehab.”

“I’m not going back. But I’m also not going near the opioids ever again.”

There was a determination in his voice that was unexpected but familiar, and reminded her of the Sheldon she knew. No one could make him do anything he didn’t want to, and he had achieved of all his accolades through discipline and self-will. She didn’t doubt that he could beat this alone, but a nagging part of her brain wishes that she could be next to him while he got through this.

“I know. And I’m not ever going to touch anything that contains even the smallest drop of alcohol again. I know you don’t believe me, but I’ll prove it to you.”

“Penny, I think it’s best if we terminate our relationship. At least for the time being.”

She expected it but the words still cut. “I thought you’d say as much. And I think it’s for the best too.”

“You overwhelm me. When I’m with you, I feel like I’m so out of control that my body isn’t mine anymore. My receptors aren’t responding the way I need them to. My subconscious is in overdrive. I can’t make any progress at work because my brain keeps replaying conversations we’ve had, places we went to together, the intimacy we shared, and the need

for more for it. When I'm with you, there are so many daily anomalies that it's impossible to generate a functional schedule that I can adhere to. I'm a creature of habit and repetition. I need order to survive, Penny. And you are the antithesis of it."

He looks at her again, and she tucks on a smile for him and reaches over to grasp his hand even though she's been staring at his lips since she stepped in. All she ever wanted from him was honesty. And now she was getting it. It was a relief to know that the intensity was there for him as well.

"I think all these symptoms summate to a feeling simpletons would term as love."

"I love you too, Sheldon. More than anything." She pauses. "I came by because I wanted to tell you that I'm leaving for New York next week. The play is going to debut on a Saturday and there are final dress rehearsals."

"I'm certain it will be a spectacle."

"Call me when you're discharged."

He nods, and she leans in to kiss him on the cheek. She wants him to promise that'll be here, even though she knows he will, because of his work or her, she doesn't want to know.



# Chapter 13

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

She's only ever been to New York twice in her life, once for an all-girls' road trip and the other for an elopement that she chickened out of in the last minute. The past few months had been a carousel of rehearsal drills and press calls. The city looks different through the shaded windows in the limo that chauffeurs her to and from her hotel and the Orpheum theatre. Stepping through the revolving doors, she always has to blink twice when she sees her name on billboard, now strung up in lights for opening night, just a few hours away. As the driver pulls up to the back entrance curb, she can see a few critics lurking outside the main entrance, chatting.

Craig had been replaced since she phoned in about their little scuffle, and sent in pictures of her bruised lip. That was when she knew that her character, Laine, was pivotal and that she was the star. Doubt crept in. Could she do it? Could she stun the critics and impel the audiences? Broadway was so raw. There were no special effects or rigorous editing. It was just her and the spotlight. She had to be an enchantress rather than an actress to please everyone. The new guy who was taking over the role of Jack was tan and well-mannered. They did a few chemistry readings before he got the role, but her heart wasn't in it. During rehearsal breaks, she kept fiddling with her phone, drafting various text messages to Sheldon but then deleting them. *Thinking of you. Hope you're feeling better. The city is so magical at night. I hate sleeping alone. I can't eat Chinese takeout without thinking of you. I'm scared. I'm so sorry.* Leonard had sent his well wishes, apologizing that he wouldn't be able to fly over to New York. It was fine with her, familiar faces in the crowd would do nothing but faze her, pull her out of Laine's mind.

In her dressing room, she takes a few deep breaths and stares at her reflection in the powder-stained mirror. She fidgets with the red wig and smooths out the black silk night gown that cascades way past her ankles. Sheldon had only seen her in that little low-budget production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, but he was so enamoured by it, generous with his compliments regarding her performance in the weeks following it. This was a whole new ball game. This was everything she had ever wanted and worked for. She will not ruin it by thinking about a guy. This was her moment and she'll enjoy every second of it.

The curtain rises, and the first act kicks in. The theatre is packed, and she tries not to search through the faces whenever she faces the audience. Laine has possessed her. She speaks haughtily with a faux midwestern accent. Takes sly, seductive steps around Jack while clutching a cigarette between two fingers, crushing the bud against the wallpaper just before the scene ends. Jack is entranced, the audience is silent. She has them all in the palm of her hand. She breaks character for a split second in the third act, when Jack flings a beer bottle in her direction and tells her she's a whore. She lets out a real scream, piercing and guttural. But in the heat of the moment, her emotions are fused with Laine's. An idea buzzes, and she decides to continue with the improvisation. She lets herself sink to the floor as she breaks down in a fit of hysteria. *If being a whore means that I'm someone that takes what I want,*

*then that's what I'll be.* The words sear her tongue, and the audience gasps when Laine finds Jack's dead body next to an empty bottle of pills in the last scene. The applause is deafening, people rising to their feet and yelling encore. The cast joins hands and bows, and they step aside to let her take a solo one. There are flowers all over her dressing room, it's so old school and cheesy that she can't help but laugh, tucking a few petals into the hair of the extras. When she slips out the backdoor leading into the alley for some autumn breeze, someone taps her on the shoulder.

She almost doesn't recognize him at first. He's dressed in a velvet burgundy blazer with matching dress pants, sporting a pair of brown wire rimmed glasses. A dark blue handkerchief embossed with the star fleet logo peeks out of his lapel, the only indication of the past.

"Sheldon?" She squeaks, nearly toppling into an empty trash can.

"My prognosis was accurate. You always need a few minutes away from the crowd, despite claiming to be an extrovert."

"You came."

"I thought it'd be better if I didn't inform you advance. It occurred to me that my presence might affect your performance."

She steps forward, resting a hand tentatively on his shoulder. "Oh my God, I can't believe you're here. Did you like the play?"

He catches her hand in his, runs a thumb down her palm. "My eidetic memory wouldn't let me forget the promise we made when you first got the role. I'm a man of my word if nothing else. As to whether I liked it, your performance is the first thing I've come across that has challenged my preconceived bias in regards to a career in the arts. You were spectacular, even from the mezzanine."

She stares at the familiar stranger in front of her. The new look is sexy nerd chic and she's digging every bit of it. He squirms a little under her gaze, adjusting his glasses. Something about it hits at her heartstrings. She never dreamed of meeting a guy who would put himself on the line like this, wishing to earn her affections, but would covet just a smile.

"What's with the new look?"

He fidgets for a moment before meeting her gaze. "I've always been slightly short sighted, but have always worn contact lenses. I thought a change would be a nice visual metaphor for what I'm about to propose. I've been thinking a lot about this affiliation we've been embarking on, albeit wrought with many speed bumps. Needless to say, our vices might have detracted from its full potential. I believe we may have a better shot, now that we're past them."

"Sheldon, I don't want you to change for me."

“Penny, you deserve a partner who’s ready to be part of your world. A socially deficient hermit will only hold you back, and to say that will be a tragedy is an understatement. You have made many alterations in your life to accommodate me, and it’s time I do the same. Think of this as Sheldon 2.0, new and improved.”

She laughs, a throaty one that’s half sob. “I like that. I’m just so happy to see you. And guess what?” She pulls out a badge from her purse and waggles it in front of him. “Two months sober.”

“I knew you could do it.” His voice is quiet, sheepish. “I have some good news of my own. I’ve made headway with dark matter research and Oxford has invited me to do a seminar. I was hoping you’d accompany me to England. They have an excellent rail network around the countryside that I intend to thoroughly explore.”

“All the chocolate in the world can’t stop me.” He rolls his eyes and she pulls him close. “Hey, I need something to stave off the cravings. Don’t think that body alone will do it for me.”

\*

The afterparty ballroom is decked out with an overflowing buffet table and a full dance floor, which she tugs Sheldon onto.

“Hey, Penny!” Calls the director. “Thought you didn’t have a plus one.”

“Got lucky, I guess.” She calls back. So absurdly lucky.

A new song starts, the rift somehow caverns and winds her as the lyrics croon words that seem so tailored for them. *Cos you’re beautiful inside*. And he is, achingly so. As she rests her cheek against his shoulder, the twinkling sky gleams above them through the sky roof. If she lifts a hand, she might be able to pluck Polaris from its obsidian canvas, carve it into a pendant to string around her neck. The dark had never been so bright, but still she hopes the fairy lights will come back on soon, so that she can see him. Fully, unobstructed. She couldn’t promise him forever, not just yet. But almost forever she could do, and almost forever was a long time. And a long time was enough for now. She might talk. He might kiss her. Or maybe they’d do neither, and that would be fine too. They fit their hands together for a proper waltz as the chorus kicks in, and she feels a strange pull, an amalgamation. He gasps a little, and she knows he feels it too. In every single universe, versions of themselves are magnetizing, reaching forth and closing the distance. She watches as the emotions flit through his eyes, until the body subdues the mind, and he leans down to kiss her. They take in short, controlled breaths as their lips settle into a rhythm, tongues loosening clenched jaws. She pulls away after what feels like a life time, as he lowers her into a dip. She basks in the sprawl of stars bared by the sky roof, her body almost weightless, levitating through the clouds and atmosphere, tethered by warm hands on her hips, the only thing firmer than gravity.

Thanks so much for all your lovely comments! Hope you guys enjoyed the story. Shenny is one of my favorite ships of all time and i'm so glad I decided to explore their dynamic, I really learned a lot more about both Penny and Sheldon writing this fic. The song I referred to in the ballroom dance scene is Anywhere but Here by Safety Suit, if i could pick a theme song for this fic, that'll be it. Do check out my other works if they suit your fancy!

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!