***Mutual Respect***

By Kæl “Viktor” St Jean-Kearsley

Thick bands of sunlight streamed through the windows of Ackerman High School, lighting up the dreary hallways. The large, single corridor didn't have much light otherwise, the bustling crowds of joyous students blocking out any unnatural light that shone from the high ceilings. Classrooms buzzed with activity around them, some filled with teachers giving lectures (it was lunchtime, and as with most large schools, there were two lunches) and some filled with chatting students enjoying their meager amount of free time before they were required to go back to class. The amount of colors that greeted the eyes upon entry to the school would make anyone feel welcome, but not for Marco.

The boy was poor; his backpack was a hand-me-down from his older brother and his coat sported a couple of fashionable holes. His pants also had shredded knees; however, he bought them this way, so this could say nothing about his parents' pay. The jagged way he wore his thick black hair implied that he cut it himself, and his converse were so worn you could almost see his toes through them.

Safe to say, the boy stuck out in the colorful crowd.

Marco was also anything but comfortable in the school. He was bullied often and had experienced nothing but avoidance from his other peers. While in the hallways, Marco kept his shoulders hunched, his hand gripping the strap of his backpack so hard his fingers had almost turned white.

However, it hadn't always been this way.

During his freshman year in high school, Marco had been one of the most popular teens in school. He had hundreds of friends, girls hanging off his shoulders, and was the best soccer player on the team.

Marco had tried many times to figure out exactly what happened. His friends were amazing, his team was friendly, and the girls...

They were the problem, he realized. He hadn't even thought about it before the bullying started, before his fellow team-mates turned on him and made him feel unworthy of being alive. The girls were the problem because they were always there, trying to get his attention, trying to ask him out...

But he didn't want to go out with them. And not any girl specifically just... girls in general.

That was when Marco started to realize that he was different.

One of the other teens on his soccer team, an older boy named Kyle, caught his attention one day. Not because he was fit, not because he was popular, but because he was intelligent. He was extremely smart, politely correcting people when they had facts wrong and such. But he never noticed Marco.

Ever.

Marco continued on his way down the hall, mumbling lightly to himself as he made his way to his classroom in the southwest wing, when he suddenly heard a voice behind him.

"F\*\*\*\*t…" Marco turned around ready to deflect...

But suddenly found he didn't have to.

"What did you just say?" It was Kyle, his voice hard and his glare menacing. The girl stopped, shrinking in on herself as Kyle walked towards her.

"Would you call me a f\*\*\*\*t?" He said, baring his teeth subconsciously.

"Nuh---no!" She stuttered.

"Then why in the world would you call him one?" Kyle pointed at Marco, who stumbled backwards at the intense gaze Kyle brought upon him. Looking away, he blushed lightly, focusing on the floor intently.

"He-he's just... he's just a useless piece of trash! Why would anyone care about him?!" She shouted back, throwing her hands behind her and shouting at Kyle. He smirked.

"So you would refer to him as a f\*\*\*\*t? Are you implying that being gay is a bad thing? Because trust me; you had better hope that you aren't. I happen to know quite a few gay people that would be absolutely horrified at the word that just came out of your mouth." The girl glared.

"Oh yeah? WHO. I bet you can't come up with a name on the spot, can you?" She deflected, placing her hands on her hips and harrumphing pointedly. Kyle grimaced, placing his palm flat against his face.

"Don’t patronize me," she said. "You may be captain of the soccer team, a leader; but you're going to have to stop acting like a f\*\*\*\*t yourself and man up if you want my respect--"

"I don't want your respect."

"What?!" She snapped, genuinely surprised. Her hands fell from her hips and her eyes narrowed.

"If you are going to be such a b\*\*\*\*, I don't want your respect," he said. Marco's eyes went wide, and a surge of pride soared through his chest as he watched the girl fume on the spot.

"I would rather have his." Marco hadn't even realized that Kyle had turned around until he saw his hand mere inches from his own. He startled, stepping backwards.

"W-why would you want my r-respect?" Marco asked, surprised. Kyle's eyes softened, and he smiled at Marco.

"Because I like you." Marco's eyes widened in disbelief.

"W-what?!" Kyle's smile dropped, the man obviously assuming that he was on the brink of rejection, but Marco was merely shocked at his apparent bluntness.

"I—I mean... you like me?" Marco stuttered, and another smile ghosted Kyle's lips.

"Isn't that what I just said?"

"Y-y-yeah... but are you... actually... like..." Marco gesticulated wildly with his hands, and Kyle laughed smartly.

"Yes."

"Then hell yeah... you, uh, have my respect..." Marco said awkwardly, rubbing his scalp with his hands.

"Hahaha, I'm glad," he said, smiling.

"Now, I hope you don't mind if I have something else on my agenda..." he muttered, walking towards a stuttering Marco, his strides heavy and long. His smile was intoxicating, and Marco was finding it difficult to breathe with him standing so close. He staggered a breath, looking up into Kyle's deep brown eyes.

"May I?" Kyle asked, placing his hands on Marco's chin.

"Do you even have to ask?" Marco smiled, smirking as Kyle brought their lips together.

And there, in the high school's long, dreary hallways, Marco realized that maybe there was more color in his life than he thought there was.