

Medal of Achievement

“Avery Beneval.” My name echoed across the silent hall as I stared up at the principal, stunned. “Avery, please rise to receive your medal.”

My friends nudged at my shoulders, their hushed and excited whispers lifting me out of my seat with joyful weightlessness. My eyes caught on the gleam of the golden coin on the lanyard as I floated to it. Nothing else existed—nothing else *mattered*.

Not the audience, not my classmates, not the crooked clip that skewed my freshly curled hair.

This was my movie montage moment, I thought. A small sliver of a second that would go into a documentary talking about my genius from a young age.

I’d won it without trying, after all. I’d won that medal without opening a single book, without memorizing a single word. I ran through my memories of the competition as the silk lanyard was placed around my neck.

Intuition led me to most of my correct answers, and pure logic led me to others. This *must* have been the payoff for my childhood of isolation, with nothing but books and puzzles to keep me company.

The soft, even pressure from the flat silk around my nape seemed to agree. I jingled as I walked back to my seat, the new golden coin lightly brushing the other accolades I'd piled.

Out of the corner of my eye, I thought I saw someone flinch.

Unremarkable black hair as straight as her face registered in my mind as Charlotte Williams—an ambitious, outspoken girl who prided herself on her hard work.

Well, I thought. Hard work is a talent, too. (Not that I'd ever needed it.)

As I neaten up my robes in my seat, my friend leaned over to me. “Can’t *believe* you got *another* medal, dude. Lottie didn’t even get *one*.”

Some mean part of me preened at the situation, but a shred of guilt plagued me. “You know,” I tried to make my voice sound sad, “I think she probably deserves this more than I do. She prepped way more than me.”

“You get what you get.” My friend shrugged. “She didn’t get it, and you did. No use in feeling bad for being naturally awesome.”

The shred disappeared. “Right.”

The ceremony ended. My classmates ran into the arms of waiting family members and friends, their graduation robes engulfing them in cheap silk and yarn.

I watched some of my friends roll in the grass as they tackled their loved ones, watched some of them laugh as their mothers cried, wetting their robes with patches of tears.

My classmates came up to me with stained robes and genuine crooked smiles.

I looked perfect, as always.

It was fine like this. I preferred to look nice, to keep my composure a little. And, even though I may not have had any uncontrollable bursts of emotion nor arms to jump into nor tears to wipe, I had whimsy.

I was a full person, surely, and I was a fine person, certainly.

So I dusted off nothing and tugged at my robes pointlessly as I told my friends I wanted to go wander the halls alone.

Because I wanted to. Because *I* had desires too, desires that *I* could fulfill too.

This was a happy day for me, too, I told myself, as my heels clicked down empty halls.

But even as I tried to smile, I could tell that the reflection of the golds around my neck were quickly growing dull, swallowed up by my greedy pupils like a black hole.

A muffled sound from a classroom broke me out of my thoughts. I walked closer.

A long snuffle made me hold my breath, and I stood outside the door.

The next sound was a sob, a kind of whimpering breathless staccato that came out in strings of bitten misery. The snippets of voice seemed familiar.

“Why...why wasn’t it me?” The words came out between sobbing hiccups. “Why couldn’t it... have been me? What’d Avery... do that I didn’t?”

I listened on, frozen.

“Shh...” The calm voice of an older woman seemed to mingle with her strangled breaths of air. “It’s alright, honey. You can’t win everything—”

“*But I didn’t win anything!*” Charlotte snapped, bitterness dripping from every word.

“And I *tried*, Mom, I *tried so... so fucking hard*. Haven’t I earned...” Her voice grew shaky.

“...earned... *something?*”

“Hey.” Her mother’s voice grew stern. “Hard work will get you closer to where you need to go, but it doesn’t entitle you to anything. Like it or not, Lottie, you *didn’t* earn it.”

Charlotte took a sharp breath, as if someone had pierced her with a dagger. My chest lurched. *That had to hurt.*

After a moment of suffocating silence, I heard a rustle from inside the classroom as Charlotte quickly gathered her things.

“Lottie, sweetie—”

“I just want to be alone right now.” Charlotte rushed toward the doorway, shouldering past me down the hall. “Sorry—”

She met my eye.

I opened my mouth, but no words came out. I wanted to apologize to her for listening, I wanted to comfort her—but I didn’t know what I could say to make up for the fact that it was *me*, that anything I offered would come out of *my* mouth.

Unconsciously, my gaze traced her wet eyes, red from crying, the clear tear tracks running over her rosy flushed cheeks. And... did she always have freckles?

My mouth started to move without thinking. “You look—”

“Fuck off, Avery,” she hissed before racing away.

Even as I stared at her quickly retreating back, I replayed the way my name rolled off her tongue, helpless to stop it.

I wandered aimlessly—or so I told myself. Subconsciously, I followed the sound of Charlotte’s bitten off sobs and strangled breaths, like a sailor to a siren song.

Hallways and doors meandered past, and before I knew it, I'd found myself facing another door to an empty classroom.

The name on the door read "Mr. Conan," a straight-laced calculus teacher with a sensible syllabus and a clear-cut grading system. I'd been apathetic in his class. His lectures, though easily understandable, were boring, and his face seemed to be frozen in a perpetual focus, his mind never wandering to something beyond the material he was teaching.

This, I thought, picking him apart instead of listening to him drone on, must be what they mean when they say someone has a "one-track mind."

I gave up on trying to bond with him beyond the shallow bond a good student has with a teacher. We were too different. His thoughts were a perfectly oiled train that drove quietly and cleanly on a set of train tracks he'd picked out for himself. Meanwhile, no matter how meticulously I chose my train tracks, my thought process was a five-wheeled car from a Dr. Seuss picture book with three flat tires, uncontrollable and utterly unable to follow a designed path.

However, even as my car wobbled down other unrelated paths during his class, Charlotte, who sat in front of me, would stare at Mr. Conan with the same focused eyes he stared at us with. I'd often heard snippets of her rants about other teachers as I walked down the hallways—complaints about why this teacher couldn't lecture as clearly as Mr. Conan, or why another teacher couldn't grade as sensibly as Mr. Conan.

He was always her favorite.

I rocked on my heels in front of his door. It made sense she would end up here.

I hadn't considered what I was going to do past this, really. I still didn't have the words to say—again, not any that would make up for the fact that they would be coming from me—and

the soft sniffing I heard from beyond the door tugged at my conscience for every second that passed.

I reached to my neck and rubbed my thumb over the golden coin that seemed to be causing all her pain. My reflection in it was stoic—I had already stopped finding the shine any sort of exciting. I pictured what Charlotte’s reflection would have looked like. She would have been overjoyed, vindicated, trembling a little bit with the effort to hold all the pride inside herself, like a bright balloon threatening to pop.

She would look so much better with it than I did.

Vaguely, I thought about the superhero shows and dramas I grew up with, replaying the scene they all seemed to have in common—two characters standing in a dramatically lit setting, one character giving an object of importance to another and telling them something that they’ve always wanted to hear, and the second character tearily taking it and thanking them as they hugged, their arcs ending with a neatly tied bow.

The medal felt warm and heavy in my hand.

I eased the door open.

Charlotte jolted to look at me, and, immediately, her face shuttered blank. I swallowed—*real life really is much scarier than TV shows*—and I held the medal out to her.

Charlotte stared.

“I— you— sorry,” I mumbled, noticing peripherally that Charlotte flinched at my apology. I cleared my throat. “I was just, walking around, you know, and I overheard what your mom said to you about this thing. ...truth is, you *did* earn it. You’ve been trying so much harder than me for so much longer, and I’ve always admired you for that. I mean, I can’t imagine doing what you do and still... you know.”

I gently took Charlotte's hand as I placed the medal in her palm.

"You *did* earn it, Charlotte," I repeated.

Charlotte continued to stare at me.

As I turned to leave, patting myself on the back for overcoming my discomfort and pride, I heard Charlotte finally move.

Ah, I thought, *here comes the emotional climax*.

"Hey, Avery?" Her voice had a slight edge to it—from sentiment, no doubt.

I turned back to her with a small smile. The sunset was beginning to flow in from the windows, bathing the room in a warm glow.

"Yeah—?"

And Charlotte punched me.

I blinked stars from my eyes, sunset oranges blurring in front of me. I stumbled backward into a desk—"Jesus fucking Christ, Charlotte—"

"You're *such* a pretentious prick, you know that? I don't *want* your medal," she snarled.

"Bullshit. You were literally—I *heard* you—! In the, in the room, and I found you here, and I gave it to you, and you *fucking punched me in the face when I was just being fucking nice!*" I stormed forward, grabbing Charlotte by the lapels of her graduation gown.

I pushed her into the wall. The fire in her eyes blazed. "*Nice?* You call that nice? You're so *fucking infuriating*—" She grabbed a fistful of my hair and yanked me forward. "You get off on everyone calling you a genius all the time, but you're actually really fucking stupid when it comes to common sense, huh? You're so, so self-obsessed and arrogant that you *really* can't *fathom* people not seeing you as this, this perfect queen—"

"*That's not true—*"

“*It is*, you think the world revolves around you, that you getting *everything* and getting everyone to *love* you is just a given—”

Empty graduation seats, empty rooms, suitcases dragging out of closing front doors. Anger burned through my voice, hot and bitter.

“*You don’t know a damn thing about me—*”

“—well, newsflash, bitch, I’ve *hated* you since the day we met—you and your little protagonist holier-than-thou attitude with your Mary Sue life where you get *everything—*”

I slapped her, and the sound echoed in the empty room. The final dregs of sunlight slipped from the walls. I shoved her into the darkness and followed her in.

“You’re so shitty to me, you know that?” The words burned as they escaped my lips. “I know, okay? I know you’re just so *completely* blinded by jealousy that you can’t see a single thing about me worth liking—I can’t help being good at the things I’m good at, so unless you want me to *let you win*, you need to stop being such a *fucking child—*”

Charlotte gripped my wrists. “Which one out of us is the child, you *spoiled little princess?*” She hissed.

“*You*. Charlotte, I tried, I’ve fucking *tried to be your friend—*”

“*My friend?*”

“I gave you my notes, I told you how I study, I greet you in the mornings, I turn to help you, *every single time—*” My hands buried themselves in her lapels again, pushing her back.

“You think I don’t see the look in your eyes when you pull that shit? That’s not friendship,” she snarled, “That’s charity.”

“The look in my—you *paranoid bitch—*”

“You look down from the little throne you sit on in your head, and you give everyone little slivers of decency, and you act like you just gave them the sun and the stars, and you wait for them to fucking fall over themselves kneeling down to you in gratitude.” She squeezed my wrists tighter as she kicked me in the shin.

“Fucking *bitch*—” I crumpled to the ground.

“Well, I don’t buy *any* of that shit, *Your Majesty*. ”

I glared at her from the floor. “I don’t get why you being insecure has to be my problem—!” I kicked out her legs from below her.

She fell down in front of me, grip still tight around my wrists. “I’m not insecure, you’re just a *pretentious prick*.”

“You already called me that. Running out of insults, bitch?”

“I’ll repeat it until it gets through your thick *fucking* head—!” She lunged at me, pinning me to the ground. “You’re a pretentious prick, Avery. I don’t need your medal, I don’t need your help, and I sure as hell don’t need your pity, so I’m not gonna *thank you* for offering it to me.”

I laughed mirthlessly. “Oh, *fuck* you, you insecure pathetic—”

“*Be quiet*. ” Her voice was choked up. My mouth snapped shut.

The last rays of sun reflected off of the tears sliding down her cheeks, and I watched the shimmering droplets fall from her face to mine.

“You’re crying,” I commented pointlessly.

Charlotte reddened. Her tears seemed to frustrate her. “Shut the fuck up.”

“I didn’t mean to make you—”

“*Don’t you dare fucking apologize, Beneval, I swear to god*, ” Charlotte sniffed. “Not when I was finally able to talk to you for once—”

My quickly-forming bruises throbbed. “You literally just *mauled* me—”

“But you got angry,” Charlotte said, as if it explained everything. She snorted, and a faint smile rose to her lips. “I actually *pissed you off*, like, all the way.”

I was too tired to parse what she was saying. I sighed underneath her, catching my breath and letting the thrill of the fight simmer down. Silence hung between us for a few seconds.

“You know...” I started, meeting her eyes again. “You’d usually expect any normal person to be pissed off if they randomly got punched in the face.”

“Any ‘normal person.’”

“That’s what I said.”

“No, that’s what I mean.” Charlotte leaned away from me, rising to a kneel. She looked at the ceiling. “You’ve never seemed like a normal person to me until today.”

I took that in for a second.

“You still piss me off.” I finally decided.

“Same here.”

I caught a golden glint from the corner of my eye. The medal laid in a shadow of the floor, and as I picked it up to hold it to the light, I found a few scuff marks on the gilded medallion. I hung it back around my neck, and fuzzy frayed edges from cheap fabric tickled my nape.

“I’m taking this back, then,” I mumbled, redundant.

“It’s yours. Always was. But watch your fucking back.” A little bit of hostility flickered across her expression, but I no longer felt offended by it. “I’ll steal it from under your nose when you least expect.”

I dusted off my robes as I got up from the ground. My grin was sharp. “Try me, bitch.”

I didn't bother saying goodbye as the door shut behind me. My cheek twitched, and a bubble of mirth finally burst in my chest, releasing giggles that rose in my throat. Bruises on my body throbbed, and I found the pain hilarious.

We'd wrestled like two children on a playground over a shiny coin, and the ridiculousness and immaturity of it refreshed me. When did we stop telling each other the truth, burying it under false smiles and passive aggression that we called maturity? Why did we?

I stared at the classroom door just a moment more, burning the sight into my mind before I walked away.

"Congratulations on our graduation," I murmured, a sincerity in it only I understood.