

Saturday, January 6, 2069, 8:30 p.m., Tracy Island.

"Nine ball in the corner pocket."

John leaned on his pool cue as Scott lined up his shot. A gentle tap, and the white ball rolled serenely across the felt, nudging the hovering nine ball into the pocket without following it in.

"Nice shot," John commented.

"Thanks." Scott picked up the long necked bottle and took a few gulps before returning it to its mini-cooler. John took a swig of his own beer, and watched Scott prowl around the edges of the table. He put his bottle down and sighed.

"Scott?"

The elder brother didn't look up. "Yeah, John?"

"I had an... odd conversation with Alan on the way up to Five yesterday."

Scott spared his brother a quick, eyebrows-raised glance. "Define 'odd'."

John pursed his lips, thinking about the best way to follow his instructions. "Well... we were talking about women...Nikki and Kat in particular..."

"Kat?" Now Scott gave John a longer look, and a thoughtful frown. "What does Kat have anything to do with anything?" He glanced back down at the table, and crouched to peer over the edge. "I thought she was long gone."

"She was." John took another swig, then added, "She is. It's just that she was at Lady P's party and we met her there. Me and Gords and Alan and Nikki. She was there with her fiancé."

"Fiancé, huh?" Scott got to his feet to try another spot. "Bet you felt relieved about that."

"Psht!" John half-snorted, half-hissed, annoyed. "If she's happy with the guy, and he can give her what she wants, more power to them." He picked up the beer again. "He wanted me to talk about Kat, but I said I would only if he talked about Nikki first."

"What did he have to say about Nikki?" Scott had made a decision. "Two ball in the corner pocket."

John stood by, quietly draining his beer while Scott took his shot. The white ball hit the blue solid square on, but not at the angle Scott had hoped for. It bounced off the edge of the pocket and rolled down the table's shorter edge.

"Damn." Scott made a motion with one hand. "Your turn."

John smiled, and took up his cue. He paced around the table, looking for his next victim.

Scott drank his beer and watched his blond brother duck down to assess the shots open to him, shake his head, then heave a heavy sigh.

"It's a long shot, but... twelve ball in the side pocket."

Scott said nothing as John positioned his cue, sliding through his long fingers one or two times for good measure. A sharp rap and the white ball slammed into the bumper, careening off the side, hitting the two ball with some force. The two ball, thus impelled, bumped sharply into the twelve ball at such an angle that the stationary ball all but jumped up and into the indicated pocket. Scott let out a low whistle.

"Never play pool against an astronomer," John said, his tone and smile smug.

"I'll have to remember that," Scott said dryly. He watched John search for his next play, repeating, "So, what about Nikki?"

"Well, we discussed why Nikki was going to Auckland instead of back to England." The taller brother sighted along his pool cue, then shook his head. "And he admitted that their relationship had factored into Nikki's choice. A 'secondary consideration', he called it."

Scott shrugged. "So? Wouldn't you want your girlfriend close to home?"

"Yeah, I suppose I would," John admitted. He straightened from his crouch, and leaned across the table, the cue supported firmly by his fingers. "Two ball in the corner pocket."

The cue ball was tapped precisely, driven at a smart clip along the green. It struck the blue ball on one edge, pushing that sphere toward the corner where it teetered, hovering on the pocket's brink.

"C'mon, c'mon, go in!" John muttered. The ball seemed to contemplate its position for another fraction of a second, then dropped obligingly into the abyss. "Whew!"

As John took another turn around the table, Scott went over to the small wet bar and pulled a fresh beer from the fridge. "You haven't finished defining 'odd' for me."

"Oh, right." The younger man leaned his cue against the table, and joined his brother.. "Another one for me, too, please?" He took a seat as Scott handed him another bottle, and leaned his elbows on the bar's surface. "So, we talked about Nikki first, then turned to Kat. He asked me if I was jealous, and I told him, quite truthfully, that I wasn't." He shrugged. "Then he just said, 'Good', and shut up."

"So?" Scott swigged his beer, letting out an audible, "Ahh!" when he'd finished swallowing. "What's so odd about that?"

"It wasn't so much what he said as how he said it, Scott." John turned his bottle around and

around on the polished wood, watching the condensation make a fat, wet ring. "I dunno. I might be reading more into it than is there, but I think somehow that he's jealous. Whether he's still jealous of Brains for hooking up with Tin-Tin, or of just not having Nikki around all the time, or that I've been able to put Kat out of my life... I don't know. But it's the impression I got."

Scott was quiet for a minute, then blew out a frustrated breath. "I'm not saying your impression is wrong or anything, John. You're probably better than I am with reading between the lines of what someone says, and we all know the kid has a jealous streak a mile wide." He ran a hand through his dark hair. "Listen. I'll give him a call later this weekend, just to talk. Bring up Nikki in passing; see what he has to say to me." Smiling, he added, "It's a damned good thing Lena worked up that program and Anna reminded us that we could actually call whoever is on Five."

"Made a lot of difference to me on Thanksgiving," John admitted. He picked up his beer, and held it out, offering a toast. "Thanks for listening, Scott."

Scott touched his bottle to John's. "No problem." With a nod toward the table, he asked, "Ready to finish the game?"

"Sure! Why quit when I'm ahead?" John grinned, and slipped off the bar stool.

Scott came out from behind the bar and picked up his cue. "Right, John. I'll have you know I have not yet begun to fight."