

A Professional Relationship

by Alice Scott

The highlight of my morning is getting to see Casey Sorrento.

He's always at work before I am, he's that kind of dedicated. Typing away at something, so focused on his work, he doesn't notice me come in until I wave a paper coffee cup under his nose. He jumps at the sudden distraction, making an adorable sort of squeak in surprise.

"Good morning, Casey."

"Renard," he says.

"We've been working together for five years now," I plead. "At this point you're allowed to call me by my first name. Nero." Casey looks down at his shoes and I'm pretty sure he's blushing.

"I don't know how professional that is," he mumbles. Honestly? Fuck professionalism, it's not like I'm his boss. Casey and I are equals on this project, and if anyone else besides our bosses pulled the "Dr. Renard" card I think I'd tear my hair out.

But Casey's so sweet that his insistence on professionalism is endearing and I let it go.

"Alright, I'll play." I hand him the coffee cup. "Shot of vanilla and more sugar than coffee, right?"

His face lights up. "You memorized my coffee order?"

"Of course!"

Casey has a smile that could light up a room and considering our lab is in the cold, windowless basement, that's a godsend. I want to tell him that, how much I love his smile, but he's easily embarrassed and I don't want to put him on the spot. Instead I just watch him sip his coffee and scribble down notes.

"Renard?" he says, pulling me out of my thoughts.

"Yes?"

"Do you think you could take a look at this?" He waves me over to squint into the microscope on his desk.

"Sure can!"

I realize I'm probably the only person who can find a virus cute. Even Casey calls it "that shit" like we haven't been studying this genetically engineered super pathogen for the better part of five years. Casey has a...healthy respect for the virus whereas I've grown pretty attached to it. It's my passion project, my baby in a way. Some people talk to the plants in their office, I dote on a pathogen, but we all have our quirks, right?

"It didn't look like that yesterday?" Casey asks, hopefully as excited as I am. "Did it?"

"No!" I say, scrambling for a notebook to scribble down a diagram and hoping I can read my piss-poor handwriting later. Casey has penmanship that could be its own font.

When I look up, he's across the room and I decide today's the day I just go for it.

"Would you like to get dinner sometime?" As soon as I say it I know I must look like an idiot. Of course not, why would someone as *perfect* as Casey want to go out with his scatterbrained lab partner with terrible handwriting? "Not just the two of us, I mean. Maybe we could invite some of the techs, celebrate this..." I gesture to the microscope.

"Oh!" Casey says. "That sounds like it could be fun." Even with a handful of techs there, it'd still be the closest I've gotten to an actual date with Casey Sorrento. I've wanted to ask him out before but something always comes up and I lose my nerve, like at the Christmas party. I saw him under the mistletoe with that light up a room smile of his, eyes closed and swaying to some Christmas song by The Killers and he looked like magic. I wanted to kiss him, just a friendly little peck on the cheek, I could attribute to the mistletoe, but I chickened out, praying he wouldn't but ultimately too scared he'd turn me down and I'd just make things weird.

At least now I have a foot in the door.

"How does Thursday sound?" I ask and his face falls.

"This Thursday?" he says. "I'm sorry, that's my uncle's birthday, we're all going out to dinner. Shame..."

"Oh." I can tell he feels bad about it so I wrack my brain for the next day when he's not working later than me. Our schedules are a chaotic tangled mess of long hours and longer weeks "Maybe next Tuesday then?"

"I don't see why that wouldn't work?" Casey says. Before the victory dance I'm doing in my head can spill over onto my face, there's a knock at the door.

"Come in!" Casey calls. It's one of the project higher-ups whose name is currently escaping me.

"How's it going?" he asks.

"It's going," Casey says, glancing at me.

"It's more than going!" I say, gesturing to the shoddy diagram I just scribbled down.

"Well that certainly sounds promising," says doctor whatshisface, clearly unable to read my handwriting but able to tell that I'm excited. "Dr. Renard, would you mind bringing your notes upstairs? Quarterly progress check and all that."

"I can indeed!" I say, probably giving off the enthusiasm of an overactive puppy. Casey waves as if to say "good luck."

I don't need luck, not this week. I'm sure of it.

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Every day I go to work in fear of Nero Renard.

I have to get up at the asscrack of dawn every day to get to work before he does. It's the only chance I have of getting anything done without constantly having to look over my shoulder. I can admit that Renard's a genius, the man has a master's degree in biochemistry or something, so if he spent his time actually working and not leering at me, I can only imagine how much shit we'd get done.

I must've gotten lost in work because the next thing I know, he's behind me waving a paper coffee cup under my nose and I jump with a strangled yelp. I didn't even hear him come in because the man just doesn't make noise. I swear, my life would be significantly easier if I could just put a bell on him like a cat. Early Renard Warning System.

"Good morning, Casey," he says, his voice disgustingly sweet. I bite back the *that's Dr. Sorrento to you* brewing on my tongue.

"Renard," I say, hoping he'll get the memo that he shouldn't talk to me like we're friends. We haven't been friends in five years and it's entirely his fault.

"We've been working together for five years now. At this point you're allowed to call me by my first name. Nero." I look down quickly so he doesn't see the look on my face that says I'd rather choke than act friendly with Renard. I'll be civil, sure, but not friendly. Who names their kid Nero anyway? I sometimes want to ask if he had a dog named Caligula or some shit, but I don't want him to take it as loving banter. I don't want to do *anything* that might justify his sick crush on me.

"I don't know how *professional* that is," I say with careful emphasis that of course goes over his head.

"Alright, I'll play," he says, holding out the coffee up. "Shot of vanilla and more sugar than coffee, right?"

Fuck. He knows my coffee order. How the fuck does he know my coffee order? I'm one-hundred percent sure that I've never ordered coffee in front of Renard.

I must be making a face that looks vaguely positive because he's smiling now and I swear, he's even creepier looking when he smiles.

"You memorized my coffee order?" I ask, hoping he'll give me some indication of how he learned it. He doesn't, he just keeps smiling.

"Of course!" he says. Fan-fucking-tastic. I take the coffee to be polite and go back to my work.

Renard reminds me of one of those brightly colored poisonous butterflies. Maybe it's the orange flower tattoos that sleeve his arms or the dopey, excited persona he puts on, but everything about him feels like a carefully placed warning saying I AM DANGEROUS if you know how to read it. Nobody else in this damn complex does though, they're swayed by the bright colors and what I guess is a conventionally attractive face and have actually told me "you're worried about Renard? Nero? But he's basically an excited puppy!"

A puppy that won't stop trying to hump your leg, maybe. I can feel him staring at me while I work until I finally find an excuse to get him to stop.

"Renard?" I say. He tries to act like he wasn't ogling me just now.

"Yes?"

"Do you think you could take a look at this?" I gesture to the microscope.

"Sure can!" Of course he jumps at the chance. You wouldn't know we've been studying a supervirus, as excited as Renard gets over that shit. You'd think he was being asked to play with puppies and not a pathogen that could kill him if he were careless with it. I swear I once heard him call it his baby, and if that's not weird I don't know what is.

"It didn't look like that yesterday, did it?" I say, backing towards the door while he's distracted. I'm taking my lunchbreak early; I don't care if it's not even noon, I can only take so much of Renard acting like *that*.

"No!" he says. He's still distracted looking for a notebook to write down whatever he's taking this to mean. I'm almost out the door when he looks up and I feel trapped, especially when he asks me out.

"Would you like to get dinner sometime?"

Like hell I would. Not after the Christmas party. I got buzzed on daiquiris and Renard tried to kiss me, stone cold sober at the time. He's not the most intimidating man on the surface, I guess you could even call him gangly, but he's still bigger than me and I don't trust him. The idea of trying to fight him off while tipsy was a terrifying prospect, but thankfully he lost his nerve when I yelled at him to get

the hell off of me. It was loud enough for people to hear and I guess he decided not to risk anything with everyone staring.

I'm just glad there were people around that time, unlike five years ago, when a late night and a smuggled flask led him to kiss me. We were still friends then, in fact I actually thought he was kind of cute in that probably-repressed nerd kind of way. I remember taking his glasses off his nose, playfully mocking how of *course* they were designer, rich bastard, and when he leaned forward I thought he was trying to grab them back.

He wasn't.

I probably look horrified now, either at the memory or at his dinner invitation, because Renard's got that expression like a kicked puppy, like he's the slighted party in this whole exchange. Like he's not the one who hounded me every day for a week after I pulled out of that kiss, no matter how much I asked him to give me space.

"Not just the two of us, I mean!" he adds. "Maybe we could invite some of the techs, celebrate this..." He gestures towards the microscope.

"Oh," I tell him. "That sounds like it could be fun." If he gets sick and doesn't show up. Even if he did actually invite a couple of other people I wouldn't put it past him to try to put an arm around me and blame it on too many margaritas.

"How does Thursday sound?" Renard asks, and reality sets in. I'd actually have to go to dinner with him.

"This Thursday?" I say. "I'm sorry, that's my uncle's birthday, we're all going out to dinner. Shame." Bullshit. I have one uncle and he lives in New Hampshire.

My last boyfriend said I need to face this issue head-on, that since constant excuses and pleas for space and filing reports with HR apparently aren't enough to give Renard a hint, I need to just tell him I'm not interested in him like that and never will be. My last boyfriend had the pleasure of never meeting Renard though. I'm bad at confrontation and I don't trust Renard to take rejection gracefully. I don't want to do anything that would give him an excuse to drop the nice guy act.

"Oh." Again with the kicked puppy face. "Maybe next Tuesday then?"

He knows what day I'm not working late. I change the days I work late weekly to avoid a situation like this and those changes aren't exactly public. He's somehow gotten his hand on my schedule, how the fuck did he...

"I don't see why that wouldn't work?" I say. That means I have until next Tuesday to find a new excuse. Thankfully there's a knock at the door before Renard can ask a follow-up question.

"Come in!" I say, maybe a bit too eager to have a neutral party in the room. It's one of the project bosses, Dr. Bell.

"How's it going?" he asks.

"It's going," I say, looking at Renard in an attempt to get him talking about something that isn't me.

"It's more than going!" Renard gestures excitedly to his notes.

"Well that certainly sounds promising," Bell says. "Dr. Renard, would you mind bringing your notes upstairs? Quarterly progress check and all that."

"I can indeed!" says Renard. He's practically bouncing on the balls of his feet and Bell seems to appreciate his enthusiasm. I'm glad someone finds it endearing instead of just plain freaky.

I give a small wave as the lab door swings shut behind them. Being alone again, I can finally get some actual work done.

I swear, some days it feels like this job is trying to kill me.