Backsliding

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Summary

After a late night at work, Taylor just wants to head home. Only it appears that they are not the only one staying late that night.

Notes

Well, this just kind of came out of nowhere, but here's some more Winston fanfic for the world. That boy needs so much more love!

Also, since Winston doesn't have a last name, I just have him one here. I'm not going to go into all the implications of the one I gave him, so think of it what you will.

Taylor rubbed the back of their neck and sighed. It had been a long day and they were happy to finally be heading home. Ever since they had joined back up with Axe Capital, Taylor's days seemed to just be one headache after another.

Today had been worse than most. With every day Taylor continued their charade of being allies with Axe, they could feel his grip tightening just a little bit more around them. Yet it was still too soon to betray him. There were still too many moving pieces and unknowns.

As Taylor made their way through the desolate office, they were relieved at least that everyone else seemed to have gone home already. Lauren had offered to wait up, but Taylor had sent her home a few hours earlier. There was no reason why she had to sit around waiting just for Taylor's sake.

Taylor was immensely grateful for the support, but they were not going to ask too much of their employees anymore. They had dragged everyone unfairly into battle before and this time they planned on being more careful.

Lost in their thoughts, Taylor almost missed the dim light coming from the southern stairwell. Those stairs lead down to the the quant work area, or quant dungeon as they knew Winston had taken to calling it.

Taylor frowned at the electricity wastage. Winston usually knew better than to leave the lights on when he left. Although Winston did have Math Meetup on Thursdays, so perhaps he wasn't the last one out that day.

Taylor made their way over to the stairwell to turn the lights off, but froze when they heard noises coming from below. There was no way that anyone was still down there, was there?

Taylor squared up their shoulders before heading downstairs. It would not do to show any signs of fear, especially in their own office.

"Hello?" they called out. "Is someone down there?" They were greeted in response by a startled yelp.

"Winston?" Taylor asked, recognizing the voice and heading down the stairs. "Shit. You scared me. I guess I sort of got into the zone and lost track of the time," Winston responded.

He stood up to greet Taylor as they got to the bottom of the steps. "What are you still doing here at..." Winston paused to look at the clock on his computer.

"Holy shit. What are you still doing here at 1:30am?" Winston asked, looking at Taylor with concern.

"I was taking care of some things," Taylor responded vaguely. "Why are you still here?" they countered. "I was coding," Winston responded, a little defensively.

Taylor made a mental note of Winston's tone as they gave him a once over. He looked tired and defeated. "Don't you have Math Meetup on Thursdays?" Taylor asked gently. Winston

shook his head.

"Not anymore," he replied miserably. He slumped back into his chair and stared dejectedly up at the ceiling.

Taylor frowned slightly. "What happened?" they asked. Winston sighed. "Well, you know how I'm an asshole?" he began. Taylor felt the corners of their mouth twitch, but refused to smile and Winston's self deprecating comments.

"I know how you can be somewhat abrasive," they replied diplomatically. Winston let out a slight chuckle at this. "Yeah, well, apparently they don't want 'abrasive' people there," he admitted.

Any degree of amusement Taylor was feeling before instantly disappeared. They though back to how Winston's eyes lit up whenever he talked about Math Meetup. It was clearly something that meant a lot to him. Losing it like this was surely a painful blow.

Taylor stared at Winston's sad eyes for a moment before making a decision. They quickly grabbed a chair and sat down next to him. "Did I ever tell you about my times as a child poker star?" they asked. Winston shook his head.

"Well, back when I was younger, I discovered the world of online poker. It was an amazing experience, really. I was just a kid, but I was already playing against and beating adults at that point. And I won quite a bit of money too. I felt like I ruled the world.

Only my rein was short lived. Eventually the other players grew tired of my success and rebelled. They kicked me out of the server and refused to let me back in. And even if I made a new account and pretended to be a different person, it was clearly only a matter of time before that one was banned as well.

They took something that I, just a kid at the time, loved and ripped it away from me. And even today it still hurts to think about," Taylor concluded, their face more open and vulnerable than they had intended to get.

Winston blinked in surprise and let out a small exhale of breath. "Shit. That sucks ass," he responded. Despite it all, Taylor felt the corners of their mouth twitched up again as they let out a slight chuckle.

"Yes," they replied. "It does, as you so elegantly put it, suck ass. It really turned me off from the whole concept of poker for a long time. In fact, it wasn't until Axe signed me up for the poker tournament that I was willing to play again. It was one of the few positive impacts that man has had on my life."

Winston cocked his head and smiled at his boss. "So you're saying that I shouldn't let being kicked out of Math Meetup stop me from doing what I love?" he asked.

Taylor only raised an eyebrow mysteriously. "I'm simply telling you a tale about myself. What you take away from it is up to you," they replied.

Winston stared at them for a second, then suddenly started to laugh. He continued to laugh until tears streamed down his cheeks. Only the tears continued even as the laughter died away.

"It was the one place I felt I truly belonged," Winston admitted. "It wasn't just about the math or the code. I felt like I had friends there. I saw those people all the time. Sometimes we would all even order food in during the meetup and eat together. Do you know how many other people willing eat together with me?"

Winston stared sadly at Taylor. "Without Math Meetup, what do I still have? All I'm good at is math, programming, and making stupid and inappropriate comments. I just lost the people who accepted me for the first two because of the third.

I feel like I'm backsliding so far. I promised I would become a better person, but here I am, months later, and nothing has changed. I'm still the same asshole I always was, only now I have less to show for it. If my skills can't outshine my shitty personality, then what hope do I have for my future?"

Taylor stared at the sobbing boy for a few seconds before holding out their arms to him. Winston paused for a moment before realizing what Taylor was offering and sinking into them.

Taylor winced a little at the warm, wet form collapsing into their chest, but wrapped their arms around him regardless.

"You still have us, you know," Taylor said gently. "You asked what you still have, and you still have this. You are an important part of the team here at Mase Cap and that's not about to change."

"But only because you don't care about my personality," Winston protested. "You are willing to overlook flaws in exchange for skill, but what if the other employees eventually can't? I've already driven people away. What if I keep making that mistake?"

Taylor felt a small pang in their chest and let their arms wrap a little tighter around Winston's body. "You're wrong about that," they admitted. "I didn't hire you despite your personality at all. Your personality was one of your selling points."

Winston sat up in surprise. "What?" he asked in confusion. "But you rejected me because of it! Then you only offered to let me try again if I stopped being such a piece of shit. And you only let my backsliding slide because my algorithm was so good."

Taylor shook their head. "I reached out to you because I needed someone with passion and drive. I needed someone who was able to take risks and wasn't afraid to challenge me. You were always so much more than just your code."

Winston felt his body start to tremble. Was he really more to Taylor than just some extremely talented code monkey?

"Just recently you helped me realize how dangerous the path I was walking truly was. I lost sight of my goals, my values, and myself, but you helped guide me back. And sure, you were a little self-centered and abrasive in your words, but your anger was well-founded. And only you had the courage and passion to take me on.

There is a reason why you come to all my executive meetings and it isn't because of your code. You are a valuable part of this company. You, Winston Kleinman, are the resource I was after when I hired you, the incredible code you produce is just a side effect.

And I'm sorry if you never realized that. It was my job to make you feel welcome and I guess I failed to do that." Taylor looked around at the quant room. It was easy to see why Winston called it a dungeon.

"And you are important to me. Me, personally. Even if you were not my valuable employee, you would still be my friend," Taylor concluded. Their body grew a little more rigid now that the words were out there. These were not words easily uttered, but they were completely true.

For his part, Winston was in a daze. He honestly couldn't believe his ears, but he know better than to ask Taylor to repeat themselves. These were midnight words, he determined. They were the sort of words that were only uttered late at night while alone together in a windowless room.

Yet they caused Winston's heart to swell. He had a friend. There was somewhere where he belonged, somewhere where he was wanted.

"Thank you," he whispered. There was nothing else he could think to say. Taylor simply patted him awkwardly on the back.

Winston got up and moved back to his own chair. Taylor's arms were a warm and safe place, but he didn't want to overstay his welcome.

The pair stared at each other in silence for a few minutes. The tears in Winston's eyes had dried up and the pain had faded from his eyes, but there was still uncertainty and fear there.

"Have you eaten?" Taylor finally asked, breaking the silence. Winston's eyes widened and he shook his head. "I completely forgot to," he admitted.

"There's not much open at this hour," Taylor continued, but there is a 24 hour diner not too far away from here. They have some decent enough vegan options there and you could use something in your system. Want to join me for a late night meal?"

Winston was once again rendered speechless, but as Taylor stood up and held out a hand, Winston found himself taking it. Wordlessly, he followed Taylor up the stairs, absentmindedly flicking the light off as he climbed the last one.

"I thought you always turned that off when you left," Taylor remarked when they noticed Winston's actions. "What?" Winston asked, startled a little by Taylor's voice suddenly filling the air. "I almost without you left earlier," Taylor explained. "But I saw the light was on and wanted to see what was going on. I'm glad I did."

Winston felt his cheeks grow warm. He had thought that Taylor's compliments would be limited to the confines of the quant dungeon, but they were on the main floor now.

"I'm glad you did too," Winston agreed. "You should look for a new programming group to join," Taylor suggested. "I'm sure there are plenty of others out there." Winston nodded reluctantly. He knew that Taylor was right, but he was still scared.

"Once you find it, let me know the meeting dates. Then we can plan our dinners around them," Taylor concluded, a smile once again tugging at the corners of their mouth.

Winston nearly tripped on a desk. "Our dinners?" he inquired. Taylor nodded. "You implied earlier that you wanted to eat dinner with friends from time to time, so I thought you might want to grab a bite with me sometimes after work. If I'm wrong then..."

Winston shook his head empathetically, cutting Taylor off. "I would love to grab dinner with you," he assured them. "I'm just still getting over the fact that you want to spend time with me outside work."

"Well, I do," Taylor replied. "And I bet others do too. Have a little bit more faith in yourself, okay. Backsliding isn't just about how you treat others. Treat yourself kindly too."

Winston nodded. The tears were back in the corners of his eyes, but this time they weren't from sadness. "Okay," he agreed. "No more backsliding. This time I'm going to get it right. Just you watch! Winston Kleinman is ready to face the world! Nothing can stop him now!"

As his excitement grew, so too did the volume of Winston's words. On the last ones, he jumped in the air, pumping his fists. And Taylor couldn't help themselves. They laughed, bright and clear. And then Winston laughed too. The entire ride down the elevator was filled with the joyous sound.

And as they stepped into the cool night air, Taylor realized they weren't stressed anymore. Their problems had not gone away, but they seemed so much smaller in the moment.

Taylor shot a quick text to Lauren informing her that they had left the office and were going to grab a bite before heading home. They then slipped the phone back into their pocket and turned back to Winston.

"Shall we?" they asked. Winston nodded and grinned. "We shall," he replied. He then jumped up once more and did another fist pump. "Lead the way, my friend!" he declared, enjoying the sound of his voice echoing throughout the city. And with another smile, Taylor did.

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