

Wess twisted nervously in the swivel chair. They liked the arms of the chair and the sway of their ears jostling about. Sensing their anxiety, Poppy placed a gentle hand on their head, not looking away at the paper before the both of them. Wess continued to stir as she read the same answer over and over. Another failed test, another afterschool tutoring session. Poppy let them sit in her chair so they didn't feel in trouble. It was important to her that Wess felt special.



The issue this time was the names of historical figures.

Poppy was trying to think up a mnemonic to help. *“Zinnia.. Zinnia is a flower; it starts with a Z, not many names start with Z, unique... hmmm”*.

Squeaks emanated from some obscured swivel mechanism in the chair. The anxiety that fueled the sound began to power a sense of calm. Wess began to lose themselves in the repetition of it coupled by the hushed hums of Poppy's thoughts. Like a trumpet and guitar. An orchestra of things Wess loved. This make-shift symphony was interrupted by the click of the classroom door opening. Lucky had popped his head into the classroom, peering in quietly to assess the situation. With a trained eye, honed by the thick forests of Willanova, he gained a full grasp of everything. His suspicions were correct.

“Well isn't it you and Wess.”

He smiled and stepped in, his eyes soft. He had arrived home from work before his darling had. Wess often lagged behind their peers, so seeing them with Poppy was no surprise to him. Poppy was adamant on not letting them repeat another year. Lucky understood and had even briefly helped on occasion with Wess's after school lessons. During some of the

more academic parts he struggled with them, but he was always quick with a destressing story or topical anecdote.

Poppy glanced out the window. The last sun stuck to the bottom of the fall clouds like flaky dirt.

“Oh, sorry Wess, let's wrap up for the day. The last one is Zinnia. You fixed everything else perfectly. Good job!” She let the hand on Wess's head drift down. The shadow of a windowpane crossed her face as she shifted upward from the floor. She clutched the edge of her desk, pulling herself up. The desk was intentionally high for her stature and her chair specially fashioned for her equine body. Wess's legs dangled from it, the chair pushed to its maximum height so they could reach the papers on top of the desk.

“Thank you!” Wess sings with a smile on their face.

Wess really wanted to graduate. They wanted to make Poppy and Lucky proud. Both of them had de-facto-raised Wess, with Lucky finding them as a baby in the woods, and Poppy caring for them. Despite intermittent fostering, Wess proved too much of a challenge and was never fully adopted. Wess decided a few years ago to grow out of the system, finding the emotional pressure to be too much. They lived with a few Willows in similar situations in a comfy corner of Sullow. They were all classmates and were probably wondering where Wess was this late.

Wess took their marked up test and a few notes and started to get up from the chair. The chair began exiting a little faster, prompting Poppy and Lucky to dart towards Wess as the chair started to roll out from under them. Poppy, still partially prone, grabbed at the chair's base while Lucky vaulted over the large desk. The chair stopped but Wess did not, slowly tumbling into Lucky's arms. As if frozen midair before their safety was assured, stationery finally begins crashing into the floor. Lucky lets out a hearty laugh while Poppy takes a sign of relief.

“S-sorry! Aaahh” Wess frowned, their head flicking between Lucky and Poppy. She was quite the clutz.

“All's well, just a few pencils caught in the crossfire” Lucky said, setting them down. He thought to himself *“still the same little Willow”*.

They all collected the tossed papers and pens, placing them back on the desk. After a few more apologies and smiles, Wess rushed off home, stars peeking through the clouds.