

## A Fatally Irresistible Taboo

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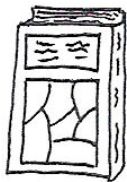
"Ph...Phobos...I...I've got something to...to tell you," mumbled Lyra.

"Whatever you want to say, say it. Don't mince words; it's not like you," said Phobos a little impatiently, squint-eyed and arms-folded.

"I...I...What do you think of me? Ah, no, no, I mean...I...I...I like you!" She snarled out the last few words with almost all her strength, and then waited with a bated breath. But seconds after another, only silence overbearingly stepped in between the two.

"Hum...Lyra? To me you are a bosom buddy, a very important friend. And that's all. I don't want to hurt you but...I think you know what I mean. And of course we are still best friends, right? Lyra? Are you still listening to me? You know what I mean?"

"Perfectly..." Tears bleared everything in front of her. Not knowing what to say, she lurched feebly out of the classroom just in time so that Phobos didn't see her tears dropping.



Left alone in the classroom listening to Lyra's sobs fading away, Phobos started to wonder. Why not Lyra? She was forthright and sincere. She was considerate. She was the most beautiful girl he had ever met. And, the most important of all, they were so close that he thought there wouldn't be anyone who knew him better than she did. She seemed to be a perfect mate, but why did he never feel a bit love for her? Going into whys and wherefores, he discovered that it seemed he never fell for a woman however charming she might be. *Maybe it's simply because he hadn't met his Miss Right yet.* This question didn't stay long on his mind because all that he was looking forward to full-heartedly was the basketball game he was going to watch the next day with Orion, now one of his classmates in his sophomore year.

It was a fine Saturday afternoon. The audience swarmed into the stadium in droves, and fortunately Orion and Phobos arrived early enough to pick out two seats with quite a good view. Packed to capacity, the stadium was like a clamorous market. The game was great and the players did put up a splendid show in which the two boys shouted, laughed, praised, swore, and enjoyed themselves. During the halftime show, there were cheer teams consisting of pretty girls performing artfully and lively.

"You see the girl with a ponytail over there? She is so cute! And I'm sure I saw her glancing at me!" Laying his left arm on Phobos' shoulder, Orion said excitedly.

"Which one?" Phobos turned to Orion in order to find out which direction his eyes were fixed on. But on turning and seeing Orion's face enlarged right in front of him, for no reason Phobos suddenly felt his cheek flush and his heart skip a beat.

"Ye...Yeah...She's cute..." echoed Phobos perfunctorily. Phobos was unable to figure out what it was, and this subtle affection did prevent Phobos from continuing to concentrate on the rest of the game.

After dinner, Phobos came back to his own apartment and his five-year-old husky, Deimos, greeted him enthusiastically as usual. Deimos was very smart as if he could understand human language whenever Phobos talked to him, and thus Deimos became the best listener to whom Phobos was used to baring his soul. After a shower and getting something for Deimos to eat, he tiredly lay on his bed with Deimos' head laying on his belly and grunted, "you know what, Deimos, today I think I did experience something different, or maybe something I have been longing for...I still don't know exactly what it was, but I'm sure it must be something related to Orion, and I have to admit that he...I can...he...he's..." After a long silence, Deimos raised and tilted his head and saw Phobos had already fallen asleep.

On Monday, Phobos didn't have the same class with Orion and he seemed to have forgotten his bemusement last Saturday. However, Phobos gradually found himself unable to tear his gaze away from Orion whenever they had the same class, which of course was all noted by Lyra, for Phobos was still someone who attracted most of Lyra's attention. One day, Phobos' phone rang and it was Orion.

"Let's play one-on-one after school!" said Orion through the phone.

"Sure! See ya then!" replied Phobos without hesitation.

Successfully surviving those classes that were as boring as usual, Phobos rushed to the basketball court just like an elementary schoolboy rushing to the candy shop after class. He found Orion, with his shirt off because of the scorching hot weather, standing under the sun and waving at him. On the court Orion and Phobos crouched and dashed and leapt; their two shadows moved swiftly. The one holding the ball watched for his chance to shoot; the other stretching his arms wide tried hard to block any chance his opponent was looking for, which meant the inevitable contact of their limbs and trunks. When Phobos' back was pushed by Orion's naked chest, Phobos found himself going pit-a-pat again. "It's not a good sign," Phobos thought. While Phobos' feelings and thoughts slowed his movement, Orion sensed it almost immediately.

"Why are you slowing down? Already tired?" asked Orion.

"No, no, of course not, we've just started playing!" answered Phobos quickly.

Orion stopped. "To tell the truth, I found you go blank many times since we went to the game together the other day. I'll know if you try to smooth it over. So come clean, Phobos. What's on your mind?" Orion asked quite casually with a suspicious smile. Hearing Orion's words, Phobos was all in a sweat and suddenly motionless.

"Wh...What?"

"Or should I say, WHO's on your mind?"

"What do you mean?' Who are you referring to? You can see there you...just keep you..."

Not letting him finish, Orion interrupted, "Stop! What are you raving about? So I guessed right and you do like Brea, the girl on the cheer team!" Phobos thought about it for a while and said, "Who is she?" Bewildered, Orion inferred, "You forgot? So it's not Brea, but who else, then? Mmm... Ha! I got it! It's me,

right? Ha ha! Come on, let's snog!" Orion pretended to hug Phobos, which made Phobos shocked and blushful. Seeing Phobos speechless and then pausing suddenly, Orion shouted, "Hey, hey, hey, why are you blushing! I'm just joking! ... Whatever, let's get something to eat, I'm starving!" "Um...m. Sure, me too."

They sat at a food stand. Orion said, "Do you want some cuttlefish? It's good!"

"No, thanks. By the way, I remember the girl you just mentioned. Brea, right? I remember that day you insisted we exchange our phone numbers with her when the game ends, and she called me the day after the game hoping to see me again, but I refused. Are you still in touch with her now?" Phobos dug into a big plateful of fried rice in front of him as he talked. But when he raised his head as the question was raised, he didn't get the answer but only saw Orion trying hard to stick his tongue out to see if it's been blackened by the ink from the cuttlefish. Phobos burst out laughing. "I can help you!" Phobos stretched out his hand to pull Orion's tongue; Orion laughed and hit him on his head. This began a battle full of swearing and laughter.

On his way home, Phobos kept waving his fists thinking about how interesting the battle was. Suddenly his fists froze in the air as he recalled his unanswered question. Orion mentioned Brea, the girl Orion seemed to be fond of. *Is Orion still in touch with her? Are Orion and Brea going out without me? Or is Orion already seeing her now?* Tons of questions without answers blotted out Phobos' good mood a few seconds before. Knowing it's impossible to figure out the answers by himself, Phobos took out his phone and dialed Orion's number. When hearing the familiar tune "To Be With You" and waiting for Orion to answer it, Phobos hanged up the phone abruptly disregarding Orion's repeatedly saying hello from the other side of the phone. Phobos started to ponder why those questions bothered him so much that he had to get the answers right away. Then he thought of those good times he shared with Orion in which he had those unspeakable feelings in his heart of hearts. All these pieces of memory pointed directly to the fact that he loved his best friend, who was a man.

It's very hard for him to face the reality though he knew he could no longer bury his head in the sand. He turned off his cell phone, shoved it into his pocket and rode on his motorbike heading for nowhere. He stared at the front, followed the line that separated the shade trees and passersby into two halves, and let speed blur things besides him to the fullest. His numbness made him neglect the time and how much gas was left. His motorbike gradually became slower and slower, and it finally ground to a halt. When Phobos raised his head and looked around, he found himself out of the concrete jungle he was familiar with.

Phobos sat by the road beside his motorbike motionlessly. Not knowing how long it had been, Phobos counted all his money and realized that there wasn't enough money to buy gas or to take any kind of transportation home. Then he slowly took out and turned on his cell phone, and saw many unanswered calls made by Orion,



who was both the first and the last person he wanted to see now. He scanned the names in his telephone book in search of a friend, except for Orion, to help him out of this situation. He scanned the phone book one, two, three, four or more times. Staring at the screen, finally he surrendered and called Orion.

"Where are you?" Orion answered the phone almost immediately and shouted.

"I...I don't know where it is..."

"Any store in the vicinity? Hand the phone to the storekeeper. Let me ask him!"

After another two hours, Orion appeared with a barrel of gas and finally they both rode on their own motorbike and set off for home. When they were about to separate and head for their own apartment, suddenly Orion stopped by the wayside, which forced Phobos to apply his emergency brake also. "What's up?" asked Phobos.

After a long silence, Orion said, "I know everything. I know why you blushed when we were playing basketball. I know what you're thinking when you look at me without saying anything." Phobos felt throttled and didn't breathe a word. Orion continued, "Honestly, I think it's ridiculous. You don't think I'm thinking in the same way, do you? I hope you can see the truth and face it." And then Orion left.

In the following days Phobos didn't appear at school; his phone was either turned off or left unanswered, and neither could he be found in his apartment.

"Where's Phobos? Why did he just vanish into thin air?" asked Lyra worriedly.

"I...think I was too harsh on him... I didn't mean to say it...I just couldn't accept that idea at that time..." Orion buried his face in his palms and murmured.

It took Lyra several seconds to see the light, "...You...How do you know that? I thought you've never had a doubt?"

"One of my friends, Brea, told me. But actually I don't know how she knew it."

"...It's me...We were close in senior high. I thought she didn't know anyone in our class so I just felt free to confide in her, but now...and...Phobos' gone, what about Deimos?"

"I'll take care of it. I believe Phobos is just going out for a distraction and someday he'll appear and talk to me as if nothing had ever happened. At that time he'll be glad that I can keep Deimos in good health as usual. I won't disappoint him again."