

## area man can't keep job

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/52761106) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/52761106>.

Rating:	<a href="#">Teen And Up Audiences</a>
Archive Warning:	<a href="#">No Archive Warnings Apply</a>
Category:	<a href="#">Gen</a>
Fandom:	<a href="#">Lifesteal SMP</a>
Relationships:	<a href="#">Poafa &amp; Vitalasy</a> , <a href="#">Poafa &amp; Mapicc &amp; Roshambo</a> , <a href="#">Poafa &amp; Original Female Character</a> , <a href="#">Vitalasy / Original Female Character</a>
Characters:	<a href="#">Poafa (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Vitalasy (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Mapicc (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">PrinceZam (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Baconnwaffles0 (Video Blogging RPF)</a>
Additional Tags:	<a href="#">This was a long running joke and now here we are</a> , <a href="#">9k words in and I dont know how to tag this</a> , <a href="#">world building</a> , <a href="#">Alternate Universe - Modern Setting</a> , <a href="#">Horror &amp; Cryptid Elements</a> , <a href="#">Fluff</a> , <a href="#">Comedy</a> , <a href="#">Comedy of Errors</a> but it's Poafa's career decisions, <a href="#">Blood</a>
Language:	English
Series:	Part 9 of <a href="#">completely normal things happening in nevada</a>
Collections:	<a href="#">Anonymous</a>
Stats:	Published: 2024-01-02 Words: 8,928 Chapters: 1/1

# area man can't keep job

by Anonymous

## Summary

Poafa cycles through jobs like socks but it always seems to be restaurants and it always seems to be the same place. It always shuts down, either due to a health hazard, bankruptcy, or just a lack of interest. But Poafa's having fun, at least, right?

A view of the town from someone whose life is completely unaffected by the supernatural. Or at least, so he believes.

Also Vitalasy is there a bunch.

## Notes

god i love poafa  
would love to see a video of his some day  
- my friend upon beta-reading

Trigger warnings for: Mentions of a character vomiting, human blood and a human heart

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Poafa, like any teenager with not much to do, got his first minimum wage job when he was about fifteen. Their small town economy wasn't in the gutter just yet, but it was still not that common for highschool freshmen to have jobs other than kid-who-mows-the-lawn and kid-who-delivers news paper. Still, Poafa's mom knew a guy, and his dad knew a guy, and those guys each had a cousin that was connected to the man who owned the single Italian place in town.

Which is how Poafa got the job. It was nothing to write home about, nothing to celebrate really. The pizzeria was on its last legs, the last waiter had quit the day after Poafa started, and Poafa was only supposed to work the cash register but he ended up cleaning the floors and helping around in the kitchen in the rare times they had more than three tables taken.

It came as a surprise to him then, that during one slow spring day of him just playing games on his phone while standing in front of the cash register, the bell rang and someone entered.

It was two someone's, and despite never having more than a passing glance Poafa recognized them both. The guy was Vitalasy, same year as Poafa, and part of the reason he wasn't on the basketball team (it definitely wasn't that Poafa wasn't tall enough, or that he failed to show up to practice). And unlike Poafa, Vitalasy was student council president and basketball team captain and overall really popular, so they weren't exactly best friends. The girl was Alice, pretty and clever and also part of the student council, and another reason Poafa didn't really like Vitalasy. The two of them were dating, and Poafa? Poafa had a huge crush on her. How could he not? Even now he couldn't take his eyes off her, her long brown hair twisted in plaits, her off-shoulder floral blouse only emphasizing the green of her eyes.

By the time they approached he was helplessly blushing.

"Hi Poafa! I didn't know you worked here," Vitalasy greeted him, and Poafa wanted to kick himself. Of course Vitalasy recognized him, his smile seemed genuine too. Never once fading as they made their order and sat at one of the tables. Alice, much to Poafa's dismay, didn't seem to recognize him.

Poafa hid in the kitchen while their order was being prepared. He was sure no one else would walk in, and he was too busy stewing in his thoughts. He didn't want them to catch him glaring, *either* of them. Vitalasy made himself difficult to dislike, even when he was dating someone Poafa clearly had a crush on!

The cook delivered the pizza to the table instead of Poafa, and then had the nerve to say that Vitalasy had asked about Poafa! The terror! Poafa simply had to walk out there and prove everything was okay, that despite the fact that the potential love of his life, the beautiful Alice, was dating Vitalasy, he was strong enough to bear the heartbreak.

Once he made it back to the cash register Vi looked up from his pizza and gave him a little wave. Alice turned to look at him with a confused look on her face before turning to Vitalasy and saying something Poafa didn't quite catch. She must not have recognized him. It soured his mood even more, they had math and physics together! Although he sat in the back during math and tried his best to look small so the teacher didn't pick him to answer a question.

When Alice always knew the answer. He put his head in his hands, maybe they weren't the best match.

He tried his best to focus on his phone. Poafa couldn't even really hear their conversation, thanks to the "*authentic*" Italian music that the owner insisted on playing. He was so intensely focused on his game that it startled him when Vitalasy came up to him.

"Hey, I'm really sorry, but- the pizza we ordered is uncooked in the middle," he pointed at the dish, where true to his word the dough was still pale and sticky. It grossed Poafa out.

"Oh- I uh- I'm so sorry-" Poafa started, but he was already dreading the conversation he was going to have with the chef. Truth be told, the old man scared him.

"Should I talk to the chef?" Vitalasy offered.

"No- no- I'll-"

"I don't wanna get you in trouble bro, I can do it myself it's okay-"

"Let's just- Let's go together?" Poafa asked, hesitantly, but Vitalasy just smiled at him and motioned for him to lead the way.

To no one's surprise, the chef was already smoking in the kitchen, and just yelled at both of them and kicked them out. Alice was already waiting with her things, ready to go. But Vitalasy wanted to make sure Poafa was alright, too, so he waited until Poafa got his things and they left together.

He still came to work regularly, just completely avoided the kitchen every time. Not like Poafa worked there every day. It was just the weekends, with a few weekday afternoons scattered in between.

When summer break came the restaurant owner told him to take a break, come back in the fall when school started up again. Of course Poafa found that suspicious, but he'd just finished freshman year and was planning on dedicating his entire summer to basketball training. He was determined to make his highschool basketball team, partially to show Vitalasy, and to impress Alice, and not having to work only gave him more free time.

His plan backfired when the second day of summer break he made it to the school basketball court and Vitalasy was there. School was closed, but the basketball court was inside and had air conditioning, so they made it available during summer break along with the library and other places.

Vitalasy, at least, was happy to see him.

"I didn't know you still played," he said, absentmindedly spinning the ball in his hands.

"Well, I... Kind of wanted to try out for the basketball team again, when school starts," Poafa explained, transfixed by the way Vitalasy was balancing the ball on one finger.

“Sick, we can practice together,” Vitalasy cheered and threw the ball to him, which Poafa, to his own surprise, caught.

Poafa never expected to become friends with Vitalasy of all people. He’d seemed so far away, always on a pedestal, untouchable. But now he was on the school basketball court most mornings, sometimes alone, sometimes with friends, but always close.

It was one morning that Poafa had made it to the court before Vitalasy for once, and was doing his warm ups already when Vitalasy came in, a faraway look on his face. Poafa didn’t really know what to make of it, just watched as he walked around, changed into gym clothes. It was when Vitalasy failed to catch the ball Poafa threw at him that he finally cracked.

“Okay, what’s wrong?” he asked, and this seemed to shake Vitalasy out of it. He smiled and to Poafa’s untrained eye, this seemed genuine.

“Nothing, nothing. I stayed up late playing video games and forced myself to go to practice,” he explained and Poafa shrugged.

“We can take it easy then,” he said, but Vitalasy shook his head.

“Nah man, you wanna make it on the team? You gotta practice,” Vitalasy grinned and threw Poafa the ball hard, but not in a harsh way.

“I’m already better than like, half the guys there,” Poafa rolled his eyes, but it was on now and he was taking it seriously. Vitalasy had a whole head of height and months of being on the team advantage on him, he wasn’t going to give him an inch. But Vitalasy was groggy, slow.

The basketball left his hands and in a neat arch landed into the net and onto the floor. Poafa sighed.

“You know Subz?”

“Who?”

“Nevermind then,” Vitalasy shook his head, and grabbed the ball again.

They spent the summer like that, practicing. Sometimes they’d hang out at Poafa’s house watching basketball games, but for the most part, they didn’t get closer than that. Poafa wasn’t about to make friendship bracelets with the guy, but Vitalasy was certainly his friend.

When sophomore year started Poafa made it onto the team surprisingly easy, but it wasn’t as fun as it was playing with Vitalasy and his friends over the summer. He stuck with it though, school in the mornings and practice in the afternoons, that by the time the weekend came he was exhausted.

Poafa remembered what his boss had told him though, and he was still afraid of the short Italian chef that ran the pizzeria. Half alive on Saturday, Poafa came in early to start his shift, not even really looking at the name at the door, when a strange man walked up to him and started asking him what he was doing here.

“Uh, working?” He answered dumbly.

“As what?”

“I think the proper term is host, but I mostly do everything.”

“You’re hired.”

And that’s how Poafa found out that the pizzeria had closed, and a new sandwich shop had opened in the few weeks he’d had off work for summer break.

In truth he didn’t mind, the chef was nicer to him and he got to keep his tips. The fact that there *were* tips was also a miracle, but he realized later on that it’s just the novelty of something *new* in their small town that brings people in. They had no real regulars, the closest one customer came to it was the one weird guy named Brian.

“I’ll have my regular,” he had said the first time, and Poafa had only given him a confused look.

“Who are you?” he asked, because at this point Poafa had worked there long enough to tell most people apart, and this guy was surely new.

“I’m Brian! Man, how do you not know me? Moved in a few weeks ago, work at the bar?” He’d said, but Poafa had only continued to stare. Eventually the man just gave up.

“It’s my first time here, what do you have?”

“Sandwiches,” Poafa smiled, now determined to make this man’s life hell.

Brian did end up being a regular, and at first things seemed fairly normal. Poafa didn’t really get to know him that well, on account of the guy being a bartender and not really out and about town during the same hours as Poafa was. Sometimes he’d stick around and show Poafa some card tricks, he’d even promised him a tarot card reading once. Soon after that though, he started coming in less and less.

Poafa would have chalked it up to the fact that their sandwiches were expensive, and that they got worse over time. But he couldn’t ignore how much more... haggard Brian looked. There was something up with his hair, and the look in his eyes, he looked like he hadn’t been sleeping.

He didn’t really know what he could do, if he could even do anything. He spent his shifts waiting for Brian to show up, waiting to talk to him. Brian came in once, and Poafa bombarded him with pamphlets about getting help when you’re in an abusive relationship. Brian had looked at him for a moment before bursting into laughter. He gave Poafa a pat on the head and told him that he was a good kid, under which Poafa bristled.

As if that particular day couldn’t get any worse, a boy in a bright red hoodie walked into the sandwich shop, his friend in pale lilac trailing in behind him. Poafa didn’t think too much of them at first, although he recognized both of them as highschool freshmen. Though he would soon learn to curse the names Mapicc and Roshambo.

“Two of your finest sandwiches, *uh-please*, ” the boy in red announced, his still high-pitched voice making him sound funny along with the regular annoyance. Poafa just subtly rolled his eyes and brought them their order, not really keeping an eye on them until about a minute later when he heard gagging sounds coming from the table.

“Are you gonna be sick? Are you gonna be sick?” said the tall one, speaking for the first time, loudly enough for it to carry along the already sparsely populated sandwich shop. The boy in question, the one wearing red, was gagging. His face had gone completely green, making him look like a weird parody of a tomato, before the sounds got too much for Poafa and his own stomach started getting queasy. He ran into the kitchen, alerting his boss, and then refused to come back out until the mess was cleaned up.

Poafa had a sensitive stomach, sue him.

Following the incident, Poafa heard rumor that the boy’s mother was trying to sue the place for food poisoning. And although there were *certain* things about the place that definitely could have been cleaner, Poafa knew the entire thing was bullshit. The boy had barely bitten into his sandwich before he started projectile puking all over the place. He shivered just thinking about it.

But there was nothing he could do. It was his word against theirs, and Mapicc was the one who was sick. They didn’t end up going through with the lawsuit.

The sandwich shop closed, this time the owner just cut his losses before things got even worse. He never really saw Brian around town, except once or twice in the grocery store, and he always gave Poafa a conspiratory wink and smile.

He’d been *so* wrong, and he would never live it down, but at least Brian didn’t seem to know his parents, so no one would find out. Poafa wasn’t really expecting anything to happen after that, but another dine-in place opened at the same location, and Poafa couldn’t help himself. He applied for the job.

This was a bad idea for multiple reasons. The place offered just fries, which wasn’t really a bad thing, there were multiple spices and sauce combos that one could pick from to go with their fries. However, it meant that every time a customer came in and asked if it was really “*Just fries?*” Poafa had to deadpan “*Yes, just fries.*”

The words held no semantic value for him anymore.

The other reason this was a bad idea was the fact that the restaurant wasn’t just owned by some *no one*. The restaurant owner was one Mrs. Spiel, who was also head of the parent council at his school, and mother of one Roshambo Spiel. Poafa had mostly grown immune to the fact that his peers would often come and eat at the places he worked at. He’d actually befriended Vitalasy, too. (It was easy now that he was no longer jealous and also part of the basketball team.) But Poafa *hated* Roshambo and Mapicc.

They were always so damn annoying. It wasn’t even like they demanded their food for free, they paid like anyone else, except maybe Roshambo when they were alone. But at least Roshambo, alone, was easy to deal with. The problem was that Roshambo was *never* alone.

Mapicc was always with them, and where there was Mapicc, there were also Mapicc's friends.

And Mapicc's friends never let Poafa just do his damn job. Absolute menaces.

Poafa was a professional though, there was nothing these *children* (they were all a year younger) could do that would rattle him. They could laugh and whistle and spill their milkshakes all they wanted, Poafa would remain unbothered. His cold attitude seemed to bore them after a while, and instead of annoying him they just sort of accepted him, in a way. Poafa definitely wasn't *friends* with them, but with them coming in all the time over the summer, they were on decent terms.

Until they brought Spoke with them.

It was the usual group that came to order, the three of them with bright hair colors still smelling like bleach in protest of the new school dress code they'd started enforcing in Poafa's junior year. Without meaning to, Poafa recoiled, but Mapicc didn't even seem to notice. Instead he just grinned and leaned over the counter.

"Hey, we got a stick and poke set from my cousin, do you wanna join us?" he grinned, and Poafa hesitated. It was an immediate no, obviously, for him. Poafa didn't like tattoos at all.

"Bro I'm literally at work," he said incredulously, and Mapicc's face immediately fell into disappointment.

"Boring," he drawled and leaned back. Poafa thought for a moment that he'd just dodged a bullet, and the bullet was Mapicc's friendship. "Can we have some fries please?" Mapicc said in an obnoxiously polite tone, batting his eyelashes. Roshambo squeezed past him, clearly comfortable being squished into Mapicc's personal space.

"Got any dick shaped ones?" They said, earning a giggle from their blonde friend standing in the back.

"They're fries, Ro," Poafa said, already exasperated.

"Got any ball shaped ones then?"

"Oh my God, *go away*. I'll put in your usual," Poafa said, and they all snickered and walked away. He didn't pay them any further attention, instead lost in thought about the best way to ask Lisa from Chemistry to prom, when the door swung open and the lights flickered.

Poafa looked up to the lights, half expecting the old ceiling lights to have broken down, but they were still holding on. Poafa looked to the door then, and saw an oil spill.

Spoke looked like a normal boy but behaved like a man-made catastrophe. He was blond, handsome, skin a warm tan from tending to his grandfather's farm. He was the only home-schooled kid in town, he was the only one who lived outside of town- so far out that it couldn't even count as the edge of town. And all of this should have made him a stranger,

someone unknown. But Poafa was uniquely placed in a spot where he heard everything about everyone, and he definitely knew of him.

He'd just never expected him to be so weird.

It was Roshambo, Mapicc, Zam, and Spoke. Poafa remembered because nothing had... *unsettled* him like Spoke had up until that point in his life. There was something unreal about him, like the light didn't reflect properly off his skin, which was only made worse when he smiled and revealed a row of shiny white teeth.

He didn't even order anything, which made Poafa wonder if he was even real, until Mapicc laughed at something he said and Ro put a hand over Spoke's back. But Spoke kept looking at Poafa. Never once taking his eyes off him, even when he was seemingly speaking to someone at his table. The final straw was when Spoke spilled his fries all over the floor, the ketchup stark red against the white tile, all while keeping eye contact with him.

Poafa quit. The restaurant "*Just fries?*" didn't last much longer.

For six months the place stayed empty, and Poafa started his senior year of highschool. He was on his way to his girlfriend's place when he saw the poster for the new ice cream shop that was opening soon. He didn't really think about it too much, just dialed the number on the poster and somehow convinced the owner to hire him. He was getting good at that.

When it finally opened Poafa had even convinced the owner not to make him wear the silly hat, but instead of his usual job of working at the cash register he had to serve the ice cream too. It was in the usual crowd of people that gathered when a new place opened that he also saw Vitalasy. Poafa hadn't really hung out with him much ever since he quit the basketball team, sometimes things just worked out like that.

He was mulling over the idea of asking him to hang out over the weekend- Poafa wanted to do homework and hang out with his girlfriend too, when he noticed Alice. She was still as pretty as ever, but Poafa didn't really have a crush on her anymore. Her long plaits were now just shoulder length brown hair, and despite the fact that they were supposed to be dating, she seemed kind of... cold.

That could have also been a side effect of the fact that Poafa had been working right above a freezer all day.

Still, Vitalasy's face stuck with him, and the next day in school he sought him out. All of the seniors were constantly too busy to talk in the hallways but it was easy to invite himself to have lunch with Vi and his friends. Poafa had quite a few friends but none close enough that they'd throw a fuss over Poafa abandoning them for one lunch anyways.

He sat at the table with Vitalasy, Alice on her phone next to him, and a few other people from what must have been the school council because Poafa didn't really know them that well. In the cafeteria Poafa wondered what he had even been worried about. Vitalasy seemed fine, if a little spaced out, and nothing about Alice seemed unusual. They sat close to each other but not too close to be indecent in a school cafeteria, a completely normal couple of highschool sweethearts.

About fifteen minutes later Vitalasy seemed to realize something and stood up, excusing himself and leaving the table. Poafa exchanged looks with his fellow classmates, trying to gauge their reactions, but they all just glanced at Alice like that was the answer. She didn't meet Poafa's eyes, in fact, she was intensely focused on Vitalasy's back as he walked out, closing the door behind them and leaving the cafeteria.

About half a minute later she got up, too.

"Missing your pen again, Alice?" one of their classmates asked, but she just picked up her tray and left, not sparing any of them a further glance.

"What... was that?" Poafa asked, not really posing the question to anyone in particular. His classmates, always eager to gossip, piped up.

"Oh they're *totally* making out dude."

"Yeah- like- for sure going over a few biology diagrams," one of them wiggled his eyebrows, and got an elbow in the gut for good measure.

"We don't know," one of them shrugged, and that was that.

But Poafa kept going to their table and kept watching as almost exactly on the dot, Vitalasy left and Alice followed him. Sometimes Vitalasy would mention hanging out with Subz to work on their bio project, and Alice would say she was missing a book or a pen. It was bothering him and he couldn't quite put his finger on it, and although his girlfriend agreed with him that it was weird she told him to leave them alone. But Poafa never liked to leave things unresolved.

The plan came to him the moment before he entered the cafeteria, lunch in hand, and with great effort he fought against the tide of students heading there for their lunch break and hid away. There were still a few lingering students, a couple of girls doing their homework on the hallway floor, a guy that was- let's face it- taking a nap leaning against his locker door. And Poafa, waiting. A few days ago he'd caught on that Vitalasy always left in the direction of the library, so now he sat in a corner in the opposite direction, hoping that once Vitalasy left and Alice followed him, Poafa could go after them without them noticing. He realized belatedly that this might have been stalking, but the curiosity was *killing him*.

So he wolfed down his sandwich and waited, hoping he wasn't gonna get a stomach ache as he sat on the cold tiles. True to his habits, Vitalasy left about fifteen minutes into lunch period, and Alice followed suit. Poafa hesitated for a moment- the idea of walking in on them making out kind of grossed him out- but if he even *suspected* that that was the case he wasn't even going to go inside the room. He just really wanted to know where they disappeared off to.

He followed them down linoleum hallways, up one flight of stairs and at this point Poafa was ready to let them be. To give in and let them make out in the library in peace. But just then, instead of walking into the school library, Vitalasy walked past the door, not even giving it a passing glance.

And Alice walked inside.

Poafa stood in the hallway, stopping at the library door. He watched as Vitalasy disappeared behind a corner, and was torn apart between deciding to follow Alice or follow Vitalasy. He had fully expected them to go together, but even as he'd followed them through the school they weren't exactly walking *together*, just walking in the same direction.

Poafa leaned against the library door— it was completely opaque, but he'd hoped in the quiet of the library he could listen in on whatever conversation Alice was having. '*Possibly having*,' he corrected himself. He wasn't sure if she was having a secret rendezvous or not. And if it *was* quiet, and Alice was only studying, he'd go back to pursuing Vitalasy. But what he hadn't realized as he pressed his ear against the door was that it hadn't been closed fully, and instead of discreetly spying he stumbled through the entrance, clutching on the door handle to save himself from completely eating shit.

“Poafa?” Alice shrieked.

*Busted.*

“Quiet!” Scolded the school librarian, and Poafa barely had the time to compose himself enough to say:

“Sorry,” to them and look up at Alice. She was looking at him with wide, wild green eyes, clearly startled from his sudden entrance, and he tried to shoot her an apologetic look but she only grabbed him by the hand and dragged him off into a corner of the library.

“Were you following me?” She whisper-shouted, and Poafa winced at the grip she had on his hand.

“No! No-” he said, but she raised an eyebrow at him in disbelief and Poafa knew he wasn't getting away with this. “Well- I was- I was following Vitalasy-” her grip turned into her pinching him and he yelped. “You're hurting me!” He cried, and there was another warning from the librarian as Alice let go.

“Sorry. *Sorry*,” she repeated as he rubbed the sore part of his forearm. “But that's what you get for stalking me,” she said, unapologetically.

“Okay well I'm *sorry*,” Poafa said, not feeling very apologetic either. Alice sighed and slumped into a bean bag, Poafa grabbed one of the books on the shelves so he could at least *seem* like he was in the library for a good reason, and mirrored her actions.

“What did you want from Vitalasy?” Alice asked, producing a bag of snacks that she certainly wasn't allowed to eat in the library, but he wasn't about to argue with her on that. He shrugged.

“Wanted to ask him to hang out,” he said, only half-lying.

“And you couldn't do that any other time?” she asked, clearly not buying his lie.

“He's so busy,” Poafa tried to argue, but she rolled her eyes.

“Text him?” she said incredulously, and when he had no answer to that she leaned forward and rested her elbows on her knees. “Do you- Do you have a *crush* on him?”

“No!” Poafa yelled, the answer tearing itself out of his throat before he had the chance to lower his tone.

“If you kids don’t pipe it down I’m locking the library during lunch period,” the librarian scowled, and both of them made a face before making eye contact, and then Poafa had to fight the urge to laugh. God, he was ridiculous.

“No, dude, I just wanted to know what you two were up to. You disappear every lunch break,” Poafa confessed, and Alice leaned back, popping a snack into her mouth and chewing as she watched him for a moment.

“We could’ve been making out,” she said matter-of-factly, and now it was Poafa’s turn to roll his eyes.

“What?” she asked, her tone high-pitched and defensive. “We’re boyfriend and girlfriend, we *could’ve* been doing much worse, even,” she added, blushing despite her seemingly nonchalant tone.

“You and Vitalasy?” Poafa sputtered, much more embarrassed about this conversation than Alice was “You guys don’t– You guys don’t kiss in public– *Hell*. I don’t think I’ve seen you guys hold hands since–” Poafa stopped. When *was* the last time he’d seen them hold hands?

Alice seemed to realize it at the same time, and swallowed her food. She looked away, and then looked back at Poafa again, whose brain was running a mile a minute trying to piece the puzzle in front of him, but he was still missing pieces.

Alice took a deep breath in.

“Listen, I’m gonna tell you something, but you have to promise you won’t tell anyone,” she said, suddenly looking gravely serious.

“I promise,” Poafa said immediately, but Alice shook her head.

“Poafa I’m serious. If you tell anyone I’m going to tell the whole school you had a crush on me freshman year and that this entire rumor is something you spread to get revenge,” she said quickly, and Poafa sputtered.

“Wait, wait– What?! Who told you that??” he said but she just sighed.

“Dude you were *so* obvious– Poafa!” She snapped her fingers in front of him, keeping her voice quiet but urgent. “You either promise me this or you can go find Vitalasy and see what he’s doing,” she said. Poafa considered for a moment. He’d always thought of Vitalasy as a friend, but how close were they, really? Poafa couldn’t even remember his last name most of the time, and he was pretty sure that he’d never even been at his house, despite them spending an entire summer together practicing basketball. Alice stared him. She wasn’t as universally liked as Vitalasy was, she was meaner, more blunt. *Honest*.

“I promise,” he said, and something in his eyes must have been enough for her, because suddenly Alice looked... tired. As if she’d been holding up a facade for so long it was a relief to let it drop.

“We’re not dating. Anymore. Not really,” she said quietly, but it shattered Poafa’s entire worldview. They were their highschool’s *IT* couple. Their celebrity sweethearts. If Vi and Alice weren’t together was love even real?! She stared at him with disappointment in her eyes. “This is why I didn’t wanna tell anyone...”

“Wait what? Since when?” He asked, but as the initial shock passed he was struck with how *stupid* he’d been. Of course they weren’t together. It seemed so *obvious* now. How cold they seemed when one paid attention, how they barely seemed to hang out after school anymore.

“Like, start of senior year? Sort of? Honestly, I don’t even think Vitalasy has realized it yet,” she added absentmindedly.

“Vitalasy *doesn’t know?*” Poafa asked, and Alice dismissed his shock with a wave.

“He’s been... distracted, with family stuff,” she said, and Poafa had the feeling she wasn’t going to add anything else on the subject. She sighed, deeply. “I don’t know, man. I just don’t want to spend my senior year being known as ‘*the girl Vitalasy broke up with*’,” she said, gesturing quotation marks. “Or— Or even worse, ‘*the girl who broke Vitalasy’s heart*’, can you imagine? It would be... weird,” she added. And Poafa realized with a start that he understood exactly how she felt.

It was the reason why he quit the basketball team, after all. He’d thought it was just normal, at first, the attention he got from his teammates from being close to Vitalasy. He was always *Vitalasy’s friend*, and *the guy Vitalasy brought onto the team*. Someone *Vitalasy* had taken pity on and took under his wing because how else would someone get on the team after being rejected once? It was never his own training and skill, it was always— ‘*Oh, he trained with Vitalasy, guys,*’ always giving him the credit. Keeping him both a station above *and* below his peers, never an equal.

“So... All those times your ‘pen was missing’?”

“I was studying here!” she said, gesturing to the bean bag and the scattered notebooks next to it.

“We thought you were making out in the hallway!” Poafa laughed, and she joined in a quiet chuckle. He didn’t know how to express it, exactly, because he understood that her situation was still a little different. Poafa wasn’t *dating* Vitalasy, and although his teammates were certainly jealous of their closeness, it wasn’t the same. This quiet understanding coursed through them, and Alice continued to laugh. There was something melancholic to her laughter, and before Poafa could decide whether to laugh or to cry, his body made the choice for him.

The fact that they couldn’t laugh loudly made the entire situation even funnier to them, knowing they should be quiet only spurring them on until they were silently wheezing, laughing over something that was barely even funny.

Alice sighed after they'd composed themselves, and all the leftover giggles had escaped them the three times they met eyes and burst into silent laughter again. She wiped a tear from her eye, suddenly somber. "I– I don't–" she stopped, and looked at him again. "I don't want to be the girl Vitalasy broke up with," she said.

Poafa held out a hand to her and she took it. "You're Alice," he stated.

"Yeah," she said softly.

"Student council treasury and mathlete," he shook her hand and she laughed, slipping out of his grip. She picked up her notebook and pen, clearly intending to actually get some studying done.

"Aspiring actress," she said out loud, stating her dream like it was a passing fancy, but Poafa was beginning to understand her a little better now.

"Alice, aspiring actress," he confirmed out loud, and then realized something. "Dude you're a AAA battery," he said, and before he could gauge her reaction she'd already thrown a rubber eraser at his head.

It was a slow day at the ice cream shop the next time he saw Vitalasy again, Poafa smiled at him as he walked in and ordered three different ice-cream scoops and took two wooden spoons to go with it.

"On a date with Alice?" Poafa asked conversationally, knowing full well that in her eyes at least they weren't together anymore. Vitalasy seemed deep in thought and it took him a second to answer.

"With Alice? Oh no– Subz and I are working on the bio project today," he said and paid for his ice cream, leaving with a cheerful goodbye and nothing else. Poafa watched him leave, and true to his word as Vitalasy exited the ice cream shop he climbed into a car where a boy with brown hair who must have been Subz was waiting. Poafa vaguely recognized him, and was still staring at him trying to figure out what class he knew him from as he watched Vitalasy feed him ice cream. Subz barely reacted as he backed his car out the drive, but in the last moment before they drove off Poafa watched his mouth move as he said something, and Vitalasy smiled.

It surprised him, for he had never before seen Vitalasy smile like that, so bright, so... *genuine*.

And the final puzzle piece in the mystery of Vitalasy fell into place.

It was all highschool. His job was normal, school was normal, Poafa's life was normal. Sure, he couldn't really *keep* a job, but he was getting attached to the place. Maybe one day he'd earn enough money being a waiter that he'd be able to open up his own restaurant in the same place. Now there was an idea.

The ice cream shop lasted all of senior year. The ice cream shop witnessed the fire that enveloped Vitalasy's home. That's how long it stood, until that business eventually failed too.

Poafa mulled over the idea of business school and decided to go for it until he dropped out approximately one year in and moved back home. He wasn't really one for structured classes and professors, he could barely stand all the pressure.

The ice cream shop had morphed into a taco place had morphed into another pizzeria by the time Poafa came back to wait tables and work the cash register.

He was happy to be home. Yes, the customers were still annoying, still few and far in between, but it was a comfort. He didn't see Vitalasy around a lot— Poafa knew that he went to the diner instead, the only stable restaurant business in town. But there were still a few familiar faces.

Zam, for one, who had never even left for college. Poafa had been confused about that, but didn't manage to ask more questions because Zam had run out after his dog. Poafa felt a little bad about it, he knew what it was like being judged for deciding not to go to college, he didn't mean to make Zam feel the same way.

There were no signs of Ro or Mapicc. Poafa had it on good authority that at least *one* of them was in college, though what institution would accept Mapicc wondered even him.

The one person Poafa was grateful not to see was Spoke, but he didn't like thinking about him *at all*. Part of him was afraid that just mentioning his name would summon him, but that was just ridiculous. Spoke was just Spoke, one of the kids that lived just *slightly* out of town. It was his own fault that people thought he was weird.

He had student loans now, and that was gonna set him back a bit on his plans of opening a restaurant, but he also *delivered* pizzas now, so there was bound to be a bonus.

Time passed, difficult to measure now that he was out of highschool and out of set milestones to define his progress.

The thing that came with being a small town pizzeria, is that you *should* know all the addresses. But every now and then Poafa found himself driving down unfamiliar roads, especially those that lead out of town. He was wary of them, unnaturally so. There was nothing he should have been afraid of. There was *nothing* he should have been afraid of. But every time he headed down a particular road a shudder went down his spine as he recalled where Spoke lived.

It wasn't just Spoke though.

Thirty-three Herzing Str. didn't sound like a real address— which Poafa belatedly realized was because it *wasn't*. Apparently, the man who owned the building held enough political sway that he could just *name* the street that, despite the fact that it was barely a street and that the number of buildings *definitely* didn't go all the way up to thirty-three.

They were all bigger buildings, abandoned, relics of what the old people called a better time, and his teachers called a tetanus hazard. He passed a large old brick building, the sign clinging on to the wall for its dear breath, and Poafa read the words '*Monmouth manufacturing.*' A relic indeed.

Once Poafa made it to the address he still refused to acknowledge existed, he had to admit, the last thing he expected it to be was functional. It was old— a grandmother to old Monmouth down the street, but still stood with an elegance that the manufacturing hall couldn't mimic. He noticed a disparity in the windows— while the lower ones were fairly new, intact and polished, the upper ones looked like bruised, glassy eyes. One was cracked, too. The brick seemed shinier, the vines crawling up the wall looking intentional rather than a result of years of negligence.

He would have kept staring, but Poafa was getting anxious of a snake crawling out from somewhere in between the buildings, and he climbed off his bike and grabbed the pizza delivery box. He rang the buzzer, noticing a heart drawn in sharpie next to the words "Heart Institute."

"Yeah?" came a voice from the buzzer.

"I have two large veggie pizzas for a—" Poafa paused. "A guy named Bacon?" he said in disbelief, more to himself than the intercom.

"Yeah I'll be right there," the guy said, as Poafa stood there and struggled to keep his composure.

The guy who opened the door was both exactly and not at all what Poafa had expected. He had curly brown hair and was wearing a short sleeved orange button-down.

"A vegetarian named Bacon," Poafa said out loud without realizing, and the guy gave him a deadpan stare, unimpressed.

"Wow, never heard that one before," he said flatly, taking the pizza with more force than necessary when Poafa offered it to him. He set it on the side as he began to fumble with his wallet and then sighed in annoyance. "Planet! Got any cash on you?" he yelled back in the hallway, and Poafa perked up at the familiar name. There weren't a lot of people named Planet, and he definitely remembered a person in highschool, maybe a year or two under him? Friends with Zam, maybe? But then again, who *wasn't* Zam friends with.

"No, you gotta ask Jaron," they said, walking into Poafa's field of view. He would recognize them anyway, with their pale skin and striking platinum blonde hair. They were standing behind the guy— Bacon— dressed in the complete opposite of his business-adjacent attire in a galaxy print t-shirt and jeans.

"Oh my *god*," Bacon said, turning on his heel and going inside the building. "I'm deducting this from both your paychecks," he grumbled, going off to find Jaron, from what Poafa presumed. He caught Planet's gaze and they smiled at him.

“Hi Poafa, I didn’t know you still worked in town,” they said, tucking their hands into their jean pockets and rolling on their heels.

“Yeah, I’m thinking of opening a restaurant myself, one of these days.”

“At the same place?” they asked, and Poafa nodded in agreement. “Don’t, bro. That place is like, *super* cursed. How many businesses opened and closed there?”

“Well—” Poafa was about to argue, but then Bacon arrived again, carrying a different wallet from the one he’d had originally.

“Here, keep the tip,” he said, and was about to close the door when Poafa protested.

“This barely even covers it!” he exclaimed, lodging his foot in the door. Bacon looked down at his foot, and then back at him, and Poafa suddenly regretted his decision when he saw the look in his eye.

Poafa still doesn’t know how he made it out of there alive.

But despite their rough first introduction, the Heart Institute trio became frequent customers of *all* of Poafa’s businesses. Even the weird sushi place that Poafa was ninety percent sure wasn’t feeding its customers real fish. (He knew from one look from Planet that they never even touched *that* particular meal, but Poafa was still grateful for their presence.)

Another consistent presence was Panggi, who would frequently come in to complain about Zam. Poafa thought those visits would be frequent at first, but it turned out that Panggi had gone to med school, and was only in town during breaks. His rants were still music to Poafa’s bored ears, even though he had a tendency to ramble and lose the plot, every now and then he’d come up with a few gems.

“... and then my best friend fell in love with some emo asshole with snakebites.”

“*No way*, Zam?!” Poafa gasped, leaning over the counter as Panggi lamented.

“No Poafa, I’m best friends with freaking Woogie- *of course I’m talking about Zam.*” Panggi rolled his eyes and continued. “And I was sitting there with him, desperately trying to talk some sense in him, because like, the guy *has a boyfriend-*” Poafa, who had zoned out for the first half of the story was now scrambling to figure out who the hell had snakebite piercings and a boyfriend in town. “He looked at me, and-” Panggi paused for dramatic effect, looking Poafa straight in the eye and straightening his back as if he was a weatherman about to announce a devastating hurricane. “He looked at me and told me the guys were *polyamorous.*”

“*No-*” Poafa gasped, and then broke into laughter.

“Bro- it’s not funny! For all you know one of these days he’s gonna join their weird emo cult-”

“Panggi- *Panggi* - Zam’s not joining a *cult*, he’s gonna have a threesome with strings attached,” he said dismissively. Panggi blushed at what was a probably accurate description of what Zam

was going into, having gotten involved with two guys that were dating. He crossed his arms and looked away.

“Well whatever, I still don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“Sure dude, do you want your food to-go?” Pangi deflated. It was good to have him around, Poafa decided.

And then Poafa was delegated to the night shift.

It wasn’t the first time he’d worked the night shift but it was the first time he did it so *regularly*. . He was counting the days until this restaurant closed - who even had the funds to keep it open around the clock? He was just happy it wasn’t a part of some chain, that would have made it even worse, but as it was he found it hard to appreciate the silver lining as he slept his days away and worked away the nights.

The worst part of it was the boredom. Always the boredom.

Poafa knew the usual 3 AM customers of fast food places - college students, highschoolers, anyone who felt like getting drunk and anyone just leaving a party. There wasn’t much of that in their small town, not really. It was quiet, peaceful, especially since Clown Pierce was arrested (or did he disappear? He didn’t really care much either way.) and things had settled down.

He did most of the night shifts on his own, too. The concept was ridiculous at first, he felt like he was wasting so much food, but then he just stopped... preparing it. It wasn’t like anyone was coming in anyways. Poafa *did* see Vitalasy once, through the window, but he didn’t see Poafa. So that was a missed opportunity. There was maybe one customer every hour, and that was if he was being generous, so Poafa spent his time in the office creating his own business plans.

It was on one such night that he was spending his time in the office, headphones on, fully convinced he was going to spend another eight hour shift without anyone bothering him when the bell rang. He’d set up an alarm system at the door during the night, so it would notify him when someone entered, but Poafa had been so focused on what he’d been working on that he hadn’t even fully registered it at first. He was also really tired, his circadian rhythm was *not* playing along this week. He sighed and slowly got up, not really caring if the person left in the meanwhile. It wouldn’t be the first time, and Poafa was sure they weren’t gonna buy anything anyway once they found out he would need longer than 20 minutes to prepare their food.

He made his way to the entrance when he heard voices, surprised that it was more than one person. The hallway was dark, the only light streaming in from the cracks in the door, and the window peeking into the kitchen. Poafa had walked by that window millions of times, had seen that kitchen in a thousand states of disarray, and he was fully expecting it to be clean and empty, until he saw someone inside.

Poafa stopped. He was alone on shift.

The girl in the kitchen had long brown hair tied up in a pony tail and wore a pink apron. For a sudden moment he thought it was Alice- but that was just wishful thinking, Alice was in California living out her dreams of being an actress. This girl was too short, and had this particular bounce in her step that Alice never had. Poafa shrunk back from the window, careful not to be seen. She wasn't one of the employees- couldn't be, really. She didn't have the right uniform and Poafa's boss would inform him if there was someone else on shift with him. Or at least that's what he thought.

But he didn't really have much time to think anyway, the girl jumping around in the kitchen headed out, towards the front counter.

*'Maybe she's stealing food?'* He thought to himself, as he crawled under the kitchen window and towards the door. There were multiple ways to get to the main part of the restaurant, and maybe the girl had staked out the place during the day and decided to sneak in and get herself food at night. But there was something so unsettling about the situation that Poafa didn't feel comfortable going out and revealing himself. He'd laugh about it later, for sure, but right now his phone was in the office and the girl's presence terrified him, and he wanted to make sure she only took food.

The cash register was empty, anyways. All the money was in the safe.

He opened the door a crack, fully expecting the girl to already be gone. But to his surprise she stood at the counter, like an employee, and was holding something in her hands. It took Poafa a second to recognize the takeout box. It was clenched in her hands and dripping something red on the floor. His brain helpfully suggested ketchup, but Poafa knew it couldn't be anything other than blood.

She offered it to the person standing across from her, but Poafa couldn't see them, and he was too afraid to open the door further. Once the person hesitated, the girl just giggled.

"Haven't you figured it out yet?" Her voice was surprisingly... sweet. Poafa had expected her to sound creepy, monstrous. But she was just a girl. A cute, normal girl, who wore pink and broke into restaurants at 3 AM.

The takeout box was staining her hands red.

"Rat hearts and coyote parts won't sate your hunger, come on now, you know only this will do," Poafa watched as clawed hands reached for the box, hesitant, as the girl continued smiling. Once the hands had accepted it she let go, but the other person must not have had a good grip, because the box slipped out of them and fell, spilling out the contents onto the floor.

Poafa's world tilted as the... *thing* inside the box fell out, bounced, and then slid across the floor towards him, leaving a bloody trail in its wake. He realized too late that he'd leaned against the door and opened it wide, now staring at the human heart on the floor in front of him.

He looked up in disbelief, meeting the girl's eyes, who was still smiling, and Vitalasy standing across from her. His hair was longer than he remembered, but Poafa recognized the

purple hoodie, the way the sleeves were rolled up, and how instead of hands his friend now had sharp claws.

Poafa couldn't help it. He passed out.

Once he woke up again the sun was streaming in through the window, and the clock read 7 AM. His cheek was glued to the desk and he slowly pushed himself up with a groan. He realized that he'd fallen asleep during his shift and scoffed, he was not happy with himself. Poafa was just about to continue his morning, shifting around the receipts scattered around the desk until the events of last night all came back to him and he stood up.

But he wasn't on the floor- his mind helpfully supplied to him- he'd been asleep at the desk in his office. He looked around, and ran to the shift plan- he was the only person working that night. He was the only person *working* nights, and he recognized all the other names on the roster and none of them were a young girl his age.

He made his way to the counter, checked the restaurant floor, but there was no drop of blood. No sign the events of last night were anything other than a bad dream.

Poafa locked the restaurant door, it didn't reopen until 11 AM, and it was the end of his shift. He did a short cursory glance at the cash register, tables and floors- he didn't keep these jobs by being a *bad* employee. He was doing a round of the kitchen when he noticed there was a takeout box missing. He wouldn't have noticed it usually, except for the fact that when he started his shift they were out and he hadn't bothered to restock. The only ones they had were still packaged and wrapped in plastic. Now instead the plastic was torn, and the takeout boxes weren't in their right space, as if someone had opened up the packaging just because they needed one single box.

Poafa shivered. No, he must be misremembering. It was all a bad dream.

He needed to talk to his boss about taking him off the night shift.

## End Notes

This one REALLY got out of hand. it was gonna be like, a joke. something for the funnies. my "im including every damn character in this and poafa is driving the bus moment." and now im 9k words in having given vi's girlfriend's character a redemption arc (more like it's my redemption arc) , i have branzy appear but it's not even his real name, vi and subz start dating and poafa doesnt even fucking realize- like? does he even realize? does it matter?

also let's play clock the raven cycle reference

also huge fan of poafa consistently not knowing who the fuck subz is. like. poafa doesnt realize zam is dating both vi and subz PURELY because pangi is focusing on the part where subz has snakebite piercings and doesnt even ACKNOWLEDGE the other guy zam is dating so poafa literally doesnt connect the strings. like. also even if he did he wouldnt really care. anyway.

Shoutout to my friend for beta reading this. they came up with the " "Wow, never heard that one before." in a deadpan voice and stare " bit and also are the sole reason why poafa isnt dead. thank u my love. shoutout to the girl in the end trying to make sure vi has a well balanced diet. (its not alicia by the way) (does he eat it? DOES HE? ). OH AND SHOUT OUT TO THEM FOR THE BIT WITH VITALASY FEEDING SUBZ FOOD. ILY FRIEND

Shoutout to Poafa. Would love to see a video of his some day. Sorry you became my OC dude (he will never read this and you, the reader, will make sure he never sees this, or so help me God if any lifestealer sees this i will delete this entire series). Poafa's been one of the OG's, older even than Mapicc's characterisation, and he was only gonna be someone that Ro and Mapicc (in present time) pretend to get food poisoning from and now. Now here we are. The practical joke, the medusa reference, has become its own monster. But we kept the food poisoning in.

Also I have like. Two other things (Spoke thing and Vitalasy thing) that are mostly finished, so keep an eye out!

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