

THIS IS

the

FUTURE,
BABY

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ABOUT THE BOOK

It's the year 2100, and the Mojave has reclaimed the Las Vegas valley. But, with a little hop back in time, you can still visit all the landmarks we've lost, including Sin City. Kale and Toby choose Vegas 2015 for their Destination Wedding, and it's all it was promised to be. But the trip isn't making the sort of memories Kale wants to associate with the most important day of his life.

"This is the Future, Baby" was written for the What Happened in Vegas blog hop in support of LGBTQ charities. I'd like to highlight The Attic Youth Center in Philadelphia. The Attic creates opportunities for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning (LGBTQ) youth to develop into healthy, independent, civic-minded adults within a safe and supportive community, and promotes the acceptance of LGBTQ youth in society.

Like free books? Join my newsletter for new release news, free short stories, and first look at covers and excerpts. You'll also get a complimentary copy of my college romance novella, *Wrong Direction*. http://eepurl.com/cAqagL

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The holo outside of Destination Weddings darkened and the projection stuttered as the program restarted, a bud of light growing in the center of the virtual marquee. The light expanded and diverged like an old-fashioned firework. Each streamer arced out from the display. Kale ducked as a point of light sailed past his ear. He could have sworn he felt a flash of heat. Turning, he checked to make sure Toby hadn't been in the path of any errant streamers. His lover stood well clear by chance alone. Head tilted back, lips parted, he was watching the lights dance with the wonder of a small child.

"Look, Kale! It's a map!" Toby spun around, arms flying out from his sides, mouth open in a wide grin.

Around him shimmered a map of the world connected by a ghostly network of lines. Instead of a mall on the 56th level of the dirt scraper, Minneapolis Deep, Kale stood somewhere in the middle of Europe, the bright light of Paris blinking just to his left. Toby was lost somewhere in the south-west, the lights of scattered cities glittering around him. He reached out to tap the closest point and the holo-projection flickered.

"You have selected Las Vegas, Nevada. For more information on this exciting destination, please step inside the store."

Kale frowned. "This map is seriously out of date. Vegas is nothing a strip of broken hotels in a desert valley." And had been since the great drought of 2020. Kale tapped the point next to him. "What about Paris?" Europe still had surface water, and most of their cities towered above the ground instead of below.

"That's where Max and Itsuki got married," Toby said. "I want to go somewhere completely different." Somewhere wondrous and unforgettable—and Kale would do anything, go anywhere, to make sure Toby got exactly what he wanted.

The holo stuttered again, preparing to relaunch the display. Grabbing Toby's hand, Kale tugged him beneath the marquee and into the store. "C'mon, let's go inside. I'm gonna have an epileptic fit if I stand out here much longer."

"And I thought I was the dramatic one."

Kale pressed a kiss to Toby's temple. "I learned from the best."

"Welcome to Destination Weddings!"

Kale had expected to be greeted by another holo. The woman standing in front of them defied reality in every other way, however. She wore a white robe with a thigh-high slit on both sides. The neckline plunged toward her navel. Twist the fabric, and she'd fall out. A wide belt of blue and gold cinched the waist. A sash of matching fabric hung about her shoulders.

Toby surged forward like an over-excited puppy. "Oh my God, is your hair real?" From another band of gold set with blue jewels, hair as black as space fell all the way down her back. Uninhibited as always, Toby caught a strand between his fingers. "It's so smooth. What products do you use?"

Leaving Toby to discuss hair and shampoo—a conversation that could extend from minutes to an hour, he was a stylist, after all—Kale wandered deeper into the store. Small, more constrained holo displays flickered from nearly every surface. Photos of happy couples tying the knot, interspersed with images of famous landmarks. Kale let each display capture his attention in turn, but despite the bright colors and cheerful smiles, there was something off about every destination. He couldn't quite figure out what was wrong until he saw the Vegas display.

Behind a cycling holo of smiling couples was an aerial photograph of Las Vegas Boulevard at night. The glittering path of The Strip was easy to pick out—and shouldn't be. The desert had reclaimed the valley eighty years ago. Las Vegas wasn't a viable destination.

Kale turned to look at the displays he'd just walked past and frowned as he recognized landmarks no longer in existence. The ruins of Pompeii were buried under another layer of ash and the Golden Gate Bridge had been swept down by the tsunami of 2089. Giza was closed to visitors and had been for over seventy years.

He looked at the bright lights of Vegas again. The background image had switched to a daytime view, each casino still a jewel against the desert. Of all the lost places, this would be the one he'd most like to visit. A city carved from the sand, in defiance of all natural law. A culture built out of sin, now dead and buried. Oh, the stories those ruins could tell if anyone cared to dig through the shifting sands of the Mojave. A dead city wasn't exactly the most romantic wedding destination, though.

"Kale!" Toby was beckoning him—and bouncing on his toes. "What do you think?"

He still stood next to the woman, whose costume now made sense. She was dressed as an Ancient Egyptian something. The reenactment idea was pretty cool, but Kale really didn't want to get married on a movie set. He wanted his wedding to Toby to be real.

"Not sure this is what we had in mind," Kale said, trying to keep his tone light. What if Toby thought it was a great idea? He loved dressing up.

"I know it's not what we discussed, but this could be way cooler. Our special day will be truly unique!"

At the package price of... How much did these illusions cost, anyway? "Toby..."

The light in Toby's eyes was dimming, but also sharpening. Wrapping slender fingers around Kale's biceps, he turned to their hostess. "We'll be right back."

Crap. Were they going to do the adults-need-to-talk thing before they even got married?

Toby tugged him into a corner, coincidentally near the Vegas display. "What's up?"

Kale captured Toby's beautiful face gently between his palms. "I want to make you happy, but this doesn't feel right to me. I want our wedding to be real, Toby, not some scripted play. I want to go to an actual place, somewhere we can revisit whenever we're feeling sappy, so we can remember the day we exchanged our vows."

"I love your romantic soul." Which Kale tended to keep well buried. Engineers generally weren't hired for their idealism. Toby covered his hands, lacing their fingers together. "But, babe, these places are real. Destination Weddings is a time travel agency."

Kale tried not to wince as he added a couple of zeroes to his imagined price. "Time travel?" Keeping the strain out of his voice proved just as difficult. "That's..." He glanced over his shoulder at the shining seductress of the desert, Las Vegas at its height. "Is it safe?"

Time travel had been an inevitable development, really. Once dimensional doorways had become a reliable form of transport, a dozen or more agencies had funded research into moving forward and backward through time, instead of simply from point to point. But like trips to Mars, time travel had been always seemed the provenance of the wealthy and the daring. Or the stupid. Kale hadn't realized it was available for vacations. Affordable vacations.

Their hostess had drifted close again. "Destination Weddings has been transporting happy couples to the past for over five years." But had any of them come back? "It's as safe as walking through the d-door from the first level to the fiftieth of Minneapolis Deep. And we'll provide you with everything you need for the time period and location you choose. We're a full-service agency." Her smile was bright and very white.

Kale prepared to broach the subject of money. Of course, Toby had adopted the eager puppy look again. Damn him. "I...can we afford it?" he asked.

Could you really put a price on happiness?

Toby stepped back, turning his hands so their fingers remained entwined. "Ultimately, it's not where we go. I know that and you know that. But I think this could be really neat. Did you know men weren't even allowed to marry men in some of these periods of history? Not that I want our wedding to be us thumbing our noses at our ancestors. I'd rather go where we can celebrate."

"We could go to the Lakes."

"The Puddles, you mean." No one called them the Great Lakes anymore. "I don't want to get married by a reminder of just how badly we've messed up our planet. I'd rather risk a trip to Mars. But this..." Pulling one hand free, Toby made a dramatic, sweeping gesture that encompassed the Vegas display, among others. "This is when we were great!"

"That's kinda depressing, Tobes."

He sobered. "Yeah, I know. Think of it this way, then. Time travel is a way to revitalize our present. To set us to dreaming again."

Kale felt a sideways grin pulling at his mouth. "And that's a lot of philosophy for one wedding."

"Ah hell. I just want to get married and you haven't stopped looking at the pictures of Vegas since we got here." Toby had both of his hands again. "Hang the expense. They've got payment plans. This will be the trip of a lifetime. It will be unforgettable!"

Toby could come across as frivolous, but when he really wanted something, he would work at it from every angle until it happened. And just as Toby loved the soft stuff Kale hid inside, Kale loved the core of iron within Toby.

He squeezed Toby's fingers. "Let's do it."



Las Vegas was hot. Ungodly hot. And completely surreal. The entire place made no sense. Each casino was like a village—completely self-contained and culturally distinct. Kale felt as if he'd time-traveled again every time he stepped through a new pair of doors. They'd been to the tropics, Egypt, and New York City. They'd seen animals that only existed in these towering institutions of greed and vanity. After five hours of sightseeing, they'd seen more of the world than either of them had expected to see—except it wasn't real. Any of it.

For Toby's sake, Kale refused to acknowledge the small curl of disappointment hidden beneath what could only be described as awe. Artifice or not, Las Vegas was amazing. He'd never forget the experience of being here.

"Let's go to Paris next." Toby held up a glossy map. He looked like a tourist, but so did everyone else surging up and down the wide sidewalk. They'd been told to dress down a little for 2015, but Toby loved color. His hair stood out from his head in crimson spikes and the green lenses in his eyes flashed brightly every time he blinked. The shirt he wore combined both colors in a lurid pattern of palm trees and sunsets. According to their guidebook, the shirt was appropriate to the culture and time. Kale had yet to see anything quite like it, but while the sometimes bland world of Minneapolis Deep needed the brightness of people like Toby, Las Vegas seemed designed for him.

Kale touched the corner of the map, expecting a menu to coalesce in the air in front of it. For about the tenth time that afternoon, he started when it didn't happen.

Toby pointed to a spot somewhere along the boulevard. "It's here." He moved his finger down a way. "And we're here."

Half a kilometer away, and not a glidewalk in sight. "I can't believe we're really eighty-five years in the past," Kale said.

"It hits me every now and then too. I mean, being outside in the sunshine is weird enough."

"Right?" And sort of thrilling. "Speaking of which, how long before we need to replace our SPF patches?" Even dark skin burned.

"We have another hour."

Kale studied the map again. "It's a long walk to Paris."

"Yeah, they could use a D-door or two along Las Vegas Boulevard."

The futility of it all hit Kale, then. Glancing up from the map, he murmured, "It's kind of eerie, isn't it? Knowing all of this will disappear in five years?"

Toby smacked his arm. "Don't. We can't do anything about it, you know that. And that's not why we came here."

"But don't you feel a bit, I don't know, icky? As if we're taking advantage. Trading on their doom?"

Toby gaped at him. "I feel like every other tourist here." He gestured the crowd. "Besides, none of these people would listen to us if we told them what the future holds. We'd either be ignored, spat on, or locked up. And, you're forgetting the most important fact."

"That we can't change history?" There'd been a brief lecture on the fallacy of paradoxes and multiple continuums. Or had it been the fallacy of continuums and multiple—

"No! That we're here to get married."

Blushes didn't show well on Kale's dark skin, but Toby always said his cheeks glowed when he was embarrassed. And that he looked like a chastened bulldog. "Toby, I..."

"Shh."

Toby stood on tiptoe to press a quick kiss to his lips. Kale caught him around the waist and hauled him closer, deepening the kiss. He stopped short of making love to Toby's mouth—he wasn't an exhibitionist—but he was always ready to show his lover the depth of his desire.

"Fucking queers."

Jostled from behind, their mouths came apart. Kale tightened his hold on Toby before looking around.

Toby caught his chin. "Ignore it. This was a less enlightened time, remember?"

"But they just ruled same-sex marriage legal in all states."

"And how long did it take for black men to gain respect in this country?"

Kale growled under his breath. "I'm starting to wonder why we came here. Maybe a holo wedding would have been better. Or the Roman Empire. Did you know two of the emperors were married to men?"

Toby smiled. "I love that you're so passionate about history. But while we might have lost much of this, we've gained a lot too." Bigotry seemed to be a hardwired aspect of human nature, but their present—nearly a hundred years in the future—was a time of respect and equality.

Kale squeezed Toby a little tighter. "Love you."

"Love you too. Now put me down so we can go to Paris. I want to check out the wedding chapel there."

He set Toby back down on the pavement. "It's kinda neat that we're getting to do Vegas and Paris in the same trip."

"See? This is the future, baby."



Paris turned out to be just another casino and less culturally distinct than many of the others they'd visited. Or maybe all the bright lights and ringing slot machines were starting to blur into a mind-numbing symphony. Either way, Kale was disappointed. He was also tired. He and Toby lived in one of the largest underground cities in North America, but the streets of Minneapolis Deep were lined by moving pathways and joined by lift tubes. D-doors allowed commuters to traverse fifty levels at a time.

After inspecting another disappointingly bland wedding chapel, he pulled Toby out of another over-caffeinated crowd and into a corner of relative quiet. A space behind a pillar. There was a reassuring scuff of dust on the floor.

"I'm done in."

"Yeah, me too," Toby said, leaning into him. The tips of his spiky hair tickled Kale's chin. "Let's check out our hotel room and maybe indulge in some virtual tourism."

They had the internet in 2015. It didn't come alive, projecting holograms and threedimensional maps into the air, but after an afternoon of casino floors and tourists, that would almost be a relief.

Destination Weddings had booked them into a room at the Bellagio, which was just across the boulevard from Paris. Across the boulevard could turn into a distance of a kilometer or more by the time they exited one hotel and entered another. Half an hour later, they reached their room, which overlooked the fountains Kale had been too weary to appreciate as they passed.

Toby sidled up next to him and leaned into his side. "The fountains will be spectacular at night."

"Mmm," Kale agreed. He turned to survey the pleasingly large bed. "Where are our bags?"

Their luggage was supposed to have been delivered while they did their sightseeing. "Unpacked and stowed," Toby said. "I could get used to this luxury living. Let's check out the bathroom!"

It was small but well appointed. And it had a tub. Kale swallowed any comments about the amount of water required to fill it. They were here to celebrate their wedding, and... "Think we could both fit in there?"

"You and me and not so little you?" Toby fondled Kale's crotch.

"Mmm-hmm." Kale rocked forward into Toby's palm. "Now I kinda want to test the bed too." He bent down to kiss Toby's brow, nose, and lips. Then he picked up his lover and carried him to the great expanse of creamy linens, intending to muss them into irrevocable wrinkles.

After testing the bed, bath, and shower, they returned to the bed dressed in robes made of an odd, furry fabric Toby identified as cotton. The towels had had the same thick feel. Sprawled across the rumpled sheets, Toby activated the bulky tablet computer their tour assistant had assured them was all the thing in 2015 and followed the instructions for gaining access to the internet.

"Do you think it's always this slow?" Toby muttered as they waited for the results to his search for Vegas wedding chapels.

"Dunno. Try this one." Kale pointed to flashing advertisement under the map of Vegas that had appeared on the right side of the screen.

Toby tapped the picture and a video interface opened. Together, they watched the dashed circle in the middle chase its own tail. Finally, the video loaded. It was an advertisement for cat food, featuring singing cats.

Giggling, Toby touched the screen. "Aww, this one is so cute." As he stroked the gray and white tabby, the screen reloaded to show a second video, this one of a fat orange cat forcing its way inside a box that might accommodate one of its paws. Then the screen split into a preview of six new videos, all of cats. Toby touched another and they watched a series of cats falling from tables, in between couch cushions, and behind bookcases. They moved on to a video of a

woman dressing her cat in ridiculous outfits, then another about a cat with a sad, sad face, who spoke of resignation, boredom, and the silliness of humans.

Kale fell asleep listening to the sound of Toby's chuckles, and awoke to the feel of a cat's tongue licking his cheeks, only to realize Toby was nuzzling him.

"Hey, sleeping beauty."

Kale grunted.

"Hungry?"

Nosing his way toward Toby's ear, Kale caught the delicate pebble of flesh between his lips. "Always hungry for you."

"Mmm, I did mean the other hunger, though."

Kale's stomach added its opinion, growling loudly. "I could eat."

"Then I think it's time to do the buffet and maybe a show."

"Did you find a chapel, or did you watch another million cat videos?"

"I have a list of three places to check out and they're all open at night."

"Awesome." Kale nosed below Toby's ear and sucked on his neck. "Do we need to go right away?"



After another round of bed, bath, and shower testing, Kale stood in the midst of a continent of food. He'd never seen such variety, such plenty. Fruits and vegetables he couldn't reliably name, and meat in shapes suggesting they had been cut from actual carcasses. Bread of different colors and textures. Baked casseroles. A pasta bar. Seafood.

"Oh my God, they have fish."

"I want to move to the past," Toby said.

"Against the rules," Kale reminded him. "I'm glad they issued us with digestives. We could kill ourselves eating all of this."

"We don't have to eat all of it. But I'm going to taste as much as I can." Toby plucked a plate from a teetering stack and began arranging fruit around the rim.

"We can come back as many times as we like, right?"

"That's not the point," Toby said.

Kale smiled. No, it wasn't. Regardless of how many visits he could make, Toby would want each plate to look pretty.

Grabbing a plate of his own, Kale arrowed toward the island of seafood and spent half a minute dithering between snow crab legs and jumbo shrimp before remembering he could sample both. And clams, calamari, and little gray nuggets of flesh in black shells called oysters. He peeled slivers of firm, pink fish away from a display arranged to look like a salmon.

With his plate more than half full, he veered toward the vegetable island and layered seven different kinds of leaves with thin slices of cucumber, tomato, radish, and carrot. Like seafood,

and meat that actually bled on the plate, fresh vegetables were a luxury deep city dwellers rarely saw.

He met Toby back at their table and they passed a lively half-hour sampling everything from both plates. Then they went back for more. Kale's tummy started rumbling before he finished his second plate, but he'd discovered the dessert bar and wanted to taste at least four of the delectable treats on offer. Maybe five. Six if he wanted to include some fresh fruit.

He managed one dessert, a slice of apple pie. Beside him, Toby was working his way through a sundae he'd constructed himself. With his gut stretched beyond satiety, Kale found the sight of all that ice cream vaguely nauseating. But he enjoyed Toby's enthusiasm. As he sipped his coffee, though, a vague sense of melancholy wound through him. At first, he thought it might be homesickness. The amenities of the hotel far surpassed the tiny apartment he and Toby shared sixty-one levels below the surface of what had once been a thriving city. But Las Vegas was loud, and the city seemed to move and breathe around them. The sun shone so brightly—almost relentlessly on it all. And the heat, the smells. People sweating and—he eyed the buffet again—consuming.

His belly grumbled again.

The excess bothered him. Not just because it would all be gone in five years. More, it was that no one around him seemed to care. They didn't understand.

They didn't know.

"Hey." Toby elbowed him gently in the side.

"Watch it. Dig that elbow any deeper and I might show you what I ate last."

"So gross."

Kale smiled.

"You're looking a bit too thoughtful," Toby said.

"Just a little homesick."

Toby opened his mouth, expression set to friendly rebuke, then he stopped, smiled, and reached up to caress Kale's cheek. "We'll be home soon enough, big guy." He grabbed Kale's hand. "C'mon. I want to go see the fountains."

The push through the still crowded casino floor wore on Kale's nerves. Lingering heat from the day stole his breath when they finally emerged into the night. There was a slight breeze, but the press of so much humanity stunted its effectiveness. The crowds of Minneapolis Deep had never bothered him this much. He must just be tired.

Toby used his smaller stature to elbow through the throng. Kale wedged his bulk into each opening. Every disgruntled sound from the people they passed scratched against his psyche. Then the fountain show started and a collective gasp quieted the night.

Music, color, and water surging upward in symphony. It was beautiful. It was tragic. Kale blinked against tears that made no sense and decided that perhaps he'd caught some spray in his eyes. But the ache in his chest couldn't be explained so simply. He hadn't realized he'd stepped back until Toby looked up at him, bright eyes reflecting the leaping plumes of water.

"What's wrong?"

Shaking his head, Kale directed his lover's attention back toward the fountains. Toby pulled him backward instead. They worked their way through the spectators until they reached the fringe, then Toby asked his question again.

Biting his lips, Kale considered his response before giving it. He didn't want to break Toby's heart, but... "I don't want to get married here," he finally said.

The hurt he'd expected flashed through Toby's eyes. "But why?"

"It's too sad, Tobes. It's amazing. I'm glad I've seen it, but I can't stop thinking about the fact all of this will be gone in a few years. The waste and the futility. That's not how I think of us."

"We're going to be together for longer than five years, Kale."

Kale sought the right words to explain what felt like irrational thoughts. "But Las Vegas won't be here. Not like this."

Toby was silent for a while. Around them, the music continued to swell and dip, and the water that would eventually evaporate beyond humanity's ability to recover it cavorted and played in rhythm. He gazed toward the fountain, something like longing on his face, then he squeezed Kale's hand. "Okay. Let's go home."



The colors were brilliant, the rising sun picking vibrant hues of red and gold from the sand and stone. Kale wriggled free of his sleeping bag and pushed to his feet, turning his face toward Sunrise Mountain. A vivid lip of sunlight blazed between the peaks. Below, the desert was quiet and serene, the dawn air almost cool. A breeze stirred against Kale's skin. He could smell only dirt and sand and warming sunshine. And Toby, who always smelled the same to him, regardless of how often he changed his cologne.

Kale nudged his husband's sleeping bag. "Rise and shine, babe."

Blinking, Toby sat up and tugged on his sleep flattened hair. He mumbled as he encouraged a wide, green brush to stand straight up from his scalp. The rest of his skull was covered by a soft orange fuzz that glowed in the morning light. He'd changed the style for their wedding, which they'd had at home. Kale had been right; Minneapolis Deep needed the color of men like Toby, and exchanging their vows there, where they lived and loved, had felt good.

But so did their choice of honeymoon destination.

Kale held out his hand and Toby struggled out of his sleeping bag and came to join him. Together, they gazed out over the valley. The ruins of Las Vegas threw long shadows across the desert. The casinos were there, half buried, and between them, you could still trace The Strip. Las Vegas Boulevard. A roller-coaster curled above a drift in the vicinity of New York, New York, and Paris's Eiffel Tower drew a more complicated pattern across the rising tide of sand. Kale couldn't pick out the colors on the turrets of Excalibur, but he remembered them.

"It's beautiful," Toby said.

Kale looked down at his husband. "And sad."

Toby cocked his head. "Still?"

"A little. Not like it was then." A week ago for them, eighty-five years in the past for the rest of the world. "It's more like a held breath now. As if it's waiting."

"For what?"

For us to come back and remember it.

Sand covered most of what had been outlying suburbs and industry, but with a holographic overlay map, you could match the smooth areas, bumps, and depressions to old landmarks. The valley would never be reclaimed by humanity. Not in their lifetimes. And the substructure beneath the desert was too unstable for a dirt scraper.

Kale squeezed Toby's hand. "Maybe it was waiting for this. Our first dawn as husband and husband."

Toby's smile was as bright as the rising sun. "My romantic fool."

"Mmm." Kale nosed Toby's temple. "It's wondrous and unforgettable, which is what I wanted for our wedding. And it's a monument to what we've been able to achieve. Who we were. Who we still are. Who we will always be."

"You're saying we're going to keep trying to build cities in the desert."

Kale extended a finger toward the sky. "Frozen deserts now, millions of kilometers away, but yeah. And some of what we'll build will be useful and some of it will be just like this. A city with no real purpose." Of greed and lust and waste. "Something just for fun."

"And that's a good thing?"

"I don't know, Tobes. But isn't that what makes us human?"

"Well, I kinda liked that city of sin."

"I did too. But not as much as I like this. Us, together, with the rising sun painting pictures across the sand. It's quiet now. Restful."

Toby turned back toward the view. "Yeah. And it's not going to change much in five years, is it?"

"Nope. Or ten, twenty, thirty. The casinos might just be lumps beneath the sand in fifty years."

"I'll still love you then," Toby said.

Kale's chest swelled with the joy of his husband's simple statement. "And I'll still love you." Tugging on Toby's fingers, he drew him back toward the sleeping bags. "C'mon. I think the sun can finish rising without us."



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

If aliens ever do land on Earth, Kelly will not be prepared, despite having read over a hundred stories of the apocalypse. Still, she will pack her precious books into a box and carry them with her as she strives to survive. It's what bibliophiles do.

Kelly is the author of a number of novels, novellas, and short stories, including the Chaos Station series, co-written with Jenn Burke. Some of what she writes is speculative in nature, but mostly it's just about a guy losing his socks and/or burning dinner. Because life isn't all conquering aliens and mountain peaks. Sometimes finding a happy ever after is all the adventure we need.

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