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# FOREWORD: WHAT IS THIS?

*I.C.Q.* is a free webcomic created by Alexandra “quoting\_mungo” Malmberg and Veritas, first launched on August 1 2010. It follows the lives of Sarah Woolf, Toni Squire, and Blake Masterson, who move into the same rented duplex, as well as (occasionally) the lives of their friends. The aim with the comic is to tell a slice-of-life story that isn’t always very pat and doesn’t hide the more questionable things the characters sometimes do. Our characters are, first and foremost, *people*, and people sometimes say hurtful or insensitive things, have sex, or do stupid shit.

LiveJournal Idol (from here on LJ Idol or LJI) is a periodic writing competition held in a community on the blog site LiveJournal. Six seasons of the competition have been completed so far; Alex has been taking part since season five. For the seventh season, which came close on the heels of the launch of *I.C.Q.*, she decided she would write all entries from the point of view of the comic’s three main characters. This is a collection of those entries.

The way LJ Idol is set up, the community founder posts a topic for the participants to write an entry on, roughly once a week. These entries are then collected into a number of polls, each poll representing a “tribe” of participants. The polls will run for, usually, a few days, and then a predetermined number of people, usually the 1-2 bottom vote getters for each poll, will be eliminated from the competition and encouraged to continue playing “the Home Game,” writing on the prompts but not being part of the running for the season’s LJ Idol. This has been the case for Alex from Week 4.

Readers of the comic can note that all entries are canonical in the sense that it’s the characters’ voices. This does not mean that everything that is said is actually factually correct; nothing says the characters are not misinformed or have not chosen to lie for whatever reason. In fact, characters have been making false claims (in good faith or otherwise) all since Week 0 – see if you can spot the errors!

# WEEK 0: INTRODUCTION



## On Sarah

**Sarah:** My name's Sarah Woolf, and I just moved into this townhouse owned by a little old lady who knew my father when he was young, to attend college. I wanted to go into, like, women's studies or design or something, but Mother had me sign up for Accounting. I don't know why, it's not like she ever worked a day in her life since she met Father when *she* was in college. At least she didn't send a *nanny* along and there's bound to be lots of eyecandy and stuff in a college town, right?

**Toni:** I'm sure Sarah is a good kid, but she can be... kind of overexcited over things, and she seems kind of sheltered. I guess I can sympathize with getting a bit wild out from under her mother's thumb, but sooner or later someone's going to have to scare a bit of sense into her before she hurts herself.

**Blake:** Sarah's pretty fun, I guess... I mean, there's virtually *no* bait she won't rise to. Her mother, though... geez! Even ignoring that she apparently took me for a groundskeeper, that lady is possibly the most stuck-up, entitled bitch I ever met, and that's supposedly *normal* for her?



## On Toni

**Sarah:** It must be rough being Toni; she's not going to school, I guess her parents can't afford it or something. She's not only working, but she's working at... I can't even say it! Well, she made an effort to welcome us when we moved in, so I can't fault her for that, at least. I hope she comes upon better times soon, though, it must be terrible to work in that kind of place day after day.

**Toni:** I'm Toni Squire, 27, senior cashier at Lovers' Lagoon and owner of a white-and-gray tabby cat named Mittens. I had to move since my apartment building was sold and the new landlords changed the pet policy; if I was going to stay there he would've had to go and I couldn't well just get rid of him after I had him since he was a kitten. Luckily I found this room for rent in a duplex owned by a retired ewe, and it's suiting me fine so far. My parents divorced when I was about four or five, so I grew up with my mother, who still tries to spoil me rotten at any opportunity.

**Blake:** I like Toni so far, even if our first meeting was kind of brief. She seems to have her head screwed on the right way, for the most part, and far as I can tell she has a sense of humor. Now if only her fucking cat would stop hacking up hairballs in my sock drawer...



## **On Blake**

**Sarah:** When Mother first saw Blake I thought she'd turn the car around and drive back home or something. The look on her face! I can't really complain about him, he was nice enough to help me bring my furniture in even after she insulted him, though I'd be happier if he'd stop poking fun at me all the time.

**Toni:** Blake seems like a solid enough guy, the kind I'm glad to have for a roommate, and he has enough of a sense of humor he'd fit in with most people I know. He could do to be a little less mean-spirited towards Sarah on occasion; it's not the poor girl's fault she's a bit naive, after all. And he can be a slob sometimes.

**Blake:** I'm Blake Masterson, and for the next four years I'll be studying at the college here in town. I major in Biology with a minor in Journalism, and rent a room in a house on Blackbird Lane, in walking distance from campus, thank goodness, because I swear every other driver in this fucking city bought their license off eBay or something. Back home I have my parents, of course, and a little sister ten years younger than I named Marie. Mom and Dad spoil her rotten, but she's a good kid, really. Especially now that she's growing out of Candyland. I hate that game.

# WEEK 1: HERE THERE BE DRAGONS



The first time I saw a dragon, and made note of it, I was maybe a year and a half, two years old. I've no memory of it, myself; I only know about it because it seems to come up at every family gathering, and sometimes also when I bring a date home. You know, the kind of things parents *do*, tell embarrassing stories about things you did when you were too young to know better. Show baby pictures, that whole thing.

My parents take unholy delight in talking about "that one time, when Blake saw a dragon gentleman on the bus". Like I've not seen dragons on the bus or in line at the grocery a hundred times since then, with nothing of note happening. Or more. But it always has to be *that one time*. Do you know if they ever stop?

It's not as though dragons are particularly rare, as exotics go. I think, though don't quote me on that, raw numbers are probably more anthropology than biology, so it's a bit out of my field, that through the sheer number of species that end up bunched under "dragon", as well as the number of species compatible with each of them, that they're the single most common exotic. Probably even more common than a few rare, non-exotic species, like the smilodon. After dragons, I'd guess, come gryphons, which again occur in a wide variety of variations across quite a few species, but after that, I couldn't tell you. Possibly unicorns, since once again there's more than one exotic species that gets registered as "unicorn", but I'm not really sure. I could probably ask one of my professors, if I *really* wanted to know.

There's dumbasses who want to define "exotic" as any species occurring among people that we don't find an animal equivalent for. By that layman's definition (which, I might add, is *wrong*), I'm exotic. Feral quagga went extinct years ago. That's pure idiocy on their part, though. You might get closer with "never existed", but that's sort of just a coincidence. The biological reason we differentiate exotics from other people have nothing to do with the animal kingdom. You know, beyond all living organisms being subject to genetics and heredity.

If I was Dad, I'd veer off into rambling about medieval bestiaries or something about

now. And that might be interesting, but I know about fuck all about it, so I'll stick to what I do know.

Anyway, dragons. Pretty much any lizard (talking people, not animals, here, still) can carry the genetic markers for a given species of dragon. And when a lady-lizard and a scaly gentleman carrying the genetic markers for the same exotic species get down and fuck, about a quarter of their offspring will be born as that species of dragon. Getting into what happens when you mix and match those exotic markers is way too complicated, so let's just... ignore that or something. Besides, the theory's the same for pretty much all exotics.

Except the oddball cases. Those even *scientists* argue about. Like people with wings who shouldn't have them. Among equines, they'll just register as pegasi, but now and then, very rarely, it'll crop up in other mammalian species. The two hypotheses I've heard about are that it's either a spontaneous non-exotic mutation, or that it's a mutation of the pegasi markers that allowed them to pass over to other species.

Honestly I don't know what to think. Wings are way too complicated a feature to form completely as a spontaneous mutation, on one hand, regardless of what speculative fiction would have us believe. On the other hand, they've sprung up in carnivores. We have enough trouble interbreeding already, and to think that someone carrying pegasi markers didn't just manage to carry to term, but that the individual who decided to try *also* happened to be one whose markers were mutated *just so* to be compatible with their partner's species? That's really stretching probability for me.

What's that? I should stop babbling about biology and finish the story? What story? The story about—? Oh, for fuck's sake! There's nothing interesting about that story, really. Kids say stupid shit all the time! Seriously.

Oh, fine. Damn, why did I even bring that goddamned story up...?

So we were riding the bus back from the aquarium. I don't know, I guess my parents thought I'd like to look at all the fish, or pet jellyfish and manta rays, or whatever. As I said, I don't really remember any of this, I just know about it because they *won't shut up about it*. And now here you are, nagging me to tell you about it, as well.

Anyway, that aquarium has catfish.

So we were riding the bus back home, when a man got on the bus, and sat down somewhere around us. I'd guess a row or two back or forward, at most, and probably across the aisle, but I don't really know. It's not important. This suit-and-tie gentleman happened to be the species of dragon usually identified as oriental. Or one of them. I'm honestly not quite sure if there's more than one species in that group. I may be a Biology major but I'm just a freshman, yet, and the term barely started, give me a break!

This is the part where my family starts snickering, because everyone (and I mean *everyone*, including my kid sister) knows what happens next. I, being a little kid and not quite having a grasp of an "indoor voice" yet, much less a whisper, pointed at this gentleman and said, in a clear voice:

"Look, Mommy, catfish!"

When, a few stops later, the gentleman was getting off the bus, he paused by me for a moment, and then asked, in that tone you use to ask children questions, whether I was a zebra or an angelfish. Then he patted me on the head, smiled at my parents, and got off the bus while I was still sputtering indignantly.

I guess I always hated being called a zebra.

# WEEK 2: DECONSTRUCTION



When my parents divorced, neither of them kept the house I spent the first almost six years of my life in. Mom found another place in the same town, unwilling to give up her client base, and Dad requested a transfer first chance he got. The house was sold, and I'd imagine they split the money. Mom and I moved into a smaller house, closer to the park, not because she couldn't afford something bigger but because she was tired of it. She's never been much for showcasing her wealth, while Dad wants to show off everything he has that he thinks is worth having, including his new wife. I don't remember much about the old house, just bits and pieces here and there, but especially when I'd moved away for college, I made a habit of stopping by and just... looking at it, every time I was back in town. Sort of like checking up on an old friend.

Over my college years it started to show wear. Nothing huge; the paint looked like it had seen better days, the garden looked like someone was barely managing to keep up with not letting it get much *worse*, mostly that kind of thing. I didn't despair over the state of it, just watched it age, idly wondering with whom it was aging.

I kept checking up on the house after I graduated, but nothing much changed. It got a fresh coat of paint over the old flaking stuff, a few shingles disappeared from the roof between one visit and the next, replaced with tarp that didn't seem quite as temporary as it probably should have been. When the tarp started fraying, nobody really did much. I guess at that point, whoever owned the house had given up on trying to keep up with its silent demands.

Two years ago, when I visited Mom and Nikolaj, her new husband, for Thanksgiving, the house had been sold. I don't think it was anything but coincidence that that particular year I'd asked for a full ten days off over the holidays, in order to get to spend more time with my family. If I believed in premonition, I'd say what I really wanted that time off for was to say goodbye.

I visited the house the day I arrived, after dropping off my bags and Mittens at Mom's.



They were starting to put up scaffolding, and I didn't stay long, but I admit it made me feel heartened. I hadn't thought I was all that attached to my early childhood home, but that little bounce in my chest as I saw signs of someone finally caring for it proved me wrong.

When I came by the next time, all the shingles were gone from the roof and neatly stacked on pallets in the driveway.

Over the course of the next week, the shingles were joined by piles of rotting wood, as the workers removed most of the roofing battens; cracked or warped paneling boards, as much of the outer walls of the house were stripped bare to grant access to the insulation beneath, much of which, too, was thrown out. I never spent any long moments there, not wanting to draw attention to myself, but even so, I practically ended up watching how skin and flesh were stripped off of that house that used to be my home, leaving not much more than bone. Everything that was damaged by damp, sun, or time was mercilessly peeled off, layer by layer.

By the time I had to go back home, what I had to say goodbye to was little more than a skeleton, so badly had the house fared from those years of neglect. I've been back since, but too much changed in too short a timespan. It may look more like the house I grew up in, now, newly renovated as it is, but it feels so much less like my old home than the water-damaged wreck it was turning into did, somehow.

I no longer check up on that old friend. It's someone else's childhood home now — I've heard their voices, passing by — and I don't feel bad leaving it to them.

## WEEK 3: IT'S A TRAP!



Would you believe that moving out here for college was the first time I spent the night in a house that didn't belong to a relative? Definitely the first time I spent any time in relative privacy with a guy whose last name isn't von Löwen or Woolf; she's never permitted me to go to even a birthday party without a chaperone as long as I can remember. And that's probably only because Mother couldn't conceive of the thought that Blake *lives* here. If she'd realized that, she'd probably have taken her chances with the corrupting influences of an all-girl dorm at the last minute. Hell, Father only convinced her *this* was a good idea because Mrs. Elliott used to sit him when he was little.

So I was the girl whose *nanny* was hovering in the background as we were playing pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey. I was the girl who had to go home if the words "Truth or Dare" were ever uttered in the presence of a boy (or a girl who wouldn't meet with Mother's approval — anyone who "looks like a lesbian" would qualify there). I was the girl who had to take my *cousin* as my prom date, because my governess wouldn't have been let in and Mother lives in eternal fear that I will, I don't know, kiss a boy "below my station," whatever that's supposed to mean. I bet she'd have been shocked to hear how the talk went after *that*.

I mean, I don't mind my cousins, or anything, but there were *no* kids in the area whose social status would've passed her muster. I grew up followed around by a *warden*, just to make sure I didn't jump in puddles ("not suitable for a young *lady*"), or climb trees, even to get a ball that got stuck up there ("we're not *poor*, Sarah, we can afford to get you a new ball. Now get down immediately; *ladies* don't climb trees!"), or play with the Johnson kids down on the corner ("I never want to see you near those dirty working-class *fowl* again!").

It's nice to have nice things, and all. But the point of nice things is to *show them off* and how do I show off designer lingerie when Ms. Chastity Guardian won't even let me get to first base?

I'm not you, Mother.

And anyway, you'd be *nothing* if it wasn't for Father's money. That money you conveniently keep forgetting is dirty "new money" and not the mythical "old money" the von Löwens don't have anymore. But you'll keep him on a diamond leash and me in a gilded cage, just to protect your own crazy idea about how there are "different kinds of people — those born with class and grace, and those trying to be us."

## WEEK 4: THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM



I have a few favorite places to be. I enjoy my job; my coworkers are great, our boss is a wonderful woman, and most of the customers are good people. Obviously I like spending time at home; Mittens is there and I'd be a pretty pathetic person if I gave up my flat to keep a cat that I planned to leave home on his own all the time. Visiting Mom and Nikolaj is nice enough, but it doesn't really count as a "favorite place" since it's far enough I have to get time off for it. It's more vacation. And then there's All Stripes.

All Stripes is a club downtown that I've been a regular to more or less since I moved here for college. It's exactly what it says on the tin; I've seen about as many people get a Word from the bouncers about being dicks to the gay crowd as I have seen the bouncers lecture about showing the straight customers some respect. Kindly leave your judgments at the door.

All regulars of All Stripes know a couple of unadvertised quirks about club policy. First, Zachary Black, one of the bartenders, isn't just a flirt. That's something that newcomers learn pretty quick, too, if they're at all inclined that way; Zack will invite patrons back for a quickie if he thinks he can get away with it. While he's kept his job thus far, there's no illusion about him getting away with it; more regulars than I have seen him get chewed out by one of the owners about pulling that kind of shit, and they know a couple of his regular partners by name.

And then there's the policy that goes unstated for good reason.

There's a couple of smallish rooms off the main areas of the club. They're intended to let people have a slightly quieter place to chat over their drinks, that kind of thing. The bouncers do check in on them now and then, to make sure nothing untoward is going on there. But as all the regulars, and no doubt the staff as well, know, there's plenty of illicit goings-on there between rounds. The club does turn a blind eye to it, for the most part; if they didn't catch you in the act, it didn't happen, even when what

happened is pretty obvious. Most of the time, you'd have to be pretty damned careless to get caught red-handed. The bouncers don't particularly *want* to catch anyone; they're just making a token effort because not doing so could get the club shut down. And most of the time they just know *that* it happens, not exactly who nor exactly when it went on.

Which brings us to the biggest fucking elephant in the room. A rat named Nathaniel who usually drops by at least a couple times a week, except for during midterms and finals. Hardly anyone who knows his name *doesn't* know what he gets up to; the reason he goes to All Stripes at all, I imagine. Without fail, if Nathaniel is there, there's some guy getting sexed up at some point during the course of the night. The staff know, certainly, but are choosing not to see it. And I'd be fine with that, if he wasn't also a total sleazeball.

I don't have a problem with him having sex with strangers.

I don't have a problem with him coming to All Stripes for it.

I *do* have a problem with the little rat bastard having absolutely no judgement; promiscuity is one thing, but getting it on with strangers on a semi-weekly basis without covering up? What sort of sleazy *moron* does that?

But since the club policy, which isn't stated anywhere since stating it would mean getting the club shut down, is to let him be until he's caught in the act, and since he's pretty damn good at not getting caught, he keeps doing it. He's not going to *get* caught, and he's not going to *get* called on it, because the bouncers feel it would be against the spirit of the club or something to single a *known sleaze* out to follow around.

Far as I'm concerned? Someone having gotten Nathaniel's attention is probably not someone I want to take home with me. Ever.

## WEEK 5: AFTERTHOUGHT



I sort of envy Blake, you know? Not all the time, that'd be pretty pathetic. But sometimes, well...

Like when he gets all excited about having gotten the classes he wanted. And then it just hits me, that he's doing what he wants to be doing. He's going to college because it'll get him somewhere in life. I mean, directly, somewhere he wants to go. He chose his own major, and he's taking it because he has an interest in the subject. I mean, at least I assume so, because I sure couldn't work up that enthusiasm about *my* classes.

I mean, come on, Accounting? Seriously? Who the hell gets worked up over *Accounting*?

But for the kind of woman Mother wants me to be, college is just a parenthesis. A way to get in touch with the poor guy who'll be your free ride for the rest of your life. I mean, that's how she met Father, and you better believe she never lifted a finger once she got her degree, aside from the one she'd wrapped Father around. You'd think that'd lead to the conclusion that at least I'd get to choose my own bloody major, but oh, no. Because it wouldn't do to *acknowledge* that the whole college thing is just a charade. So I still have to get a "respectable education," whatever that's supposed to mean.

Mother didn't go looking at colleges with me. She just decided where I was going, made sure I filled out the application and got the grades necessary, and then basically forgot about it. Because, hey, it's not really important, at least not in Mother's world. It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single woman of standing must be in want for a husband, to paraphrase Jane Austen. (Mother never did like me reading that book; Elizabeth is altogether too rebellious to be a good example, to hear her speak. I swear she lives in the 18th century still.) College is just an afterthought, a way to snare that husband, and as long as there's a medical or law school in the area, one college is as good as another.

If she'd planned things better, if she'd thought things through, she'd have realized I've no intention of becoming her and marrying for money. I'm sure there are Med students out there with looks and personality, and until I find them, I'm going to have *fun*.

(But at least I've got it better than Toni. She's not going to college at all; she's slaving away at some job no sane woman would want to keep in the long term. I guess her parents can't help her out.)

## WEEK 6: NOT OF YOUR WORLD



When I was still going to college, I got into my head that I would find a job to support myself. It wasn't that my mother was unwilling or unable to — she's embarrassingly generous towards her only child — but I guess living away from home for the first time I wanted to see if I *could*. I wasn't quite as desperate as some of my coursemates who honestly needed the job, so it took a while before I was offered one — ironically, one that few of my fellow students (at least the ones I talked to at the time) would have considered.

The woman who ended up hiring me was Cassandra Martinez, and thus I started selling marital aids for a living. For the record, Mom doesn't have a problem with it; she's come in to shop once or twice when she's been in town. It's not the kind of thing that fits into Dad's worldview, though, so I pick my words and let him believe I'm a relationship therapist. (Which is still pretty bad, but at least it's not vibrator vending.)

At some point, Cassie decided to put together some sort of little newsletter for the store. For most of its life it's been a sheet of paper that we slip into customers' bags and make available on our website, nothing big. Pretty early on in its life, she asked me if I'd review one of our newer DVD titles for it. What we carry tends to fall into one of two categories; either there's a fairly coherent plot, or there's not even the pretense of plot. At one point Cassie said (though she might have been joking) she won't stock anything that makes her laugh.



That review didn't go over so well, and never did get printed in the newsletter. I think she might've handed it off to her husband to do, instead. When I presented my version to her, she read through it, and then said, in the most deadpan voice I have ever heard from her: "We can't put this in the newsletter, Toni."

"Why not?" I asked. I was pretty concerned; writing movie reviews was after all one of the possible careers I considered for myself after I got my degree.

"You've not reviewed porn, kitten." She used to call me that, back then; I don't remember exactly when she quit but it was either when I graduated or when she hired Brooke. Not that the two were terribly far apart. "You've reviewed a movie feature."

"It *is* a movie," I protested. She had me pretty confused at that point; even more than I had been by the premise of the DVD she'd sent home with me. "A movie focusing on deflowering a unicorn for at least the third time."

"A movie which will be viewed by people who most likely don't *care* about lighting, or stiff acting. I'm sorry, kitten, but none of our customers are going to care about this. They want to know how engrossing the sex scenes are, not how implausible it is that the title character is a virgin in the third installment of the series."

It's kind of funny the lesson that best drove home the point about different target audiences for me was given not by one of my professors, but by my boss acting to prevent me from scaring away her customer base for one of our best-selling porn series.

## WEEK 7: BROUHAHA



Dear Unfamiliar Friend of My Roommate's,

There will, inevitably, be something in culture which makes the uninitiated ask "what's the fuss?" Always. It wouldn't surprise me if people wondered what the fuss was with Shakespeare, back in the day. That's just the way it is; not everyone is into everything.

But I swear, there is no rhyme or reason to people (like you) *enjoying* reality TV, much less getting worked up over it. I mean, come *on*. I'm hardly the next John Lennon, but even I can tell that guy who you're screaming about sings about as well as a frog with a headcold, or a cracked kettle. And I swear I'm going to lift you up off the couch and bodily carry you outside if you don't shut up about how it's "not fair" that the cracked headcold frog-kettle doesn't get to come back next week.

I know he looks like he could be a model. That implies he should try for a career in modeling. Or porn. Or, you know, anything else that takes advantages of his good looks without him needing to open his mouth for anything other than to put a cock in it.

Seriously. That goddamned show you and Sarah have been squealing over all night would be so much better if the lot of them would put a cock in it.

At least that'd muffle their crowing.

No love,

Blake.

# CREDITS

*I.C.Q.*, setting, and associated characters, are the creations of Alexandra “quoting\_mungo” Malmberg and Veritas.

All entries in this collection were written by Alexandra, and proofread by Veritas.

The illustrations for each entry, as well as the icons used for weeks 1-3, were created by Alexandra specifically for this use; the icons are crops from comic pages.

The icons used for week 4 and on were commissioned from Lindsay Wade. Her work can be found on her personal website, at <http://henzy1234.webs.com/index.html>