

MUST LOVE ORCS



ZORA BLACK

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By Zora Black

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GRUG

“**W**hat I wouldn’t give to see Skrag Kuraz’s face when he finds out his precious deal is off!” Cornan says.

My fellow orc and finance officer’s words are met with a chorus of snickers and head nods from the rest of his golfing buddies. Including yours truly, a real estate mogul who didn’t earn the title by playing nice. Or by taking no for an answer.

“If the asshole’s face can get any uglier, it’s right about now,” Deitric observes smugly as my caddy hands me my driver.

So what if I had to throw down some money for the information? Or snake my way into the hearts of the investors with deep pockets?

If Skrag really wanted the old shopping district near downtown Montimere Beach, he should have learned to keep his potential investors happy and off my radar. And his ex-employees. I don’t think I could have tracked down each of Skrag’s soon-to-be silent partners without them.

Deitric’s ex still works for Skrag and hates the guy as much as the werewolf and I do. It didn’t take more than a few thousand bucks and four tickets to the theater to whet her appetite. And a cushy job working the front desk at a fashion magazine to motivate her all the way.

Once she shared the location of Skrag’s next land grab, as well as the identities of the investors he’d hoped to partner with, it didn’t take long to track the wealthy couple down. Convincing the Lutzes to trust me with their next investment, rather than the ghoul, didn’t take more than a few dinners. A slice of cake in comparison to Deitric’s ex.

“I’m doing this because the prick deserves it,” she’d explained when

Deitric and I met her to swap the cash for her boss's schedule, plus access to his day planner. *"And if I have to work through Christmas again this year, you better believe I'm getting a bonus. One way or another."*

The words were music to my ears, and the cash was nothing I would miss. Worth it a hundred times over. And if Deitric is onto something about Skrag's ugly face, which I believe he is, my enemy's hideous mug doesn't need to get any worse to make me smile.

"To being smarter than those who said we'd never amount to anything," I say, then swing my driver with expert form.

I'm hoping to play the best game of celebratory golf of my life, but I'd settle with a decent score and a few victory drinks. I'm not greedy. A development deal worth over a hundred million is enough. At least for now.

"That's just about three hundred yards, sir," my caddie comments, and I nod his way in thanks as the ball comes to a stop. The process of screwing over Skrag has taught me a lot but mostly this –it pays to be good to the people around you.

Deitric congratulates me and so do Toryn and Arvid. Both ghouls came up in the developing world unfortunately under the watchful eye of Kuraz alongside yours truly. Now they work for me, and we never get tired of laughing at the colder, much uglier ghoul's expense.

"Let's make this a win for everyone," I suggest to the slack-jawed caddy and hand the young teen a crisp hundred-dollar bill. "Remember today as the morning you met the dream team." I pat his narrow back and hope I don't knock the kid over.

It isn't everyday I can take my staff out to celebrate such a monumental success, but with luck, I can keep up the winning streak. I grin as the rest of the guys tip their own caddies, following my lead like the team we are. I want the club's employees to feel pampered, too, and enough to spread the news around.

I've never seen Skrag at Montimere's finest golf course and club, but the rest of the guys have. Is it too much to ask that he gets wind of our celebration? This very specific one? I hear he knows one of the owners, and it would be icing on the cake if he learned we were throwing around money he thought would belong to him by now. And somewhere he no doubt *wishes* were his, too.

Okay, sure, I'm an asshole. Don't get me wrong, but it pays to be tough. But it doesn't pay to never give bonuses. Or vacation time. Or compliments.

Skrag's tone has always been the same, whether with an assistant, employer, plumber, or ex-wife.

"Toryn, tell them what he used to call you." Arvid snickers as Toryn grabs his driver from his own caddy. The kid can't be more than seventeen, and from the look of him, he's listening rapturously to our conversation and trying to hide it by keeping his wide eyes on the ground.

"No," I say as soon as Toryn takes his swing, which doesn't sail as far as mine but still over a hundred and thirty yards. Maybe more. The nickname was Titties Tore, which is still the orc's name in my contacts. "Let the kid guess. You know Skrag?"

Toryn's caddy looks as if I threw him into a sea of oncoming cars naked and in full hair and makeup. It's a punishment I wouldn't put past Skrag, actually, now that I think about it, knowing he'd once locked Arvid in the bathroom until the ghoul shaved his head.

"You spend too much time running your lazy mitts through it. I pay you to work, not throw yourself at every skirt in your general vicinity. You can grow it back when I think you've earned it."

"What do you think he called Toryn over here?" I point to Toryn, which doesn't help the caddy feel any better.

I can tell because his shoulders are still glued to his ears. What's wrong with him? I narrow my eyes and try to remember where I've seen this same uncomfortable stance before. It hits me like a ton of bricks, and I snap my fingers his way. "Come on, shitting on him is fun. I can tell you know him."

The way the kid jumps tells me it's true. That and the pat on the back my buddy's caddie gives him.

"Just remember what the doctor said." The caddie looks at his co-worker and shakes his head. "You're not the sum of the spills you don't clean up."

"Thanks, Ty," the caddie mumbles, and I don't need to know any more to set the scene myself.

Skrag's great at fucking up and blaming it on others. Sometimes simultaneously, which is both embarrassing and impressive. I've mastered the art myself, though I use it only on my enemies, not the people on my payroll. That's akin to sabotaging your own plans, which lucky for me, Skrag has never learned.

"What was the spill? Scotch? Coffee? Coffee and scotch?" Cornan asks.

"The third one," Skrag's victim replies.

"Oh my God, he still drinks that?" I ask, watching the kid study the

specks of clouds in the otherwise bright blue sky. I'm dying to know what he's thinking.

"Go on, Larz," the one called Ty said. "It'll be good for you." The other two caddies agree.

"Do you guys know what a Catch You Next Tuesday is?" Toryn snickers at Larz's words.

"That's easy. It's me every time I refuse to pay his lunch dates with office petty cash," Toryn answers. "So you're not the first person he's called that. You won't be the last, either."

"Oh, he didn't call me that. It's the name of the drink I didn't clean up," he says and air-quotes the last few words. "Some of the members order it, maybe to be funny. I don't even know if it's a real thing, pretty much a Bloody Mary but loaded with hot sauce and double the liquor. And Worcestershire sauce. All the pickled stuff is spicy. I don't know how the drink started. It's as old as the club."

"Yum," Toryn comments. "Bet that made his breath smell like roses."

The caddie shakes his head like Toryn doesn't know the half of it. "It cut his butt up." The caddie gestures to our own golf cart in the distance. "He broke an empty glass of the stuff that someone must have put there."

"It happens," my caddie says.

"Drove off anyway," Larz finishes.

"And you don't know the name of this mystery drinker?" Cornan asks. "You guys work with your phones on you?"

I get giddy at the idea of watching Skrag embarrass himself and rip his pants. "Did you see this?" I ask my caddie, who nods.

"The cart's not functional anymore since the tree did a number on it," he says, explaining Skrag lost control of the vehicle as the pain set in. "But the same can be said for Ray."

My caddie nods at us, then explains how Skrag hopped out of the crashed cart and toward him. "He looked like a zombie heading toward me," Ray finishes.

"If that zombie cut his ass taking a seat." I can't help myself.

"So where's the tree?" Arvid's voice is like a kid's at Christmas. He looks around the sprawling green, and I do the same. Any enemy of my enemy is a friend of mine. "I need a picture with that tree now."

"It didn't make it," Ray answers. "It had to go with the golf cart, but Mr. Skrag wasn't hurt."

“Well, that fucking sucks,” I admit, and the rest of the guys agree. What Skrag needs more than anything is a good, long ass kicking.

“So again,” Coran asks. “No one caught this on video?”

“Someone got Mr. Skrag barreling after Ray, but management bribed the guy who took the video,” Ty says. “He got a free round of golf, and Ray over here got employee of the month.”

“No one can take an unwarranted reprimand from a guy whose pants are ripped with his ass out.” Larz gestures to Ray with a twinkle of pride in his eyes. “No one but Ray, of course.”

The rest of the game goes swimmingly. All of us are happy with our scores, and by the end of it, we have a few choice Skrag stories to add to our roster. The ghoul has a pension for clogging the toilets, which he blames on the guests before him. He ended up doing this close enough to where the man overheard. A yeti. Who denied it and pointed the finger right back at Skrag.

On my drive home from the club, feeling on top of the world and ready for anything, I thank my lucky stars I’m not him. Skrag’s star is on the decline. You could say it shattered a drink with its ass and drove head first into a tree, which is, hands down, the story I’ll be telling anytime his name comes up.

Poor Skrag, but not everybody can have a charmed life. And there’s something about today that tells me mine is about to get even better.

THEODORA

“Just a sec!” I holler for the third time, leaning against the door of the employee’s single bathroom with my notes app up and my thumbs flying.

As an artist, I want to control when the inspiration comes. But alas, like all the other mortals in this world, we can’t control when our dreams come true any more than we can all the other parts of our lives.

Another knock trio of knocks, followed by a hand slap gets my eyes rolling. Whoever’s on the other side should just try their luck with guest bathrooms in the lounge. They’re nicer. The only reason I’m even here is because Larry’s already told me too many times I can’t skip players in line to the bathroom.

“What’s taking so long?” comes a familiar voice.

Speak of the devil...“Pooping!”

“You said that ten minutes ago!”

I smirk, but not at whatever Larry is blathering on about. The guy has no right to comment on what I was or was not doing eight minutes ago. No right! That was my own time and not The Wheelhouse’s, a poker club and lounge where all the biggest and richest assholes come to lose money they shouldn’t have in the first place.

“I was lying ten minutes ago! Now I’m telling the truth.”

I’m finished with the concept of my newest story idea, which struck me when I was watching Buttons eating his breakfast this morning. He’s afraid of his dog bowl and growls whenever it moves. And since he eats so fast, it moves a lot.

I think a story about a dog who's always barking at nothing would be a great idea. A corgi who cried wolf. Until he doesn't. But the family doesn't buy that he sees the ghost he sees. Or the robber. Or whatever the villain should be... Okay, so maybe I'm not all the way done.

"You can get ready for your shift on your own time!" I spin on my heel and pull the door open. His brown eyes and even browner pencil mustache never cease to make me smirk. He's been sporting the thin but impressive womb broom ever since Empress Anastasia, our finest patron, said she liked them.

"Is that the empress?" I look over his shoulder to the empty corridor of the employee hallway, a narrow and dark fire hazard that's given me more than one good idea. Lenny stiffens, then wills himself to turn around slowly. I hide a smile behind my hand, but he still sees it.

"She best not catch you saying that," he whisper-hisses.

I adjust my corset and booty shorts, then throw a freshly lotioned arm around his bony shoulder. "Walk with me."

I tease Lenny, but he's the best-worst manager ever. He'll never have your back against a patron, and it isn't beneath him to remind all of us cocktail waitresses that he can, technically, do the weigh-ins the owners expect him to. It's his go-to threat whenever we get on his nerves.

Which is a lot, considering he's a nervous person who can't handle strong women. Or at least that's what we like to tell him when he barks for us to stop bitching about the temperature.

But he doesn't snitch to the owners about any of it. Ever. And he's always letting us pick the new hires. Without Lenny and his non-existent backbone, I wouldn't have half the ideas I do. He lets us finish our tasks and look cute, rather than finish our tasks and play the entertainer, too.

The current rule is, so long as at least two of the waitresses are on the floor and everyone has drinks, our down time is for us. Name one boss that you have who does that. It's why we're okay when he chastises us on the floor, especially because he stops as soon as we're behind closed doors. He can be reasoned with, he just needs a little convincing.

"Lenny, Lenny. Listen, Len." I pat his suit, which is also brown and maybe a bit too big, but I don't judge. "You and I both know two minutes is no big deal."

"You have a visitor," he replies as we enter the lounge floor.

Though elegant with its intricate crystal chandeliers, various water

features, and naked sculptures, I spend too much time in the place to consider it all that glamorous. Maybe if I were coming here to gamble and win. On someone else's dime, of course. I like to spend my money just as much as the next girl, but I'm not about to be foolish and lose my own on something frivolous. Not when I have everything exactly how I want it. And where I wanted it, inside the cutest little beachfront flat a girl and her dog can rent.

"Please tell me you're not letting the guy with the braces back in," I cry out and scan the room for the one and only patron who's ever actually caught me off guard.

But then again, that's easy to do when you're in the bathroom. Braces Guy learned this the hard way, since I did more than scream when I stepped out of the stall. If I try hard enough, I can still sense the tingling in the back of my left hand where it connected with his cheek. I'd never felt a burn so good.

"Don't be ridiculous. I wouldn't leave the floor for a mouth breather."

I'm too busy leering at the ghoul Larry's motioning toward to respond to the dig. I'm not against mouth breathers, but I am against mouth breathers who threaten to call the cops when I smack them. I know when I'm in the right and when I'm not.

But back to Skrag Kuraz, currently watching me from a poker table at the far end of the floor. "Oh, great..." I try to keep a small smile on my face. He's looking hard enough to count the pores on my face. I don't want him reading my lips.

The dude's never been cold to me or even rude, though I've seen him flick off the charm like a child flicks away a booger – with practice and little care for who gets hurt in the end. Last night, he'd offered me a 'modeling opportunity,' which felt more to me like a 'personal favor.'

I draw the line at those. I'm not a personal favor. I like my modeling opportunities like I like my burger. Real.

"Did you call him fat like you did to that other guy?"

I hate it when Larry brings this up. "He told me my boobs were lopsided!"

"Which is why you still have your job," he explains, then hands me my tray and order pad, shooing me away with the flick of the wrist.

This whole time, Skrag hasn't taken his eyes off us, and as soon as I make eye contact with the ghoul, his pale face curls into a smile fit for the Grinch himself.

“Mr. Kuraz,” I begin, giving him my best smile and a napkin. The poker dealer shuffles the deck as Skrag looks me up and down. It’s a gesture I’m definitely used to, though up until last night, not from him. “I’m assuming another coffee and scotch, heavy on the whip.”

“You’re a doll and a vision,” he says before leaning back to greet the new players coming to his table.

I can admit I use my looks, but I see it as playing to my strengths while I still have said strengths, which has blossomed into that steady modeling career I mentioned, along with this cocktail gig.

But I’m not stupid. I know my looks won’t last. Or my desire to stay active to keep my hourglass figure the curvy wonderland that it currently is. I save my money and only invest it in things I know my corgi and I need, such as our own place and cash flow.

“Another regular for Skrag,” I say to the bartender, a bubbly college student named Roxanne.

“I tried this, and guess what?” she says, then hands me the scotch and coffee.

I do my best to place it on my tray without spilling a drop of whip. “It tastes like an alcoholic’s breakfast?”

Roxanne thinks about this and nods, apparently losing interest in her own comparison. “When you’re not wrong, you’re not wrong.”

“Facts.” I wink and head back to Skrag.

I’d already told him my schedule was too busy for more work, as well as the fact that ownership doesn’t take kindly to others poaching their talent. I’ve had more than one co-worker who found a real opportunity working at a place like this. Hence the rule, I guess. It’s not Wheelhouse’s responsibility to find employees for their patrons. And no one has made this more clear than Phylis and Arnold Bell.

“You’ll never guess the good news I have,” Skrag begins. I tilt my head as if interested, giving him a ‘go on’ look. “I’ve found a way around our predicament.” He gestures to Larry, who comes over immediately.

“Has Arnold phoned?” Skrag asks, and I realize he’s gone over my head to get permission from the Bells. What could he possibly want me to do?

“Just got off the phone with him,” Larry replies, giving me the faintest ‘hang in there’ look as he does. “Theo, you’re welcome to hear Mr. Skrag out.”

He leaves, and I grit my teeth instead of glare as the lucky son of a bitch

walks off.

“I won’t insult you by thinking you want to hear me out,” Skrag begins, getting up from the table and ushering me to one of the booths near the far wall. “Let me set your mind at ease and say all I’m asking for is information.”

“What kind of information?” I can’t imagine there’s anything Skrag has any interest in that I would be capable of learning better than him.

“The kind someone like you can get just by looking pretty,” he replies. I lock eyes with the dealer, who gives me a small smile. Almost as if to say, *good luck with this guy.*

“Mr. Kuraz –”

He stops with a wave of his hand and drops a bomb I actually didn’t know. He owns my studio flat. My beachfront flat.

“You won’t be paying a single penny on rent,” he says, and I get the sense there is a huge and invisible ‘if’ attached to the end of the sentence, one he hopes I won’t notice. “And this.” He puts a slip of paper in my hand. I read the number and freeze despite myself.

Six months rent on a beach front condo and ten grand? What kind of information does this guy want? Security codes? A deathbed confession? Or maybe... I can’t deny the number looks good, but then again, I don’t know what I’m supposed to do.

“I’m not a sex worker, Mr. Kuraz. Or a spy.”

“I’m aware of this,” he says, putting his arm around my shoulder. “You’re my favorite cocktail waitress and tenant. And someone who’s about to be ten grand richer.”

And homeless if I don’t say yes, my mind says, wondering what I’ve just been roped into.

GRUG

I feel like the biggest success in Avalon's tonight, a cozy little bar and grill that's as exclusive as it is lavish.

"So you just stood there and talked shit with the caddies all afternoon?" I hate it when Delinzia does this, repeat back to me what I said without getting any of the context.

"We finished the game," I reply evenly.

I take a slow sip of my lager and think about the lie I'll need. Yes, we finished. Yes, we did well. But we also took all day. And I don't want to support her tone, which I appreciate about as much as an attempted kick to the face.

I smile, knowing good old Ray was too quick for skinny old Skrag, apparently the clumsiest *and* ugliest ghoull known anywhere.

Of course, he manages to work around his ashy skin. Money equals influence, and women love it. But the fact that this is a race that, shall we say, occasionally and literally samples the delights of humankind, how does that even work?

"Did I mention the part where I was celebrating?" I decide to add. Delinzia's my favorite cousin and trustworthy confidant, but I wouldn't expect her to appreciate the satisfaction this plan ended up bringing to me.

"And how's Toryn and the rest of your crew of minions?" She sips her wine, then sets it down to tap her french tips against the table.

"Is this about me not asking you to golf?"

Her bright gold eyes roll to the back of her head. "I just wonder if you realize the consequences yet."

“Of what? Being a success?” Of course, I know what she’s talking about, but Delinzia can be a fun bear to poke.

“It doesn’t sound like it was much about success,” Delinzia observes, her voice even and free of judgment now, though I know it’s still there. She’s better at hiding her frustrations than I am. Or how she puts it, ‘not letting them get the best of you.’

“It sounds more like payback to me. And if you feel that way, maybe he feels that way, too.”

I’m way ahead of her. Skrag’s on a lot of people’s hit lists, and most of them are either past or current employees. It didn’t take much to stir the pot and even less to finesse my way between him and the investors he was hoping to keep from me.

Being from out of town, Skrag was quick to scoop them up and let none of the rest of us know there were out-of-state pockets looking to collect on the growing opportunities that Montimere Beach has to offer.

“It’s not my fault the dude’s unpopular.” I tap the tips of my fingers against the glass of my near-empty lager. If she wants to have a drum contest, we can. “But business is business, and Skrag would do the same in my situation.”

“That’s the point I’m getting at,” Delinzia says. “You aren’t expecting some payback?”

“He’d have to do it on his own or I’d know about it. I’ve got too many sources for him to do much more than his usual routine.”

“Unless he’s going to get creative,” Delinzia suggests. She shuts up when the waitress, holding two steak dinners in either hand, approaches with a big smile.

“Who had the diet dressing?” she asks, and I blink up at her like I’ve never heard the question before.

“Diet dressing?” Delinzia and I say at the same time, and both of us receive a similar look of confusion for it.

“Yeah, you know,” the waitress says. “The low calorie option.”

“Yo.” Delinzia motions for her to set the place in front of her. “I didn’t know raspberry vinaigrette was low calorie. Learn something new every day.”

She winks, then tosses her silver-white hair behind her shoulders like some model. It would have been a smooth attempt to flirt with the waitress, if not for the candle burning in a bowl in the alcove directly behind her. “Ah!”

she hollers as the back of her dainty green hand connects with the glass.

“Oh, yeah, there’s a candle there,” our waitress offers.

I can’t help but reach my fork out and dip it into Delinzia’s side of vinaigrette as my frowning cousin watches her target walk off.

“Just want to see if it was worth it,” I say and lick my fork. “Yep, tastes like diet.”

“Fuck you.” Delinzia flips me off, then pours the ramekin of dressing all over her side salad.

“It was the most boring conversation starter I’ve ever heard.” Back when we were kids, Delinzia made it her mission to bust my balls. On occasion, I like to return the favor.

“I was just starting a conversation.”

I shake my head. “That you hoped would lead to sex, I get it. I’ve hung out with you. I call them Delinzia originals.”

“And you wonder why Skrag never wanted to promote you,” she says, drinking to her petty dig.

I shrug and bite into my steak. I won today. And so did my team. We’re all benefitting from outmaneuvering Skrag, which I can’t emphasize enough he had coming.

It was only a matter of time before someone came for him in the way I did. And now if they do, I’ll have my money and revenge out of the way, crossed off the Grug’s list of unaccomplished aspirations and out of sight.

“Whoa.” The word coming out of Delinzia’s mouth takes me by surprise.

She’s looking past me, wide-eyed. I follow her gaze to the middle of the restaurant, which seems to almost have paused at the dark haired human beauty’s arrival. “Whoa,” I concur.

The vixen's hips are the perfect amount of round. And the same goes for the swell of her generous breast. More than average. A handful and a half easy. Full lips, high cheeks, milky skin and the sexiest walk imaginable, I watch her glide to the bar while the head of nearly every man she passes turns her way.

She’s dressed in a black and cream form-fitting little piece that stops right above the knees. I can tell even from this distance the delicate black lace overlays a silk underlayer – no doubt as soft as her own creamy skin.

“Can you look at her any harder, my guy?” Delinzia’s voice pulls me out of my daydream, where I’m licking real cream off a trail running up her inner thigh.

“It’s better than saying ‘whoa’ with my tongue hanging out,” I mutter, hoping my future wife will sit at the side of the bar that faces us.

That way, I’ll at least have a chance at making eye contact. Plus figure out what she’s drinking. My tried and true ice breaker is to always send a drink first, though I doubt it’s nothing a woman like her hasn’t seen before. She’s probably been turning down drinks since junior year.

“You could always go over there and tell her you’re a millionaire,” Delinzia suggests. As if a thought like that wouldn’t occur to me otherwise. “It’s never failed me.” She takes a drink as I frown at her, wondering what the candle-burning incident was all about.

“How’s your hand doing?” I gesture with my head to the hand in question.

“Don’t look at me like that. We all strike out sometimes.”

“You literally just said the opposite.”

“I said.” She takes a big bite of her salad, forcing me to wait until she finishes to hear the rest.

After a few moments of watching her graze, I roll my eyes and take a chance.

I cast a glance at the future mother of my children, and just my luck, her back is to us. I watch her order a drink with the bartender and feel a pang of jealousy at the smile he shoots her. I’ve never wanted to be a bartender in my life. But at this moment, if it meant getting a chance to cross paths with her, I’d spend the rest of my life wiping down bottles and pouring stiff ones.

The bartender laughs at something she says before rushing off to prepare her drink. I don’t like how fast he comes back over with it, or the way he leans against the bar as she tries it out.

But I do like a funny girl. She uses her slender hand to gesture as she speaks, clearing regaling the bartender with some joke or another. I like jokes. In fact, I love them.

“Learn something new everyday.” Delinzia snaps her fingers in my direction, finally finishing her thought. “It’s different than opening with the fact you’re rich.”

I wonder if I should open with the fact I’m rich... I chew my lower lip and continue to ignore my dinner as well as my cousin. I wonder what her name is. What she does for a living. The types of movies she likes to watch.

“I could stick a fork in your mouth right now, and you wouldn’t even notice,” Delinzia says after a bit. Maybe a while. I don’t know.

I shake away the fantasy forming in my mind. Delinzia is right. She could turn around at any moment and –

“She's looking over here. She's looking over here,” Delinzia clumsily repeats into her wine.

My eyes meet the woman's. She gives me a little smile, then flicks her eyes away, scanning the rest of the room before turning back.

Was that an invite? I think it was.

“That smile was for you, bro,” Delinzia says, and I get the urge to leap out of my seat and rush over. But I don't, obviously. There isn't a bone in my body that's trying to come across as too eager.

I order another round of drinks from the waitress and bide my time, relishing the fact she hasn't once turned back around.

“Venice On First?” I say after thirty minutes of waiting for the right moment to come over.

“How did you know?” The smile she throws my way completely disarms me, but I recover easily with a shrug and quick breath in. She sounds genuinely impressed. Good.

“I know my fashion,” I begin, gesturing to the seat next to her as she sizes me up with her deep blue eyes. “May I?”

THEODORA

Damn, this guy is hot. Why didn't Skrag warn me? He can drop over a grand on a dress, but he can't drop a hint for a girl?

My lips move but nothing comes out, so I smile to save face and nod. I was half expecting my target to never approach, and now that he has, I'm swooning for real. What a very good omen this is.

As he pulls out the stool next to me, I take a moment to look over my left shoulder and breathe away the tension rising in my shoulders. Then I turn back to face him, adjusting the capped sleeve of my revealing – yet unbelievably comfortable – cocktail dress.

“Please do,” I manage to get out in a breathy tone. It sounds sexy even to me.

I remind myself to celebrate the momentous feat of not sounding like Batman when I get home. *There's a first time for everything.* The thought makes me smile, and he returns the look with one of his own.

I grab my drink, a sparkling grapefruit mimosa that tickles the tip of my nose as I sip its jubilant bubbles. Most of me wants to start the conversation, but I've been told by people who just want the best for me that I talk a lot.

Normally, something like this would have to be acceptable to any potential man of mine. But for ten grand and six months free rent in my dream apartment, I'm willing to take it back a century or two. I can be seen and not heard, no problem.

“I take it you're a fan of brunch.” His question takes me aback, but I don't let it show in my face

I smile and shrug, wondering how to respond in a flirty way that requires

more than my lips curling. Normally when some guy saddles up to the bar for a chat, they get straight to the point – looks.

“Anytime, any place.” I don’t really know what this means, but it’s the first thing that comes to mind. I complement the reply, which I hope came off adventurous and not desperate, with a toast.

He clinks my glass with his own near-empty one, a souvenir he brought with him from his original table. I peek over to see another orc trying her best to look nonchalant. Though her best consists of flicking her eyes above our heads rather than looking away. She must be a friend or relative if she’s willing to be ditched, right?

So they were talking about me over there? The theory’s a good one by the looks of it, which suits me more than fine.

He smiles and extends his hand. “Grug.”

“Theo.” His hand is bigger than I anticipated, and I smirk at the sight of my own dainty digits swallowed up in his gentle but firm grip.

“That’s going to be an easy one to remember.” He motions to the bartender and points to his drink. The mixologist, a dapper older man in a classic black and white tux, nods and turns away.

So he comes here a lot. Ask that, my mind advises.

“Oh, yeah?” I take another drink and sit up straight. *Not what was suggested but he’s laughing for some reason. That’s good.*

“Just like you,” he says matter of factly, rolling his eyes as he continues. “Which I’m sure you hear all the time. Easy on the eyes. Easy to remember.”

Oof, I hate this question. It’s impossible to answer without coming across either clueless or smug. At least in my experience, anyway.

I’m both aware and embarrassed by the compliment. I consider myself a capitalist, so why wouldn’t I play to my strengths, right? At least a little. Especially while I got it. But I’m no more than a statistical anomaly at the end of the day.

A winner of the genetics lottery, sure, but doesn’t this also make me a freak? Yes, yes it does. I try to remember this whenever I start to believe the way I’m treated by the world has anything to do with merit. Bottom line, it’s hard for me to take a compliment and mean it.

“Nah,” I try, remembering Skrag had described Grug as ‘a bro who only speaks in full sentences when he has to.’ “You’re the first.”

He actually laughs at this, gracing me with a wide smile and perfect teeth. Would it be stupid to think he’s genuine?

“So she’s got jokes. Okay.” I watch him study the new glass of frothy beer overflowing onto his coaster.

“Sometimes,” I reply, realizing in the moment there’s a fifty-fifty chance the dad joke on the tip of my tongue is going to bomb. At the last minute, I shift gears and go for something understated but sarcastic. “But more often than not, I’m repeating something I heard on TV.”

He smirks and mimics my own shrug. “Don’t we all. So are you meeting anyone here?”

“You mean besides you?” I gesture his way with a recently manicured hand.

Skrag insisted I come looking as fresh as possible. The stylists responsible for my waterfall of perfect curls didn’t finish their work until two minutes after my car came. All in all, I’ve been gussied up for calendar shoots with less fanfare.

"I want him eating out of the palm of your hand, got it?" That's what Skrag's exact words had been to me. *"What he knows, you know. What you know, I know."*

I nodded along because the directions weren’t rocket science. Skrag wants dirt. Personal dirt, business dirt, family dirt, anything dirt, so long as that dirt comes from the yard of Grug Zillkens.

“Smooth but not subtle,” he observes, a dimple forming on his cheek as he smirks my way.

“A great terrible band name,” I offer and drink in his laugh.

When I’d asked Skrag what the guy did to deserve his particularly invested negative attention, his response was more of a noise than an actual answer. The growl, which sounded like a hybrid between a gurgle and moan at the time, led me to believe the reason was more personal than anything else.

Did this guy sleep with Skrag’s wife? His daughter? Does he have a wife or daughter?

“So what do you do for a living, Theo?”

It feels too good on my ears, the way my name sounds on his lips. I think about his lips on my ears as I take another drink. I smile as Grug gestures to the bartender for another.

“And just to be clear,” he says, turning back around to face me with a serious look. “I *am* trying to ply you with drink. Full disclosure. I did not forget to ask.”

It's my turn to laugh. There's always been something about unexpected sarcasm that makes me giddy. For me, it's a colorful way of saying '*don't worry, I know this is awkward.*'

"Well, in that case, full disclosure, I'm a model," I say, bringing the conversation back to his original question.

He frowns and cocks his head at me, wincing as he realizes where I'm going with this. "Right, the question I asked."

"The question you asked," I repeat.

We're doing that thing where we both smile at each, but the reason isn't all that clear. Well, it is, but it's more something that doesn't go said. It goes *unsaid*, always guiding our thoughts and behaviors in that primal way that attraction alone knows how.

"You should have let me guess," he says as the bartender drops off my drink, taking the empty flute from my hand with a practiced grace.

I wonder how often this guy sees two individuals in a similar situation. Hourly, I'd guess, if the place is anything like the poker lounge.

"You know what I would have guessed?" He uses a napkin to clean up the tiny drop of mimosa I spill as my lips meet the rim of my latest cocktail.

"A model," we say in unison, and I shake my head and smirk despite myself. Not because smirking isn't the right thing to do. I need to show this guy I think he's adorable. But because I'm doing something else in the process, letting myself get reeled in.

"And a cocktail waitress," I add.

He asks me where, and I tell him, all the while reminding myself to turn on autopilot. *You have to be flirty for work. This should be no different.*

'Should' and 'are' have never been, nor will they ever be, the same thing. My arms sprout goosebumps the moment his knee touches mine, such a casual move on his part and probably not even intentional. Still, I have to excuse myself for a moment of reflection in the bathroom mirror.

If there is a god above, my exit hopefully looks equal parts dainty and inviting. There's an art to excusing yourself to the bathroom, and I hope my choice to walk slowly and with a slight sway in my hips pays off.

Attraction is the enemy. Attraction is the enemy, I repeat as I apply another layer of lipstick. *Compartmentalize so we can get this over with.* I take a few deep breaths and nod to my reflection.

Just because I'm attracted to this guy doesn't make it right or real. I've learned that the hard way, as have most girls. Just because you're attracted to

something right away doesn't mean it's good or actually attractive.

It takes looking at something up close, experiencing what it has to offer first hand, for any of us to really know what we have is a trustworthy emotion. Or whom. However you want to look at it.

“So, what should we toast to?” Gurg asks as soon as I get back, a perfectly fake smile plastered across my face.

“How about we try something more original?” I suggest. “A wish. Everybody loves a good wish.”

GRUG

“How about we try something more original?” Her voice is what honey would sound like if it could speak. I’m sure of it. “A wish. Everybody loves a good wish.”

I wish you would tell me what you like so I can be it. I keep the thought to myself because I’m not trying to get friend zoned. There’s no way I’m leaving here letting her think she can wag a finger and I’ll come running.

Even if it’s probably true? I take an extra long sip of my lager, keeping my eyes locked on her own baby blues. *Especially if it’s probably true.* She’s heard it all before anyway, I’m sure.

“I assume the same rules apply as cake and star wishes.” I set my drink on the bar rather than gulp down the rest, which I did with my previous lager as soon as she left for the bathroom.

“Correct,” she replies. “You know your wishes.”

“Yeah, but I want to know your wishes, Theo, not mine. Mine are boring.” I know the importance of using someone’s name to keep their attention, especially when it’s both sparse and well-placed.

She looks at me like I’ve done something cute. Elementary-school cute. Elementary school *student* cute. Hey mom, *check-out-this-picture-I-drew* cute. Otherwise, a swing and a miss. I can feel it in the heat slowly making its way up my neck.

“Oh, so your wish wasn’t about me?” She asks this casually, leaving me nonplussed by the delivery but impressed just the same. I let out one of those laughs that are involuntary, the kind that means *I have nothing to say and I know it. Plus you’re hot, so... hahahahaha!*

I'm normally the one seeing the look. Feeling it is entirely different. And for the record, I'd rather be the inspirer, not the inspired if given the choice.

"Do you want them to be about you?" I'm tapping the sweaty glass of my drink like it's my favorite pastime.

"Ah, ah. You see, that's cheating," she says, pointing a recently manicured nail at me. "That's too close to asking what my wish is. I thought we already established the rules of the game, Grug."

I inadvertently hold my breath as soon as she says this. How did I ever think I mastered the art of the well-placed name-drop? *You can wipe the egg off your face later!* my libido screams. *Right now, your job is to say words.*

"You're right..." I finally manage. "I should have..." I don't know why I think adjusting my suit is going to do anything but make me look just as nervous as I feel. The same goes for rubbing the back of my neck and looking at the ceiling. *Words strung together cohesively, you fool!* "Wished for the power to read your mind."

"Oh, are we doing super hero powers now? I'm good at those." She finishes her drink and places it back down on the bar. "My superpower would be that I can steal the superpowers of others. But only one at a time."

"One superpower at a time?"

"One superhero's power at a time," she explains, and I wonder how many times she's answered this very question.

"So when I commandeer their powers, I have them, but if I want someone else's, then I have to release the power."

"And it just goes back into the superhero again?"

"Uh-huh," she replies in agreement as the bartender drops off another drink for us both.

"Do you have any other powers?" I ask.

"Taking other's isn't enough?"

I frown, wondering if she means to describe what sounds like a villain. "But what can you do on your own? Or are you otherwise normal when you're not ripping someone off?"

She takes under a second to decide. "The second one."

I suck a breath in through my teeth, as if her decision was the wrong one. "Are there any powers you can't steal?"

"Nope." Her smirk alone could have an Only Fans.

My brows furrow. "So in some ways, you're unstoppable."

"But limited in my unstoppable..." It's her turn to frown. She does a

decidedly better job at looking hot while scrunching her face up than any other woman I know. “Unstoppableness?”

“Unstoppability,” I suggest.

“You win,” she concedes, and once again we clink glasses.

“To words that have a ring to them, at least when you’re tipsy,” I say, and we toast. She gives me a genuine smile before flicking her eyes at the clock.

“Are you meeting someone here?” *More likely, she needs to go.*

“I have a shoot in the morning,” she says. “But I’m dying to know what you’re into. Besides ditching your friend to talk to some broad.” She flicks her head back toward Delinzia, and I turn. Yep. She’s still watching. And now she’s waving.

Theo waves back before I can. Delinzia smiles and continues eating from my plate.

“I will have you know, that’s my cousin,” I correct. “She’s supposed to love me no matter what.”

“I’d say you owe her that dinner she’s gobbling down,” she quips. “Amen, sister.”

“Are you hungry?” I ask, wanting her to know that anything on the menu is hers.

“For information,” she says. “Such as what Grug The Cousin Ditcher likes to do for fun.”



“AND GUESS WHAT ELSE SHE SAID,” I tell Delinzia as she drives my Audi through one green light after another. Just like my day, my night has turned out perfect. All green lights. Metaphorical and literal.

“Um...” Delinzia taps a finger against her cheek. I’ve been catching her up on my conversation with Theo since we left the restaurant. “She said...” Delinzia taps her cheek. I get the sense she’s about to say something snarky. “She said... that she was dying to see you again?”

I frown. “Not exactly.”

So far, I’ve already shared the fact that we both can’t get enough of the gym, karaoke, surfing, mini golf, sports betting, *and* extreme escape rooming. It always impresses me when a woman is as dedicated to her health as I am. The same goes for having fun.

“Umm...” Delinzia chews her lower lip as we cruise down the open freeway.

I almost couldn't believe it when Theo confessed to loving, not liking, a good bodybuilding competition. It's more than just the pageantry. I've been saying it for years, and I've finally found someone who feels the same way.

“She said she's never met anyone like you,” Delinzia asks, and I ignore the kissy face she's currently making.

“Would I be letting you drive me home if she did?” I ask, remembering how Theo said I should give her a call before writing her number down on a napkin. “She's a woman of action and few words,” I finish, then reach into my breast pocket. Theo had slid the napkin inside it before wishing me a good night.

I have a shoot in the morning. Otherwise, I'd let you buy me breakfast...

I smirk at Delinzia as she takes and studies the napkin. “Theodora Augustine. Theodora Augustine Zillkens. You can call her Taz for short. Could be your pet name when you two get married.”

“Too far, Delinzia,” I snap, gazing out the window and relishing the idea in private. “We can't just go assuming we know what women want from us. A wise woman once told me that.”

“Good save.”

“I'm not finished.” I point to the nearest fast food place as we exit the freeway.

While my cousin enjoyed a feast for two, I worked up an appetite meeting my next conquest. Totally worth it but hungry work nonetheless. She turns into the parking lot, and the car crawls towards the menu box. The smell of burgers and French fries wafts through the driver's side window.

“Except what they tell us in one way or another,” I continue.

I wave the napkin for effect, then quickly stuff it safely back in my breast pocket.

“Don't you think it's weird she came by herself?”

“Yeah.” I'd asked her that myself and she'd told me something that made my jaw drop – she'd been stood up.

Not one to leave the parade even when it's raining, Theo enjoyed herself and forgot about the idiot who stood her up.

His loss is our gain, she'd said. And I smiled ear to ear despite my best efforts to play it cool. She's cool. A woman really comfortable in her own skin. That was readily apparent in the way she walked. I tell Delinzia about

the world's biggest idiot, and she lets out a whistle.

"Maybe he got hit by a bus or something," Delinizia suggests.

"That makes sense." Really, the only thing it could be. An emergency.

My stomach feels like it's digesting a modest tsunami of booze, which to be fair, is not far off the mark. It'll feel good to get something greasy in me. I study the menu like it's a math equation that I just can't seem to solve.

I'm so hungry, even their lighter options look appetizing. I over order and take the discovery as a challenge. I've been nothing but a success tonight, and I'll give Skrag a foot bath before I lose to a bag of fast food.

And sure enough, I dominate the bags of comfort food. With Delinizia's back up, of course, but still. Not a lot of guys in their thirties can party this hard and wake up with little to no repercussions. Good thing I'm not a lot of guys. I'm me, the guy who can't lose.

As I stumble up the stairs to my master suite, I wonder if there's an orc alive who's had a better night. It's not until after I've slipped into bed that I realize I'm missing a prime opportunity to hunt my prey on the metaphorical plain that is the internet, starting with a few choice bikini pics.

THEODORA

My hands tremble as I step out of my car and into the planetarium's parking lot. This date could actually make or break my entire life.

How many women can say that? If I flub this up, I could lose my apartment and end up on the street. Hell, I might not be able to find any place to live in the whole city!

The thought makes my heart sink, even though I'm probably overreacting a touch. I might be able to find a place, but will I like it? Probably not. Nothing found out of necessity is ever a real prize.

I check to make sure my car door is locked as I go over everything the two of us talked about. I can't believe I told him I like sports. Yeah, I could probably sit through a match on the couch, especially if I have my phone with me, but it's not my first choice in entertainment. I've never been surfing in my life, and I get bored at even the mention of mini-golf.

I sigh in exhaustion as I realize there's no way I'm going to avoid all of these things. Hopefully, the karaoke can be forgotten. I *actually* said I like karaoke! Nobody likes karaoke!

In fact, the only thing I said that was true was how much I enjoy exercise. Working out and jogging really are my favorite hobbies. But it doesn't matter, I have to sell lies. I don't have any other choice, so all in all, I'm doing a great job.

Still, I have to tell even *more* lies tonight! He's going to ask more questions about me I'll have to answer with just enough information to keep him interested. But not so much that I trap myself in an impossible lie.

Maybe I'll be lucky, and Grug will just be so into lit-up domes that he

won't bother much with talking to me. Why can't he be like other guys and ogle my tits instead of trying to get to know me? I finally found a guy who does, and it's under the worst circumstances imaginable.

I compose myself as soon as I park and walk towards the planetarium's entrance with shoulders back and head high. There's only one other car in the lot. I guess he was telling the truth when he said he'd rent out the entire place just for us. I figured this guy was loaded, but I didn't expect *this* level of cash flow.

I'm really playing with fire.

My pulse picks up as I approach Grug. He's standing by the door with his hands in his pockets, just enough out of reach from the streetlights so his face is obscured by shadow.

Something just feels... off. Like I should turn around and run for it. I tamp down that anxiety and remind myself I don't have any other choice here. Just smile and sell the story. That's all I really want anyway, right?

Grug opens the door and waves me in. I smile at his show of chivalry and step inside. I expected there to be some number of staff still, but it's just us. It's dark, private, romantic... I can see why he'd pick this spot for a nice date.

"Hey, nice to see you again," I say cheerfully as Grug walks to my side.

"Wish the feeling was mutual."

My heart freezes, sending ice water through my veins. "O-oh?"

He frowns, looking me over with disgust like I'm covered in dog shit. "You know, it's incredibly easy to look up anything about anyone these days. And do you know what I found out about you?" Grug asks.

I shake my head, trying to play dumb. "That I wrote some really embarrassing fanfiction in middle school?"

"That you live in a development owned by Skrag Kuraz."

I blink away my anxiety and try to sound natural and confident in my response. "Am, uh, am I s-s-supposed to know who that is? Like, who knows the guy that owns your apartment?"

Grug sneers. "How about the guy that bought you last night's dress?"

I swallow hard, unsure what to say to that. I can't believe I couldn't even keep this up an entire forty-eight hours. Goodbye, perfect apartment. Goodbye, money. Goodbye, dreams.

"It doesn't take a lot to get a retail monkey talking. It cost me less than what I pay for coffee to get the information I needed. That dress was paid for

by Skrag. So, what's the ruse here? What does he get, and what is he paying you to get it?"

Grug is towering over me. I've never felt so threatened in my life. I'm trapped here between a rock and a hard place. I can try to play the denial game, try to find a way to make him doubt what he's found. Hell, maybe I could even pull out the tears and give him some kind of sob story!

Something tells me that won't get me anywhere with this guy. I'm trapped in an empty, dark building with an orc I barely know, and he's pissed at me. I am well and truly fucked. Maybe the truth will convince him to show me mercy?

"I'll double whatever Skrag is paying you."

My mouth freezes open. I feel my eyes go wide with shock. "Sorry, you – you'll *what?*"

"I'm not looking to punish you. I know whatever deal you've got going on with Skrag, it isn't personal beef with me. You're a pawn to him. But when I play against guys like Skrag, I like to cheat a little. So, how about you switch from white to black?"

I shake my head, the ends of my hair slapping my cheeks, as I try to wake up from whatever fever dream I'm obviously trapped inside.

"You want me to be a double agent?" I ask.

Grug nods. "Yes? Is that not clear? Tell me the plan, and let's work something out."

I open my mouth to speak, but the words get caught in my throat as soon as he takes off his jacket. It's as if his biceps grew overnight or something, since the cuffed sleeves of his Pima cotton T-shirt seem to be hiding some serious guns. Guns I would have absolutely noticed the other night. Though I had been focused on staying present and flirty, not getting myself into trouble.

He folds his arms across his broad chest, and I know I'm in for it. This guy's too hot not to fall for. At least just once, right? I peel my eyes from the biceps flexing beneath the world's sexiest V-neck, and meet his heavy gaze.

What other choice do I have?

"Fine. Skrag recruited me for a job. He said all I had to do was look pretty. He dressed me up and dumped me in that bar, told me to get you to like me."

"And then?" he asks, obviously not satisfied with the answer.

"Then report back to him anything I find out."

“Like what?” It takes a great deal of composure to keep from bolting out of the front door. And apparently, Grug notices because he steps between me and the exit.

“I don’t know, business deals? I guess he wants to steal your clients or something. Like, do real estate guys normally tell their girlfriends all of their business secrets? Because I don’t see how.”

“Desperate idiots out of their depths would think that,” he snaps.

I shut my mouth and nod.

“That sneaky bastard. Now what did Skrag promise you in return?”

I sigh, thinking of the nice little payday I’ve let slip through my fingers. “Ten grand and six months’ rent-free.”

“At that place?” Grug asks, sneering. I can’t help but feel offended.

“*That place* is my dream home, thank you very much. It’s cute, and –”

“Twenty thousand.” His stare is hard. Cold, even, but his tone is nothing but casual. Does he mean it?

Again, my mouth snaps shut.

“I’ll pay you twenty thousand dollars, and an entire year rent-free at someplace even better.” Grug puts his hands in his pockets and smirks down at me. He looks pretty damn proud of himself like he just offered a prime cut of steak to a starving stray dog.

“Some place better than the loft I have right now?” I ask in disbelief.

“How does Coral Ridge sound?” Grug asks.

“What?” I shake my head and pull my phone out, searching Coral Ridge. I gasp just from the initial image that pops up. I double-check the address to make sure this is the property he’s talking about. Then I look back up at Grug, who seems to know he’s hit a bullseye.

“A year? Here? For free?”

Grug shrugs. “I know a lot of places even better. Skrag’s name isn’t on any of them.”

A year without rent is a year I can spend working on my book. I can live on twenty thousand for food and stuff, no problem. I’ve done more with less, that’s for sure.

“Utilities?” I ask.

“All included.”

I’m about to lose balance, and Grug must notice since he puts a hand under my arm and helps me stay standing.

“Listen, Theo, all you have to do is what you were already doing. Pretend

like this date went perfectly. We're in a whirlwind romance starting now. Really sell it to Skrag." Grug is smiling wide, rubbing his green chin. His strong, chiseled green chin. "I'll give you a few tidbits here and there that pan out, just to sell the lie. Then, when he's nice and cozy, I'll strike. And I'll see him so humiliated, he'll never recover."

I cross my arms and nod along with Grug. But inside, I'm wondering how in the hell I got myself wedged between two men who seem to have a blood feud that makes Romeo and Juliet's folks look reasonable. And for what? A business deal? Revenge?

"What's with the two of you, anyway?" I ask.

He's quiet a moment. I wonder if he's deciding to even answer. "Just know he's not getting anything he doesn't deserve. Or hasn't pulled on someone else. He should learn not to breed resentment when he's teaching an orc the ropes."

At least it seems like the volume of lies I'd have to maintain would decrease. That's certainly a plus. And that very cushy payment offer... I'm not exactly in the position to turn it down, am I?

"You're still thinking this over?" he asks, annoyed.

Am I so easy to read, or is he just that good? I guess you don't get as rich as he does without being able to know exactly what people are thinking.

"Here's a little extra motivation," Grug says. "If you don't agree to this, I'll tell Skrag you were a terrible actress and flubbed your lines. Knowing him, he'll evict you within an hour. And don't bother trying to fight it in court. That man can woo any judge in the county." The way Grug seethes as he says this tells me he has intimate experience with that fact.

"Okay," I say, not so reluctantly. Twenty grand and Coral Ridge, or even somewhere nicer if such a place exists, are a very juicy carrot being dangled from the eviction stick. I'll chase it for Grug. "You have a deal."

"Perfect. Now, let's enjoy the stars, shall we?" he asks. I blink in confusion.

"We're still on a date?"

Grug chuckles as he flips a switch and turns on the pre-programmed show. "Of course. I want to get to know my co-conspirator."

GRUG

“It’s like you’ve never shared a meal with the enemy of your enemy before.” The way her blue eyes stay glued to her plate as I say this pleases me. Maybe more than it should but still.

It’s her turn to be uncomfortable. And she has been since the planetarium. Really uncomfortable, and I can’t help relishing the front-row seat that is my spot across from her.

“It’s kinda cute, actually,” I finish, enjoying the slight blush rising on her cheeks.

“Oh, no,” she answers. “I’ve been to cheer camp. Well acquainted with the enemy meal.” She finally meets my gaze, which is when I decide to interrupt her.

“Tell me something I don’t know.” The words sound... especially stalkerish as soon as they fall out. But can I help that she has most of her life, including cheer camp years ago, on her social media? No.

I’m aware the frown she’s throwing my way screams repulsed. The ‘creepy neighbor looking into your window at night’ kind of repulsed. ‘Help, I need an adult!’ kind of repulsed.

“I do my research,” I explain, and she nods without replying.

It’s not until this moment that I realize just how much I prefer a black eye to a quiet dinner table. Plus the importance of having others do the dirty work for you. I should have told her *someone* looked her up, not me.

“Like what? What do you want to know?” Theo finally asks, and the smile I give her is made with one-hundred percent, bonafide relief.

Until her slight smile pushes every question I have out of my head. I grab

my drink and take a sip from it, buying precious time. How the hell am I supposed to know? She's the one with all the information. And curves. And flawless beach waves. And generous cleavage.

What were we even talking about?

"Surprise me with the truth," I finally manage, shrugging casually like I always do when I'm trying to be vague.

I use the same line whenever I'm gauging someone. The demand never fails to point me in the right direction, at least to what they want to talk about.

And at this point, information is information.

"It's not like I'm not paying you enough," I add after watching her chew her lower lip starts to feel more creepy than it does gratifying. I can feel my lips curling in response to the delicious crimson color spreading across her cheeks.

"Has anyone ever told you that you stare too hard?"

She pinches the air between her thumb and finger as I press my leg against hers under the table. Her bright eyes bulge as she drops her head, then peaks up and out the window. Theo's no doubt planning her exit route, just in case I'm foolish enough to drop my guard and let her slip away. The idea of chasing her until I catch up is strong enough to snap me out of my trance.

Are you trying to embarrass yourself? The question is a bit harsh, but I wonder if there might be truth to it. *Stop smiling from ear to ear. You're not on a date. You're on a mission.*

I sit up and lean back. "Any time now," I say.

There aren't necessarily rules when it comes to revenge, but catering to my baser needs is more below the belt than I expected from Skrag. And possibly easier to do than I want to admit. Maybe it's why I want to grab hold of his sweaty head and hold it underwater.

"I like to write," Theodora finally says. "Which isn't the most lucrative career." She pokes her food around her plate with a fork, drumming her free hand on the table.

"What kind of stuff?" I ask.

"Mostly things I don't end up finishing. Or letting anyone see. But I'm trying to learn more about graphic novels." She swallows hard, and I wonder on a scale from one to ten how uncomfortable she is.

"Are you any good?" I doubt it but only to myself. Most art isn't all that great. It takes more practice than most people think to stand out.

"Getting better every day," she says. It's more humble than I expected.

“You ask what I like to do, and I’m telling you. I like to work extra hard and then chicken out in the end. I wrote a lot in college, and I think the assignments and due dates helped me focus. All my finished projects are from college. Probably because I knew someone was going to look at them.”

The restaurant’s pianist plays the last few notes of his song and bows at a smattering of applause. Theodora joins in with the rest. I don’t.

“How much of what you’ve told me about yourself is a lie?” I grab an asparagus from her plate and chew it slowly.

“Working out. That I didn’t lie about,” she explains. “Everything else gives me flashbacks or chills or puts me to sleep.”

“Well that’s vague,” I snap, gesturing for her to continue. “Go on. I need to unravel your false persona so we can make you a new one.”

“The bathrooms at Wonder World hate me,” she confesses. “And I know how that sounds, okay? I’m not stupid.”

I frown. The popular spot is a decent place for a game of mini-golf, at least if you don’t know any better, but how it has a thing to do with my question is lost on me. “So you don’t like mini-golf because you have a flushing problem?”

Her eyes narrow. “You sound like the staff.”

“Who were probably pretty tired of having to tell you. How many times?” I gesture for her to continue. “And don’t lie to me.”

She looks at me like I’m the one who was singled out for their bathroom behavior. “Do you know how foolish it is to only have *four* unisex single bathrooms in a place where birthday parties are thrown?” I watch her run a hand through her hair and bask in her discomfort. “It’s a numbers game with all the action they see.” She points to herself. “Not a Theo problem.”

“So a lot is what you’re saying.”

“Zero times being my fault,” she retorts.

“Flush problem.” I pretend like I’m trying to get a visual. “My code name for you starting now. What do you think?” I tease with a smirk, then gesture for her to continue.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Her own eyes are razor-thin slits.

“So you’re the reason they took out the carpet in front of the bathrooms,” I half-kid, though I’m wondering if I’m onto something by the way she flinches. “If you ask me, your seven separate toilet clogs did them a favor.”

“It wasn’t seven.” Her tone is flat.

“Then how many was it?”

She rolls her eyes. “Surfing sounds scary.”

“Why?” I ask. The fact she’s changed the subject isn’t lost on me. “Don’t tell me because of sharks.”

“Even one shark is too many.” Her voice is a touch louder and a lot more earnest than necessary.

I cut into my steak and take a bite. “Anything else?”

“Bodybuilding competitions give me the creeps. Like muscles aren’t supposed to be the size of your head.”

I shrug, enjoying the irritation in her voice. She’s thought about this a little. “To each their own.”

“Unless it’s bodybuilding. Oh, and extreme escape rooms are what I’m trying to avoid.” She gestures to herself, no doubt referring to the dangers of womanhood. That one seems more than fair, which I’ll have to take into consideration as I plan our next few dates. How extreme is too extreme, even for an enemy?

“Plus large crowds?” she continues. “Ew.”

“Well, then we’ll start with those.” I hold up my glass and grin at the frown she gives me. “Remember to smile. Eyes and ears could be anywhere. We’re going to give Skrag what he wants.”

“And what if this double revenge scheme doesn’t work, huh?” she asks.

I roll my eyes like it’s the least of my worries. “That’s loser talk.” I scoop her hand up and into mine, caressing it for show. “By this time next month, we’re going to look so in love, there won’t be a single secret or piece of insider information Skrag won’t assume I’m sharing with you. That’s how in love we’re going to be.”

I explain my plan to make it seem like I’m wooing her on overdrive. Extravagant trips, luxurious locales, sparkling jewels, anything and everything to look invested and taken with her.

“You know a great way to avoid sources being second-guessed?” Her voice has a lilt to it, like she’s cluing me into some obvious and crucial piece of information I’ve managed to miss. In the most passive-aggressive way possible, that is.

“Believing in yourself?” I stab a cut of steak with my fork and bring it to her lips.

She smiles and opens her mouth, chewing slowly as I watch. I wonder if she’s just as intrigued with me as I am with her. “Actually having something to smile about. A convincing story to tell,” she answers.

“Is this about the crowded mini-golf course we’ll be jetting off to? Because you have my word, there will be more than four private toilets for you to ruin. I mean use.” Her glare tells me she thinks I’m a child. I drink it up like it’s a ray of sunshine to bask in.

“I’m just saying, looking happy while doing things I loathe isn’t in your best interest, either.” She isn’t wrong, but I’m not about to admit it.

“Guess you should have thought about that before you agreed to bamboozle me.” I smirk as she sighs and listens to me brainstorm ideas, which mostly consists of feeding the shithead ghoul any false information juicy enough to get his attention.

“Letting slip I’ve found some ‘diamond in the rough’ could work,” I say, suggesting Skrag might be willing to pull a move out of my playbook by stealing a project out from under me.

“If you’re willing to get a lot of people involved,” she says with a frown.

She takes another bite of her garlic mashed potatoes as I come to the conclusion she’s right. A fake deal would require a lot of actors. Still, it could be worth it.

“If you ask me,” she continues, dipping a piece of French bread into a ramekin of whipped butter. “Threatening his wallet is only one way to even the playing field. What about his dignity? His public image? His self-respect? You’re thinking too small here.”

It’s a great idea but not one I’m willing to thank her for. “You got some grease on your chin,” I say, reaching out to dab her face with my own napkin.

There’s no way I’m letting her think we’re partners in this. Cute or not, she works for me. End of discussion.

THEODORA

Oasis Cafe isn't as packed as I thought the rendezvous spot would be, which is both comforting and nerve-racking in equal parts. It was easy to find a comfortable spot as soon as I walked in, which has made my current wait for Skrag a touch more comfortable. Though I wouldn't oppose having more than the smattering of patrons that currently surround me.

"Oh, and here's little Billy. He's such a sweet little boy," Thelma, a cheerful and colorfully dressed werewolf sitting in the booth across from me, says. I lean over to see her outstretched phone and smile at the very hairy toddler on the screen, sitting in his room and strangling a teddy bear in a death hug.

"Awww..." I comment.

"May I see?" Leon, Thelma's human husband, snatches the phone from his wife's claws and turns the screen toward himself.

"Why do you need to see him?" Thelma asks. "We babysit him almost every month." She takes the phone back and frowns. "And now you've got my screen all smudged."

"I just forgot whose son he is," Leon snaps. "I thought I could figure it out by how he looks."

Thelma holds the phone up. "And can you tell?"

"Dunno, the screen's black."

"Damn it." Thelma's claws tap at the screen. She scoffs and furrows her brow while Leon smirks.

"Need your password, honey? I have it saved right here." He waves his device in his hand. "And if you're nice. I'll give it to you."

His next three attempts fail, and the human/werewolf couple break into some more bickering. I decide that what they're speaking about is none of my business, so I tune them out and wait for this to be over with.

Unfortunately, my mind slingshots right back to the actual situation. Skrag or someone posted a note on my door this morning. It simply said *12 p.m., come with information*, along with an address to this place.

"Billy is Max's son, dear," Thelma says.

"Is this you asking nicely for your password?" Leon's got his phone open now. "Gifts from the kids," he explains, and I nod.

"Nice kids," I offer as Thelma retrieves her password from her husband.

Leo squints at me. "If you like errands."

They start bickering again over some issue, and I tune it out to look at the cat clock hanging behind the front counter. Unfortunately, Skrag's over fifteen minutes late right now, which can't be a good sign.

"Are you waiting for someone?" Thelma asks me.

"Yes, I am," I say.

"Oh, that's a shame. I was thinking of introducing you to our son, Roger." Leon pushes up his glasses.

"Um, I'm in a relationship right now." I smile. It's technically not a lie, though it's also technically not the truth.

"What Roger needs is his own game, dear, not his dad soliciting women on his behalf," Thelma says, and I wonder what it is about me that screams, 'I'm for sale!'

"No, I know what the problem is," Leon replies. "He's an absolute asshole. I've told him this many times."

His wife shakes her furry head at him. "Then why did you want to give his number to this poor girl here?"

"I still wanted to give him a chance. He's our son!" Leon looks to me as if I should agree. "You know the old saying. You can lead a horse to water, but it can still call that water a 'whore' and walk away."

"Just ignore him, Theo," Thelma says.

They start bickering again. I take this moment to look around for Skrag. But instead of seeing the waifish but well-coiffed ghoul, I see a slender man in a trenchcoat looking my way. His dark eyes recognize me, and I immediately know Skrag sent someone on his behalf.

Great, I'm dealing with a henchman.

The subordinate stands as still as a statue in the middle of the café. His

stare is intense, though not in a "cool villain" way. It's the kind you'd make when you're trying to photobomb an otherwise candid shot with something creepy.

As I look at him, he beckons me toward him. But he doesn't do it in a "curling finger" way. Rather, he curls both his arms up and grabs at the air with his hands. Yet the rest of his body stays still. As a result, he looks like a malfunctioning animatronic.

"There's my..." I wrack my brain and blurt out the first word that comes to mind to the bickering couple. "Uncle. I hope you guys have a good day. Good luck with your single son."

"You too, sweetie," Thelma says. "And let us know if that relationship of yours doesn't work out. We're here almost every day."

As soon as he sees me walking over, Henchman sits down at the table behind him. I sit in the chair opposite him as he takes out his credit card and slaps it down on the table.

"I take it you got my note," he says, sliding the card my way and ignoring my nonplussed expression.

I stare at the card without taking it. Has this man ever engaged with a person before today? "And I take it we both work for the same guy..." My words trail off as he squints toward the menu board.

"So you're not a total idiot, good," Skrag's henchman says, his dark gaze falling on me again. "Maybe this will be easy."

"What will be easy?"

He ignores my question and gestures to the menu up front. "An iced grande caramel macchiato with vanilla sweet cold foam and four pumps of white chocolate mocha sauce."

"I'm not a barista." The words fall on deaf ears.

"From now until you deliver to Skrag, you're whatever I say you are," he informs me with a tight smile, adjusting the collar of his trench coat as he explains his new role as my handler.

"And this is how I'm learning about it?" I don't care if I sound snotty. There's a right way and a wrong way to spring a creeper on a girl. And Skrag did it the wrong way.

He rolls his eyes. "Save it for the complaint box, sweetie. This is just how I do things." He taps the card on the table. "An iced grande caramel macchiato with vanilla sweet cold foam and four pumps white chocolate mocha sauce."

I grab the card and do what he asks, since the faster I do, the sooner I'll get out of here. At the register, I feel Henchman's eyes burning into me and turn around. He's giving me the same bizarre wide-eyed stare as before. I whirl back around and focus on my phone screen.

"What can I get you?" the cashier asks me. I look up and see what appears to be a faun. She has cute little antlers sticking out of her curly hair and her name tag reads, *Amaryllis*.

"Yeah, hi," I say, then repeat the order, though apparently I get it wrong.

"Four pumps!" Henchman corrects from the table. "You just said three."

"Okay, four pumps then."

"Yeah, I got it," Amaryllis giggles. She enters the order into her register. "Can I get a name for the order?"

"Just put 'Theo.'"

I go back to the table. Henchman follows me the whole way there with his eyes. It's only when I sit that he relaxes his gaze.

"Now, tell me what's happened in the past few days," Henchman demands.

"Just the normal romance, if that's what you're asking," I say. "Nothing valuable yet."

"No, don't pull that. Skrag isn't just asking for anything 'of value.' He specifically asked me to squeeze every piece of information out of you. He wants to know what you do, how you do it, and who you do it with."

"He could come himself if he wants to know that," I suggest sarcastically, as if the idea has just hit me that the ghoul could, quite possibly, take care of his own shit.

Henchman sips his drink but ignores the comment. "And don't even think about lying or withholding information."

"I can tell you the sexy outfit worked," I start. "Grug came over right away, and I told him I liked all the things he liked. He completely fell for it."

"And what about that nice little date you went on? Did he say anything about the stars aligning?"

I pause in shock. "Were you spying on us?"

Henchman just smirks at me. I decide to continue with the info-dumping.

"No," I say. "But he did have a lot of other things to say. Most of it was about body parts."

"What did he say exactly?" Henchman lowers his voice.

"Do you expect me to remember every single word he says?"

"Yes, and every movement he makes," he explains. "If he blinks an eye, I want you to remember. If he sheds a flake of skin, I want you to pick it up and put it in your pocket."

"That's impossible! You think I can see every flake of skin that falls off his body? I was tapped for my beauty, not my spy skills," I scoff.

"A good woman has both," he snaps. "We're paying you a lot of money."

"We mostly talked about things we like to do," I suggest. "He bragged about how successful he was but didn't give me any deep business information."

Henchman stares out the window and chews on his tongue. "I'll expect a more detailed report next time."

You should expect a foot up your ass, I say to myself. "You got it!" I nod and slide out of the booth. I'll be damned if I wait for his permission. If he's going to be abrupt and strange, I can, too.

"Oh, and by the way..." he says as I take a step.

"Yeah?" I take another, then turn.

He reaches into his pocket and slams something on the table. "Keep that on you at all times," he demands, pulling his hand away to reveal a phone. "You need to be ready to meet with me at all times. Skrag may want to relay a message."

I nod my head, grab the phone, and throw it in my bag. *God, what have I gotten myself into?* I think as I once again attempt to bolt.

"Oh, one more thing." Henchman reaches into a pocket and pulls out a white envelope. "Clean yourself up." He gestures to my overalls and then the envelope, no doubt full of cash to keep me polished and donning the best outfits.

The thickness of the envelope I clutch as I finally leave the cafe leaves a bittersweet taste in my mouth. Sure, I have shopping money, but the ghoul who gave it to me is just as untrustworthy as the orc I'm supposed to seduce.

I check my phone, happy I won't be late for a photo shoot for pool toys. I want to head home and cuddle in bed with Buttons rather than lounge on a floaty while half a dozen assistants judge my every blemish. But losing out on a paycheck isn't going to help my situation, especially since the money in my hand is hardly the windfall a shopping spree should be.

GRUG

I lean back in my chair and kick my feet up on the one opposite. The gentle surf below my boat rocks me gently, making this sunny California day feel that much more relaxing. And how could I not be relaxed when I've concocted the most incredible way to really drive Skrag up the wall?

My phone rings, right on time. "Johnson?" I ask. "Yeah. Yeah, if it isn't too much trouble. I really appreciate it. Hey, you and the Mrs. can use my booth at the hockey stadium anytime. Tell her I said hi. Alright, take care." I hang up and instinctively fist pump in the air. The hard part is over.

The next part of my plan will begin when Theo gets here. My driver is picking her up, and she should be here any moment now. We're going to spend the day looking cute and cozy with each other, basking in the sun, and making sure Skrag's goons get a good eyeful.

Part two is to let Theo know she's going with me on a special little trip. I heard the little princess state she wasn't a fan of bodybuilding competitions. I don't know what competitions she's seen, but Theo's going to be in for a ride when we get to this one.

I took a chance to ask an old client of mine, Mr. Johnson, if I could use his season guest passes. It was last minute, and I was almost sure it wouldn't pan out, but Johnson reserved me in his VIP section and everything. That's what happens when you get a rich man a killer deal on his third property. And fourth.

My car pulls up and I stand, hands in the pockets of my cargo pants, ready to greet my 'girlfriend.' I'm halfway down the dock when my driver opens the car door and Theo steps out, looking awkward and apologetic.

“Do I... should I tip you, or...?”

“He’s salary,” I shout. “Don’t insult the man.”

Theo looks up at me with wide eyes and jumps as the driver shuts the door behind her. A loud bark reminds my driver of the second passenger, whom I had no idea I invited until the squat thing hops out. The corgi waddles toward Theo, then throws its head over its shoulder to yap out another bark.

“Buttons says thank you,” Theo explains and scoops up the dog. As she walks down the pier with the pup in her arms, I tilt my head to get a better look at her.

She’s gorgeous. Skrag is really sparing no expense dressing his little dolly up for me. She’s wearing a sundress that I know costs a couple hundred dollars, strappy sandals, a wide-brimmed hat, and designer sunglasses. Her cleavage is peeking out just enough to be tantalizing while maintaining a slight amount of modesty. Oh, he’s good. He’s very good.

Cozying up to her will certainly be easy indeed.

“Welcome,” I say with a wide smile. I embrace her tightly, letting my hand linger on her shoulder for a moment before breaking away.

Her skin is warm beneath my touch, and I wonder if the smile curling her plump lips up and reaching her cheeks is genuine or fake. Either way, the single butterfly loitering at the base of my stomach tells me I might be nervous. I might want to know more about her and for no other reason than I’m interested.

“That’s quite the floater,” she says, gesturing to the slick catamaran we’ll be spending the afternoon on.

“Wait till you see it up close,” I reply and hold my hand out for Buttons to sniff. “You too, little lady.”

“I didn’t ask because I didn’t want you to say no,” she explains.

“Fair enough,” I say, not wanting to spoil the mood. Or look like I’m jealous of a dog.

Theo clutches her bag to her chest and looks around nervously. “So... what’s the plan for today? Lounge around on the boat?”

“A little. Actually, we’re going on a small trip up north a short way. There’s a very exclusive beach up there, and I have a private cabana reserved just for us. All-inclusive.”

We get on board, and I motion for her to take a seat on a lounge chair as I head to the small bar I had made special for my pride and joy.

“Give the lady anything she desires,” I say to the two employees behind the bar, Trevor and Amy. “And if she desires nothing, push some champagne.” Amy nods and strides over to Theo.

Next, I make my way to my captain for the day. Usually, I prefer to steer my ship myself. I’m a little particular about her. But I need to be seen with Theo attached at my side at all times, just in case. I give him the sign to set sail and return to my date.

“Amy suggested some champagne,” Theo says, gesturing towards the two glasses of ice-cold bubbling wine. “I guess it’s five o’clock somewhere.” Theo smirks at her little joke and takes a sip.

“Please. Champagne is appropriate for any time of day.” I clink my flute against hers and take a long drink. I earned this.

“So... we’re going to an exclusive beach to sit in a private cabana? I thought we were supposed to be on display for Skrag and his men,” Theo asks as Buttons laps at a bowl of ice water nearby.

Theo’s voice is hesitant. She doesn’t trust my plan just yet. But she’ll understand once I break down my grand vision.

“Oh, believe me. They’ll be watching us the entire time. In fact, I guarantee they’re watching right now. Smile. Wider. Thatta girl, and don’t look around too much trying to find them.”

“Wait, oh my God, you’re doing this on purpose?” she asks with a laugh of disbelief. “You’re making it difficult for them to watch us, knowing they still have to.”

“My dear, you have no idea the lengths I will go to just to give Skrag a slightly worse day.”

Theo’s smile falters for a moment. She crosses her legs, giving me a glimpse of her milky thighs. “Remind me to never get on your bad side. Again, I mean,” she says before chugging half of her drink in one gulp.

“Careful, that gulp alone was worth seventy-five dollars.” I don’t know why I say it like this. I’ve spent more than that on much less. Something about the stunning Theo, who is only here with me as a business arrangement, who has the nerve to distrust me over Skrag, makes me want to put her in her place a little right now.

Her cheeks go red in embarrassment. She looks beautiful like this, with her little rosy dimples highlighting her bright blue eyes. After the wine and sunshine, I hope to make that blush more permanent.

“I’m not the one you need to worry about, Theo,” I remind her. Speaking

of, I have a job for you. Before we pull into the dock, I need you to call Skrag or whoever your point man is, and tell him you're going to Florida."

Theo chokes on her next sip and coughs. She fans her face for a moment and takes off her sunglasses in disbelief. "Florida?"

I scratch the top of Buttons' head. "Tomorrow."

Theo is frozen for a moment, then her mouth drops open as she laughs. "O-oh?"

"Yes. I'm taking you to an incredible show of form and fitness. The Daytona Championship Bodybuilding Competition." I sit back and smirk, knowing this little princess won't be too happy about that. She'll learn, though. It's the price she has to pay for getting involved in the first place. And all things considered, it's a more than fair one.

"Okay, Grug..." Theo fakes a smile, but her eyes tell me she's still doubting my mental faculties. "I can understand making Skrag's henchman chase us around the California coast... but a cross-country trip? Overnight? On this short notice? Grug, that's not just petty. That's impossible. There's no way they're going to be able to keep up and follow us. So there's no way for them to see us together. Don't you want Skrag to see this?"

"Impossible is a strong word. Skrag has money and means. He'll make it happen." I take a sip of my champagne. "Plus, he knows how much this sport means to me. It fits with my personality that I'd whisk my lover all the way to Florida for a three-hour competition."

"In the meantime, he's dumping money and men into this endeavor. Huh. Well, I gotta say, that's incredibly bold of you," Theo says, tilting her head. "So, how exactly are we getting there? Seems a little late to book a flight."

"Private jet," I state plainly.

"Oh. Of course. You hear that, Buttons? We'll need to get you a sitter." Theo finishes her wine and winces. "You should know, though, that I am a very nervous flier. Like, I've flown once in my entire life, and it was a miserable experience for every single person involved. Including the taxi driver who took me there."

I smile wide. I get to terrorize two people who've tried to wrong me in one little trip? Delightful.

"So, how do I-?"

I put my finger up to my nose as a sign to cut the chatter as Amy returns. It's not that I don't trust her, but I can't be completely sure. The satyr pours each of us a fresh glass before quickly excusing herself again.

Theo lifts her flute in the air and shrugs. “To making a rival’s life a huge pain in the ass!” We clink and take a drink. “Just try to remember, if even one little thing goes wrong, it’s my ass on the line. You get to have your laugh and go on with life as normal. I can’t end up sleeping in a cardboard box under an overpass. Got it? Even if he doesn’t buy it.”

I nod. “I haven’t forgotten our deal. I won’t back out.”

I won’t slip up. If anyone screws this up, it’ll be Theo. I’m certain my plan is ironclad. But even if she does screw up, which I don’t intend to let her, I won’t let her go down in complete flames. I reach across the table and take her hand, running my thumb over her soft skin.

Theo sighs and looks at the quickly approaching harbor.

“Guess I have a call to make,” she whispers.

“The bathroom is one flight down, to the left,” I tell her. She nods and follows my directions. I can almost hear Skrag cursing his own existence as he realizes he’ll have to scrounge up not only a flight and room, but a ticket for the guy trailing Theo.

How else will he clock our every move? Maybe we’ll stay a little longer on a whim? I hear Orlando is lovely. Miami, too.

Theo returns, putting on her sunglasses and the fakest smile I’ve ever seen.

“I left a message,” she says, voice shaking.

“Fantastic news,” I say, taking a fifty-dollar sip. I stand and escort Theo and Buttons to the front of the ship, holding my date close to my side as we begin the docking process. She holds her flute tight enough that I’m worried it might break.

I feel slightly bad for putting her through this. Not enough to call it off, or make it easier for her. Oh no, she’s getting expensive wine and designer dresses out of this ruse. I think she’ll be fine.

“Relax,” I tell her, massaging her shoulders. “You’re about to have the best daiquiri of your life.”

“With tomorrow’s agenda? Make it three.”

THEODORA

“So anyway, that’s when I realized he’d been dead the whole time,” Grug’s cousin Delinzia finishes, wrapping up the story of her one and only imaginary friend.

Sherlock T. Sanderson, the finest fiddle-playing ghost pal a young orc girl could have. At least according to Delinzia, who seems way more relaxed by the prospect of a real-life ghost than I would be. Even one that keeps you up at night for music lessons and treasure hunting.

“That’s insane you really found a golden fiddle, though,” I comment.

After returning from our little vacation in Florida, Grug insisted that meeting Delinzia was the next step in our fake relationship. Of all the things I expected from Grug’s cousin, friendly and laid back wasn’t a combination I considered.

Grug insists she’s always been the first relative to meet anyone important to him, hence the brunch, which Grug also insists will go a long way with Skrag. He’ll see it as a genuine sign of the orc’s interest. Or so I’ve been told.

Delinzia’s a gatekeeper, the grouchy developer explained on the way to brunch this morning. And willing to play along. Just smile and look pretty. Two things you’re good at.

He’d first mentioned it after the bodybuilding competition, which was more hilarious than I expected. And so was Henchman’s disguise from his spot in the middle of the back row. I didn’t think the creep had it in him to pull off an all-jean ensemble. And suffice it to say, I was right.

It was a small consolation prize since my ultimate goal was to laugh in Grug’s face for assuming Skrag could keep up with his last-minute plane

rides. Too bad the ghoul and his goon proved me wrong.

“A golden fiddle pin,” Grug corrects from his seat beside me.

I finally notice my jaw is practically on the table and close my open mouth. I don't need anything buzzing around the patio of Bunch of Brunch Bistro to come soaring in and ruining the vibe. That is, any more than Grug's constant interruptions to a story he's only bored of because he's not the main character already has.

“A tiny detail I overlooked,” I confess, though I really want to say it doesn't matter because it's still cool. “You're the best for correcting me, babe.”

I smile and squeeze Grug's arm, knowing Henchman probably has some spy or two lurking about. If he isn't hiding in one of the bushes himself. Grug stiffens at my sarcasm, then drops another piece of boiled chicken to Buttons, currently seated directly next to Grug.

I've been adamant my little guy tag along for the day, and Grug's been more accommodating, even nice.

“You need to start feeding your dog more chicken,” he says. “A dog needs fresh protein, none of that kibble crap.”

“What would I do without you?” I drop a finger into his dipping sauce, then stick it in my mouth.

“Please, help yourself,” he says, grabbing the last jumbo shrimp from my plate and popping it into his mouth.

“I want a clean fight, you two,” Delinzia chuckles, obviously entertained by the drama that is our current predicament. “Plus a heads up if your stalker shows up.”

I let Grug place a hand on my knee just in case, then scan the bustling hot spot a fifth time. I want to know who I'm acting for, even if I can't control who they are or what they report back. Does Henchman have henchmen?

“You'll see him soon enough, I'm sure.” I lean my head against Grug's shoulder and let him wrap an arm around me. This should be enough PDA for now if Henchman is here, which he no doubt is, considering he had no problem following us to Florida.

“And rue the day you did,” Grug comments.

“Yeah, I had more than just one imaginary friend growing up,” I confess to Delinzia, changing the subject back to something more interesting. This is our fifth date and easily my favorite, considering Delinzia isn't a thing like her cousin. “Though they were really all imaginary,” I continue. “I had a lot

of pent-up energy as a kid. It kept me from making friends sometimes, I think.”

“Just as a kid?” Grug looks up from his Reuben, that classic scowl I’ve grown so accustomed to seeing on full display over his bowl of piping hot gravy mixed with au jus. Or what he refers to as ‘the dipping sauce of champions.’

“Yes, as a kid,” I say like I’m reacting to something funny he’s said, not childish. I don’t want a single potential picture of me frowning to fall into Skrag’s lap. We need to look happy. No, ecstatic. I snuggle up to him like we’re on a dream date.

“I’m trying to imagine her as a kid,” Grug says to his cousin.

“It might help to know what a kid is,” I offer, noticing he has few friends with families of their own. “They’re the tiny things that don’t like you because they’re good judges of character?”

“I know what a kid is.” I smile as he squeezes me tight.

“Leave her alone, Grug. A girl’s gotta eat,” Delinzia says, nodding my way. “You’d do the same thing if Skrag approached you.” I raise my glass and wait for her to complete the ritual.

I don’t know whether he meant for his words about my childhood to be a compliment or an insult, but I currently don’t care, what with the mimosa in my hand. “Thank you, Delinzia,” I add, looking Grug straight in the eye. “You understand a girl’s predicament.”

“But not a cousin’s point of view,” Grug grumbles. I know he’s just upset because we’re actually getting along.

“Now who’s risking crappy pictures, huh?” I ask over the rim of my glass.

“Yeah, Grug. Follow your own rules.” Delinzia sneers. “And respect the memory that is Sherlock T. Sanderson.”

“We’re supposed to be bonding over my newfound love,” Grug complains as he brings his drink to his lips. Is this really how the guy acts when he doesn’t get his way? And with family?

“I can’t hear any more about the bodybuilding competition,” Delinzia says. “I’ve looked through the pictures on your phone twice now.”

“Yes but –”

“And scrolled all the museum pics online. Congratulations again for making the front page,” Delinzia interjects, no doubt tired of hearing about it. “Let me know if you need to borrow my sunglasses for anonymity purposes.”

I hide a smile behind my hand, remembering the look on Grug's face when he'd shown me a copy of *The Daily Dose*, a weekly newspaper that busy businessmen apparently read. I've never seen a single edition of the specific paper in my life, though I was relieved when Henchman sent me a thumbs-up emoji followed by a quick snapshot of its cover the other day. Grug and I laughing in front of a large sculpture was a win, especially for date number four.

"I don't care what you have to say about it as long as it looks convincing," he retorts.

I just hope Skrag feels the same way. About the whole thing being convincing, that is. What if he's suspicious already? What if our progress hasn't convinced him of anything except that we've joined forces? I toy with the idea of letting Grug know I think we've been moving too fast over the last week, but something tells me to hold my tongue.

He hasn't been the worst guy to travel with, but then again, it isn't as if he's going out of his way to make me comfortable. Quite the contrary, I'm beginning to think his plans to punish me have only just begun. And with unlimited funds, at least from my perspective, and an ego the size of a private island, I worry about how far our next destination date will take us. Not to mention what will be in store for me when I get there.

"Tell me you got the time off I asked you to," Grug says as soon as the ice cream attendant takes our order. We've left the bistro and are now treating Delinzia to something sticky and cold.

"I got the time off like you asked me to," I say flatly, half expecting him to tell me we're leaving for Africa for a week. And in two hours.

"All the time off?"

He wraps an arm around me as we walk, holding onto Button's leash as the corgi skips ahead. I agree that using my PTO on him makes me look just as serious, though I can't help but mourn for the vacations that could have been. None of which would ever be sullied by Grug's presence, not if I had anything to say about it.

"Yes, Father," Delinzia and I say in unison.

"What? That was easy. You threw us a softball," Delinzia explains as Grug shoots his cousin a glare.

"How do you feel about Australia?" Grug asks, and I know he's talking to me despite the fact he's busy unclipping Buttons from his leash.

"I feel it's a country I've never been to," I reply with a shrug.

“Not a feeling but good enough,” Grug says, explaining there’s a resort on the beach with our names on it. Well, a villa in a resort with our names on it, but still, bags are to be packed. And ASAP.

“Why are you just telling me this now?” I ask. Did he really have to book our trip tonight?

“Because the less time I give you to prepare, the less time Skrag has time to prepare, hence the more happiness I experience in the long run.” His explanation is as thorough as it is honest. Of all the traits I’m beginning to notice in this guy, honesty is one of them, but too bad for me his version of speaking the truth is often blunt and unrelenting.

I don’t even want to ask what’s in store for us when we land, knowing he’ll delight in telling me the details. Skydiving? Surfing? Koala fighting? Any of it could be on the menu.

“Buttons better have a bed, too,” I say as we stroll the beach hand-in-hand with Delinzia next to us.

“Of course, Buttons is coming,” he snaps. “It wouldn’t be fun without her.”

It’s not going to be fun either way, I think, keeping the thought to myself.

GRUG

The salty ocean water laps against my board as the sun beats down over us both. We haven't been in the water long, what with Buttons barking on shore at every scantily clad beachgoer passing her doggie tent.

"That's just her saying hello!" I yell into my cupped hand. Beside me, wearing the sexiest pink and polka dot bikini ever to grace my periphery, Theo smirks at my attempt at being cordial to our fellow vacationers.

"They probably heard, 'Get away from my killer dog!'" she teases, just as Buttons darts out of her tent to run circles around a set of adolescent fairy twins. After Buttons' third lap, her leash is so wrapped up that it takes the twins' mother and father to untie them both.

"Oh, great," she says, and I hear her paddling toward shore.

"No, no, they got it." I point to the parents, both their colorful wings flapping wildly behind them as one scoops up Buttons and the other unravels his lead. The family is smiling and laughing, completely ignorant of Theo's wild gesticulations from her surfboard.

"Sorry!" she yells, though the generous waves and raucous beachgoers enjoying them drown out her plea. "She's really nice! Don't be afraid!"

I watch a werewolf toddler and his mother momentarily disappear under the force of a particularly crystal-clear wave directly ahead of us. Their laughter rings out first, followed by a round of applause from the father on shore. As soon as their sopping-wet heads breach the surface, he roars his approval as the mother does the same.

"Teaching him not to be afraid of the waves," I point out, ignoring her panicked look directed at Buttons. "Now that's good parenting."

“Hey! Wait!” Theo hollers, a sliver of panic in her voice. “That’s my dog. You can’t take my dog!”

With the fairy children free of the corgi’s impromptu introduction, I smile as the smaller of the children attempts to pick up Buttons with both hands.

Before she can attempt to paddle on shore again, I reach out and grab her board. “No one’s stealing the dog.” I laugh. It took a whole hour to finally get her out here, and there’s no way I’m letting her out of the water until she surfs at least one wave.

“Ten bucks says the parents have to peel the kid away from her. Watch.” And sure enough, it takes both parents to drag one of the children away. I extend my arm toward Theo and reach out with an open palm. “See, pay up.”

“Buttons doesn’t know this beach. She’s scared.” Theo’s voice is equal parts worry and manipulation, at least to my ears. We’re no more than two dozen yards away from the corgi, who’s watching us intently as her nub of a tail wags behind her.

“You mean bored?” I correct, wondering if Buttons would rather join us in the water than relax in the makeshift shade I so thoughtfully set up for her. “If you want her, I’ll go get her, but we need to look like we’re having fun.”

The word ‘fun’ reminds me of the last text Delinzia sent. *This whole thing is fun to you, just admit it.* I didn’t even dignify her bold observation with a response, though I’ve been thinking about it since I woke up this morning.

Isn’t looking like I’m having fun the point of this whole thing? It’s not my fault I’m convincing. Well, it is, but that’s a good thing.

“I’d be having more fun if Buttons didn’t feel abandoned.”

“Abandoned?” I gesture to the corgi, currently digging a hole right outside her pop-up tent. “She’s making himself comfortable.”

She holds her hand flat over her eyes and studies Buttons for a moment. “That’s her trying to escape.”

“Then we’ll see her on the other side,” I quip, then wave to the dog like she knows what it means. Buttons looks up and barks our way, spinning in circles before plopping back into her tent, her eyes never leaving us. “Wait, false alarm. She’s content. *You can relax now.*”

Theo’s scoff makes me smile, especially when she crosses her arms in contempt. I hope my sunglasses are hiding my eyes, currently glued to the sumptuous cleavage pouring out of her bikini top.

This whole thing is fun to you, just admit it. The words are clear in the

back of my mind. No, not the words – the meaning of it. The *accusation*.

So what if I'm attracted to her? So what if I want to rip Theo's clothes off and savor the taste of her? That doesn't mean this whole thing is fun to me. It means I'm a red-blooded orc with needs. Plain and simple.

Is she engaging? Yes, but so was Elizabeth Holmes. Just ask all the people who threw their money at her.

It doesn't make her trustworthy, was my response, not exactly a denial but still. It's not beneath me to admit my attraction. The only thing about this lust is that it can't be trusted to make decisions. Fun isn't all I think about, especially when revenge is on the menu.

"Oh my God..." At first, I think Theo is scared by the way her voice trails off. Her smooth, sun-kissed back is to me, so all I have to go off are her shaking shoulders. Is she crying? Laughing?

"Seriously, just one wave and we can go back to Buttons. He could use another –"

"Please tell me you see it," she chortles, pretending to dab herself with cool ocean water. "It's like where's Waldo but stalker style. The summer edition." She pops into the water and dips her head beneath the surface. A flurry of bubbles rises to the surface, and I wonder if she's drowning herself or something.

But before I can hop off my board to investigate, she pops back up with a big smile. "Someone needs to tell them about peacocking."

I frown and look back at the dog. Buttons is hardly peacocking, considering she's wearing nothing to draw attention to herself. "Who am I supposed to be laughing at – Oh, my God, that's a tan line."

"The word you're looking for," she says, choking on a mouthful of salty ocean water. "Is sunburn."

Henchman's pale skin glows from under his beach umbrella, propped up like so many others across the beach. At least, the part of his skin that isn't lobster-red and burning as we speak is glowing. He's seated cross-legged like some yogi, the long and brown strands of his obvious wig blowing in the wind.

"Wasn't he doing yoga a little bit ago?" I ask, letting out my own cackle as I remember the image of the goon grabbing his ankles as a hungry seagull attacked his lunch. "I'm glad nobody helped him with that bird."

"Oh! I got a picture!" Theo grabs her waterproof phone, hanging in a pouch around her neck. I was against her bringing the thing along since

taking pictures while learning to surf does not a professional make. “See?”

She zooms in and past Buttons, where Henchman’s downward dog stretches across his white and red beach towel. “Yeah that’s a fake wig,” I say as she scrolls to the next shot and zooms in again. He’s bent down now, and the white wings of a hungry seagull are jetting into the frame.

She scrolls over again and sighs. “Boo, I didn’t get Hench in the shot.”

“We’re still doing Hench?” I ask, surprised she still hasn’t named Skrag’s lanky goon anything else yet.

“He looks like a Hench, right?”

“Maybe a Mortimer,” I reply.

She shakes her head as she leaps back onto her board. The water pouring off her perfect body leaves me wishing I had a camera around my neck. “Too normal,” she says.

“Mortimer is normal?”

“Too normal for him, yeah. Maybe Godfrey or Gibraltar. Something like that.”

I chew my lower lip and tap my wet fingers across my board. “Horace?”

“No!” Her eyes go wide. “Hyman,” she whispers, and I wonder if the breakfast mimosas we had earlier were stronger than I originally thought. “It’s a real name. Look it up.”

“Hyman the henchman,” I observe, then look up just in time to watch him adjust the piece on his head. I’m smiling and just about to tell Theo not to turn around when he reaches for something to his left.

“He’s got a camera,” I say, a smile spreading across my face as I slowly pull her board toward mine.

If Henchman Hyman wants pictures for his boss, he’s going to get good ones. I reach out to cradle the back of her neck, then lean forward and press my lips to hers.

She’s soft beneath me, and it takes everything I have not to slip my tongue in her mouth alongside hers. I let go as soon as I feel her pulling away, not wanting a single snapshot that might suggest she’s anything but completely enamored by my touch.

“I just needed some air,” she explains, and I’m certain no one has ever looked so hot while panting.

My mind wanders to other places, other experiences that might leave her just as wet and out of breath. She leans forward on her board again, this time slipping a soft hand behind my neck. There’s no way Henchman isn’t

watching, so I break away but keep hold of her hand.

“We should head in and make it look good,” I say, letting go of her hand to run my own across her smooth thigh. She smiles, then claps a hand over mine and squeezes. From a distance, I’m sure it looked playful. But her eyes tell me it’s anything but.

“You can do that without excavating my nether regions,” she replies.

I smile at her choice of words. Nether regions? I was barely past her knee. Nothing even close to what I’d call a nether region. At least not to my standards.

“Speaking of nether regions,” I say, plopping into the water to hide my growing erection. “Let’s stay in for the rest of the night. It’s what a real couple would do.”

She responds in the affirmative, and we do our best to look besotted and impatient as we get to shore. I scoop her up in my arms as I walk us over to a barking Buttons.

“We need to look like we want to rip each other’s clothes off,” I whisper in her ear. I keep to myself the fact that it’s exactly what I want to do anyway.

THEODORA

I cling onto Buttons' leash despite the fact my little gal is jogging beside me, sans the restraint. But if I'm going to be vigilant about the leash police, which is oftentimes the actual police, I'll need to do more than keep watch. The last thing I need is another opportunity to fumble through my pockets because I forgot which one I stuffed the damn leash in.

I feel the thing folded up and slapping me against the stomach. For some odd reason, it reminds me of *him* and I blush. The rosy color is something I've grown accustomed to, though I don't know if I'll ever find the heat that accompanies it anything but an indication I'm acting like a fool. And it doesn't take being in Grug's presence to do it, either.

Every last thought of him, and I mean every last thought, including the image of him frowning at a menu when he can't decide between two things, makes me blush. And with it comes that heat I'm not quite sure I can survive much more of.

It's been two weeks since our trip to Australia, which wasn't half the shit show I thought he'd make it. As a matter of fact, I rather enjoyed myself. And continue to keep doing so.

"Come on, buddy, you got it," I holler as I begin to jog, savoring the salty sea air filling my lungs. I wonder if I freeze my cheeks enough, could the burning finally fizzle out? The wind in my face is cold but soothing. It's definitely the only thing keeping me from breaking a real sweat as I race to keep up with Buttons.

Her clipped barks come one after another. It's one of my favorite sounds and a surefire way to gauge the corgi's interest. Clipped barks are Buttons'

talk for *Is that all you got? Move! Move!*

“You could be a drill sergeant in another life.” I manage to leap over a narrow waterway, which runs down from the rocks above and into the ocean. Buttons stops to lap up a few sips, and I bend down to make sure the water’s coming from where I think it is.

“Alright, you’re in luck,” I say to her after a quick look of my own tells me the water’s fresh. “Any further down, and I bet you’re slurping up salt. In other words, a potential vet visit.”

Buttons shakes off the leftover water dripping from her snout and licks my arm a few times. I take this as her way of thanking me for the stop. I give her a few scratches behind the ear before taking off down the beach again.

We’re almost to my favorite walking path, a winding trail lined with long, well-trimmed bushes and wide enough to fit a whole group. There’s nothing worse than having to maneuver yourself around several strangers in what is essentially a closed space, save the sky above you.

“Race you to the bathroom?” I ask, but Buttons is already way ahead of me, just as used to the routine as I am at this point. “Hey, I wasn’t ready. Buttons!” I barely catch sight of her before she disappears up the trail. I cross my fingers and hope the rest stop at the end of the path isn’t too crowded.

She loves making new friends. Regardless of whether or not they’re up for a chat and sniff. Though I have to admit, Buttons can turn most anxious travelers into long-lost friends. It’s something the two of us do *not* have in common.

“And another win for Buttons,” I say, glad the path is secluded. I’ve been needing some downtime. Craving it actually, what with all the extra company I’ve been having.

Grug isn’t half the bag of expired cold cuts I thought he’d be. And nothing even close to handsy, either, which I have... mixed feelings about. Plus mixed feelings about these mixed feelings.

Why are the interesting ones so complicated? Or at least, why are my relationships with them always the same? The last guy I was into came off nice enough, especially because he was just as attentive and interested as Grug seems to be. But that was before he ran into the ex-love of his life. Or how he phrased it, ‘the one that got away but then came back.’

“He didn’t like trying new flavors anyway,” I say to Buttons, though it makes only one of us feel better. I can tell by the way my precious corgi trudges past me and to the next bush to give it a sniff, paying no mind to her

mother's woes.

Grug's a foodie, just as devoted to a good plate as I am. Greasy or otherwise. So he's got that going for him, which I wish didn't get me so excited. We spent just as much time scarfing down burgers and fries in Australia as we did dressing up for the types of dinners that come in three separate courses.

And that's before dessert, which he also partakes in. An exercise enthusiast and part-time secret fat kid with deep pockets and washboard abs? Of course, I had to meet him in the worst-case scenario.

I once went on a handful of dates with a wealthy entrepreneur who made me laugh and showed up on time. He smelled good, too, like he tried to dress up for me, which only made the realization that he'd lost interest sting even harder. After about a month of seeing each other whenever he came to town, which was frequent and the perfect setup for me, we shared a long weekend together.

It was followed by a few more late-night chats, then another long weekend before he ghosted. Sure enough, once I got the courage to creep his socials, it was clear he'd found someone closer to home. And more familiar, too. Another ex by the sound of the posts.

I'm happy to know Grug doesn't have a closet full of exes, at least not any who are still on his mind. I swear the minute I think he's the world's best actor, he does something that tells me there's more to him than just the show.

He's nervous around me, or can be when he's had a drink or two. He trips over his words, forgets his train of thought, and even apologizes on these occasions. We'd held hands for show after a particularly animated story about a childhood friend whose name he couldn't remember. His hands were clammy, nearly slick by the time he'd rambled to our destination, a local Italian place near my apartment.

"You like Grug coming over with his big-boy energy?" I pant as I keep jogging. In front of me, Buttons turns her head and barks in my direction. "Surprise, surprise."

I was totally fine thinking all orcs were greedy, money-worshipping frat boys with no moral compass and too much free time. But now, I'm well aware that Grug likes road trips using old maps, something only the best people have the patience to do anymore. At least in my experience. And the same goes for enjoying a feature film in its original language.

We get to the end of the trail, which leads to a rest area overlooking a

parking lot hidden from the highway. I check the time, scoop up Buttons, and head back. Grug's picking me up for a charity luncheon later, and it wouldn't hurt to clean up the place before getting ready. Skrag will be at the benefit, too, which I only know because Henchman told me.

I smirk as I remember what Grug's been calling Skrag's jet-setting errand boy of late — Hyman, the slow-walking mouth-breather formally known as Henchman. It's a great name if not a little wordy. But then again, so is Henchman.

I bend down for a stretch and heave a sigh of relief as I do. *Hyman, the slow-walking mouth-breather formally known as Henchman.* It gets better and better every time I think of it.

The sharp-nosed mansplainer isn't set to scare me with his presence until tomorrow, so for now, I relish my stretch and bask in this opportunity. For the first time in a while, I don't feel the need to look around for the definition of stranger danger. I clip Buttons to her leash and stroll the panting pooch the rest of the way home.

As I step through my front door and fill Buttons' bowl with water, my phone vibrates with a text from Grug.

I'll text when I'm outside your place. Look for the guy in the Audi waiting for his sexy ass date. Hint hint.

He's been throwing these physical compliments around like Mardi Gras beads, leaving me equal parts flattered and confused. He doesn't say anything he doesn't mean, at least not that I've noticed. And he's been spending evenings at my place every couple of days, making our time together... challenging, despite his sleeping on the couch. But eye-opening, too.

He's a hard worker and someone I'm inspired by. Even when he's not pleased with himself, which is more often than I would have guessed. The first time he cooked us dinner ended with him swearing into a bowl of hand-rolled lobster ravioli, which was to die for. I practically pleaded with him to see reason and take my compliment, though the orc brushed me off.

Henchman had mentioned Grug's cooking sessions at my place the last time we rendezvoused, and it took everything in me not to grab him by the collar and slap the creep three times for good measure.

Oasis Cafe itself has grown on me, especially the patrons like Leon and Thelma, who make waiting for Henchman at least entertaining. They're still as technologically challenged as they were a month ago, I've given up on explaining how to download an application. Or add new contact info. Or turn

off the Bluetooth.

Will do, I reply into my own phone as soon as the door is locked and my keys are hanging on their hook near the kitchen window.

And don't be afraid to go out and grab something special. You look perfect in anything blue. He finishes the text with an emoji, the one with the thumb and pointer finger of a hand forming a perfect 'o'. Is he trying to be flirty? Does he mean to make me second-guess our endgame?

Not for the first time, I wonder if there's a real spark between Grug and I. Or if, just like the handsome men before him, the chemistry is superficial and nothing worth holding onto.

GRUG

I gaze at the vast but tedious ice displays like they actually impress me. I can't think of anything else to do in an effort to get out of mingling. Since I started by adjusting my suit as soon as the doors opened, I'm guessing admiring something other than myself might keep up appearances.

Nothing kills a decent introduction like resting bitch face. Or in my special circumstance, resting bitch face under a generous scowl that puts any version of Dickenson's Ebenezer Scrooge to shame. Plus, I'm green, so I stand out in a sea of investors who are, yes, supernatural but an array of hues and tones.

I learned Skrag showed up earlier after catching his eye while maneuvering around a centaur with purple dreads. The ghoul's beady eyes and shit-eating grin are a match made in the deepest pits of hell and equate to a fucking headache. An ugly one at that.

Now, I'm watching him slowly approach me as the group he's with veers off in another direction. "Just thought I'd come over and congratulate you on winning over the Lutzes."

Not hard once I figured out they existed. I keep the thought to myself and fight the urge to sneer in his direction. I don't need anyone around this place to catch a glimpse of my true feelings. This is nobody's business but mine.

"I'd appreciate that if I thought I could believe you," I say.

Skrag and I have always been icy, and to be outright nice at this point would be tantamount to screaming my co-conspirator's name while twirling on the dessert table.

"No, you wouldn't." Skrag's voice is flat, unaffected, and barely

interested in my reaction. In other words, classic Skrag. It's always why I get the best of him. He was born predictable and he'll die predictable.

I run my tongue along my gritted teeth rather than slap the shit out of him. Why did I ever consider throwing Theo at me a slick idea for Skrag? On second thought, it's really the only thing he's never pulled before now.

He succeeded by trying again and again. Not an original thought in his head, only the ones he steals from his underlings.

"Is there anything you don't know?" I ask, widening my eyes in mock amazement. Skrag's dark eyes smolder as they bore into me.

I catch Theodora from the corner of my eye and turn my head to see her walking over. I do my best to linger on her, to really look pathetic and in love. Skrag could use some more false encouragement, which has to be the reason he's approached now.

He wants to see his work up close and he'd only do that if he's buying it, I think. Watching her walk isn't hard, anyway, especially in the dark blue and cream pantsuit hugging her generous curves.

"A pleasure as always. And –" Skrag's already walking away. I glare at the back of his narrow head and the thinning hair that clings to it. Would it kill him to get a wig? Or an implant? Something...

The idea brings me back to a particular afternoon when I still worked for the ghoul. It was years ago but still fresh in my mind. A few of us paid interns were five minutes late not twice but three days in a row, and the ghoul laced our morning coffee with uppers because of it.

He'd said it was an attempt to double our productivity, the least we could do to make up for our consistent tardiness. It worked. All through the night and the next morning. By the time I came down, I'd rearranged the lobby furniture, deep cleaned the employee break room, and completed not four but six mockup sketches.

All were for a series of high-rises overlooking the park. Skrag took two of my originals and ran with them. And the thanks I received for being his personal guinea pig? A pharmacy bill for the 'pick me ups,' as he called them.

So much for a proper mentor, I think as Theo's soft grip on my arm pulls me out of my revelry.

"You look angry," she says, motioning to Skrag in the distance, now mingling with a group of witches and fauns, investment bankers if I remember correctly.

“You look like a ten out of ten,” I say and wrap them around her waist.

“Let’s just hope Skrag is watching.” She smiles up at me, and I bend down to plant a respectable kiss on her. She tastes like mint and grapefruit, a combination I wouldn’t put together on my own. I lick my lips as I pull away from her.

“Oh, sorry.”

She flinches, and I have to smile. Of all the women I’ve dated – well... fake-dated or dated – she’s the only one remotely concerned about getting makeup on me. Where other dates seem to make it their job to mark their territory, Theo plays it cool but friendly.

She’s thoughtful, my mind whispers as if I haven’t come to the conclusion already. Or it’s something I’ve forgotten. *You should tell her that before this is over. A job well done deserves a thanks.*

“I’ve been marked with worse,” I quip, referring to the gloss on her lips. “Tropical bubblegum should be banned from stores. Let’s just put it that way.”

The smile she gives me is definitely genuine. I can tell because it comes slowly, almost reluctantly. As if she doesn’t want to give the look away. Not to me at least.

A job well done deserves thanks. I blink away the thought and elect to get us drinks.

“Something fizzy,” she calls out as I head to the bar.

Drumming my meaty fingers along the oak countertop, I savor the lingering mint flavor stuck to the top of my lip. I hate the fact that I want to show her appreciation since the fantasy always leads to showing her way more than that. Does she know she has me wrapped around her finger yet?

Several hours later at the lounge where Theo works, I keep the question to myself as I wait for Delinzia to arrive. In the distance, I see my fake girlfriend in her busty and sleek uniform and wonder how things would have turned out if we’d met somewhere else. Maybe at a grocery store or swap meet.

I know she loves afternoon side projects, and most of the furniture in her house is refurbished. The swap meet is probably heaven to her.

And somewhere you’d never go on your own. The realization isn’t hard to swallow, especially since it’s not the first time I’ve thought about it. We don’t run in the same circles. It would have been a fluke if we’d ever met, which now that it dons on me, feels more finite than I expected.

“Please tell me you’ve ordered for us and haven’t just been watching Theo,” Delinzia says as she slides into the seat next to me. We’re at a table rather than a card game since I want to be seen but not heard. I know Skrag frequents the place, and enough to poach the gorgeous help into wooing me, so I hope someone mentions I’m here.

“Have you seen Hyman yet?” I ask Theo as she struts up.

“Oh, Henchman would never come here,” she replies, clinging to her cocktail tray and swinging from side to side. “And Skrag’s been MIA since he cornered me.”

I smile. Her nervous energy is cute. She’s not one to stand still on a normal day, and now I see that Work Theo is the same. At least the cocktail waitress in her.

“So remind me again,” Delinzia says. “Winter in Springtime?”

She smiles as I frown. What are they talking about? “Just type in Winter Spring. It’ll pop up. But seriously, you don’t have to read it.”

“Under your name, right?” Delinzia asks, and I gather this must be one of Theo’s works.

The model wanting to be a writer is impressive, especially since I’ve seen how diligent she is at getting her writing in for the day. I’ve had to stop myself on multiple occasions from reading a few lines right off her laptop. As Theo leaves to grab our drinks, I type the title in my phone, ready to lie if Delinzia asks.

“Are we going to discuss the short together when we’re done?” she finally asks, looking up at me with a grin as Theo returns. “Chicks love guys who read their shit.”

“I’ve come to a conclusion,” I blurt, hoping Theo didn’t rightly assume we were whispering about her.

A poker dealer turns to stare at us, followed by the rest of his table. And the one next to it. Plus their dealer.

“Big voice,” Delinzia blurts out, pointing right at me. “He’s used to being outside with the animals. It’s his thing. We’re family. We don’t judge.”

I roll my eyes as the patrons mumble amongst themselves and get back to their losing. I give Delinzia a ‘real mature, lady’ look as she fist pumps Theo. Of course, she’s rocking the biggest smile ever. But since I’m not Skrag, I swallow the urge to wipe it off her face, even if it is at my expense.

“Yeah, Grug, inside voice,” she teases. “You’re embarrassing me.”

“I know how I want to hit him where it hurts,” I say, painfully aware my

plan is both petty and juvenile. But that's the beauty of it.

It's low down. It's secluded. It's secretive. And it's out of left field. Too good to pass up. We'll need to make it work, sure. There are always details to hammer out. But I'm gambling on something integral to the festering half-wit in the custom suit. He likes to witness his work up close.

It's why he's getting pictures, evidence, and *visuals* of his good work without getting his hands dirty. But maybe if the destination is somewhere close, as well as anonymous, he'd slither out of his cave to watch.

THEODORA

“If I had a nickel for every time I've been accused of being in the mafia, I'd have four nickels and all of them from you!”

I hope this passive comment will somehow appease the Evanses, especially Leon, who I'm beginning to think only responds well to near-ancient references. And what's more turn of the century than counting the frequency of my irritation in gifted nickels?

Leon takes my statement in, scratching his eyebrows with a nonplussed look. “You don't say? Four nickels won't get you far from that ‘uncle of yours. Is he a captain or an associate?”

I don't like his air quotes. Not one bit. “He's just a weird uncle I keep in touch with. It's either this or dodge his calls forever so...” Leon's never seen a mafioso in his life if he thinks Henchman or I fit the bill.

“Thelma and have a bet going. Does he meet you here because you don't want him at your place? Or because you have roommates that don't want him around? Is it his choice or yours is what I'm asking?”

“Leon, that's rude,” Thelma says, giving me an apologetic smile while unconsciously leaning toward me. I hate it when people say one thing but mean another.

“You know what's rude, Thel? Betting your husband you're right about the creepy stiff who walks like he's auditioning for the next slasher film –”

“He knows I don't like those slasher films.” Thelma waggles a razor-sharp and clawed finger in the air. “No siree, I do not.”

“Amen, sister,” Amaryllis calls from behind the coffee bar.

“Then interrupt him when he's trying to prove you wrong!” Leon pushes

his glasses up and points his own chunky, less impressive nub of a finger Thelma's way.

Thelma fiddles with her wooden stir stick, gazing into her empty cup. "Sounds like someone's afraid I'm right if you ask me. A certain husband."

"How would you interrupting me indicate I'm upset?" Leon frowns, and I have to agree with him.

"He doesn't think it could possibly be that he's extorting you or something," Thelma whispers.

I freeze mid-smile, thankfully not letting my face fall. Instead, I pretend to be flabbergasted but entertained and let myself laugh for a second. It's not far off from the truth. I definitely feel taken advantage of and bled dry, if not of my money. "No wonder you don't like horror. You crave a thrill, not a scare."

Leon ignores the statement and looks at me. "Yes or no, he got restraining orders? Priors?"

I'm glad the question isn't about me, so I play along and answer. "I wouldn't put it past Uncle..."

I can practically hear the bells in their heads going off. What niece doesn't remember her uncle's name? "... Lee... thel," I get out. "Lethal. Uncle Lethal. He... used to be in the army. It was his nickname, and when my family found out one year at a reunion, they never stopped using it on occasion. It stuck after a bit."

Leon frowns, and I hold my breath. Was the lie not convincing? "Honorable discharge?" he asks.

"Yeah... yeah. Saved some kids actually. Bus fire. Lots. Just..." I'm using my arm to indicate fire for some reason. Maybe to make up for the fact I'm no longer speaking sentences. "Got burns all over his... everywhere."

"Explains the trenchcoat," Amaryllis hollers, and the others agree.

I heave a sigh of relief. My writer's brain came to the rescue. Finally. I mean, not immediately but still. Lethal? Wow. Just wow. Leon and Thelma put together. Not spy worthy.

"How about those kids, huh? Luke and Amyra?" I hope the last one is right.

"Alvira," Leon corrects. "Now back to the previous discussion. This uncle. He got a real name? A job?"

"What are you, a cop?" I hold my hands out playfully. "I love Uncle Lethal. We come here because it's his favorite spot."

Leon shakes his head. “We’ve never seen him here.”

Thelma scoffs. “It’s like you want to be left at home next time.”

“Then who would tell the two of you that Prince Charming is here?” His eyes flick behind me to the front door.

“Always a pleasure, guys.” I get up as his heavy footsteps fill the diner and slide into his chosen booth, moving to sit with him.

“I would have expected my drink to be ready by now.” His tone is flat, his eyes glued to me.

I cut to the chase. “I have news. About a week ago –”

“A week ago?”

My face falls, and I realize he expected me to come to him immediately. “I wanted to be sure. Do my homework,” I explain.

He rubs his temples, his eyes closed. “It’s not your job to be sure and do homework. It’s mine.”

I know at the very least Thelma can hear us. We might be seated further away from everyone now, though I’d eat my foot if she can’t pick up a few words. I lower my voice, not wanting the grandma with the literal wolf ears to hear what I have to say next.

“Well, either way, I got something.”

He gives me a curious look, one that I can’t tell the meaning of. I keep breathing as his eyes flick back and forth between my shoulders. He’s checking my posture, my rigidity. But why?

A tiny smile curls on the right side of his mouth, falling back to its normal placid droop in an instant. What did he notice? What is he thinking?

“Then do it. You have my attention,” he says. *But not my trust.*

He doesn’t verbalize this last part, but he doesn’t have to. His condescending tone is enough to tell me this. I chew my lower lip and, not for the first time, consider how Skrag came upon this creature. Was it at a bar? Maybe one that caters to lanky mouth breathers?

“I don’t hear any words coming out of your mouth.” He gets a kick out of telling me this and holds what I imagine is a clammy hand up to his ear in the classic ‘huh?’ gesture.

I grit my teeth and breathe in through my nose. He clocks the response and smirks, pleased to see me so confused. Probably the only way he knows how to survive a conversation with a woman.

“He’s got some kinks,” I say, rather than what I actually want to blurt out, which is to tell him that asshole doesn’t look good on him.

“That’s vague.”

“Well, the rest of what I overheard his maids saying wasn’t,” I reply. “It’s a bit S&M-centric. And by a bit, I mean he frequents The Saucery more than a liquor rep in heels and fishnets.”

“I don’t know any liquor rep who wears fishnets.”

That’s because no woman on her own would talk to you. You’re stuck outside even the friend zone. I shrug and pretend his stupid comment wasn’t stupid. Anyone selling something to The Saucery comes prepared and properly attired. Which is my whole point.

“All I know is when I tried a little...” I trail off, letting my actual discomfort disguise itself as embarrassment. I assume I should be fake-bashful for fake-sleeping with a guy I’ve been real-hired to play like a fiddle.

“Spit it out,” Hunchman snaps.

“A little of the naughty stuff, he ate it up. I tried some more, and he liked it. Now he’s making requests. Asked me to spank him.”

“Open hand?” Hunchman lifts a pencil-thin eyebrow at me.

His tone sounds genuinely interested, sending shivers down my spine. Suddenly, I get the image of me, Hunchman, and my two closed fists wailing on him to a chorus of cheers.

I fix my face to look bashful and lower my voice. “Riding crop.”

“Genuinely leather or imitation?”

“Leather,” I reply immediately. Grug and I anticipated Hunchman to quiz me on the big and little details.

He’ll want to make sure you’re not wrong. You gotta give him proof. And fast answers, he’d said.

“And how did he sound when you struck him with it?” Hunchman asks, finally succumbing to a few eye-blinks.

I smile instead of hurling up the bran muffin I ate on the way here. “You tell me,” I say, then pull out my phone and slide it closer to him. I hit play on the ‘secret video’ I made of Grug and I ‘exploring his body’ with a hand-held tassel whip. “This is just audio.”

“Why am I not privy to the whole thing?” He picks up the phone and holds the phone’s speaker to his ear, just as Grug can be heard moaning at each stroke of the whip.

“Because Grug doesn’t take kindly to cell phones in his face during sex. I kinda had to improvise.”

“Call me Captain!” I hear myself demand, followed by Grug’s high-

pitched, perfectly delivered response.

“Yes, Captain! Yes, Captain!”

“It’s Captain Mother now!” I look around the quiet diner, then back to Henchman. Delinzia had suggested we include some PG-13 lines, and I’m glad she did since the creep appears satiated and giddy.

“Yes, Captain Mother!”

“Aye aye, Captain Mother!” Leather hits again flesh, though not against Grug’s skin like Henchman hopefully thinks but a large ham we picked up for the occasion. “Aye aye, Captain Mother!”

“Good boy.” I hear another crack of the whip as Grug cries out in mock delight over the sound of my laughter.

“You’re my captain!”

“How long does this go on?” As he says this, a series of knocks and scuffling can be heard. It cuts out shortly after.

“The landscaper walking into the pool house,” I explain.

Henchman considers this and nods. “So he trusts you. Good. There’s one born every day.”

I try not to take offense to the obvious insult, as if trusting me is tantamount to falling out of an airplane sans the parachute.

“I’ll let you know what to do as soon as I get word from Demeter.” He gestures for me to send him the video, snapping his fingers at it and then pointing to his phone.

“Demeter?” Who the fuck is Demeter?

“I’m assuming you haven’t checked your phone.” He gives me a flat look, and I do my best to look apologetic, even though I want to roll up the newspaper left behind on the table next to us and shove it real hard in his eye.

I grab it from my purse and read the newest text. *Will be using a code name for the benefactor starting now. Too many nosy werewolves.*

I shoot him a thumbs up as he studies me. “Why do you look so nervous?”

I choke down the sip of coffee I’ve foolishly taken as my eyes widen. “Right,” I confess. There’s no way he didn’t notice. “I, um...”

Drumming my fingers on the table, I realize I’ve ignored my own upper hand. I lean into my nervousness and look around before starting. “There’s this place he goes. And kind of a lot.”

“It’s like a dungeon where business types with certain... like, tastes for controlled danger will go to... hook up with like-minded people and

sometimes..." I shrug. "Masks only, leather required. I took a chance and brought it up after our activity."

"How do you know he knew about it?"

I lick my lips. I practiced this. "His cousin likes me. We got a little tipsy the last time we hung out, and she told me about it. It's called Dark Moth. He goes there to watch the burlesque dancers when he can't get in with his mistress." I pause for effect. "It's all underground. One big club his driver doesn't even take him to."

"He walks," I continue. "That's how his cousin found out. Had to pick him up one night and he was still wearing his... outfit."

Henchman scratches his chin with two bony fingers. "And what are we supposed to do with this?"

"Get pics. Proof. His reputation will tank when people know he pays strangers to humiliate him." He gets up and adjusts his trench coat. "Where are you going?"

"To do my own research. If he's such a regular, the employees must know him."

"The place is mask-only," I manage. "Bossman might have to come down for this one to really get a..."

He fastens his top button, then spins on his heel, and I do nothing to stop him. I'm about fifty percent sure he didn't buy a word of it.

GRUG

“This is... a lot,” Theo says as she observes the wide variety of clothing, gear, and accessories Delinzia has brought for display, coupled with a few of my own purchases.

If all goes well, Skrag will take the bait for a chance to gloat at my secret being exposed, to be the one to rip off the mask. Even if it's only after his muscles do the heavy lifting of following my every move in and outside the club, then home by myself in the dark.

“How do you have so much?”

I walk around the king-sized bed covered in bondage attire and place my hands on my hips. “I also would like to know.” But after the thought hangs in my mind for a moment, I shake my head, realizing this may be too much information on my cousin. “Or do I?”

Delinzia grins. “It's not mine,” she says with a laugh. “Not that I wouldn't mind keeping some of it, per se,” she says, eyeing a black leather corset with red trim and satin lacing.

I wouldn't mind keeping it either, especially if it fits Theo.

“Okay, now I have to know where you got this much bondage gear on such short notice.” Theo crosses her arms and snorts out a laugh.

“It's on loan from the club,” Delinzia replies. “I helped them secure the place back when they opened.”

I pick up a pleather thong that is unreasonably shiny and small. “Really? This club rents out gear?”

“Oh, not normally, no. This is all from their lost and found.”

I immediately drop the undergarment and walk to the bathroom to wash

my hands.

“Relax, Grug, it’s all sanitized. They run a tight, clean ship over there.” Delinzia picks up a belt with dozens of silver studs facing inward toward the wearer. Something for a particularly masochistic werewolf, I assume.

“Well, let’s hurry up and pick something,” Theo says. “Hyman’s expecting some photos of your ‘outfit’ about ten minutes ago.”

Theo curls her fingers in air quotes around the word outfit. It’s a ruse. She’s going to send him a fake outfit to look out for, while we disguise ourselves in something much more generic.

“Just pick the most outlandish things you can find and show him that. I’ll wear this,” I state.

I pick out some black pants, a hat that looks like it belongs to an elderly biker, and a studded belt. Paired with a tight shirt, large sunglasses, and some shiny jewelry from my own wardrobe, I’ll look like any regular orc.

“Ooh, add a fake mustache and you’ll look like a real dungeon regular,” Delinzia says.

“You seem to know an awful lot about this place,” I say with suspicion.

“Hm? Did you say something? Anyway, you should absolutely send him a pic of this, Theo.” Delinzia picks up a battle helmet that wouldn’t withstand impact with a single arrow and tosses it to her. “It’s vintage. Nothing they make today looks exactly like it.”

The decorative tassels are cheap versions of ones given to ancient warriors who took down chieftains. I try not to feel offended that some regular guy would wear this for fun.

“Still claiming not to know a lot?” I ask.

“Wow, yeah alright. And how about this?” Theo picks up a leather vest and matching shorts that do not leave enough to the imagination. “And this!” She grabs a large chain with metal hoops dangling from the center.

Delinzia gasps. “Oh, you know, there’s an interesting story about that –”

“No one wants to hear it,” I state.

She shakes her head again. “Add a few more accessories. I don’t want anyone else to get dragged into this by accident, and even with the helmet, it’s too generic.”

Theo bites her lip and continues searching. She comes up with a belt that has feathers and bells attached, a face mask that is meant to mimic the snout of a dog, and chain link bracelets.

I nod in agreement. “That’s perfect, Theo. Send it off while I pick your

outfit.”

Theo looks at me with a frozen smile and wide eyes. Her cheeks go bright red. “Oh, you will?”

I smirk. “Yes. Don’t worry, you’ll be unrecognizable.”

Delinzia shakes her head as Theo leaves to send the pics.

“You’re terrible,” my cousin says in a sing-song voice.

“She’ll be fine. Look...” I pick out the pieces of a naughty schoolgirl outfit, with fishnet stockings and a red wig, plus a dainty half-mask per the rules. “This is vanilla compared to everything else. I bet she’s worn worse while modeling.”

The skirt is very short, admittedly. I imagine Theo’s ass cheeks just barely peeking out from under the hem and feel a burst of heat in the pit of my stomach. I quickly shake it out. Now is not the time for such diversions. We have work to do.

“You’re absolutely sure this won’t get anyone else dragged in, right? Some good, honest people come to this thing. They have weird kinks, but they’re otherwise decent monsters. This is where they go to relax. Any pictures we’re taking of Skrag in his costume are happening as he’s coming out, not while he’s looking for you.”

“Don’t worry, Skrag wouldn’t be stupid enough to get an entire community on his bad side. The only livelihood he wants to ruin is mine.”

Delinzia still looks pensive but nods in understanding.

“Text sent,” Theo says, waving her phone in the air. “I can’t believe he’s buying it. Skrag doesn’t hire the best and brightest, I guess.”

“Good. Now, go change,” I say as I throw Theo her costume for the evening. She grabs it, and those cheeks go very red again.

“Thanks,” she says, smirking up at me. She knows I could’ve done much, much worse. Lucky her, this is exactly what I want to see her in.

Finally, we arrive at the club. Inside is an overwhelming explosion on the senses. The lighting is dim, yet somehow blinding at the same time. The music is loud, uncomfortable industrial tracks with repetitive beats that lull you into the space before dropping a drastic change that rips you into reality again.

The aroma of sweat, liquor, and expensive perfume hangs heavy in the hazy air. All around me is leather, lace, mesh, and skin. So much exposed skin... I’m beginning to understand why an orc would find this place so enjoyable. But there’s business to finish here before any thought of pleasure,

even as it's surrounding me at every angle.

"Where's Skrag?" I whisper to Theo who hasn't stopped watching a man getting spanked on a pommel horse since we came in.

"Huh? Oh! Actually, yeah, what? I don't see any ghouls anywhere." Theo looks around quickly. As she does, she accidentally bumps into a man wearing nothing but a bright pink Speedo and a matching leather mask. He looks us over, and that's when my heart jumps into my throat.

I know him. He's Petra, a vampire I sold a townhouse to a year ago. I can tell by the poorly covered makeup over his tattoo. More importantly, he knows me. He follows me on social media and likes every single one of my photos. Can he recognize me behind my own mask and collar?

Petra looks between me and Theo and smirks. "Well, aren't you two just so adorably vanilla?" Theo laughs nervously. "Don't worry, you'll figure it out. Good luck, you two!" Petra raises his deep red shot glass and walks into the gyrating crowd.

A deep sense of relief washes over me. If Petra can't recognize me, then no one will.

Delinzia, dressed as a Victorian lady of the night, walks over to us with a tight smile. "I don't see him. Are you sure you gave him the right address?" she asks between clenched teeth.

"Yeah, I'm sure," Theo says forlornly. She points at a man walking through the crowd, slow and purposeful, all the while adjusting the leather bracelets studded with silver spikes around his wrists. "I'd recognize that serial killer gait anywhere. It's literally the only way he walks."

"Amazing," I seethe.

"You mean predictable?" Delinzia asks. "We knew he might be a no-show."

"I really thought he'd want to be the one to pull the mask off me," I say, shaking my head.

If Skrag's not here in person, I won't be able to do the same to him. Theo bends over for a moment to adjust her thigh-high stocking, showing off a very lovely view of her rear. Well... at least this wasn't for nothing at all.

We stay for a bit just to watch the guy skulking around. Maybe Skrag won't be here till later? Hyman nods to two masked individuals, neither of which are Skrag.

"This is getting us nowhere," I say to Theo and Delinzia. "We're better off leaving at this rate." I snap my fingers at Theo, who seems glued to the

image of a gorgon woman tied very decoratively in knotted rope and hanging from the ceiling.

“Yeah. Yeah, we should definitely go.” Theo nods her head. Delinzia sighs in relief. We make our way to the exit, keeping to the walls to avoid any sort of exposure, and leave without fanfare.

The three of us pile into the back of the car. I lean my head back and shut my eyes in frustration. Now I need to think of some other way to get to Skrag.

“Um...guys?” Theo asks anxiously. “We... may have a problem...”

I sit up and look out the window. Delinzia grunts at the sight. The orc leaving his own car and heading into the dungeon looks a little too much like our made-up outfit. The leather vest, matching short shorts, and feathered belt adorned with bells look better together than I thought.

“Oof... why universe?” Delinzia cries.

“Hold on, it’s okay, look...” I scramble to find some way to find the bright side. “It’s not the exact outfit. Or the entire one, right? You sent him a pic of everything, right? The helmet?”

Theo nods quickly.

Delinzia relaxes slightly. Until someone else leaves the car, presenting this orc a replica war helmet. Tassels and all.

THEO

“**H**ow did this happen?” Grug asks.

His tone is harsh and irritated. I can hear him banging things around and stomping from room to room, even from here in the bathroom. I remove the red wig, brush out my hair, and wipe off the garish makeup meant to hide my appearance, the part that wasn't stuck under a mask, of course. My skin is red and blotchy. Cheap costume makeup does not do well on my complexion.

Grug and Delinzia chatter in a normal volume, leaving whatever they're saying muffled to my ears. The sound of the front door closing is loud and clear, though. But definitely not as terrifying as the shivers I wish weren't currently cascading down my spine. It's not a bad feeling but a good one, which is exactly what motivates me to take as much time as I need in the enormous shower beckoning me to open its stained-glass door and climb inside the marble cave.

Now it's just me and Grug. My breath quickens as I start the water, knowing all the thought will do is fester and spread. But maybe taking advantage of the numerous shower head settings just might cool me off. At least enough to get through this night without another massive mistake hanging over my head. Something like sleeping with the enemy and liking it.

I take off the uncomfortably tight schoolgirl costume and slip on the simple dress I was wearing earlier. The pleated skirt, necktie, and button-down shirt sit in a pile in the corner of the bathroom.

Finally feeling like my real self again, I steady myself against the bathroom sink and take a few deep breaths. There's nothing I can do about an

orc showing up to a secret dungeon bar in a similar getup as one I just so happen to send to a mouth-breathing weirdo. Whether or not this weirdo has mastered the art of not blinking should be irrelevant to my crime. Besides making TV extraterrestrials look like warm, emotionally intelligent Einsteins in comparison, Henchman was uncomfortably... thorough tonight. I don't know where he got his steel-toed, jet-black combat boots, but the bright crimson rhinestones around its base weren't identical to those around the mouth of his mask by accident. If he spent that much time on his costume, maybe he'll abort the mission if the orc in the tassel hat is exactly like the picture I sent.

"This is so bad," I whisper, testing the water spewing from the showerhead.

"It's not just bad, it's terrible!" Grug yells from the other side of the door. I jump, not realizing he was able to hear me. I turn off the water and open the door. I walk into the living room area and greet Grug with my hands on my hips.

"Let's just focus on what we can control," I say to the both of us. "Henchman is looking for someone who's gonna leave on foot, right?"

Grug frowns. "Yeah... so?"

"He'll see the car and assume it must be another orc. There are a lot of you." I don't know if I think we'll be so lucky, since Henchman seems to enjoy asserting his authority.

"Or that I have a car for this kind of stuff. You saw that hat, right? He's going to think that's me." Grug paces in front of me as I rub my hands together.

I remember the look on Delinzia's face as she left us. The poor woman was in a panic. We promised her no one in the community would get dragged into this. It was a valiant promise, and one we really thought we could uphold.

Obviously, we were wrong. I wonder if she can ever forgive me for my part in all this. I really like her and was hoping we could stay friends when my job with Grug is finished. It might be finished for good now, anyway.

"That guy had a near-identical stature as me," he says. "And don't say a lot of orcs do. That's not the point."

"He's still not getting what he wants," I offer since it technically is true. No pictures of Grug. We're at a stalemate.

Well, not me. I'm SOL. There's no way I'm getting a second chance, not

if Skrag wants to shell out another wardrobe budget as well as risk another failure. How many of those will he suffer through before growing wise?

“How are we going to prove it wasn’t me? He was wearing the exact same outfit!” Grug bellows. I hold my ground, chin held high. I’m not about to be scared into submission by his alpha attitude. Having a meltdown isn’t going to help this situation.

“First of all, it wasn’t the exact same outfit as the one I photographed,” I say, beginning to count my defense on my left hand. Grug scoffs in response. “He wasn’t wearing that stupid belt or the mask. The boots were also a different style, they were laced when yours were buckled.”

In my opinion, that should be more than enough differences to make anyone suspicious. But Grug’s face is still frozen in an expression of rage. He shakes his head and scowls.

“*Obviously*, Grug changed his mind at the last minute and chose a different outfit from his very wide wardrobe of fetish gear,” Grug says in a very bizarre attempt to impersonate Skrag’s voice.

I sigh. I want to retaliate but he’s right. A viewer could easily wave off the differences in outfit selection. The fact that the helmet itself was an exact replica, probably even from the same manufacturer, is a serious issue.

“They’re just going to get pictures of a guy in a dark club,” I say. “You saw the guy going in with that big crowd. Henchman won’t have a chance to get his mask off for the real pictures if he isn’t leaving alone. So anything they get means nothing.”

“Delinzia is never going to speak to me again. If this ends in the club getting busted, or people losing their jobs, there’s going to be so much hell to pay. Shit. Shit!” Grug runs a hand through his hair, then another. “You should have picked something less popular!”

My mouth drops open, aghast at the way this conversation is turning. “Excuse me? Now this is somehow *my* fault? How exactly was I supposed to know what is and is not popular in a subculture I have never participated in?” I yell. “Yes, I have a hand in this blowing up, but so do you and Delinzia. We’re all at fault here.”

Grug’s eyebrows lower. He looks like he’s trying to find a way out of taking any blame for this. When he finally can’t seem to find any, he shakes his head and turns back around.

“He was shorter than you,” I state. I continue counting my defense on my fingers, holding out two now.

Grug lifts his head and looks at me strangely. “No, he wasn’t.”

“Yes, he was,” I state firmly. “Not by much, but it was noticeable. I mean, to me it was.”

And now Grug is looking at me even stranger. “Was it?” he asks. There’s something weird in his voice. A fluttering of doubt. But it’s not about my memory.

I nod my head and walk up to him. “See, you’re here,” I say, holding my left hand up to the top of Grug’s head. “And this other orc was here.” I hold my right hand at the top of his ear. “And that’s with those boots on. He’s probably even shorter.”

I move my hands back down awkwardly. Grug is staring hard into me, His blue eyes are ice cold, staring icicle daggers through me. But it doesn’t feel violent. There’s some sort of warmth in there I can’t quite place. I wish I knew what was going through his head.

“Uh, number three. His skin tone was different from yours.” I hold out three fingers in Grug’s face. He pushes my hand away and raises an eyebrow.

“We’re both green.” He says it like I’m an idiot. At least I can easily understand *that*.

“Yes, of course, but you’re like a deeper green. Like emeralds. He was lighter. It’s noticeable. Maybe not in the low lights in the club...” I trail off and bite my lip. So much for that defense. “But it was noticeable to *me*.”

Grug folds his arms and raises his chin. He continues to look down at me with something brewing in his head. Maybe I’m finally starting to convince him?

“Reason four.” I put up four fingers, this time in front of my own face. “His gait was completely different from yours.”

Grug pulls back, a look of doubt on his face.

“I’m serious! You always carry yourself like you’re being photographed anywhere you go. Spine straight, shoulders pulled back, head held up high. You know, like a model or something? This guy was hunched over slightly. And he walked like he wasn’t paying any attention to where he was going. You always walk with purpose. Even if that purpose is to send an email or something. Anyone who knows you could easily tell that wasn’t you.”

I put my hands on my hips, pleased that I’ve obviously made my case. We have no reason to panic.

“I’ll probably be shown the photos myself before they get sent anywhere. I’ll point all that stuff out and tell Skrag his guys messed up if it comes to

that. Crisis averted.” I smile, fully believing in my plan. But Grug continues to be strangely quiet. Is this all really not enough for him?

Slowly, he removes the gaudy jewelry from his costume and places it on the kitchen counter. He spreads his fingers against the dark marble and seems to be studying the patterns in the glaze.

Something about his shift in demeanor makes me anxious. There’s some kind of tension between us now, something thick and palpable. But I can’t tell exactly what it is. I break the stillness, needing something at all to happen, and grab myself a glass of ice water. I down it while standing in the kitchen. When I look back up, Grug is staring at me again. I put the glass down and walk to him, arms crossed.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“... And just how closely do you watch me?” he asks.

I blink, taken aback by his question. “I... huh?”

“All the ways you just described me, how I walk, how I stand, you were dead on. How do you know me so well?”

My mouth drops open, hands fly up in the air. They move like I’m trying to conjure up some sort of understandable excuse to satisfy him.

“Well, I... you know, I have to... with all this going on, I guess I—?”

Grug steps forward, puts a hand behind my head, and pulls me towards him. His lips fall on mine, shutting down my sad excuse for damage control. My hands land on Grug’s chest, feeling his tight muscles under his shirt.

Suddenly, something clicks into place. Something that was deeply buried inside my heart, but I couldn’t let myself see it until this exact moment. He leans down over me, deepening the kiss. There’s passion in it. This is more than a gesture of panic. This is so much more real than every time he kissed me for the cameras.

I stand on my toes to try and meet him better. I want him. I know that now. I want this orc. I want this orc bad.

GRUG

She tastes like honey on my lips, and I want more. I crush her to me, exploring her mouth eagerly. Surprisingly, she doesn't resist.

She seems... to want it.

With that in mind, I deepen the kiss, tilting her head to the side for a better angle. I know in the back of my mind I shouldn't be doing this, but I throw caution to the wind.

She's beautiful, and I want her. Her creamy skin is so very different from my own green and for a moment, I pause to admire the contrast, before pushing her up against the wall.

She gasps but doesn't fight me. Despite how much smaller she is, she's not afraid of me. She leans in hungrily before I grab her wrists and pin them against the wall over her head.

Her eyes darken with desire.

Yes...

I want her to submit to me.

I kiss her neck roughly as my hands roam down to her waist and then up to her breasts. They fill my hands perfectly as I knead them gently.

"Grug!" she cries out my name, but I don't stop. I can't. She wants this, too. I can feel it.

I pinch her nipple, a little roughly and she cries out. I move to her other breast, eliciting the same response.

"Yes," she sighs. The sound sends heat through me. She rubs her thighs together, trying to relieve some of the pressure there. "I want this. Grug, please, I want...I want you."

I grin against her soft skin before kissing her once more and pulling my shirt over my head in one fluid motion. Her eyes widen at the sight of my bare chest. I smirk at that, leaning in to kiss her hungrily once again. She resists for just a moment, seemingly at odds with herself, but she quickly relents to our passion and lets me plunge my tongue deep into her mouth.

She's panting as I kiss down her neck again and then across her collarbone, finding first one nipple and then the other with my mouth before tugging on them lightly with my teeth, sending sensations straight down between her legs.

"Oh..." she moans softly.

Her arms are still pinned above her head, so she thrusts her chest forward, eager for more of my mouth.

I grin, pleasing her for a short while longer before moving lower.

Her excited breathing is driving me mad. I position myself above the waistband of her dress before sliding the fabric down her body. Some hidden part of me is excited to see lacy white underwear, but I stow that away because they're going to come off very soon.

She shivers as I drag my fingertips against her soft skin, pushing the dress down until it falls around her feet. She's naked now except for her underwear. I pause for a moment, drinking in the view. Her body is perfect, with large breasts, full hips, and the softest skin I've ever seen.

Beautiful, creamy skin... And between her legs...

Before I can stop myself, I bury my head between her thighs, pressing my lips against the soaking-wet fabric of her panties. She squeals and then stills for a moment before pushing her hips forward against my face, urging me on without even knowing it.

I press my tongue against the crotch of her underwear, as hard as I can. She wriggles, moaning softly before I pull back enough to slide them off without difficulty. She blushes fiercely at having all of this skin revealed to me.

"Grug!"

To my surprise, she reaches for me even as I nudge her thighs apart, before hoisting her up on the counter and settling between them. My cock presses insistently

She yelps as I use all my strength to push her thighs apart even further, and I can feel my cock pressing up against the lips of her pussy more insistently. The heat there... it's divine.

And then... I find her clit with my tongue, and...

Theodora screams and she's holding on to me so tightly it hurts. I pause for only a moment before going back to work, laying my hands on her lightly from time to time in lieu of saying something reassuring and foolish, like "It's okay" or some such nonsense.

Instead, I bury my face deeper in the heat between her legs.

I could stay like this all day.

I insert a finger into her now dripping wet hole, slowly. She gasps and clenches around it instinctively, as if she were trying to keep it from going in deeper. But I am stronger than she is, and overcome that reluctance easily.

I'm pushing in past the first knuckle even as she starts breathing heavily again and making soft little moans each time I thrust inside of her. She's tight around me but already accommodates my finger easily. I press further until most of it has disappeared inside of her tight little hole before slowing down and sliding it back out.

Now I want more. Much, much more. To be inside of her. To claim her. To impress myself on her forever, so she'll remember me all the days of her life even if I die tomorrow.

But before that...

I withdraw my fingers and run my hands over her smooth legs and tummy, before continuing down to the moist heat between her legs once again. She's gasping as she responds to my touch. It isn't long before I find another area that produces the same reaction, and then I start really paying attention to that spot.

Every time I find it, she gasps louder and closer together. I kiss it gently one time before finding it again with the very tip of my tongue.

She lets out a sharp cry that ends in a laugh. "You're a tease!"

I grin, and then move higher once more, finding her right nipple with my mouth and pulling on it. I tug at it until she's shaking.

Her thighs are pressed firmly against my shoulders now, urging me on. It's almost like she can't relax because of how badly she wants this. I explore in between her hips for a long time before returning to that spot once more, only to find she's even wetter than before. I bring my fingers into play yet again just to make sure.

She gasps loudly now...and then bites her lip again.

I'm going to remember that lip biting with her needing more pleasure now that I'm aware of her tell. But for now, it just means that she's sensitive, and

needs more stimulation.

"Oh, Grug..." She moans softly as I enter her again with my fingers.

She's getting impatient and tries to push herself onto them, but I tease her by not moving deeper, before going back to using my tongue on her clit again which earns me another loud moan from her lips.

This is so easy! Why couldn't I do this before? How could I have forgotten? Before I know it, we're in a steady routine. I'm eating her out with my tongue while continuing to work the inside of her pussy with my fingers, occasionally adding another finger or two when she's ready for it. She gasps and moans in time with my actions.

Soon I don't need a visual cue. Her breath hitches and her hips buck in time with my own. Despite knowing what's about to happen, it still takes me by complete surprise when she becomes still, moaning out a scream that ends in something between a gasp for air and a low moan of pleasure. My hands are groping blindly at her breasts as though they can memorize how they feel without being able to see them.

She's shuddering on the counter now, her body relaxing slowly from her orgasm. I jump up next to her as soon as her feet touch the floor and kiss her hungrily. She's flushed and breathing heavily in the wake of her climax.

I don't give her any time to recover but enter her swiftly.

Fucking has never felt so good! She lifts her hips to meet me thrust for thrust.

"Yes! Grug, yes!" Theo gasps over and over, barely staying on the counter as our bodies slam into each other repeatedly.

It's all I can do to hold on, and my cock is throbbing so hard now that I can barely stand it.

I'm in a world of delirium filled with only pleasure. Every sensation thrills me, her touch, her scent, even the sound of our flesh meeting. The way her breathing grows heavier with every moment until she's gasping for air.

The moment I'm sure she's reached her peak again, I pull out of her and flip her over. She spills to the stone floor in surprise but recovers quickly enough to haul herself up on her knees and present her ass to me.

Dizzy, as if after too many drinks, I lick my lips before grasping both cheeks easily. It doesn't take much effort to slide inside of her once more.

Theodora yells and clenches around me as I start pounding into her with desperation, slamming my hips into her ass over and over with enough force that it hurts even me. But the biting pain is worth it because it means I'm

dominating her, and she *loves* it.

Legs trembling, I let out a moan of pleasure so loud that it surprises even myself as I wrap one hand around the back of Theodora's neck for leverage.

"I'm gonna...!"

I groan and she responds with a yelp. "Do it!"

I push the little bit of energy I have left into pounding her tight slit even harder. The additional stimulation means I last no longer than an instant.

My cock spasms and sends thick streams of cum deep inside her as I fuck her through my own climax. She's moaning over and over, clenching down on me hard and milking me dry.

As if she were made for me, my orgasm coincides with hers in a way it never has before. I feel like we're connected. This shared moment of complete bliss has deepened our bond more than I ever thought possible. Maybe she feels the same as she moans in time with everything I do.

Slowly, we come down from our peak together before finally collapsing on the floor.

THEODORA

My body is tingling. That was, by far, the best sex I've ever had. It was rough, dominating, and absolutely orgasmic... literally.

My legs are trembling like jelly. I can barely feel my feet. I push myself up and lean back against the cabinets in the kitchen. My heart is still pounding a mile a minute. I take a few deep breaths to try to steady myself.

Who would have thought an orc would be the best sex of my life? I'm a little stunned, to say the least. I almost smile at the thought, that is until I look at him. He doesn't look happy.

"What's wrong?" I question reluctantly. My pulse continues to hammer hard, but now it's more anxiety and less adrenaline-fueled pleasure.

Grug mimics my position, using the cabinets behind him to support himself.

"That shouldn't have happened," he says. "That was a huge mistake, mixing business with pleasure."

He's right, of course, but it still stings to hear it said out loud. I lower my gaze, saying nothing, and he seems to realize he might have hurt my feelings.

"It was incredible, Theodora. Utterly incredible. But mixing sex and a job always ends badly."

"No, I know... I agree with you," I say. I shake my head quickly. He's right. Of course, he's right! But still...

I look at him, surprised to see that he's moved closer. My breathing hitches in my chest at his nearness. I can feel the heat of his skin radiating against mine.

"We just can't do it again, that's all." His voice is husky and I find myself

nodding and staring at his perfectly shaped lips. My throat is suddenly dry.

"Okay... no more sex," I agree.

There's an awkward pause as we sit there naked. All I want to do is leap into his arms so that he can fuck me again. I look into his eyes, searching for something. Some sort of finality that words alone can't deliver. I need to know for certain that it's a done deal.

Instead, he grabs me and crushes his mouth to mine.

I respond immediately, my desire rising in my body with nowhere to go. He pulls me to my feet then picks me up and carries me into the living room.

I don't protest. As he sets me down on the couch, I realize that for the first time, I'm actually glad he's an orc.

He lowers his large body onto mine, his lips never leaving my own as he runs his hands up and down my body. I wrap my arms around his wide shoulders as he presses himself against me. With one hand, he grabs my leg and lifts it to rest against his side.

I gasp against his mouth as the new position causes him to rub his erection against my hip, right over my clit. Waves of pleasure wash over me and I buck my hips upward in an effort to rub myself more firmly against him.

He groans against my mouth, then pulls away slightly, moving to kiss my shoulder. He kisses it with soft, open-mouthed kisses, before moving lower and sucking on the skin at my breastbone.

He continues working his way lower with every kiss until he reaches my stomach. Peering up at me, he sets a small kiss to the soft skin just above the top of my pubic hair. I watch as he looks back down at me and touches those perfect lips to the skin there.

My leg slips from his grip as he moves lower still and begins kissing the insides of my legs. Without any warning, he slides his entire face into the crease of my thighs and thrusts it forward, burrowing into my pussy with his mouth. I almost scream from the incredible sensation of him thrusting against me like that.

"Oh!" I pant out loud as he continues to drive those thick lips into me. My hips buck upward again and again as I try to grind myself directly into his face.

"You taste incredible," he growls from between my legs.

That devilish smirk is back on his face as he fucks me with his mouth. His tongue reaches up to flick over my clit, causing another wave of almost

painful pleasure to shoot through my body. He pinches it between his thumb and forefinger and gives it a gentle tug, making me practically growl from the intense sensation.

"Keep going," I say through clenched teeth. "That's it."

His eyes flash with self-satisfaction and he nods once before burying that gorgeous face into my pussy again. His tongue dances around my clit, then between my folds, before he slips it into me. The sensation is so intense that I have to remind myself to breathe.

I lean my head back against the couch and lose myself in the pleasure that Grug is giving me so freely. And just as I was starting to think that orgasms were better in theory than in reality, Grug shows me just how wrong I am.

I can feel the orgasm building inside of me as I writhe against him, thrusting my hips into his face and rubbing myself all over his cheeks and chin. When the wave hits me, it's instant and completely unexpected. My body comes alive with pleasure as hot electricity shoots down each of the nerves in my body like a billion tingling fingers pinching every inch of my skin all at once.

I scream out loud as I come against Grug's hungry mouth. But still, he doesn't stop.

My hips continue to buck against him as his tongue works over my pussy, driving into me in deeper and deeper thrusts as my body spasms around him. I try to open my eyes to watch him, but I can hardly move at all as the delicious tingling underneath my skin seems to last forever.

I can hear his breathing becoming faster and heavier as he continues lapping at me, driving me higher and higher with every plunge of his long tongue inside of me.

When I've come back down from the most mind-blowing orgasm I've ever had, he begins kissing his way up from my thighs. He flicks my clit with his tongue one last time before I have any chance to recover.

The sensation builds slightly before exploding through my body again, making me give a small gasp as this orgasm takes control of me again. My head is clouded with pleasure as I come against him for the second time in less than an hour, but he keeps licking at me until there's nothing left for him to draw out of me.

"That was... amazing," I manage to get out between gasps, even though it doesn't feel like much more than a whisper.

I'm still having trouble getting my breath back. Grug has to support

himself on one arm in order to hold himself above me as he leans down to kiss me again. It seems that we're low on the oxygen supply in the air somehow. It doesn't take much effort before we're both panting heavily into the kiss.

When he pulls away, I grin at him as another orgasm begins to build. When I open my mouth to speak, the air on my wet lips makes me shudder from another wave of pleasure that is growing even stronger.

"You're incredible," I groan. "That was incredible."

I'm almost positive that the same thoughts have just gone through Grug's head because he gives me a wicked grin before moving back down between my legs. He tucks his thumbs into the bottom of my pussy and spreads me apart, exposing all of me to his hungry eyes.

Before I can even process his intentions, his mouth is on my clit again, and he gives it a long lick from one side to the other. Another wave of pleasure hits me, making me buck against him. A dull, pulsing ache forms between my legs as the sensation from that one lick continues to ripple through me.

I can feel the ache driving deeper and I know that it means another orgasm is quickly approaching. As the pleasure races its way through me and Grug licks and nips at my clit, I grab his strong shoulders and grind my hips against his face again.

"Oh fuck, Grug," I gasp out as the pressure mounts.

My voice is a strangled groan as electricity seems to fill every inch of my body and every cell in my brain. My muscles tense and my legs shake. All of the energy leaves my body in one big rush, leaving me completely limp on the couch with a smile on my face.

"That was...forget everything else," I murmur, then lift and curl a finger his way, beckoning him to crawl up and lie next to me.

He comes to lie down next to me before pulling me on top of his massive frame. His cock probes the entrance to my still throbbing pussy.

Biting my lip, I reach down and line the head of his cock up to my entrance. It takes me a moment to relax, but then I press myself down onto him.

His thickness spreads me wide open, but the feeling of being stretched for him feels amazing. I gasp as he makes his way deeper inside until I can feel him pushing up against my cervix. Once he's all the way in, I lay my hands on his chest and grind myself down on his cock before bringing myself back

up again and repeating the motion.

He moves his hands under my ass and presses upward into me, lifting my entire body up off of the couch even as I press downward onto him with my pelvis. I love the feeling of him filling me like that. Just being completely dominated by him while still maintaining some level of control over how deep he goes. It's the best of both worlds.

I begin to rotate my hips as I sit atop him, grinding my clit into his pelvic bone every time my pussy slides down onto it. The sensation is so good that I barely have any thoughts besides how deeply I want Grug to fuck me.

"Harder," I moan as sex begins to take over everything else in my mind. "I want it harder!"

Grug looks up at me with bright eyes but doesn't say anything. Apparently, he's already been planning on doing exactly that because he grips my hips and starts thrusting himself up into me in short, hard strokes, ramming himself as deep as possible.

I gasp as a new sensation wells up inside of me.

"Fuck, yes," I gasp out shakily between thrusts from Grug as his cock pounds against my cervix relentlessly.

Despite the fact that we told ourselves this was something we'd never do again, that it was a one-time thing, right now, it's something I never want to end.

GRUG

I've rolled off Theo and fallen right onto the carpet. We're both gasping for breath. The whole situation should be sexy as hell. However, Theo isn't some one-night stand or steady girlfriend.

Why did I do that? I think to myself. Maybe it was just the stress of the situation. Yeah, my body just wanted some relief and Theo was right there. It was just a natural bodily reaction and nothing more.

Still, it felt good.... so damn good. Of course, so does food, and that's less dangerous. When it comes to her, the indulgence isn't worth the risk of someone catching me off-guard.

"I'm sorry," I say. "That was damn stupid. Even after all we said... I just couldn't help myself."

Theo doesn't say anything at first. As I open my mouth to say something else reassuring, she bursts out laughing.

"What?" I ask.

"Man," she says between giggles. "Skrag was right to send me after you, wasn't he? Even when you *know* he's spying on you, you can't help chasing a bit of skirt."

"It's not like that!"

"Oh? Then what is it like?"

I pause. At that exact moment, I realize that the sex I had with Theo hadn't felt like it had felt with other chicks. There was something else there, something special that made me want to lay there with her forever.

Immediately, I shoved any further thoughts about the feeling away. No, there was nothing. There had to be nothing.

"No, you're right," I say. "It was like that. Sorry for using you. It won't happen again, I promise."

"I mean..." Theo rolls over and leans her face over the side of the couch so that it's right over mine. "I wouldn't mind if you kept doing it. It felt pretty nice. And, ya know, it would make our whole fake relationship seem more realistic."

I feel a certain warmth in my chest as she says this. She's right. We could keep things casual and I could burn off a bunch of steam. As long as I kept her at arm's length, perhaps I could avoid any of the inevitable betrayal scenarios.

But what about Theo? Yes, she's Skrag's 'minion,' but that doesn't mean she deserves to get hurt. And I know where friends-with-benefits style relationships usually end up. This is the main reason why I don't mix business with pleasure. Except in relation to Skrag of course.

"Are you sure that you won't get too attached?" I ask her.

Theo chuckles. "Me? What about you?"

"I've been in situations like this far more often than you have."

"Well, it certainly doesn't seem like it, Mister Second Helping. And I think having to resist all the pretty faces that show up at work counts for something."

"Look, all I'm saying is that I don't want you to become too attached and get hurt," I explain. "This will need to come to an end eventually. I can't fully trust that Skrag won't come back around and pay you two times what I'm paying you."

"And here you are caring about me getting hurt." She smiles and pinches my nose.

"I'm just showing some decency for my fellow sentient creatures."

"Right..." she trails off.

"We just can't let this keep happening. It's all going to end poorly. Do you understand?"

Theo gets a sad look on her face that makes my heart ache just a little. *Oh no, she's already caught feelings*, I think to myself.

"Okay, I understand," Theo finally says.

Then there's an awkward silence between us. It seems as if we're both so shocked by the change of plans that we don't know what to do next. Maybe our instincts were led to believe that everything was cut and dry with this relationship.

And I still can't pull my eyes from Theo's face. Those perfectly rounded bright blue eyes are like cool ponds that I want to plunge into. Those cherry-red lips are like pieces of candy....

"Grug!" I hear Delinzia shouting for me down the hall. "Where are you, Grug? Man, you won't believe the phone call I just had!"

Theo and I exchanged *oh shit* glances. I can faintly make out Delinzia taking off her jacket in the hall. If we're fast enough, maybe Theo and I can avoid a third party knowing about our tryst.

"One of the servers at the club had a hell of a night with one of the patrons," she continues as I search for anything to put on at this point. "Some puny dickhead in a jean mask and biker shorts, but anyway... Dude kept saying something about knowing the owner and free drinks blah, blah, blah..."

Delinzia's voice carries from down the hall as Theo and I scramble to our feet "And you know how customers often say that just to get a free drink. So the server obviously tells him to kick rocks and come back with cash, but in a nice way, and... Ugh, where are you? I know you're here, I saw your shoes by the door."

I end up finding pieces of Theo's clothes instead of my own. I tap her on the shoulder and hand them to her. She, in turn, hands me my pants.

I can hear Delinzia opening and closing doors, no doubt already suspicious of my silence. "Now, you know this makes the lean and mean jean dude upset, so he starts yelling at her. Too bad for him, turns out, the girl is a popular YouTuber on the side."

"And a lot of her fans happen to be in the club at the time. So they all start screaming at the customer. Then the manager comes in and tells everyone that the orc *is* friends with the proprietor. But that doesn't stop a few from throwing chunks of ice at the guy. Real mature, right? So anyway –"

I struggle to put on my pants and fall over. Considering how large I am, this creates a very noticeable sound.

"Oh, you're in the living room, are you?" Delinzia says. "Why are you hiding from me? Are you stroking the snake in there or something?"

I hear Delinzia 's large footsteps making their way toward the living room. I turn to Theo and gently push her toward the couch.

"Quick, hide behind the couch," I say to her.

Theo wiggles behind the couch easily. My gut, however, gets stuck right on top of the wedge between the couch and the wall. Theo grabs my hands

and tries to pull me down, but it's no use. When Delinzia walks in, she sees my legs wiggling in the air above the couch. This causes her to let out a seemingly endless peal of laughter.

While she's laughing, I sigh and push myself out of the wedge. Theo, with her dress halfway up and her bra missing, peeks her head over the couch back. I stare at Delinzia as she continues to laugh.

"It's not that funny," I say.

"Yes... it... is," Delinzia manages to say in between giggles. "Did you... really think that... I wouldn't know you... were here? I can smell your cologne and her perfume a mile away. And Theo's bra is hanging right on that lamp."

I look to where Delinzia is pointing. Sure enough, there it sits with one strap hanging over the top of the lamp. I inch over to it, grab it, and toss it to Theo.

"Did you seriously have sex in here?" Delinzia asks. "I love it. Could have saved us all some time, though, and yelled as soon as I walked in. Don't tell me you forgot all of our numerous code words."

Delinzia looks over at Theo, who is currently struggling to get her bra on. She feels her eyes on her and looks up. Then she smirks.

"Hey, girl," she says. "That sex fiend over there was the one that started it, just between us."

"I'm right here," I blurt, still trying to remember our high school and college code words.

"Yes, I see that, Grug," Delinzia replies, unimpressed with me but happy to see Theo. My traitor cousin shoots her a wink, then looks back at me and shakes her head. What the actual fuck? I thought women didn't get along.

"Everyone sees that," she continues. "Expect a bill for my therapy."

The two share a snicker as I wrack my brain for a way out, feeling like the odd man out. "You don't knock anymore?" I growl. "A grown orc shouldn't have to yell Backstreet's Back every time they're with a girl."

Delinzia scoffs. "That's never been one of our code words." Delnizia shakes a set of keys at me. "Since when have I knocked?"

"So..." Theo begins. We both turn to her. She is standing in front of the living room door and fully dressed now. "You guys seem like you have a lot to talk about. And Henchman has probably left a ton of angry messages on my second phone after the earlier incident. So I'm just gonna go ahead and go look at those, and you guys can just keep chatting as much as you want."

She leaves and I turn my gaze back to Delinzia.

"As I said, I'm not a child," I repeat. "I can take care of myself."

"Hey, you only tease the ones you love, and I already told you how I feel about her. I say keep it up."

"I just wanted sex."

"

"Believe what you want," Delinzia says. "I just thought I should tell you nothing happened in the club last night that had anything to do with us."

THEODORA

The diner. One hour.

I can't remember the last time my hands actually shook. Besides from something like being over-caffeinated. I'm a grown woman, but if someone told me I was about to be grounded and shipped off to boot camp, I'd believe it.

Or scooped up and never seen from again. I shake off the thought and remind myself we're meeting in public as I slip into my car and head home. An hour will give me at least enough time to shower off the shame of the night before. *Is it shame?*

The thought echoes in my mind unanswered as I manage to make every green and yellow light home. I'm through the front door and in the shower faster than Buttons can wake up from her nap in my bedroom.

I hear her light steps entering the bathroom as the steady flow of warm water cascades down my head. The sensation would feel better if I could answer the shame question. Then maybe crawl under my bed covers and never come out.

Of course, part of me wants to stay under the showerhead and daydream, both of Grug and the world where the two of us could actually be together, but I'm scared of the consequences. A not-so-tiny part of me yearns to tell him this, to throw caution to the wind, to just blurt my feelings out and forget the consequences.

But another, equally not-so-tiny part in me rages as I scrub my skin clean of our tryst. Was it just about the conquest for him? Is that why he was so adamant we shouldn't see where this goes, even with Delinizia's approval?

I shake off my embarrassment and get back to worrying over Grug. The problem we're having should not exist. And I definitely should not be the one who wants it to continue. But still, I do and hope he'll change his own mind.

We could be good together. And I know he likes to look at me. He's never been shy about expressing his attraction.

"His physical attraction," I correct aloud as I step out of the shower and wipe the condensation from my bathroom mirror. I need to look at myself as I suggest this, even if it doesn't feel good to say or hear. Buttons sniffs my ankle and steps back into the hall. "You and I both know there's more to love than that."

I'm frozen at the word 'love.' Is that what I meant to say? Is this what I feel?

"Oh no! I'm doing it again!" The sheer volume of my own words lights a fire under me, and I dry off and moisturize in record time as Buttons observes. "You're right," I say, searching the room for something to throw on. "I'll have plenty of time to think about my feelings after Henchman."

I've gotten very little laundry done this past week and force myself into a simple blue and white baby doll dress. I bought it at a yard sale without noticing the small hole in the left cupped sleeve but whatever.

"I don't dress to impress Skrag and his scraggly goon," I offer Buttons as I head out the front door. She looks at me like I'm leaving her forever, which reminds me to text Grug.

I've been summoned. Headed to the diner now. Wish me luck. Maybe it won't be bad?

The polyester booth seat feels cold on my ass, which is the least of my worries but still. Really? Today? I've managed to plop into the seat and ruffle up my dress at the same time and look around the cafe before fixing myself. Is it too much to hope that Skrag gives me another chance?

Lately, I've been overly observant of every little look from a stranger. Even the family of orcs at the opposite end of the place feel threatening. Despite the fact that they haven't glanced up once from their pastries and sugary beverages.

"Thanks a million," I say to Amaryllis as soon as she drops off Henchman's drink and my own cold brew with sweet cream foam. I take a sip and keep my hands on the plastic cup as I set it down. If my palms are going to insist on staying sweaty, I'd rather Henchman think it's condensation than a product of my nerves.

“You looked more worried than normal,” Amaryllis says as the front door of the cafe swings open.

Henchman pretends not to notice me at first, though the twin shiners encircling both his eyes make it impossible for me not to stare. He’s wearing a dark baseball cap, which matches the color of his bruised face perfectly.

I fight the urge to text Grug, knowing the message I’d deliver. *Shit! Hyman went after Tassel Hat Dude!* is neither helpful or confirmed at this point. But what else could explain his face?

As Amaryllis approaches the counter to help Henchman, I take a deep breath and quietly congratulate myself for texting Grug earlier. I feel my phone buzz in my purse and quickly silent it, just in time to watch Henchman limp over. He collapses into his spot across from me. So far, zero blinks, meaning nothing out of the usual.

“Got you a drink,” I try, pushing it toward him a couple of inches.

He looks at it and then back to me, his cracked lips parting painfully as he speaks. At least, if the minor shiver that just traveled across his bony shoulders can be trusted.

“Look at you following directions.” He takes a long and loud sip from the drink in his hand, then adjusts his straw, takes another slurp, and runs his swollen eyes across my body as best he can.

I’m painfully aware of how stiff I am. What to say to break the ice? He knows Grug wasn’t there last night. I know he knows Grug wasn’t there last night. And we both know that we know this.

“Are you enjoying the fruits of your labor up close?”

“Do you want to talk about your face?”

The questions leave our mouths at the same time. I blink away my shock and start explaining.

“Or should I say the fruits of my labor?”

“Sorry, you go ahead.”

Again, we speak at the same time.

Henchman narrows his puffy eyes, and I wonder if the effort is worth what has to be a painful expression under the circumstances.

“I apologize for the bad intel,” I try. “Grug actually had something –”

“You want to know what happened to my face.”

It’s not a question, so I stay quiet and make no effort to embarrass my way through a clumsy answer. There’s no way he didn’t get that by tapping the wrong leather shoulder. Tassel Hat must have been livid. But whatever

showdown Henchman lost must have taken place off the property. How much of Henchman's time was wasted last night pursuing this false lead?

"Tell Sk –" I lick my lips and correct myself. "Demeter that it won't happen again."

"Demeter is dead."

"What!"

"Dead to you, that is. And so is your place." He reaches out one of his hands and spreads his long fingers across the table. It takes a second for me to realize he's asking for the phone. "Don't make me explain what 'terminated' means, Princess Failure."

I chew my lower lip and wonder if this is the best-case scenario. At least in terms of experiencing the exact opposite of what I wanted.

I'm not surprised to hear Skrag is kicking me out of my place. This was expected in the end. Obviously, he's not the type to bet on a losing horse. Shouldn't I be grateful Skrag's not asking Henchman to get to the bottom of my part in all of this?

"I know what the word illegal means," I say instead, then lose my nerve and mumble something about renter's rights. "And a contract is a contract. I signed one when I moved in."

"And Demeter has more money than you." Henchman finishes his drink, and then grabs the one I ordered for him. His eyes don't leave me as he takes out the paper straw from the lid of his first cup and stabs it into the small hole in the second on the first try. "Which can buy a ghoul an impressive amount of friends."

He looks out the window to watch a passing SUV bolt down the road. The motorcycle cop idling in the parking lot across the street gives chase. Henchman reaches out to tap the window glass as the lights of the officer's chopper flick on.

"Good and bad," he continues. "Don't tell me you want to spend your life being tailed and chased, now do you? Not all of Demeter's soldiers are as professional as I am. Take you, for example." He gestures for me to give him the phone again. "You had one job."

He grows still, corpse-level stiff, and I wonder how much he suspects of me. Does he believe my excuse? "Feel lucky he's graced you with three more days under a roof," he snaps. "Well, at least one you won't have to flat-back it to earn."

My face falls. I feel my eyes narrowing as I slap the phone in his

hand. “You don’t know anything about me.”

“You’re a dime a dozen.” He stuffs the phone in the inside pocket of his trench coat, then steepled his fingers together. “A genetic anomaly that you’d better capitalize on because it’s the only thing of value you have to speak of.”

It’s not often the slut insult gets to me, though I’m painfully aware my deal with Grug means my next place *is* conditional. “If you’re about to infer that I skate through life based on my looks, you’re about ten years too late to the small dick party.”

It’s my turn to get up and storm out. I don’t even mind that my legs stick to the plastic-like material as I drag myself out of the booth, making my dramatic exit more of a struggle than I need at the moment.

“Sit down.” Until now, I wouldn’t have believed that Henchman’s voice could get so deep. I look down on him and relish the opportunity to be the one standing tall.

“It must burn you to know whatever you’re getting paid to follow me around while taking some hits.” I gesture to his face. “Isn’t remotely close to what he offered me.”

Henchman’s face loses what little color it has, and I know I’ve struck a nerve. Maybe even got to the bottom of his behavior toward me. At least a little.

“Men like you and Demeter, which is a girl’s name by the way, have to hate on us pretty folk because otherwise, you’d be just like everyone else.” I try taking the drink from his hand, but he fights me. I let it explode into his lap and back up as the liquid drips off the table. Not the effect I wanted but whatever.

“You have to pretend you’re not busy wishing you were one of us,” I continue, pulling out a single napkin from the nearby dispenser and dropping it onto his lap. “Remember that the next time you enjoy a coffee.” I walk out and don’t look back. Henchman may be right about giving up the fight against Skrag, but that doesn’t mean I’m leaving defeated.

GRUG

“**A**lways a pleasure doing business with you, Steve,” I say, hanging up my phone. I lean back in my leather office chair and smirk. Another sale in the bag, and I didn’t even have to leave my home office.

Whatever else is blowing up around me, at least business is still going well. There will always be a need to sell run-down, dilapidated mansions to vampires in California.

Just as I think I’m ready to celebrate with a glass of top-shelf bourbon, my phone rings again. I pick it up, ready to end the day with another prospective sale. Instead, my eyes widen when I see the caller ID.

“Theo?” I say when I pick up. We haven’t spoken since this morning, which has given me plenty of time to worry about her meeting with Skrag’s errand boy between business calls. “Hey, it’s me...”

She sounds distant, like her voice is raw. As if she’s been crying. “Theo, what’s wrong? Tell me now.”

If she’s in trouble, I need to know. Regardless of how last night went, including the amazing sex, I promised to help her out when the inevitable came. I was just hoping to get another chance to spoil the ghoul’s game.

She takes a deep, shaky breath that tells me it isn’t going to happen. I can almost see the fake smile plastered on her pale face.

“It’s not great, Grug... No, it’s okay. I mean, it’s not, but it is.”

I let out an exasperated huff. “Are you in danger? Has Skrag found you out?” I need to cut to the chase. I can’t help her if she doesn’t tell me what’s gone wrong.

“No...no, Skrag doesn't know. At least, I don't think he does. It doesn't matter. He's cut me loose.”

My blood rushes ice cold. “What?”

“If Skrag was onto me, it wasn't stated. Henchman just said I've been cut out of the deal. He's kicking me out of my place, too. I've got three days. So...” Theo sighs like her heart has been broken clean in two.

“Three days?” I don't want to tell her what I actually think. That for Skrag, it's pretty generous.

“Yeah, which is why I'm calling. I know our deal sort of included Skrag getting his just desserts in the end but...” I hear her sigh on the other end and realize she's worried I'm going to abandon her. “I know finding a new place is going to be easier with your help, even if I have to pay for it.”

“Theo, listen, I'm going to send some movers over to help you get all of your stuff together. Furniture, dishes, clothes, everything. Nothing gets left behind. If he's only giving you three days, then we'll move you out in one. If for no other reason than pure spite.” It's my favorite reason to do anything that Skrag can see me do.

“Not a chance. I'm taking the full three days,” she says. “Buttons and I have to say our goodbyes.”

“There will be plenty of other beaches,” I try.

“We don't need movers, just a favor,” she insists.

“It's not a favor,” I reiterate. “We managed to piss him off some. That's good enough for me.”

“Not for him. Skrag's no closer to ruining something for you, so get ready for round two,” she says. “Henchman looked pretty roughed up, by the way.”

She explains his face, and I come to the same conclusion. Henchman got up in someone's business after we left. But where? And when? The ‘who’ I think I know. Tassel Hat.

“Listen, I'm going to come over there later, okay? I'm going to fix this. And stop talking about paying for it, either. You're going to be taken care of.” I need her to believe me. I need Theo to trust me, now more than ever.

Another long stretch of silence follows. “Okay,” she finally says.

“Okay. Six o'clock. I'll see you then.” We hang up, and I assess the situation. Theo's been cut loose but not necessarily found out. It's possible this is a test. Skrag might be watching her still, to see if I drop her like a brick. Then he'd know for sure we were double-crossing him. I don't want to think about what would happen to Theo if that were the case.

I pick up my phone again. I'm still planning to contact those movers, but first I need to call Delinzia.

"Hey I was just about to call you," Delinzia says, answering my call on the third ring. "I've missed a few calls from some friends at the dungeon. Care to come along to see what's up? I got a feeling it might be about Jingle Vest."

Henchman's silver-encrusted get-up flashes through my mind, including the jet-black vest buttoned all the way up and studded in shiny flair.

"Why do you say that?" I ask, wondering if maybe Delinzia was wrong about her info earlier. Maybe the random customer meltdown wasn't the only thing to happen on the property. It would explain the injuries Theo saw.

"No thanks," I reply. "I'm gonna try and get work done but keep me posted. Especially if the owner needs me to write a check or anything."

"Oh, trust me," Delinzia replies. "If anything happened, it wasn't at Dark Moth."

"Still, just check."

"I'll clue you in over lunch," she replies. "There's nothing that works up an appetite like hot goss."

I tell her I'll think about it and hang up, wondering if I should have tagged along. Since focusing while I wait for answers feels impossible the more I think about it.

THEODORA

“Come on, girl! We’ve got this.”

I leave Buttons leash secured in the fanny pack around my waist for our jog. It might not be the most fashionable of choices, but I came across it while packing and couldn't help myself. I got it at a carnival after five successful ring tosses in a row. It was meant to be a gag gift.

Then when the time came to part with the neon pink and green masterpiece, with sparkly black zigzag stripes separating the stunning duet of color, well... Suffice it to say I needed a good laugh. Even if the laugh ended up just being a series of smirks.

I'm enjoying one now despite my sour mood. My anger subsided a few hours ago after I got off the phone with Grug, though I've still done my best to stay productive and managed to pack up the bathroom.

Future Me will thank me. Especially Morning Me, since I also managed to empty the hall closet before officially calling it quits for the afternoon.

“That’s it, Lil’ Butts!” I call back to my inquisitive fur baby, who’s stopped along the beach for an impromptu smell.

I don't much want to know what's got Buttons' attention, though who's to say we'll have an opportunity for another proper goodbye to the place? I know Buttons is going to miss it more than me, which is saying a lot considering my last two birthday parties have been on the beach. I'm relieved to see it's just a bunch of regular old sea crap under Buttons' nose.

Ocean detritus beats a dead bird in my book by a mile.

“Drink it in,” I say. “You've earned it.”

Buttons doesn't bother to look up from her smorgasbord of olfactory

delights. So I scan the horizon while I wait. A small group of giggling toddlers grabs my attention. They're outrunning two adults, while a third unpacks a picnic lunch nearby. My stomach growls, and I wrangle Buttons away from her sniffing to head closer to the water.

Waves crash against a series of large boulders peppered along the shoreline, and the sound makes me smile. When I first moved here, I always told myself I'd get out to one of those rocks. Maybe I'd wake up early enough one day to jog across the sands and into the ocean, scaling the cold, hulking boulder before the rest of the world opened its eyes.

I gaze out at the jagged, slippery mammoth and wonder what it would be like to feel so big. So solid and put together.

"What do you think?" I ask Buttons, scooping her up and scratching her behind the ear. "Should I just go for it now?" I point to the top of the rock while Buttons relishes my fingers digging into her furry head. "You feel like coming with me?"

She doesn't open her eyes, so I continue my line of questioning. "It might be nicer up there than we think. Free rent at least, right?" Buttons' dark eyes open and gaze into my own.

I imagine the lazy look she's gracing me with has something to do with the part I'm leaving out. Grug's promise. *You already have a free place to stay, human.* Buttons shifts nervously in my arms, the classic sign she's had enough cuddles for now.

"I was hoping you'd forget that part," I tell her as I plop her back onto the sand and watch her run toward the shrub-covered jogging trail in the distance.

And probably a good one! I imagine her bark is saying. *Pull yourself together and let's skedaddle.*

I wonder what Buttons would have to say to my next pity-filled realization. Will Skrag try to get me fired from the lounge? I lick my lips and shake the tension out, at least the amount I can. Boutiques and online shops will always need models, though I was hoping to say goodbye to the lucrative side gig as soon as possible.

With swimsuit season over, I can look forward to cozy ensembles for a while. Sleepwear is one of my favorite things to model, especially since most are oh-so-easy to look relaxed in. A set of silk PJ's is a cakewalk compared to a thong up the ass, doubly so to a fistful of sand in the eyes.

"A girl wakes up on a beach and has no idea who she is," I pant as soon as I catch up to Buttons, who's stopped to wait for me near a massive log one

step down from tree-trunk size. “She’s got one image in her mind, a tipped-over tree and a small voice calling ‘help me!’”

Buttons looks at me like I’ve already pitched the story idea to her, which I might have. It’s hard to keep track of all the loose and terrible concepts flooding my mind, without a notes app handy every minute of the day, that is.

“Did I mention she thinks that voice is her daughter’s?” I briefly toy with the idea of writing this one down on my phone, if only just to feel like a professional. Real writers write. Real writers keep track of their ideas, they take each one seriously. At least enough to jot it down and hope the act inspires more.

Buttons barks up at me, her nub of a tail wagging in the sand behind her. I don’t want to think about Grug, Skrag, or my living situation, so I double down on the vague pitch.

“Because it turns out, she isn’t. The voice is hers!” I feel a rush of satisfaction as the idea hits me. “She’s been unraveling a mystery she thought was someone else’s, but it turns out it was her own the whole time.”

Buttons licks one of my ankles, and I take it as a sign that the twist might work. Emphasis on might. “It’s something she’s been repressing, let’s say. A past event that shaped her whole life, though she doesn’t recall that even happened. Not until the accident.”

I imagine Buttons’ next bark is a question, and I answer it as we continue on our jog. “The one that left her experiencing strange dreams, visions, lost time even. She thinks she’s being haunted maybe, by the spirit of a little girl she discovers died in her new home. But nope, just good old fashion trauma.”

I wave at the middle-aged couple approaching us and try not to think about Grug as they pass me hand in hand. He’s coming over tonight, and this run is definitely something I hope will soothe my nerves. At least a little.

“Cute dog!” the woman calls. They’re wearing matching fanny packs and grin wide as they note the fabulous piece around my waist.

“Great minds think alike!” the man says, pushing up his glasses while his partner fawns over Buttons. “Plus they look good together doing it.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” I manage, jogging in place as Buttons finishes her hellos. The couple smiles and continues on. I clap my hand against my thigh for Buttons to follow me, which she does, quickly getting ahead of me like the show-off she is.

The truth... The idea drips across the walls of my head. I can’t tell whether I like the feeling or not. As a general rule, yeah, the truth is great.

But what if you don't want to face the truth?

I wonder how much of the character in my impromptu story is actually me. Sure, she's suffering from memory loss on top of being haunted by her own inner child, so not exactly my doppelgänger, but...

"Marilyn Draper..." I huff as Buttons and I finally make our way up the shrouded and verdant jogging path. My potential leading lady has a name, as well as at least one shared trait with her creator. We're not good at admitting things to ourselves.

You can't stop thinking about Grug. He's your ghost.

I shake off the idea, gulping down a big whiff of sea air through my mouth and relishing the flavor. Who's to say Grug will even stay in touch when he sets me up with a place? Maybe I won't have to see him as much after this, which will probably dull the sting of my earlier rejection.

It feels like ages ago when the idea of loathing Grug was a viable one. He's forced me into this mess, same as Skrag, though that's just about the only thing the two have done that's similar.

Where Skrag sees opportunities to get the most out of his minions while providing the least, Grug's approach comes with few strings attached. He requires just enough control to make him the boss, though not the enemy.

Even when he is our enemy, I think, wondering what the orc is doing at this very moment. He's no doubt working, though I wish he were doing it while thinking of me. Clothed or unclothed. Angry or happy. So long as Grug has me on his mind, there's a chance it might stay there. Maybe even for good.

"Wait, little buddy. Hold on!" I call to Buttons, who's not too far away from me but still oblivious of my untied shoelace.

Before I can even bend down, I catch sight of a man standing up ahead. The oversized hoodie shrouding his face gives me the distinct impression he doesn't want to be seen. My skin tingles, leaving me with a strange sensation I can't place. Angst? Fear?

No... Awareness. *Henchman's under that hood*. Every inch of me is certain of it.

He stands statue-still and so do I. A light gust of wind hits him from the side, revealing his bony shoulders beneath the inky blackness of his sweater. Behind him, the empty parking lot means I've just jogged into a trap, and probably one I should have seen coming. I'm painfully aware it's just the two of us.

The two of us and Buttons, growling up at HENCHMAN and ready to protect her mama. "Buttons, no!" I head for the dog just as HENCHMAN lunges.

GRUG

“So after the first two got tired of getting their faces buried in the dirt, the third ran off in the opposite direction,” Delinzia says, her voice giddy as she fills me in on the rest of Henchman’s night at the club.

Apparently, Theo’s stalker and three of what sound like the beefiest, ugliest trolls alive decided to follow Tassel Hat out of the dungeon. Plus his male companion, who Delinzia’s been referring to as Nipple Clamps and Chain since I picked up the phone. Obviously, the sight of a person who Skrag’s cronies thought was me rendezvousing with a vampire lover in the park was too good to pass up.

“Which was the *uphill* part of the park, so the dude wasn’t thinking,” Delinzia finishes.

“What about the other guy?” I ask, wishing I’d gone to lunch with her like she’d offered.

“Other guy backed off.” Delinzia’s details fill in a lot of missing pieces about our failed plan. “You think Theo knows?”

“She mentioned seeing bruises on Henchman,” I reply. “I can’t wait to fill her in on the rest.”

“I’m sure you can’t,” Delinzia quips, and I ignore it.

“You sure I can’t pay for anything?” I lean back in my leather office chair, custom-made and a much better place for sex than in a public park.

“I’m sure,” Delinzia replies. “Two of the bartenders know Tassel Hat, who’s been trying to get with Nipple Clamps and Chain for a minute, I guess he really made an impression dealing with Henchman’s shit.”

“And Nipple Clamps? He’s okay?” I ask.

“More than okay. That Hyman creeper dude, who should be looking pretty wrecked right about now, didn’t stand a chance. I know you and Theo both have running names for him already, but I’m going with Count Buckles N’Such.”

I smile and remember Henchman’s homemade outfit. The mouth breather looked like he rolled himself in a kiddie pool of Monopoly pieces, then glued on some buckles for good measure. I’d never seen so much flair on a leather vest and will go to my grave thinking he made the piece himself.

“Captain Bangles Galore,” I suggest.

“Nipple Clamps got my number and called to verify. He told me to tell you that he’s got your back if the idiot is foolish enough to come at you again. His name’s Petrov and I really think he and Tassel Hat are going somewhere. Maybe even down the aisle one day.”

I can practically see the smirk on Delinzia’s face as I drum my fingers against my desk. Is she about to bring up Theo?

“So when you say wrecked,” I say, referring to Captain Bangles.

“I mean that guy picked the wrong bush to stick a camera in and he knows,” Delinzia answers. “Petrov made him sing the national anthem before they let him up. It was a rough go at the start, but he remembered the lyrics real quick. Funny how no air can change a person’s mind.”

“Wow.” I wonder how much of this Skrag knows.

“And the camera?”

“I’ve got it, but I promised to give Petrov and Dave their pictures if I can get anything off it. They asked.”

“Awww,” I say.

“It’s smashed to shit, though. Looks like it fell off the top of a redwood tree. More than once.”

“Did they get anyone’s masks off?” I ask, wondering if Tassel Hat and Nipple Clamps took the time to expose their attackers.

“Just the scrawny one who stalked you guys. They’re keeping it for obvious sentimental reasons. I asked.”

“That seems fair,” I admit. More than fair.

Not for the first time, I’m grateful Delinzia is willing to apologize on my behalf to the community. I’m big enough to see the silver lining in our terrible fail.

“You sure I can’t pay for anything?” I plead Delinzia, unable to keep a straight face as I ask. A snort escapes me from out of nowhere.

“What?”

“I’m just now getting a picture in my head of the singing.” I imagine Theo’s stalker didn’t feel nearly as big after picking himself up off the ground. And in pieces by the sound of it. “The gift that keeps on giving.”

Delinzia clears her throat, and I wonder what she’s about to say next. “Speaking of gifts, how’s Theo? Because she’s the one you should be lending some muscle to.”

“I should be getting back to work,” I say flatly.

“No seriously, our happy couple made their point. You think Henchman is going to try to make his own point but through her?”

A strange angst settles in my chest, something I’ve never felt before. My annoying cousin’s not wrong. Skrag’s errand boy will be slow-walking his way through life with the weight of his dungeon beat down heavy on his impossibly sharp shoulders for a long time.

What if they’re not done with Theo? my mind warns.

“I gotta go,” I say, hanging up and grabbing my keys. As I speed walk to my Porsche, I dial Theo’s number and hold my breath.

She doesn’t answer, and I try again as soon as I start the engine and speed off. Her phone continues to ring as I merge into the right lane and onto the freeway. Everyone I pass is going well over the speed limit, but they’re still too slow. I know a state trooper typically posts themselves somewhere along the upcoming bridge, but I debate gunning it anyway.

At the last moment, I ease off the gas just in time to spot the red and blue lights peeking from the safety rails along the bridge’s onramp. I’m not against paying a ticket for speeding. I’d pay for all the speeding tickets the city’s accumulated in a month if this trooper doesn’t consider my ten miles over anything to start an engine for.

I check my phone again as the bridge fades in my rear view. Nothing. I flick my eyes up to catch sight of the trooper, now on the road and headed my way.

“Fuck.” I suck in a breath through my gritted teeth and wait for the officer’s lights to flash.

My heart is punching its way through my chest as the sound of its laborious effort fills my ears. The lights behind me go off, and I grab my phone rather than pull over. I’ll pull over when Theo picks up.

It rings three times before the sirens turn on. I get over into the right lane while the fourth ring turns into the fifth. I hear her voicemail just as I see the

state patrol car passing. My shoulders drop as I accept the fact that I've just lucked out. The trooper's no doubt answering an emergency call, so I take the opportunity to increase my speed.

I call Theo again and the same thing happens. Voicemail.

"Move, dick bag," I say to the SUV ahead of me. I honk a few times and the driver gets the hint. "Thank you, loiter on your own time." I can't make another attempt and manage to get off the freeway in one piece, so I toss my phone on the seat.

Weaving in and out of traffic isn't as difficult as finding a parking spot once I get to Theo's. At least a spot that isn't handicapped. I take the only one available and leap out. Special needs can mean a lot of things, and in this case, it means I have a special need to barge through Theo's front door and tell her we're leaving ASAP.

"Theo! Open up." I knock on the door rather than pound like I want to.

It doesn't take long for me to realize she's not in there. Buttons would be barking if they were home. And if the dog's gone, she's gone. I call her again on my way down to the beach and let out a frustrated breath as I take note of the roiling ocean waves.

I want to think she's just on a jog. It would explain the radio silence. But the knot in my chest says otherwise. I dial her number again. I'll keep calling until she answers.

THEODORA

“**W**hat’s wrong?” Henchman asks as I dart out of his grasp. “Did you go and get yourself some standards?”

Buttons growls and lunges after my attacker, who’s too slow for the corgi but not by much. He kicks the air where my dog just was, bringing up a heap of sand as Buttons darts to safety.

“Stay away from my dog!” I scream, trying and failing to get his attention. Buttons snaps her jaws at the lanky creepy, who’s smart enough to jump back at the canine’s audible warning. “Why don’t you fuck off forever, creep. It’s not that hard.”

Suddenly, his sights are on me again, and all I have time to do is raise my hands before his own hands are on me. He’s squeezing and pushing, doing his best to get me off my feet and on the ground. At his mercy.

Beat him to it! my instincts scream. *He won’t see it coming!*

“I think you’d like me if you got to know me,” his throaty confession, and the sinister implication behind it, is enough to light a fire under my ass. At least figuratively. I ignore the growing pressure of his hold and drop to the ground like a rag doll, choking on the dust kicked up beneath our feet.

Still, I’ve never been so happy with a mouthful of sand. I roll to the side just in time to miss another of Henchman’s kicks. I’m almost to my feet when he heaves himself right into me. We both let out a grunt as my head smacks against the prickly shrubs. I feel like I’ve been stabbed by a dozen wooden claws. I let out a cry of pain as my ankle rolls beneath me.

“I’m not here for the dog!” His hot breath in my face pisses me off as much as it waters my eyes. I could roll my ankle a hundred times and still

have the will to escape this guy.

My hair is too tangled for him to yank me free from the hedge on the first try. As soon as pulls again, I claw at his face and drop to the ground with all my weight. I fall and barely feel the sizzling heat spreading across my scalp. Bald spots grow back. I can't say that about everything he can take from me.

I run past the restrooms and scan the empty parking lot. Well, empty save for the dark blue van I'm assuming belongs to Henchman. Box-shaped, dented, and complete with tinted windows, it doesn't take much to put his plan together.

This isn't an attack. It's an abduction.

"Buttons!" The corgi barks over her shoulder as she catches up. It's not long before she's ahead but staying close, alternating between barks and growls as a Henchman lets out a series of chuckles.

I want to turn around and gauge my distance from Henchman but ignore the urge. It's decisions like this that trip a victim up. Literally. And I refuse to go out like a camp counselor in a cheesy slasher. I won't let the reason I lose this fight be the fact my feet got in the way of each other.

The raucous sound of the nearby highway is close but obstructed by trees. I pat my pocket for my phone and feel my heart drop when the protrusion that should be there isn't.

The horn of a semi-truck blares, pulling me out of panic and back to the present. I have to make it past the trees. I have to make it to the highway. It's an easy enough decision to make, heading towards the road and hoping someone stops.

I can hear the passing traffic and imagine running through it, frantic but out in the open, while Henchman watches. And just long enough to see a car take care of the problem—me. I push the nightmare fantasy aside. Risking the highway beats taking my chances with the psychopath behind me.

The gravel parking lot is a cloud of dust beneath my feet. Then, it's a culmination of pebbles tearing into my back. His powerful grip bores down on the top of my head as he yanks. With the wind knocked out of me, I don't have more than a moment to wonder how he caught up before I'm gasping for air. My only explanation is that Henchman took this opportunity to finally run. If only I could have been faster.

I claw at his wrists as he drags me back toward the jogging path—and his van, conveniently parked with the front facing the highway for an easier escape. His latex gloves slip from under my nails as Buttons yaps beside me.

“Shut up! Shut up, you hideous creature! Ah!”

I’ve never seen her bite an ankle so hard and I can’t be prouder. She’s just given me the chance I need to get even. As soon as he stops and loosens his grip ever so slightly, I flip over and lurch head-first into his stomach.

I miss my mark and clip his ribs instead, but it does the trick. It’s something I’ve only seen on TV, and in most of those situations, both fighters go down in the process, not one, which is what I’d prefer. I just hope the pain I feel pales in comparison to his.

“Ooof!” The involuntary noise sounds promising. We both sail back onto the sandy trail, and I take advantage of my position on top by grinding a handful of sand into his eye.

“You like that, asshole?” I sneer through my teeth, using whatever flesh beneath my knee as leverage. “How does the sand look up close, huh? Feel like a picture?”

“Ah! You bitch!” I use his face to push myself up but I don’t get far. He instinctively goes for his eyes as I crawl off and over him.

“Fuck!” His teeth sink into my ankle and I go down. “Ah!”

I kick myself free almost by accident, flailing until my foot rises and connects with his forehead. I kick again and again, even as the blood from his bite smears across his face and into the sand.

I don’t push the pain away but instead use it to push myself up to standing. I lift my leg to shove my heel into his jaw, but it’s his turn to roll away in the nick of time.

Buttons barks and leaps from side to side as I fall head-first into the shrubs again. This bush isn’t nearly as unforgiving as its pokier sibling. The minor cushion saves me more than a few gashes to the face.

I turn my head before a particularly robust branch can do more than leave me momentarily stunned. I blink and know I’m wrong in an instant. I rub my right eye and only hear the sound of Henchman laughing somewhere close.

I give up on my watery eyes and assess the scene with my good one. It takes a second for the syringe in his hand to register with my brain. He grabs me, and I know what he’s about to do. When he pulls me backward into his chest, I don’t fight the impact but use the fracture of a split second I have to lift my leg, kick back, and hope for the best.

“Ah!”

I’m almost out of arm's length when he pulls me back. It seems like hours before I manage to wrestle my arm out of his grip and into his hood. If

clawing his face worked once, it should work again.

“Oh whoa!” The new voice leaves us both stiff. “He did it, you guys! He actually did it!” It’s a boy, eleven or twelve by the sound of it, and coming from the beach.

Buttons’ bark pulls Henchman out of whatever trance had him statue-still. He pushes me away, but I grip his hood and flip around to face him.

“Of course your old man’s old man did it,” comes another voice. “I’m the best.”

Henchman grunts as he loses his balance and falls to the ground. “And I’ve got video evidence to prove it!”

Henchman stands in his ripped sweater looking just as shocked as I am to see his hood in my hand. I’d ripped the fabric clean off.

“Hey, mafia guy!” Henchman’s beady eyes momentarily bloom into something close to saucers. I turn to see Leon and a young werewolf boy, followed by another werewolf who looks a lot like Thelma. “You don’t look so good,” Leon finishes, waving his phone in his hand for effect.

I hear the start of an engine and smirk as Henchman throws his hunk of junk in reverse and guns it out of the parking lot. Damn, it’s the second time he’s ran away with my back turned.

“What’s wrong with your uncle?” Thelma asks as she and two more younglings come into view. Her eyebrows are practically to her hairline, Thelma clings another new phone to her chest. A woman with raven black hair follows after, immediately reaching for two children close to Thelma.

“That’s what you get for buying cheap shit!” I point a finger at his brake lights as Leon asks me something I don’t quite make out. I’m still clutching the hoodie in my hand, my knuckles bone-white and protruding from the sheer force of my grip. I wave it around like the battle prize it is.

“Um, Mom? Dad? Who is this?”

I watch who I assume is the couple’s son grab the young boy’s shoulders and pull him back. The little girls with identical shocked expressions cling to the dark haired woman, and I suddenly feel the urge to fix my hair.

“Who? This?” Leon throws a thumb over his shoulder while Thelma hands me an opened bottle of water. “Theo. And that there’s Buttons. Cute, huh?”

“Can you read the situation, please?” Thelma hisses. “Turn that video off and use it for what it’s for!”

A buzzing sound grabs my attention. The little girl closest to it picks it

up, then looks to her mom curiously.

“Go on,” her mother says as Leon, Thelma, and their son argue about the police.

“Thank you.” I wipe off my phone, relieved to see it isn’t cracked. And that Grug’s calling.

GRUG

“Hello?” Her breath is raspy, and I kick myself for freaking out over a few missed calls. She’s definitely been jogging. Probably sprinting, judging by the sound of her labored inhales.

“Hey...” I look around the bustling beach entrance closest to her place and wonder if I’ve simply missed her in the crowd. Suddenly, my bad feeling isn’t as sure of itself. Why did I leave work on a hunch? “I’ve been calling,” I finish. “Just –”

“Henchmen attacked me,” she says.

I sprint to my car before responding. “I need to know where you are.”

“Hey! That your boyfriend?” I hear a muffled voice on the other end say. “You didn’t tell me you got a fella!”

“Leon, please!” comes another one, a woman this time.

“It’s a deep voice on the other end. What do you want from me? I –”

“I’m at the rest area entrance,” she blurts out, interrupting what I assume are nosy witnesses. “The cops are here. A group showed up and spooked him off.”

I don’t bother buckling up for the mile-plus drive down the road. The word ‘boyfriend’ doesn’t even occur to me until I’m out of the car and just a few yards from Theo. But once I see her, I can’t get the idea out of my head.

She’s squatting down and stroking Buttons as an officer stands over her, jotting down notes. Her mangled hair, puffy red eyes, and tear-stained cheeks make me want to punch a hole in Henchman’s head.

Wherever the bastard is, I hope he’s enjoying the use of his lungs while he can. Because what I have planned for the guy is going to make his night

with Tassels and Clamps look an orgy.

“Grug!” Theo calls my name just as Buttons barks my way. I don’t doubt for a second the firecracker gave Henchmen hell. Buttons’ fur is covered in a similar sheen of dirt as Theo’s, telling me the ball of fur stayed close. And hopefully vicious.

“Are you hurt?”

“Just bruised,” she says as an older werewolf lady and what I assume is her human husband approaches.

The officer next to Theo excuses herself, and the middle-aged couple take her place. As soon as the officer is out of earshot and conversing with her partner, the man grins and shakes his phone at me.

“Hell, you should have seen the other guy. I’ve got it all right here.” His wife heaves a sigh as Theo smirks at the couple, mouthing the word ‘friends.’

“Don’t act like you don’t want to see it,” the husband barks in a whisper.

Thelma looks behind her, casting a nervous glance back to a trio of officers huddled by a patrol car. “They told you not to show anyone else,” Thelma whispers, then steps in between the officers’ line of sight and her husband. “So make it quick.”

Theo nods for me to go on and watch, though I’d rather wrap my arms around her. A video can wait. I don’t know about the knot on her forehead.



“SERIOUSLY, it looks worse than it is,” Theo says for the fifth time since leaving the hospital. But I can’t help myself. A lot of minor injuries still add up. She takes the ice pack off her forehead and points to the knuckle-sized bruise near her right temple. “Half the size it was.”

“The doctor told you not to do that,” I chastise as we head to my place.

“Do what?” she asks innocently, wincing as she leans back into her seat.

“That,” I say, referring to her stiff shoulders and neck. “Fast movements and head-turning.”

“She didn’t say head turning. She –” Theo turns her head too fast, and I instinctively place my hand on her knee to soothe her.

“You alright?”

I almost run through the red light up ahead but manage to slow down in the nick of time. My arm flies up to shield her. Theo clutches my arm as we

watch the black sedan cruise through the intersection

“Sorry.”

“It’s okay...” She releases my arm but does nothing to move it away from her. I don’t know whether to keep my hand where it is or pull away.

“Buttons is doing fine, by the way.” I shift gears, then keep my hand resting on the lever.

“Delinzia’s probably taking care of –”

“She’s in Delinzia’s good –”

Theo laughs and gently socks my thigh. “Jinx. You owe me one favor.”

“Deal.” I turn down the air and lower the music. All the corgi needed was a bath and a meal, though I doubt Buttons would agree. She’ll be glad to have Theo back in her line of sight.

“I need to stop at the store before you drop me off at home,” she says, apparently out of her damn mind, joking, or both. “Buttons hates her new dog food,” she continues. “And I have a feeling once I lay myself down, I won’t be betting up for at least ten hours.”

“We already took care of the dog food,” I reply.

Well, Delinzia did but still. She’d found a full three loads of clean, unfolded laundry in a hamper and sprawled across her bed when she and the police went to check her place. All of it’s now waiting for her back at my house, neatly folded in the drawers of my nicest guest room.

I don’t care what she says, I’ve already decided she won’t be spending another night somewhere owned by Skrag. It doesn’t matter to me that she’s certain Henchman was working on his own. So what? All the more reason to not return. He knows she’s there.

Neither of us said anything about Skrag or his involvement to investigators, though Theo did give them permission to search her home. She asked, in fact. We may not know Henchman’s actual name, which I won’t be asking Skrag for any time soon, but we do know the guy likes to watch. Maybe he likes to lay in wait, too?

“You guys didn’t have to do that,” she offers.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t there to protect you, Theo,” I try. “I should have known that skinny fuck would retaliate as soon as you mentioned his face.” *And not against anyone he thought would remotely be a threat. Coward.* “Obviously he has a thing for you.”

Once again, my terrible idea comes back to bite me in the ass. The dungeon trusted us, and even though it sounds like Henchman’s failed

attempt led to a happy accident, it could have just as easily ended with a hospital visit.

“Oh, don’t worry, I let him know exactly what I thought of him,” she says, moving her ice pack from her forehead to her neck. “How did you like my friends by the way? Leon and Thelma? I should get them a gift certificate to the cafe –”

“Are you going to acknowledge what I said?” It took enough to say it. The least she can do is let me know she heard. What happened to her was my fault. At least partially. Assuming I’d be the target of any and all retaliations is a rookie mistake.

“I don’t need you to save me, Grug,” she replies. “And nothing that happened is your fault.”

“Right but –”

“And also, I think you’re forgetting the part where I won.” She pumps her fist a few times.

“And I’d pay anything for a full video of the fight, but that doesn’t mean it should have happened. You wouldn’t be sitting where you are if –”

“Skrag hadn’t initiated things?” She doesn’t yell this, but she’s loud enough to get my attention. “If you think I’m *happy* that I have a welt on my forehead, you’re wrong. You would have buried Henchman if you were there and in half the time it took me to pretty much piss him off. But this is a win for me. Don’t ruin this moment.”

“You’ve got some upper body strength,” I admit, impressed as much as I am aroused. Her toned, sun-kissed arms are more than just a sight for sore eyes. Apparently, they’re a cause for sore limbs and shattered egos. “I’ll give you that.”

“Oh, do. Please,” she kids as our eyes meet. The car goes quiet as we share a look, then a smile.

God, she’s beautiful. And strong. And patient. And considerate. Especially compared to me. Who wouldn’t take ten grand and a year of free rent to smile and look cute? Theo’s more than paid the price of trying to get a quick buck at my expense.

“You ready to see your new home away from home?” I ask, letting her know that Buttons and Delinzia have dinner ready as we speak. Well, Delinzia does, but the corgi is an integral part of the cleanup crew.

“Only if you’re sure.”

“Well, yeah,” I reply as we pull up the expertly landscaped drive leading

to my sprawling estate, tucked away and overlooking a private beach I share with two neighbors. “Just until we can check out that other place.”

I wish I’d circled the hill instead of turning up the drive. We’re parked but not finished with the conversation, which means Delinzia’s going to be watching the rest of the chat from an upstairs window. I fight the urge to scan the house for any sight of her and turn to Theo instead.

“I just want to make sure the two of us are good,” I add. “That you get everything you deserve.”

She smiles at me as she unbuckles her seat belt and turns to face me. Even flushed, scraped, and bruised, Theo’s a vision. One of my favorite faces ever. “What I deserve depends on who you ask.”

“Eh, opinions are like assholes.”

I want to go for it. I want to just lean in and see what she does. Who cares how we met or what we said the other day? This can and should happen again.

Suddenly, she’s the one leaning in. I close the space between us and gently press my lips to hers. The whimper she makes as my tongue slips into her open mouth is heaven.

THEODORA

Kissing him has never felt so right. There's nothing about Grug I don't adore. His green skin, his brown hair, those blue eyes...

All of him, the whole orc.

We've managed to slip out of the car and around back to the pool house, where he carries me in through a sliding door and over to a king-sized bed.

I can feel his muscles tense as he squeezes me against him, and I know that he wants me just as badly as I want him. His scent fills my nose—leather and sweat and something primal and male—and I ache for him. I can't get enough of him, can't stop touching and kissing and exploring every inch of his body.

His lips move over mine with a hunger that matches my own as he lays me on the bed. I moan softly into his mouth. Grug pulls away from me just long enough to look into my eyes, his gaze intense and hungry. My body is on fire for him, my desire burning through me like wildfire.

He crawls on top of me, his lips finding mine once again. I wrap my legs around him, pulling him closer to me as we kiss deeply. He slides a hand down my body, cupping my breast tenderly as he moves down to kiss the curve of my neck. I arch my back, offering myself up to him completely.

Grug's fingers slip inside the waistband of my pants, pulling them down slowly. I kick them off eagerly, desperate to feel his skin against mine.

He reaches for the hem of his shirt, pulling it off to reveal his muscular chest. I run my hands over his broad shoulders and down his back, feeling the hard muscles shift beneath my fingers.

I pull his face to mine, kissing him deeply as he moves himself between

my legs. He presses his hips against me, his cock hard and demanding against my pussy, and I can feel just how excited he is. Like he can't wait to be inside of me.

Our lips part, hot breath rushing over both of our faces as he teases me with his cock. He rubs it up and down against my wet pussy, coating it in my juices. I gasp and moan, biting my lower lip as I wait for him to slide it inside of me.

I suddenly feel him push against me, and I arch my back in pleasure as Grug slides himself into me.

I cry out loudly as he fills me completely, his green cock pressed deep inside of me. He's so long and thick that it makes me feel stretched in the best possible way. It rubs over my throbbing clit perfectly as Grug grinds against me sensuously. Every inch of my body tingles beneath his touch.

"Oh yes..." I moan softly. "Give it to me..."

Grug starts to thrust into me slowly, reaching for my waist with one hand to hold myself steady while the other rests on the bed behind my head. He puts just enough pressure on my shoulders so that I'm pinned down under him. It's making me ache to have even more of him inside of me right now, burying himself deep.

I want him, all of him. I want to pleasure him the way he's done for me. I kiss my way down his chest.

Before I can go further, Grug catches me by the waist and turns me over onto my stomach. He pushes me down onto my knees and then pulls my hips back into him.

My breath catches as his cock presses against me. His hands are in my hair, grabbing onto it and holding me in place.

Each thrust is slow and deliberate, taking his time as he teases us both. His skin feels so good inside me. It's warm and powerful and pulsing with an animal need that I never knew existed.

He lets go of my hair and grabs my ass with both hands, pulling me back into him even more roughly as he slams into me from behind. The sensation sends chills down my spine, and I can't help but moan with pleasure at the moment of impact each time.

Grug lets out a growl that sends shivers through me like waves on the ocean's surface. He wraps his arms around my waist, grabbing to hold me close against him while he fucks me relentlessly from behind.

I feel every inch of him inside me, sliding over my inner walls until

they're soaking wet. It's too much, it's not enough... I don't know what I need anymore as his every thrust drives the rest of the world away.

Grug lets out a growl, and I feel his muscles tense beneath my arms as they tighten around my body even more forcefully than before.

"I'm so close," he whispers in my ear. I can feel him trembling with desire as he fucks me.

The thought of that drives me even closer to the edge. I want Grug to finish inside me!

He slides his cock deep inside of me, slamming his hips forward and burying himself completely inside of me. My whole body is shaking as I feel his balls slap against my ass and his thick cock throb deep inside of me. I let out a moan as an orgasm tingles over every inch of my skin, making every nerve ending on my body buzz with pleasure.

My body feels like it's going to break apart under the pressure of how hard my orgasm is, but Grug keeps thrusting into me, feeling the rhythm of my orgasm and keeping it going for longer than I ever would have thought possible.

My mind floats away from my body, and I feel freer from myself than I've ever been. We're losing ourselves to each other completely. This is everything that I could possibly ever need or want at this moment...and beyond.

He's still fucking me as I come down from my high.

"Let me..." I manage between gasps. "Let me taste you..."

He pauses and I somehow get out from underneath him. It takes me a second to recover from the intensity of my own orgasm, but once I wrap my mouth around the hugeness of his cock, I'm ready for him again.

The salty taste of his precum makes me want to swallow him whole. So that's what I do. The longer I stroke him the more precum leaks out and the sweeter he tastes.

It's like nectar, a pure elixir of life that I need deep down in my soul.

He groans as his hands move to tangle in my hair. He thrusts himself into my mouth over and over, each thrust pressing his cock hard against my throat. I want it just as much as he does. I suck him hard, desperate for it, taking him as deep as I can. He growls excitedly and I feel his muscles tighten as he thrusts even faster.

I bring my tongue to the sensitive underside of his head, gently caressing it there as he holds my hair tighter still. His breathing grows shallower and

faster with excitement as he starts to tremble all over again.

My whole body is buzzing with excitement at the knowledge that I have such power over him, making him tremble in pleasure against my lips and tongue.

It makes me want to keep going, to make him finish.

Grug lets out a long, low moan as he comes. I can feel his cock throbbing in my mouth as the thick liquid shoots down my throat. I swallow every drop hungrily as he flexes his cock and shoots another thick load into me.

I slowly milk him dry, trying to keep up with the amount of semen that his cock is shooting out. He's breathing hard against me, and I can hear how exhausted he is. But he's not done with me yet. In fact, it seems like there is still more energy fueling him as his cock quickly springs back to life.

He pulls me up by the waist and spins me around so that my back is against his chest. His hand reaches around to grab at my breast firmly as he pushes a knee between my legs, spreading them wide apart. It's a little painful, but I don't care—it only makes the feeling of his body and mine joined together so much better somehow. His other hand holds onto my hip tightly as he thrusts into me from behind again... and again... and again...

His hard thickness presses against every inch of my pussy as he pounds into me over and over again, deeper and more roughly than before until I'm screaming noiselessly from the intensity of the pleasure surging through every part of my body. He's so thick and relentless inside of me that it almost hurts. A sweet pain that leaves my skin buzzing with excitement in its wake.

He grips me tighter, pulling my hips back against him hard while he holds onto both of my breasts in front of him. I squeeze my eyes shut and hold my breath as Grug slams his cock into me again and again. I hear his voice moan in my ear, but the words are muffled by the feeling of his wet lips kissing my shoulders, neck, and just about everywhere else on my skin.

His hand travels from my shoulder, down my back, over the curves of my hips, and down to my ass where he grabs me with both hands and holds me against him while he fucks me even harder. The room is spinning out of control around me as I feel every inch of him sliding inside me again and again, over and over. He's going to cum again... I can feel it...

A moment later I feel his body shudder against mine as he lets out another deep groan that seems to come from somewhere deep inside of him. His whole body tightens up against mine just like before, but this time the feeling is amplified a hundred-fold. Chills race across my skin as he flexes

his cock deeply inside of me once then twice before letting out a low moan in my ear.

I can feel him cumming inside of me, surging back into me with wave after wave of warm liquid flowing from his cock. My whole body is buzzing from the sensation, feeling more alive than I've ever felt at any other moment in my life before.

I fall against Grug's chest as he slowly pulls out of me.

He catches me easily and lays me down on the pillows while he nestles successfully beside me. Without a word, we each roll onto our sides until we're looking deeply into each other's eyes.

GRUG

“**Y**ou look like a kid on Christmas,” Theo says through a dazzling grin of her own.

It’s been a week since the incident, and Theo’s attacker is still out there. Being as torn and bruised up as he is, there’s been at least two solid leads. All sightings along the same stretch of highway he’d bolted on, too, which is promising.

I worry about the validity of a third sighting when the detective in contact with Theo mentioned a mustard yellow Dodge Charger. Either Henchman lifted another ride or the second ugliest guy in the world is headed in the same direction as his greasy twin.

“What are you smirking about?” she asks from her seat next to me. We’re both dressed to impress in matching black ensembles.

My custom-made three-piece might as well be last season's rejected prototype compared to what she’s rocking. At least in my humble and immaculately coiffed opinion. Then again, I’m a sucker for anything she wears. Or doesn’t wear.

But the onyx cocktail dress clinging to her curves is something special. The perfect outfit for tonight’s revenge, it stops just about the knees, with a web-like design that sparkles across the sheer fabric covering her shoulder blades and lower back.

I trace my fingers across the back of her neck and smirk some more. She shakes her head and waits for me to answer.

“Besides the obvious? A certain someone’s getting a piece of my fist and with you on my arm?”

“Bingo.” She nods just as the car pulls up to our designated rendezvous spot along the bay. My phone buzzes and I know it’s my driver, who knows better than to roll the privacy window down when there’s a babe in the back.

“That’s for me to know and you to find out,” I say.

Theo’s perfect face falls. She suddenly looks bored, maybe even a little insulted. I grin as her eyes size me up and down. She leans into me and places an open palm on my chest, tapping her bright red fingernails to the beat of my racing heart.

“I could torture it out of you. You know that, right?” Her plump lips are inches from me, scrumptious enough to spend the night nibbling on. At least for starters.

“Yes.”

I don’t mean to make her laugh, but when in Rome. I hold her as we share a genuine laugh. We’ve had a lot of them recently, though Delinzia refers to our ‘you had to be there’ jokes as ‘really embarrassing exchanges to be a part of.’

Theo wipes the tear from her eye and reaches for the handle. “We should go before Mr. Mrs. Daisy up there thinks we’re boning.” She points to the driver on the other side of the privacy wall.

“Oh, Mr. Mrs. Daisy knows we’re boning. He’s not an idiot.” She opens the door and shoots me a glare as she exits. I don’t know if it’s fake or not, so I decide to backpedal as I climb out after her. “What? There are no cameras back there.”

She gives me a tantalizing look, equal parts hungry bedroom eyes and the innocent girl next door. “Not that you know about.”

The red brake lights of our car illuminate her mischievous grin as my driver exits, leaving us to make laps around the area until we call for him.

“Oh, there it is!” She points to the three-story party yacht cutting through the bay and out to sea and smile.

Skrag’s on that boat, and before the night is over, he’s going to leave it knowing I’m responsible for the bad luck coming his way. A minor inconvenience compared to what he’s used to seeing from me, but still. This plan Theo and I can enjoy together.

We make our way down the path leading to the houseboats adjacent to the main marina. Few have their lights on and none of them are close to the vacation guest house of a friend of a friend.

“I feel like James Bond,” Theo whispers as we board the boat and creep

our way across the empty vessel to the attached jet ski. Suddenly, she lets out an exasperated sigh, and I turn to watch her shoulders shake with laughter.

“Are you okay? Did I pick the wrong wing woman?”

“Oh no, she’s right here.” She rolls her shoulders out and slaps on a game face even I couldn’t match. “Her legs are gonna itch like a bitch when this is done, but she’s ready.”

I climb onto the jetski first, then hold out my hand to her for balance. “Well, fingers crossed you’re wrong about the backspray.”

“Maybe we should look around for a wetsuit,” Theo suggests, pointing to the door of the houseboat.

“And risk missing the auction plus not blending into the party?” I point to the yacht.

“I could rock a wetsuit,” she says playfully, wrapping her arms around me and tugging twice. I use the full moon to light most of the way, and cruise toward our destination slowly, despite the calm, empty waters.

I can feel the grin forming on my face and relish the sensation. Soon, I’ll be face-to-face with Skrag. And a few moments after that, I’ll get my two cents in.

I pull out the flashlight for my breast pocket as soon as we’re facing the stern of the luxurious yacht. I flash the light three times, and within a heartbeat, the two crewmen hired by my private detective flashes the return signal.

“You guys didn’t bring wetsuits?” Lyle, one of my lackeys asks, adjusting the sleeves of his uniform while his co-conspirator Fin casts nervous glances around the almost empty deck. Climbing aboard wasn’t the hassle I thought it’d be, though Theo lost a heel in the process.

I watch a few fashionably dressed partygoers ascend a metal staircase leading to the heart of the festivities and narrow my eyes to glare in their direction. Wherever Skrag is, he’s not part of the revelers.

“We wanted to blend in,” Theo answers. “We thought wetsuits would be distracting.” Theo accepts the handkerchief one of the crewmen offers her and dabs at her legs and feet.

“Why didn’t you just sneak earlier and hide somewhere?” My other lackey asks, and I fight the urge to point out the pimple on his forehead.

“We work harder, not smarter.” Theo laughs and hands the handkerchief back. “Please tell me they haven’t pulled the trigger on that auction yet?”

“Oh, right,” Lyle says, tapping his pockets and then pulling out a tiny

envelope. “If anyone asks, you're Carmella Angelo.” I pull out the card with the number 27 elaborately etched in gold, our proof of invite.

We linger under a stairway as the other guests above us file back down to a large, open canopy of fairy lights and emerald-green vines. A man at the podium near the edge politely waits for the chatter to subside before tapping into the microphone in front of him.

I'm not in love with mannerism-inspired American folk portraits or abstract sculptures, but since the same thing can't be said of Skrag, I can pretend. Tonight's party is invite-only, though I've never been one to ask for permission. Not when my money can buy forgiveness.

My eyes land on Skrag a moment before Theo's. We let him and others bid on the first few pieces. I'm here for what my sources say is his number-one choice and at least ninety percent the reason he even showed up.

When security brings out the vivid rendition of an earlier artist's work, Skrag's empty eyes follow it to the small stage, where the auctioneer beams at the work like it's the Mona Lisa. Or that cool starry night painting Van Gogh did.

“Lilly Allen Spencer,” Theo whispers in my ear. “It's what this is imitating.”

I look at the medium-sized portrait and the young, disproportionate woman cooking dinner – a near-neon colored feast of fish, poultry, and what I think are a series of fruits and vegetables. An older woman observes the preparation, and her staunch expression is one of the only points in the composition that I don't have to squint to look at. Who funded the materials? Lisa Frank?

“Was hers so loud?” I ask.

“No, but I like this one.”

Once the bidding starts, it's clear a lot of other people do, too. A vampire couple in the front outbid Skrag. A werewolf woman on the arm of a gorgon immediately tops it and takes the lead. Skrag calls out his next bid, replaced in a second by not one but three new bids.

I can see his sharp brow furrowing as he does the calculations in his head. It seems more than one person here likes glitter on their carpet, which is the only thing I'm envisioning as I wait for the perfect time to outbid them all.

“Seventy-five thousand,” I call, just loud enough for the auctioneer to hear.

It's just a little less than the combined total of what both Skrag and the

vampire couple have bid. Skrag eyes meet mine, and the livid expression on his face is worth twice the amount I'm prepared to give.

"Give him hell," Theo whispers in my ear, and I intend to.

THEODORA

“Which is why I demand you rescind the sale,” Skrag finishes, flicking Grug an icy glare.

The three of us stand in the artist’s greenroom, a half cozy sitting area, half portable art studio, while the captain and auctioneer summarize our crime over one another. The curvaceous fairy seated on an overstuffed sofa nods along as she strokes the ear of a winged dachshund with one hand and texts with the other.

My boyfriend won the bid but only after a full ten minutes of him and Skrag staring each other down without blinking, all over a series of continuous gasps and murmurs. Many were my own.

“May I ask where we are?” Grug asks, saving me the trouble of having to do the same.

“The most important room on the ship,” the auctioneer replies, mostly to Skrag.

The ghoul disappeared once the gavel fell and came back with the fairy. We both knew something was off when we were pointed in the opposite direction of the other buyers, who all clustered outside the first-floor reception area. Or ballroom. Or mess hall. Or whatever the term for the indoor area on the main deck is.

At the very worst, we’ll get a fine in the end, he’d said when the plan first came to us. And that probably won’t even happen. It’s not Skrag’s boat. And money is money, so don’t get jumpy.

I relax my shoulders and visualize the painting somewhere in my new dining room.

“Are we sure about that?” Grug directs his reasonable question to the captain.

A table sporting a sheet over it and cluttered with empty tubes of paint, a collection of brushes, and two medium-sized easels — with their canvases, unfortunately, turned away from me — say otherwise. But I keep the thought to myself and miss whatever the captain said to anger Skrag. I’ve never seen him grit his teeth before, let alone talk through them.

“This is not how things are done,” he explains through a scowl.

“Hey, I steer the ship.” The captain holds up his hands. “You want a second opinion about art, ask the owner.”

“The owner is whoever made the highest bid.” Skrag heaves a patronizing sigh.

“That would be me.” Grug folds his arms across his chest as I fight the urge to sneak a peek at whatever the artist is working on.

“The highest *legal* bid.” The auctioneer spits this like we’ve mixed his oat milk up with regular dairy. I’m happy I don’t take my job this seriously. Then again, I’m not a bespectacled troll clearly living his dream life. I’d give anything to call myself a professional writer, though I’d obviously do it without the purple and silver suit.

“That would be me,” Skrag answers.

“Mr. Kuraz is right. He’s a fine patron of the arts and a great asset —”

“So your friend?” Grug interjects. “I wouldn’t call getting in the middle of a perfectly good sale on a friend’s behalf legal.”

“And how long have you been going by...” The auctioneer takes the card one of the crewmen gave us. “Carmela Angelo.”

“My money’s as green as anyone’s.”

“That wasn’t the question. This is invite-only. Exclusive.”

“The sale is your territory,” the captain says again to the fairy, who flicks her green eyes up to meet the captain’s gaze.

The auctioneer turns to look at her. “Obviously they snuck on board.”

I watch her finish her text, close her phone, and look up at the troll almost in one fluid motion. “From the sound of it, it’s obvious their bid was the highest.” She stands and adjusts her black cashmere dress as Skrag and the auctioneer object in unison.

“This is highly irregular, Daphne. Tell him. Go on. Let him know.” The auctioneer motions to her phone. Him?

“*He* can hear you.”

The voice is nearby. I look around out of impulse and flinch as I realize there's a person behind a canvas — an average-sized satyr, with dark blue eyes that match the color of the beads in his short, thinly dreaded hair.

The auctioneer clasps his hands together. "Mr. Fellows—"

"And you completely have his attention," the satyr continues, setting down his brush and approaching. "Now that you've broken his focus."

The emerald green and golden glitter under his manicured nails pale in comparison to the dazzling orange swathed across his cheek. An accident? A fashion statement? Whatever it is, I want one, too.

"You should know your most successful auction to date has been infiltrated," the auctioneer huffs, motioning to Skrag, who offers the artist the smallest of head nods. "And Mr. Skrag has paid a great mind to item 203, even mentioning it from last season's showing."

"Are you two in love?" The artist directs his question between me and Grug.

"Yes," Grug says quickly, exposing how we'd snuck aboard, as well as why. "And so I'm defending her honor," he finishes.

The satyr smiles at Daphne, then the captain. "How inspiring."

"How irrelevant." Skrag's voice sounds like gravel sliding across a chalkboard.

"How romantic," Mr. Fellows replies, gesturing to the Daphne, who I assume is his manager

"Fellows likes romantic," Daphne explains as Mr. Fellows returns to his work behind one of the easels. "Which settles it," the fairy finishes, looking back down to her phone.

"Not if you want any more of my money, it's not." Skrag looks at the auctioneer.

"And nothing else has captured your attention?" she asks.

"There's nothing left to capture," the auctioneer replies, directing the next part to Fellows himself. "We were already hosting an extraordinary crowd."

"But *not* an extraordinary desire." The artist proffers up a crisp business card stained with imprints of his glitter-encrusted digits, and the winged lapdog flaps over to retrieve it.

"My client is a sucker for going the extra mile." Daphne takes the card and hands it to Skrag, who starts telling his own side of the story until Daphne cuts him off. "A special price for an exclusive commission then. For your troubles."

Skrag moves slowly toward the easel, sneering and pointing in my direction as his pale complexion reddens. “This indecent fuck and his slutty little piece of trailer –”

Skrag’s nose cracks from the force of my fist, his skinny head snapping back as the room lets out an audible and collective, “Whoa.”

“There’s your ‘something to cry about!’” I hiss as Grug bolts toward me, the captain rushing to help a groaning Skrag.

“You’ll pay for this,” Skrag hollers, wincing as a trickle of fresh blood drips into his mouth.

“This gives me a lot to work with,” Mr. Fellows says, peeking out from his canvas as Skrag is walked out by the captain and auctioneer. “Daphne.” He snaps his fingers at the fairy.

“Good luck with all that,” she says, handing me the card while gesturing out the door. “And your new love. Isn’t that right, Theramus?” The winged dog flapping next to her barks, then flutters over to sit on her shoulder.

I reach out and pat the furry thing with a knuckle.



“I TOLD you he was too much of a coward to risk taking you to court,” Grug says from his towel next to me. The ocean waves lick at the shore in the distance as we soak up the last night of our extended vacation.

“Maybe he ran out of money,” I kid.

I’m not saying Grug isn’t onto something. But if the last two weeks have taught me anything, besides the fact that vacation tans are the best tans, it’s that self-preservation is a powerful motivator. And if Skrag wants to get as far away from Henchman as possible, he’ll keep his mouth shut, and let his goon take the fall.

I’m not much looking forward to testifying in court, though if I have to see him the creep’s hideous form again, it may as well be in an orange jumpsuit. He’s been rocking a state-issued uniform since last week when police caught him outside my old apartment, disguised as a bum pushing a stolen shopping cart. The investigators didn’t need to text me a picture of Henchman in all his dirt and grime-covered glory, but it did help.

“Maybe I should start a late career as a boxer,” I say, jabbing Grug.

“Oh, no,” Greg says. “You’re right to think you have a gift with words. I

personally couldn't put down your short story." It takes a moment for me to register what he just said. "When did you read it? You don't have to lie and say you like it if you don't."

He gives me a stern look before opening his mouth to speak. Buttons takes this opportunity to rush up with her new beach ball, forcing me to wait for what I know will be an important opinion to me.

"See, Buttons agrees. I couldn't have said it better myself." He pets the wet corgi with a sandy green hand.

"Well, I'll dedicate the next one to you," I suggest, completely willing to show him all my cards. Yes, I'm glad he read it. And yes, I am glad he has something positive to say about my noir short story, the one Delinzia still hasn't read.

"It deserves a sequel." Greg tilts his head as if an additional thought has come to mind. "Maybe if you had a studio of your own, the creative energies will do the rest." He grabs his phone to show me a series of beautiful beachfront flats.

"I thought we decided you couldn't stay away from me?" I say, referencing his desire that I stay with him.

"That hasn't changed," Greg replies. "But a professional needs professional space. And I'm hooked now. On your writing."

He makes me pick my favorite two of the five potential offices and tells me they were both the ones he thought I'd pick.

"You know me so well!" I laugh.

"It helps that I love you." He plants a soft kiss on my lips as I melt beneath him. He gets up and makes me do the same, carrying me into our bungalow and out of the sun. I know what's next and can't wait for him to get to the bedroom. What a happy surprise to an even happier vacation.

GRUG

There's nothing in this world more delectable than the taste of Theo's lips. That honey taste of hers drives me wild. Her happiness is my happiness now and I love it.

She uses my neck as a bar and pulls herself up so that she can wrap those fantastic legs around my waist. That's enough for me to want to sink my dick as deep inside of her as possible.

With a growl, I toss her onto the floor, not caring that we're nowhere near a bed or a couch. I quite literally tear her shirt off. Her tits bounce as they expose themselves to me.

My mouth waters at the thought of tasting one of those plump, pink nipples.

She leans back and smiles at me, her eyes twinkling. Her fingers stroke over the length of my cock, driving me crazy with anticipation. I want nothing more than to fuck her raw, but I want to taste those nipples before I do.

It's almost like she can't wait to give into temptation and see what sins we can commit, because she turns around and pushes her ass up in the air, awaiting further instruction from me.

I can feel my skin prick with anticipation as I slide a finger inside of her wetness. She's so damn tight, it's maddening.

I look over and see the orgasmic look on her face. It's absolutely delicious to know that I put that there, even if it wasn't intentional. I want to make her feel even better. I want to make her squeal my name as loud as possible. But before that, there is something else that I want to taste first.

I lean down before she realizes what is happening and pull a nipple into my mouth. The flavor explodes on my tongue and sends shivers down my spine. It drives me wild as I fall into a deep trance, leaning in for more as she rocks herself against my fingers.

"They're so fucking perfect," I mumble, lowering my head and sucking on one of those plump delights. My tongue swirls around her nipple before I bare my teeth. I begin to gently bite on it.

When I pull away, it's with reluctance, but pride courses through me at the sight of her breasts glistening with spit. Pure pleasure drips down Theo's face as she enjoys the sensations of my hand inside of her pussy while sucking on another breast with great hunger.

Her hand slides down into my pants and grabs onto me. Fuck yes! Don't make me wait!

"I want you deep inside of me, right now," she says. Her face is flushed and she looks so cute as she bites her lower lip.

It goes without saying that she really wants me deep inside of her.

"You know what? You're so fucking wet, you deserve a reward," I whisper roughly in her ear, then pull away with a devilish grin on my face.

"I... I..." she stammers, then stops herself when she understands what kind of reward I'm talking about. "Yes!"

She gives me an excited look as I drop myself between her legs, ready to ravish her glorious pussy with my tongue.

The first taste of her juices spreads through my mouth as I savor the flavor. I moan and close my eyes for a second, then pull away to get a good look at her face. She's so relaxed, laying back with anticipation of more.

My tongue goes wild on her pussy, licking every inch of her exposed flesh, causing Theo to squirm uncontrollably. I'm sure with enough time and patience, I could make her lose herself completely.

But right now, all that matters is that my tongue is relentless in its valiant effort to make Theo feel as good as possible.

I slide my fingers inside of her eager hole and press on her G-spot while my tongue seeks out every bit of honey that I can find to coat myself in. She moans as I do, and her juices pour down my chin, leaving behind that same sweet taste that had me begging for more a few seconds ago.

This time though, instead of pulling away and begging for more, I keep pushing forward and lapping up every single drop.

Her breathing becomes staggered when I finally come up for air and see

her happy face gaze upon me with adoration. I know that look in her eyes by now. She doesn't want a fucking thing except my cock right now.

"I want you," she says breathlessly.

My cock twitches in anticipation, but I'm not done eating her. I lower my head and go back to ravishing her pussy. She screams out in pleasure and frustration. I know she wants my cock now, but not yet. I just want her to feel amazing.

"You're... you're almost there! I'm going to cum! I'm going to cum!"

Her body becomes taut as the orgasm rushes through every nerve ending. She shakes and convulses with wild abandon, pulling away from me and finally being able to push me off of her.

I smile at her as she looks on, breathing hard while drenched in sweat and demanding a taste of me in return.

I lean down and pull her into my arms as she climbs on top of me. She rides me as hard as she can before her body begins to slow down and her strength comes back.

"That was... fuck. Goddamnit, you're so good," I say breathlessly.

Her lips are moving but all that comes out is mumbling. Besides, I'm not really listening anyway. My mind is occupied with nothing but my cock pumping inside of her tight, perfect pussy.

I let Theo ride me until she starts feeling sore. When she finally takes a break, it's long enough for her body to get that final adrenaline rush through her system so it doesn't slow down any time soon. We move to the couch where I hold her close, letting her rest up against my chest while I lazily thrust into her.

The second time takes us both by surprise when Theo cums so hard that she squirts all over my dick and onto my shirt.

I laugh and pull her closer, kissing her forehead. "That's it," I tell her. "Do it again. Let's get another one out of you."

Her body convulses and another orgasm begins to manifest in her body. I hold tighter and thrust harder, feeling the tightness within her pussy despite cumming not too long ago.

"Oh my god! Oh my god! Oh my god! Oh my god!"

She twitches around my cock as another bout of white-hot pleasure shines through her body. Her juices coat my dick and she quivers as if something is grabbing at her from the inside out, pulling everything out of her to make room for a more powerful feeling.

She's lost in sensation but that doesn't stop me from holding tighter and thrusting harder until I give into a powerful orgasm of my own. It has every last muscle in me lose control, finally succumbing to the powerful pleasure that Theo is bringing me with every stroke of her pussy.

But I want more. The thought of making her cum again keeps my dick hard.

I slowly make my way to where I had come just minutes ago and leave a trail of kisses behind me, letting them slowly turn into moans. I get to her thighs and taste both her pussy juice and my pre-cum mixed together as I continue licking away at her skin.

By the time I get close enough to her warmth, she's already begging me for more.

My tongue laps at her as deep moans and groans emerge from her mouth. Her legs wrap themselves around my head as she rocks her hips in pleasure. There's something to be said about the way she tastes on my lips, something absolutely amazing that flicks every one of my pleasure switches.

I can't get enough of it. It even makes me forget about my unsatisfied cock, which begs eagerly for some attention from my own hand as I stop for a moment and take a glance at it.

It's rock hard and aching for some release, despite the orgasm I just had.

Theo notices me taking a look and decides to help me out with the lack of attention that I've been receiving from my own hand. She pulls herself forward and grabs onto it like a primal animal, giving me the kind of pleasure that only the greatest of lovers can provide.

Between gasps, she looks down at me. "Let me taste you," she says, lips pursed together and hungry for more than just the taste of herself on my lips.

Her mouth opens wide as I slide myself deep inside of it. Theo closes her lips around me as she begins sucking like her life depends on it. Her hair falls over onto one side of her flushed, aroused face as she gets every ounce of pleasure that she can.

When my mouth begins salivating over her once again, and my own buzz starts making its way back to my lips, she climbs on top of me and slides my cock deep inside of herself.

"Fuck, yes baby," I groan.

She grits her teeth together as she readies herself for the pleasure that's about to be unleashed. The heady feeling of it starts to settle deep within her core and warmth radiates throughout every inch of her body. She holds onto

it as long as she possibly can while watching me buck in pleasure beneath her.

She squirms around until I can't hold back any longer, and the orgasm overwhelms every last inch of my body. It sends a new wave of intense pleasure through me and I explode inside of her.

Every ounce of cum that I had built up in my balls is now being shot into her, with enough intensity to make her throw back her head and scream out in pleasure. It fills her deep inside as she goes limp against me. She seems surprised at how much came out.

Our bodies position themselves how they want to before we both fall into a comfortable, endorphin-filled somberness that only comes after such an intense fuck session. She curls up beside me and closes her eyes before nestling herself deeper into my arms.

THEODORA

“So just go ahead and add the milk and butter to the same bowl with the rest of your ingredients,” the guest chef on my favorite YouTube channel, Fat Food For Fat Souls, drawls. “Y'all might think the milk and butter are too much together, but I say don't be talking that mess in Texas, ya hear?”

“Amen, brother,” I say into the screen of my propped-up phone while loosening the strings of my second favorite apron.

The lace around the blue and red, polka-dotted Christmas present is stained in the front with soy, pasta, and hot sauce, though not from the meal I'm making. I just spilled so much preparing anything creamy, it's a miracle if I manage to keep anything cute someone buys me clean.

I wipe my greasy hands on the kitchen towel hanging across my right shoulder. Grug thinks I look like a sexy fry cook with the tattered and white eyesore covering part of an otherwise delightful sight. But that's when I'm naked underneath and he's watching me cook.

“Okay, now what I want you to do is take this hot mess of satan's salad and pop the sucker right into what yours truly calls his deep-frying devil's box,” the guest chef continues.

I take my large bowl of dried macaroni noodles and all the fixings to my air fryer, which I will forever be referring to as a creation straight from the king of hell himself.

“But don't go turning it on now and letting this baby burn your fingertips. We're going to need them to sprinkle in our shredded cheeses of choice,” the chef says, flicking his dark blue eyes at the channel's host, an equally dashing

werewolf observing preparations of the three-cheese macaroni.

Or what I hope will soon be called Grug's favorite Theo meal. I've been slow-cooking chicken breasts in a steaming bog of tangy barbecue sauce and a few choice, finely diced ghost peppers for about two hours now. I check the brightly painted cuckoo clock on the wall and figure Buttons and Grug should be back from their stroll to the market soon.

Flicking my eyes over to my desk and current project, a graphic novel about a pair of siblings losing themselves in the forest, I smile at the glittering beauty hanging above my favorite place to be. Well, besides in Grug's arms with Buttons burrowed under the covers and curled up at our feet.

My new beachfront apartment turned art studio has become a second address for me and Buttons. Grug, too, whenever we want to enjoy the delights of downtown and crash somewhere close when we're done.

It's been a little over three months since one of the best moments of my life. Punching Skrag in the face was not part of the plan, one that both inspired the artist and lit a fire under the ghoul's ass. We haven't heard from him since, though Grug's seen him at a few luncheons around town.

I have no idea if he still frequents the club since I haven't gone back after quitting two months back. Henchman, whose name turned out to be Lloyd Rodchester Heringsmuss, didn't get as much time as I thought he would for attacking me.

It told me and Grug that Skrag hadn't abandoned his lapdog, given the top-notch team of lawyers who represented him. When they pleaded out, rather than going to court, it stood to reason more than what Lloyd did that day at the beach would come to light.

Three years for attempted kidnapping. It's bittersweet but not the end of the world since rumor has it the DA's office is working on other possible crimes with connection to Lloyd. I'm hopeful, but more in the mood for dinner than wishful thinking.

"We're grabbing some tinfoil now for the top. We want a crispy layer but not too dry," the chef continues once I unpause the video. "This devil's box can't be trusted to do all the work, not unless you like your noodles mushy and your three cheeses chunky."

"Not on my watch," I say, covering the silver bowl with a strip of tin foil and flipping on the air fryer.

The barbecue chicken's savory aroma has finally escaped the crockpot, filling the kitchen and the rest of the studio with a mouth-watering smell. It's

just about time to shred it up, and I head to grab a knife and large meat fork while the host quizzes the guest chef on his favorite desserts to complement the macaroni.

“I don’t know, something sweet like you,” the guest chef replies lazily.

“Then who would host the show?” I ask as the host of Fat Food For Fat Souls laughs and plays along with the flirtatious southern gentleman.

“But I guess if I serve you up with dinner, your fans might come for me,” the guest chef teases. “Better make it huckleberry ice cream or some lemon cookies.”

“Fools!” I hustle over to the freezer as the video plugs the guest chef’s own show and social media handle. The chocolate-covered strawberries should be nice and chilled at this point. I pull out the sheet of organically grown fruit and pump a fist in the air at the smooth layers of milk and dark chocolate blanketing each one. “Even coverage. I can die happy.”

“Honey, I’m home,” Grug calls over the jingling of his keys and Buttons’ nails clacking on the hardwood.

“Did y’all have a good and grand old time? That was a mighty long walk y’all done took,” I say in, admittedly, a Southern accent that sounded way more believable in my head.

“The walk was divine, darling,” he replies in his own bad version of a cattle rancher. “Made us worker bees mighty hungry.”

Buttons barks and I take it as a sign the two of us should stick to our strengths, which is in no way acting like we grew up in the Bible Belt. “Buttons don’t take kindly to our bad acting,” I say as Grug peruses the panels I’ve completed while they were out.

“Buttons kicked up enough sand for an aquarium by the way,” he says in his regular voice. “She got water in the car but probably not enough.”

I fight the urge to watch him check my work out. It’s like a chef excited to witness someone else enjoying their food. If I had my way, I’d rather Grug dislike the dinner than my early afternoon accomplishment. It takes my brain three times to get my feet to move and my hands to grab a glass to pour into Buttons’ empty bowl.

“Huh,” I say, observing the dish and wondering if I made up the memory of filling it up this morning.

I’ve been meaning to get my precious little sweet a fountain, but the silver bowl bedazzled, with hot pink and orange bling spelling her name, is Buttons’ favorite. Or maybe it’s mine because I made it special.

I look to the dry bowl, then at Buttons, who's currently gnawing on a bone she'd inconveniently left smack in the middle of the living room rug. I'd stepped on it while walking over to grab my cell charger and barely managed to catch myself from falling as I hopped away in momentary but exquisite pain.

"You're giving the villain all the best lines," Grug says, turning to give a curious look. "Did you mean to do that?"

"Of course, I meant to do that," I say, heading to the mason jar of filtered water. I pour what's left in my glass on the counter into the bowl as Buttons pads the rest of the way over. "I want the readers to pay attention, don't I? The best lines can be a good place for theme without coming off as preachy. If I want a truth spoken, I'm giving it to the asshole."

"Why?"

"Because the hero is already the hero. He can't be the philosopher, too. It makes him perfect. Phony."

I stroke Buttons' head as she gorges herself on the ice-cold water. Grug watches me a moment, then furrows his brow. I watch him think about my statement as the host of the YouTube video, still playing on my phone, reminds his audience to subscribe to his channel.

"So a more complicated character is better? Including –"

"People just don't tend to see it coming from the bad guy," I reply. "Good advice, that is. Good advice or universal truths they know up here." I tap my head. "But not here." I tap my heart. "So the message of the story is lost on a few characters but not the readers. They'll understand it fully and get the significance at the end."

He watches me, and I wonder if I over-explained. I have a bad habit of cutting people off when nerding out on my artistic choices. It's something I'm trying to work on, especially since transitioning to modeling part-time and devoting the rest to my dreams.

"Well, I like how he said it," Grug explains. "These panels make me see him more. I don't know if you meant to do that."

I smile at the admission, knowing this means the panels did their job. "You mean make a reader feel some type of way? I –"

My hand touches an odd cluster of metal caught on Buttons' collar and rotates it until the silver ring attached to her name tag is visible.

"What is this?" I'm wrong about the cluster of metal. It's not metal. It's diamond. A platinum band with a princess cut gem hangs from Buttons'

name tag.

“Me thinking with my head and heart.” Grug closes the space between us and removes the ring from Buttons’ collar. He stands and pulls me up with him, and I extend my left hand without a word, my mouth too busy hanging open to cooperate.

“I’m assuming that’s a yes?” He asks, cupping the back of my head while leaning down for a kiss.

“Yes,” I say as soon as his full lips break from mine.

He scoops me up and into the bedroom, covering my neck with kisses as the timer on the air fryer dings. Dinner might be ready, but we aren’t. Tonight we’re starting with dessert. The chocolate strawberries can wait for breakfast.