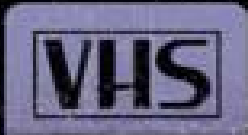




CREEPY COURT

A MONSTER **M** **A** **L** ANTHOLOGY



CREEPY COURT

A Monster Mall Anthology

DARKLIGHT PRESS



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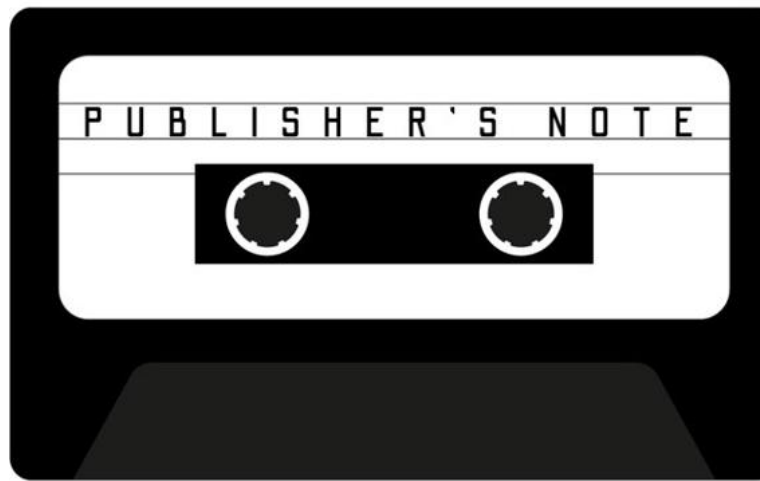
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DEAR MONSTER LOVER,

Creepy Court: A Monster Mall Anthology is a limited edition monster romance collection of fourteen stories. It will be available to purchase exclusively on Amazon in both digital and print format. The eBook will also be enrolled in Kindle Unlimited.

It will be unpublished in early January 2024.

Due to page count restrictions, the print version of this anthology needed two volumes.

The first half of seven stories are in *Creepy Court: A Monster Anthology* *vol.* *1:*

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0CKXZ7VFC>

“PLAYING MANTIS” BY CLIO EVANS

“FRANKIE’S FUNHOUSE” BY BEATRIX HOLLOW

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“FED AFTER MIDNIGHT” BY LATREXA NOVA

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“THE MONSTER OF DARKSPELL COMICS” BY SJ SANDERS

“CREEPY PASTA” BY EVANGELINE PRIEST

The second half of seven stories are in *Creepy Court: A
Monster Anthology* vol. 2.

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0CKXZ3D88>

“DREADFUL THINGS” BY MAEVE BLACK

“VAMPIRES TOTALLY SUCK” BY C. ROCHELLE

“THE BEST BOY” BY WREN K MORRIS

“THE PHANTOM OF THE THEATER” BY ELLE M DREW

“THE GOOD CHAR” BY YD LA MAR

“MALL RAT” BY ASHLEY BENNETT

“DON’T EAT YOUR HUMAN BOYFRIEND” BY LILY MAYNE

Much love,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Eva Priest". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large, stylized 'E' and 'P'.

EVA PRIEST

CREATIVE DIRECTOR, DARKLIGHT PRESS

CONTENT WARNING

Please note that this anthology features a diverse range of stories that span from sweet to spicy, and all the delicious flavors in between. Please consult each story's content warnings for further details.

They may contain the following themes, tropes, and triggers:

Abduction, Assault, BDSM, Criminal Acts, Dark Themes, Fighting, Forced Marriage, Graphic Sex, Heat, Hunting, Kinks, Menage, Nightmares, Power Exchange, Size Difference, Trafficking, Why Choose.

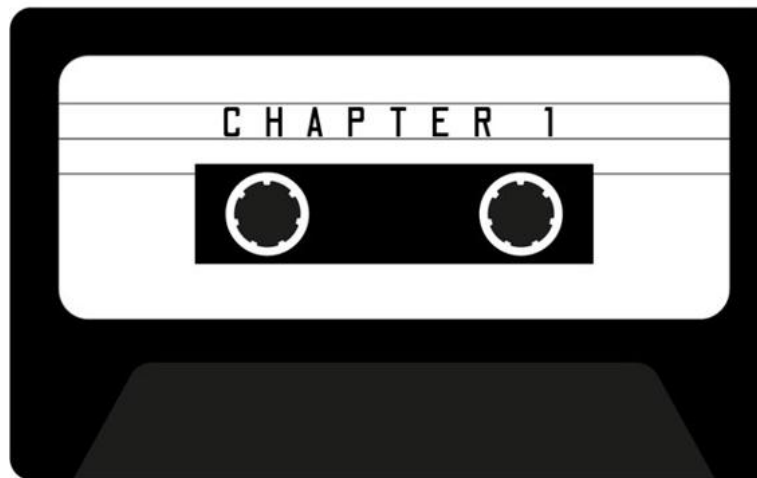
Please proceed with caution.

PLAYING MANTIS

CLIO EVANS



In this short story, you will find: instalust, pheromones, oviposition, breeding kink, cervix penetration, heats, and more.



JAMIE

IF I WERE A WIZARD, LIFE WOULD BE SO MUCH MORE RAD.

Instead, I was stuck like everyone else in this office for another two minutes. I stared at the clock, waiting for 5 P.M. to hit. I impatiently drummed my fingers on the desk, twirling the phone cord with the other hand, hoping time would move faster.

The phone rang, and I let out a hiss between my teeth. Another angry person hoping to catch an insurance agent so they could vent about whatever had happened.

“Are ya gonna get that, Jamie?” Lucy asked from her cubicle next to mine.

Hell no.

9 to 5, Monday through Friday, I was a driven business woman. I’d worked my way up through the insurance company I worked for, and was on the verge of getting another

promotion despite the assholes I worked with. I did everything I could to be the best. Do the best work, get the most clients, make the most sales.

But the moment the weekend hit, my secret addiction called like a siren from the sea.

The clock hit 5pm, and I stood up, ignoring the petulant ring. “It’s five o’clock, babe,” I said, looking at Lucy.

Lucy paused, caught in the middle of putting on lipstick. Her teased platinum blonde hair radiated hairspray like a cloud of smoke, even from where I stood. She wagged a lace gloved finger at me, rolling her eyes.

The nice thing about Lucy was that she knew I always left like this on Fridays and was used to it. It meant I did her other favors here and there when she covered for me. “Fine, I’ll answer it for you, sugar, but you owe me one.”

“I’ll bring you a chocolate suisse mocha on Monday,” I promised.

Lucy gasped. “I can’t wait!”

The phones in the office kept ringing in a loud chorus, some employees choosing to answer while others left. Like me.

On the clock, I was the best of the best—but it was the weekend, baby. I could already feel the tingle of victory in my fingertips.

“I would. I’m out of here,” I said, grinning at her.

“You always rush out of here on Fridays,” she sighed, picking up the phone. She winked at me as she put on her best customer service voice. “Hello, thank you for calling Haunt Insurance, where we help you make decisions that won’t haunt you for the rest of your life. How can I help you?”

Good luck, I mouthed, already grabbing my bag. I rushed out of the office, squeezing into the elevator and riding down to the parking garage. I slung my purse over my padded shoulder, adjusting my plaid blazer as I almost ran to my cherry red BMW M3.

I slid into the back seat and slammed the door, looking around to make sure no one was peeping. I always parked away from everyone else because my backseat was my changing room on Fridays.

All clear.

I ripped off my blazer and turtleneck, leaning down and snatching my gym bag. I unzipped it quickly and pulled out a lime green crop top and high-waisted fade jeans. Within a few minutes, I was a changed woman. I had morphed from Career-Jamie to Arcade-Queen-Jamie.

The mall's parking lot was already crowded when I arrived. My radio blasted rock, a shot of adrenaline straight into my bloodstream. The neon sign above the doors burned bright pink, *Creepy Court* drawing all of us in like moths to a flame. I pulled into a parking spot, excitement making my stomach flip.

Home sweet home.

I grabbed my bag and got out of the car. The cool breeze ruffled my dark curls as I crossed the parking lot, joining the masses that went through the front doors. A chill went up my spine, which I'd found to be my normal reaction when stepping foot onto the carpet lobby of Creepy Court. There was something strange about this place, but that only made it more exciting.

It was a wonderland.

Laughter and shouts surrounded me, the scent of burning corn dogs and popcorn wafting through the air. Teenagers moved in packs, adults stood in front of shop windows fishing out their wallets, and the elderly sat by the fountain at the center of the food court. Creepypasta had a line outside of it, the noodle sign blinking like a carb calling card.

Pasta sounded delicious, but my reward for making it to the weekend was waiting.

I strolled down one section of the mall, passing other shops. None of them mattered to me the way my destination did.

I passed Frankie's Funhouse, the only other arcade in the mall. That one served pizza, but I couldn't get over how it made me feel. I'd gone in there once before, but had felt like I was being watched.

The vibe of that place was really unsettling.

I let out a sigh of relief as I bounced to the front of GalaxyGames. The outside was painted dark blue with specks of white. The name was displayed on a glowing, planet-shaped sign. Two massive windows showed the inside. As per usual on Friday nights, it was jam-packed.

"Damn it," I breathed out.

Other people were waiting outside. I went towards the front doors, but a girl hissed at me. "Hey, lady, get in line."

My fingers itched. I had to be at my game, to make sure I'd maintained my high score.

"I work here," I lied.

She scoffed at me, popping a bubblegum bubble as an exclamation point of disgust. I ignored her and went through the front doors, sweat dripping down the back of my neck.

The clerk at the counter recognized me. Jimmy. He raised a brow but said nothing as I slinked through those that waited and eventually disappeared into the chaos of the arcade.

I was pretty sure he had a thing for me and I was chaotic enough to accept the favors.

I went down a row of pinball machines, squeezing past the shouting kids. I felt a little out of place here, sometimes, but all of those feelings drifted away as I rounded the corner and met my machine.

Playing Mantis.

No one was playing at the moment, so I stepped forward, claiming it as mine. I reached into my purse and pulled out the stash of coins I had.

I let out a soft breath as the screen flashed brilliant colors. I braced my hands on either side of the green and white machine, smiling as three digital hearts charged up.

I waited patiently to see my name at the top of the leaderboard as always. I grinned as it popped up.

But then my stomach dropped.

“No,” I whispered.

My name was not number one. *JamieandtheJets* had been knocked down to number two by a simple name.

Mantis.

Fuck.

“No, no, no,” I groaned.

Who the fuck was *that*?

I’d been playing this game for years, and no one—NO ONE—had ever beaten me. Never. I had held the golden spot for so

long.

I was going to destroy them.

My heart hammered in my chest, moisture exuding from my palms. I swallowed hard as I slid two coins into the slot and slapped the red start button.

I felt autopilot kick in, fueled by adrenaline and the need to beat them. I knew this game like the back of my hand. I'd been playing it for years. Coming to this arcade for so long that I could tell when there was a new stain on the zigzag patterned carpet. I played the game, smirking as I hit a level I'd never hit before. Surely, this would be enough to defeat my enemy.

"Fuck," I whispered.

"Damn, you're totally rad!" A teen called.

I ignored them, and the weird feeling of being observed. They could watch all they wanted.

Hell, part of me hoped that the mysterious *Mantis* was watching me right now, too. I wanted them to see me absolutely destroy them.

My heart raced faster as I played through the level. I slammed my hands down as I lost my last life; the screen turning black with the neon green Praying Mantis emblem.

The high score bloomed on the screen.

+++

1. Mantis

2. JamieandtheJets

+++

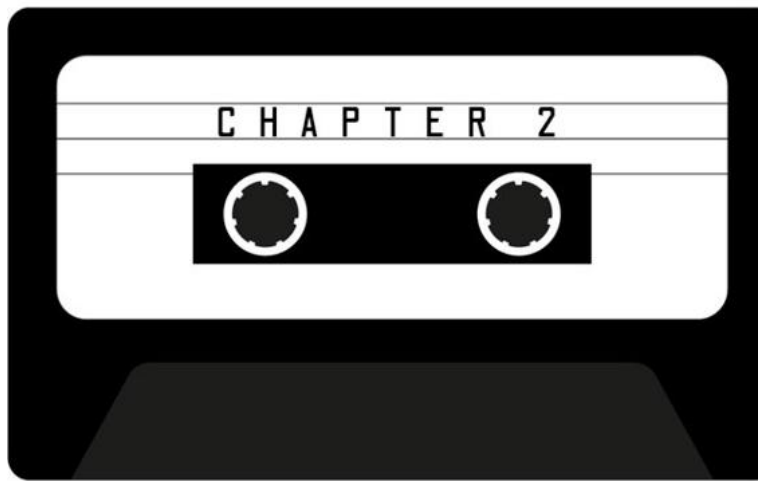
My name remained in second place.

My chest heaved with breaths. I stared at their name, stared at the game I felt had betrayed me.

I was superb. But I wasn't superb enough.

I blew a stray curl out of my face and reached for the coins. I slid one into the slot and started it over.

Whoever *Mantis* was, I *would* crush them.



MANTIS

MY GAZE DRIFTED UP AND DOWN HER BODY, MY COCKS hardening as she spent the last of her coins trying to beat my high score. I watched from the darkness as the woman shouted at the machine, her frustration clear.

For years, she had come here. I had watched since the first day she'd stepped foot into GalaxyGames. Watching her from the shadows, wanting her but never daring to pursue her.

My mandibles clicked in satisfaction as she continued to play, even as the other humans left the arcade. The mall would close soon, going from a hub for humans to a place of monsters.

We didn't bother each other. I was aware there were other creatures that roamed Creepy Court, but they had their own domains. I heard them in the night, their growls and roars and the scratch of their claws over the linoleum.

GalaxyGames was mine.

And this woman who fought so hard to beat my high score?

She was mine too.

The attendant approached her. He tapped her shoulder, and I listened as he informed her the arcade was closing. She argued with him, insisting she had to beat me.

Where she was competitive and fierce, I was slow and methodical. It had taken me some time to decide that she was the one, but her scent called to me. Her body made me lust, and she was smart. Smart, cunning, competitive.

Everything I looked for in a mate. I knew she was mine.

I would give her my life and give her my eggs.

She gave the man a curt nod and then headed towards the front. I watched as she went—but then she did something she had never done before.

She ducked out of sight and then slid behind one machine.

She was *hiding*.

Both of my cocks hardened. I let out a low growl, looking down at them. Cum dripped from the tapered heads and I felt the eggs inside of me buzzing with anticipation.

I had to restrain myself.

I pushed both of my cocks back into their pocket, grunting as I adjusted myself. I was large—larger than any of the humans that roamed around. My skin was bright green. I had four legs that were long and angled. My upper half was humanoid, but my arms stretched long and ended in points, spikes running along the underside.

The lights in the arcade dimmed, the silence settling as the attendant locked the doors.

The woman was now locked inside.

With *me*.

At last.

I waited for a few minutes. She eventually emerged again, muttering curses as she went to the machine. It illuminated her, casting a soft iridescent green glow over her body. Her dark hair fell down her back in a tumble of curls, her faded jeans tight against her skin. She wore a green shirt too, one that was similar to the color of my skin.

I ached to pull her clothes off and admire her. To taste her.

“I can’t believe I’m doing this.” Her voice was full of surprise and determination.

My mandibles chattered together with happiness. I had been waiting for this moment for so long—the chance to be alone with her. To have her standing here in front of me, trapped in this arcade with me.

My yearning for her was obsessive. Ever since I first saw her, it was her face that came to mind any time I touched myself. My cocks seemed to have a mind of their own when she was around.

She bent over, slipping a coin into the machine. It whirled to life as the game began, her shoulders stiffening as she focused on it.

She would need more coins if she were going to keep playing.

I emerged from the shadows. I crept along the rows of machines, quiet as a mouse, as I went to the counter at the front. I found the bag of coins that they kept and picked it up.

My offering.

I hoped it would please her.

I went back into the maze of whirring machines, the bright sounds pinging here and there. The arcade was never truly silent. I slowed as I came around the corner, peaking my head around to study her.

She was standing in front of the machine, her hands on her hips. My gaze fixated on her ass, the shape of her hips. I wanted to grip them as I pumped my eggs inside her dripping cunt.

“Fuck,” she growled. “I’m out of coins.”

My mandibles clicked together, and I couldn’t help it. A cloud of pheromones burst from me, invisible to the eye but pungent in the air.

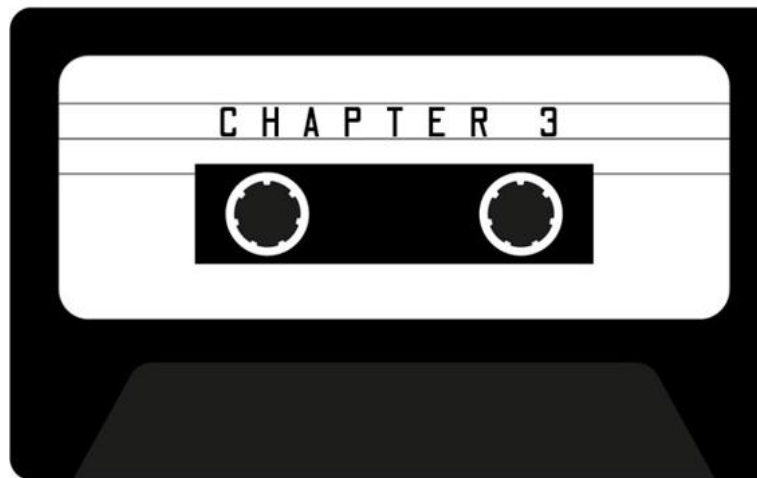
She stood still for a moment, but then let out a soft breath. Her arousal became stronger, and she let out a confused moan.

“What the fuck?”

My pheromones would send her into a heat if she was truly my mate.

I left my hiding spot, creeping towards her. She gripped the sides of the machines, letting out a low moan as she fought the waves of need pumping through her right now.

My little gamer girl had no idea that she belonged to a monster.



JAMIE

“WHAT IS HAPPENING TO ME?” I RASPED.

Suddenly, every part of my body buzzed with need. I clenched my thighs harder, groaning in surprise as my pussy pulsed. I’d never had this happen before. I needed a cock inside me. My thoughts felt erratic, my heart beating faster in my chest.

My nipples strained against my clothes, my skin sensitive. I stared at the gaming screen, at the praying mantis emblem that gleamed there. My eyes widened as I focused on the reflection on the smooth glass.

The outline of my face...

And then *something* behind me...

I turned right as a giant creature leaned in.

I didn’t scream. I should have. They were a monster, a creature, a massive *being* unlike anything I’d ever seen before.

Their skin was bright green, their eyes reflecting the flashing lights of the arcade. They had a humanoid upper half with hard abs, spikes on their long angled arms, and four legs.

I stared into their strange eyes, shivering.

“You don’t fear me.” His voice was deep and raspy, a strange edge to it.

“I must be dreaming,” I whispered.

I had to be. I let out a low moan as my pussy throbbed harder, begging for something to fill it. I’d never been this turned on before. My cheeks flared with hot embarrassment.

Not to mention there was a creature standing in front of me.

I leaned back against the machine as his oddly angled arm lifted, pinchers at the end dropping a bag of coins at my feet. They jingled, some spilling free and clinking against each other. They gleamed on the purple carpet, the GalaxyGames logo shining.

“A gift for my mate,” he huffed. “Does it please you?”

“Coins,” I whispered, staring at the bag. It *did* please me. Pleasure bloomed through my whole body, a tug in my lower stomach.

He let out a low, chortling noise. It sounded like a chuckle, but I couldn’t be sure.

“My pheromones are impacting you...”

“Pheromones?”

“You’re wet. Needy. In need of my cocks to fill your hot little cunt. Right, *JamieandtheJets?*”

I gasped. “How do you...”

“Who do you think has the high score?”

“*You?*”

He nodded, dipping his head lower until I was truly face to face with him.

It made sense, of course. Mantis was...a giant praying mantis monster. One that looked at me like he wanted to devour me. His eyes shone, gleaming. “I have been waiting for you, little gamer. I’m going to breed you over and over again. I’m going to make you mine.”

“Breed...” A low gasp left me as his arm lifted, his pincher running up my body. The hardness of his skin, smooth against mine.

“I need to fuck you,” he clarified, as if I didn’t know what he meant by *breed*.

Just hearing him say that sent a thrill through me.

This was crazy. Crazier than anything else I’d ever done, and yet, all I could think about was taking him. I wanted to touch him.

I’d already broken the rules tonight. I’d snuck into the mall and stayed like some wild teenager, unable to accept the defeat. And now, here I was, pinned against the game machine by a monster that looked like he came from it.

Desire was like a heavy drug, pumping through me.

“Do you want me to relieve you? You are under my influence... I will only take you with your consent. And then I will not stop until you end me.”

End him? I frowned, but reached up. I ran my fingertips over his mandibles, gasping. He opened his mouth, a long tongue unfurling.

Every muscle in my body tensed. I was staring up into the face of a monster, and yet all I could think about was what that tongue could do to me. What *he* could do to me.

“Like what you see?” he teased.

Apparently. My body certainly did.

“I want you,” I said. “And then I want to beat your stupid high score.”

“Why not both at the same time?”

My eyes widened as he leaned in closer. His long arms caged me against the machine, his torso pressing against mine. I let out a soft groan, feeling everything that I knew crumble around me.

I was about to fuck a monster. Hell, I *wanted* to fuck a monster.

I parted my lips as the tip of his tongue explored. He let out a gentle growl as it met mine, the taste of him turning me on even more.

His tongue drove deeper, pushing down my throat. I took him, my eyes fluttering as he devoured me. His mandibles tapped against my cheeks, our moans blending together as he pulled back.

“You will be the death of me,” he rasped.

The two claws at the end of one arm reached for the hem of my shirt. I sucked in a breath as he pulled it up, drawing it free. I reached around and pulled off my bra, never taking my eyes off him even as his fell to my breasts.

“You are beautiful,” he huffed. “A beautiful little creature. Undress further, little gamer.”

I did as he asked, unbuttoning my jeans and pushing them down. A squeak escaped me as I was lifted and perched on the ledge. He pressed against the machine. My legs parted for him. The sounds and vibrations of our game surrounded me as he lowered himself.

“Oh,” I gasped.

His tongue dipped between my thighs.

“Please don’t kill me yet,” he huffed.

Kill him?

I didn’t ask him why he thought I would murder him. His tongue pressed against my clit, pushing against the lace panties I wore. I cried out, my head falling back as he spread my legs further.

The tip of his tongue worked around the patch of fabric, running along my slit. I was so fucking wet, my body responding to him. I’d never felt this way before.

I *needed* him. I needed more.

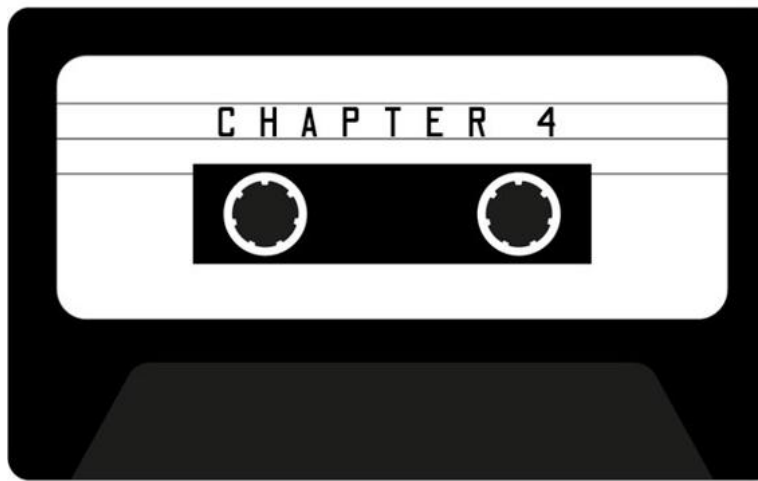
“Mantis,” I gasped. “Oh god.”

His tongue pushed inside of me and an orgasm immediately ripped through my entire body. My voice echoed through the entire arcade, every muscle tensing as the shock zapped through me.

His tongue kept working me until I completely melted. He pulled it out gently, looking up at me. His eyes shone in the flashing lights.

“More,” I groaned. “I need more.”

“I’ll give you everything I can.”



MANTIS

I PULLED HER OFF THE MACHINE AND TURNED HER AROUND, her ass facing me. Both of my cocks were fully hard, pre-cum dripping from them. She leaned against the game, her back arching as I reached around and pinched her breasts with my claws.

“Play the game,” I breathed.

She let out a helpless whimper and reached down, sliding a golden coin into the slot. The scent of her cunt was driving me wild, my instincts feeding off of her own pheromones now.

Playing Mantis whirred to life. She gripped the joystick as I pushed her legs apart, stepping closer so that I could press the head of one of my cocks against her tight pussy.

Taking my eggs would be difficult for her, but I knew she was strong. I’d work her up to it. I’d make her cum over and over

until her body accepted them completely.

“Keep focused,” I commanded. “Can you do that?”

“I can try,” she moaned. “I can feel the head of your cock...”

I looked down as I rubbed it against her. Did she know I had two yet?

My mandibles clicked, need rushing through me. My mate had accepted me, giving me everything that I could dream of. For years I had wanted her, never thinking she would let me touch her.

The taste of her was still on my tongue as I eased forward. She stiffened, her breaths becoming harsher as she took my cock, all while playing the game. I let out a low chuckle as she lost a life, the screen blinking for a moment before restarting the level.

“Be a good girl,” I whispered. “Focus on the game while you take every inch. I can feel your body milking me.”

Her muscles were squeezing me as I pushed further. She gasped as I went as deep as I could, feeling that she could take no more. I squeezed her breasts harder as I pulled back, only to slam forth again.

She yelled, her game ending as I took her. Her back muscles tensed as she gripped the machine, bracing herself as she took me repeatedly. Her scent was driving me wild, my pre-cum dripping from her cunt, the sounds turning me on even more. She fit me like a glove, tight and hot.

My long tongue ran up her spine, only to slowly wrap around her neck. She huffed as I tightened it, her body now completely in my grasp.

I fucked her harder, falling into a primal frenzy. She relaxed completely, taking a bit more of my cock with each harsh thrust. It wouldn't be long before I released for the first time inside her, and then...

Then we could do more.

My seed would make us even more desperate.

"Do you want me to fill you?" I asked.

"Please," she whined. "Please. I need it all. I need it all and more. Everything feels so good."

My hips jerked faster. I let go of her breasts and used my pinchers to grip her hips, holding her in place as I fucked her.

She cried out, her pussy squeezing me as another orgasm rolled through her precious body. I let out a low growl as I gave one last thrust, wanting to join her in our pleasure. I started to cum, using every ounce of my willpower to keep my eggs from joining as my cum shot out in hot ropes.

"Oh," she moaned. "*Oh...*"

Normally, I might relax from coming. Normally, she might too. But not now.

"I feel like I have a fever," she rasped, squirming against me. My cock was still buried deep inside her and I could feel her gripping me, squeezing out every drop. "What is happening to me?"

I let out a groan, fighting the urge to fuck her again. I was still hard. How could I not be now that I was with her? Everything about her was perfect.

She squeezed me harder, letting out the softest whimper. All of her noises turned me on even more. "Now that you've had my

cum, your body will want more,” I explained. “How do you feel, little gamer?”

“Good,” she huffed. “I’ve never felt this good in my entire life.”

“Good,” I chuckled. “Stay still.”

She stilled beneath me as I slowly pulled back. A shudder worked through her body as the last of my cock was freed. I released her, turning her to face me. Her eyes widened as they fell to both of my cocks, her lips parting with shock.

“Two? You have two cocks?”

“And you have two perfect little fuck holes,” I growled. “I want them both.”

Her eyes widened. She leaned back against the gaming machine, her legs slightly parted as my cum dripped down her soft thighs. Her eyes fell back to my cocks, taking in my form.

I loved the way she looked at me.

She hungered for me the same way that I hungered for her.

“I’ve watched you for years,” I admitted. “I’ve watched you come to play the game. Always this game. Why?”

“It’s my favorite,” she whispered. “It always has been. I’ve been playing it since I was sixteen, and I’ve always had the high score. And even though I’m an adult now, I still like to play. It still makes me happy. Helps me escape...”

My hearts pounded a little harder. For the first time in...my entire existence in this place, I wondered what life was like on the outside. All I knew was the gaming store. All I knew was the scent of the different cafes that lined the food court or the

remnants of butter outside the theater. The dark undercurrent that haunted this place, the monsters that were trapped within.

She was my window to the outside world. My ray of sunlight amongst the neon darkness of Creepy Court.

“Are you...from the game?” she asked tentatively.

I chuckled and reached for her. Part of me expected her to flinch or wince, but she did neither. Instead, she stepped closer, her hand touching my chest.

“No,” I rasped. “I don’t think I’m from the game. I don’t know how long I’ve been here, or where I came from. I only know this place.”

Her fingertips were light over the hard green shell that was my skin. She moved them up further until she pressed her palm over my hearts.

“This is crazy,” she whispered. “But I want more. And I don’t care if you came from the very depths of hell. I want you.”

A low growl rumbled, and I tugged her closer, holding her to me. She looked up at me, a smile tugging at her full lips.

“I’ll take you to my nest,” I said. “If you’re willing.”

The nest that I had been prepping for years.

She nodded. “Take me there.”

Delight rushed through me. I picked her up carefully, holding her naked body to mine as I turned. I moved to the room in the back, stepping past the dusty shelves filled with supplies and games. There was a door there, one the humans never opened. It was as if they knew a monster lived there.

I held her to me with my long arm as I opened the door, carrying her into the small room. She sucked in a breath as I

closed us in, her eyes widening as she saw the nest I'd made.

This was where I would give her my eggs and my life. Everything I had was hers.

Soft blankets padded the floor. I'd stolen them from one of the stores, along with pillows.

"This is amazing," she said. "It really is like a nest."

"It is," I said proudly.

She wrapped her arms around my shoulders and then moved, her legs wrapping around my waist. My cocks were still hard, the tips brushing against her pussy as she held onto me.

A low groan left me. I lowered her onto the blankets, pinning her beneath me. Her dark hair splayed out, her hands running down my torso.

She was everything that I'd ever dreamed of and more.

"Can I explore your body?" she asked. "I just want to touch you."

"Yes," I said. "Please. I want you to touch me everywhere you want to."

She smiled and leaned up, pushing my shoulders until I rolled over onto my back. My body was large and angular, my many legs spreading as she rose and sat on my lower half, my cocks right in front of her.

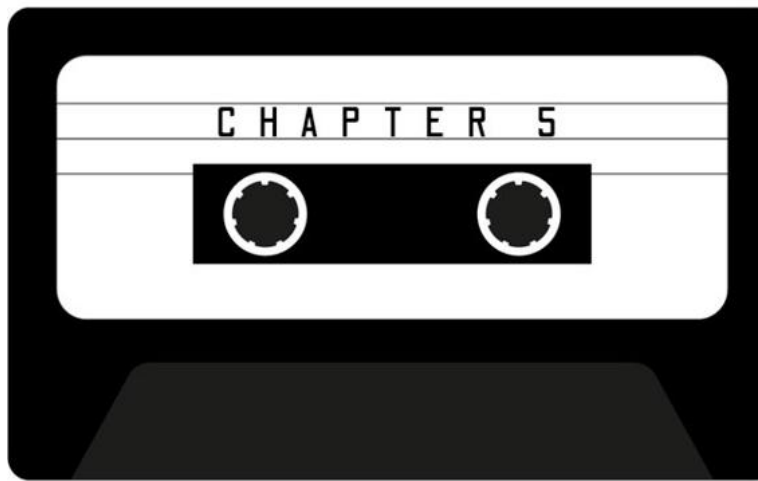
Her hands wrapped around each one, her eyes widening. She studied them the way I studied her, running her fingertips over the ridges. My cocks were dark pink, the veins bulging as pleasure rolled through me. I let out a helpless moan as she seemed to take all of my control, my body submitting to her.

Whatever she wanted, I would give her. My body felt like it was on fire, the ends of my pinchers digging into the blankets as she stroked me.

Jamie leaned forward, her eyes meeting mine as she parted her sweet lips. I gasped as her tongue ran over my cock's head, slow and sensuous. She kept stroking as she sucked, soft moans leaving her.

"You feel so swollen here," she said, squeezing the base of my cocks.

"Eggs," I rasped. "My eggs. The ones I will soon fill you with, little gamer."



JAMIE

I SQUEEZED THE BASE OF HIS COCKS, SUCKING IN A BREATH AS pre-cum dripped from the heads. Both of them throbbed in my grip as I licked them, the taste of his cum making my mouth buzz. I sucked the tip of one, groaning as I moved to the other, back and forth.

Tonight had turned into a dream. Perhaps a nightmare to some, but I'd only come to realize that I had a *thing* for monsters.

Especially ones that fucked me while I played my game.

I sucked harder, listening to the sounds he made. The grunts and groans, the way his mandibles clacked. His hips bucked as I took him deeper, my eyes fluttering closed as he hit the back of my throat.

My pussy throbbed with need. I slid my hand between my thighs as I took his cock, my fingers rubbing my clit. Bolts of

ecstasy went through me, my muscles tensing as I pushed the two of us to the edge.

“*Jamie*,” he hissed. “I must fill you.”

In one swift motion, he rolled me onto my back, his body hovering over mine. I gasped as he pinned me beneath him, his eyes gleaming like disco balls as the head of one of his cocks pressed against me. I was already so wet, ready for him.

“Take me,” I whispered.

He let out a low growl as he thrust forward, his cock filling me. I cried out as my cunt gripped him, taking as much as physically possible before he paused, allowing me to adjust to his length and girth. I gasped at the ridge that pressed right against my G-spot, an involuntary shiver working through me.

My nipples hardened, my fingers gripping the soft fabrics of the nest as he slowly pulled back. He thrust again, the two of us groaning in sync as he pumped into me.

He gripped my knees between his pinchers and pushed them back, holding me in place as he fucked me. I gasped as the head of his other cock pressed against my ass, almost pushing inside with each movement.

“Mantis,” I moaned. “Fuck. I want your other cock inside me but we need *something*.”

“Hold still,” he growled.

I did as he asked, stilling as he pulled his cock out. I gasped as cum shot from the head onto me and then he leaned down, using his tongue to push it inside of me. First my pussy, and then slowly my ass. I groaned as he worked me, using his monstrous seed as lube until I was ready to take his cock there too.

I arched against him, close to the edge. He drew back, letting out a dark chuckle as he moved over me again, both cocks ready to push inside me again.

“I’ll take it slow,” he whispered. “Your little human body is not made for a monster like me. But the pheromones have put you in heat, and it’s working its magic. You’ll take them both.”

I shuddered, heat pouring through me as he pushed forward. This time I took each cock, a long moan drawn from me at the sensation of being completely filled. Filled in a way that I never had been before.

“You’re doing so good for me, little gamer,” he rasped. “I’m going to fill you with my eggs after you cum for me.”

The sound of his cocks taking me filled the small room, coupled with our gasps and moans. He fucked me harder, my body gripping him as I got closer and closer to coming.

A cry tore from me as an orgasm came, pleasure rushing through me. He stilled as I gripped him, shivering around both of his monstrous cocks. I moaned, relaxing as I felt the endorphins from coming so hard.

His hips gave a small thrust, reawakening the fervor. He let out a low growl as he moved again.

“You feel so good,” he moaned. “My perfect mate.”

“I want you to fill me,” I whimpered.

“I will,” he promised, thrusting harder.

My eyes fluttered as he pumped into me, sliding in and out until finally he let out a guttural snarl—hot cum shooting inside of me. My eyes suddenly widened as I felt my entire body tingle, his cum making me feel like a live wire.

“Oh god,” I cried.

Another orgasm rolled through me, followed by another. And then another. It was like his cum was sending my body into a frenzy, his cocks pushing deeper with each mind shattering orgasm.

I felt pressure against my cervix, but instead of the pain I expected, I felt pleasure.

“What is happening?” I rasped.

“Your body is getting ready for me,” he huffed. “Relax, little gamer.”

I gasped as I suddenly felt something bulge at the base of his cocks, slowly working its way up both shafts.

“Oh god,” I rasped.

It was a slow push, two round objects lodging themselves inside me. I gasped, an orgasm suddenly rushing through me at the invasion. I’d never come like this before, didn’t even realize it was possible. I felt one egg be shoved in further, ready to be pushed deeper. I groaned, arching against him right as I felt another bulge at the base of his cock.

His cum dripped out of me as another egg pushed out, bumping against the one already inside of me. I gasped, writhing under him as it happened again. With each egg, I felt myself relaxing further, helpless moans leaving me. I felt like I was high, a mix of euphoria and pleasure.

He shuddered as he gave me the last of his eggs. I looked down, seeing the bulge of my lower stomach. He slowly pulled out. I could feel his admiration, his appreciation, his desire.

“Beautiful,” he whispered softly. “If you wish to kill me now, I will die knowing I gave you everything I have.”

“Kill you?” I whispered, confused. “What do you mean?”

“It is custom for you to behead your mate,” he said sadly.

“I’m not going to behead you!” I exclaimed.

I started to sit up, but gasped as I felt an egg slip free. Fuck. I laid back down, letting out a short laugh. I couldn’t believe this beautiful monster thought I was going to kill him now that we’d had sex.

This was not the kind of pillow talk I was used to.

“I will not *kill* you, Mantis. I was going to ask for a second date...”

“Really?” he whispered. “You want...you want me to live?”

“Yes! That’s a crazy custom!”

“Where I’m from, it is always that way. Of course, there are rare exceptions. You honor me, little gamer. I never believed I would be...”

“Wanted? That I would want you?” I let out a helpless giggle.

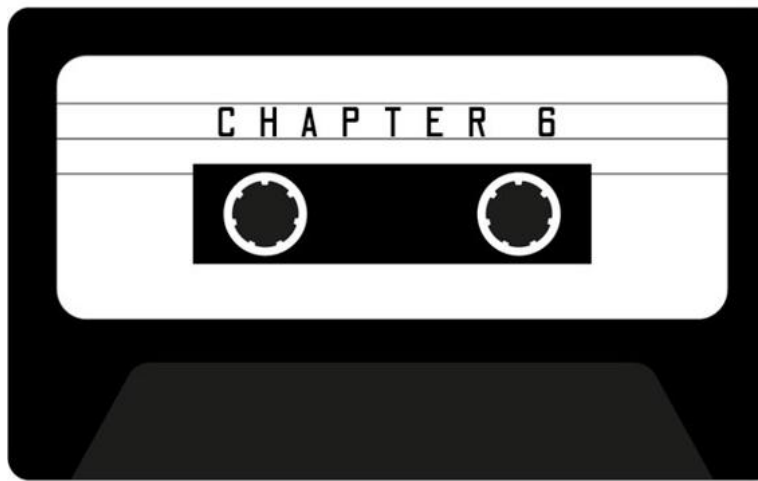
“What do I do now?”

He leaned down, pressing one of his pinchers to my stomach. I gasped at the pressure, moaning as all of the eggs slipped out, covered in our cum.

“Fuck,” I groaned.

He chuckled. “I guess we...plan another date?”

“Yes,” I groaned. “Another date.”



JAMIE

I FELT A SENSE OF SADNESS AS THE MALL CAME BACK TO LIFE. Mantis held onto me for a while longer, the two of us curled up in his nest. I didn't know how I was going to sneak out yet, but I would manage it.

After all the eggs, we'd cleaned up, and I'd shown him what snuggling meant. He discovered that was his favorite thing. I lost track of time when I was with him, it seemed.

I should have run and screamed, but how could I when he was so damn sweet? Monsters were real, monsters were hot, and monsters were better in bed than any human I'd ever met.

Now I just had to figure out how to sneak into the mall all the time...

He caressed the top of my head, his sweetness making me smile.

“I will be back,” I promised him, letting out a sigh as I sat up. Every muscle in my body felt like jelly, as if I’d run a marathon. “I’ll come back tonight and we can have another date.”

“I will count every moment until then,” he said. “I will prepare a new nest while you are away. I will do everything I can to please you. Your happiness means everything to me, little gamer.”

I nodded, trying to fight the tears that suddenly sprang up. Why did he have to live here all alone? How hard would it be to bring him home? Could he even fit in my apartment?

“We’ll find a way,” I promised.

I reached for my clothes and got up, putting them on slowly. My thoughts were running like a freight train, trying to work out a solution.

I pulled my hair back and tied it up, and then turned to look at him. He stood up, pulling me close. I wrapped my arms around him as I accepted his monstrous kiss, one that had my pussy aching to be filled by him again.

“We will be together again soon,” he promised.

“We will,” I said.

I turned and went to the door, slowly opening it and poking my head out. I could hear a voice out in the arcade. One that belonged to the owner, Buddy Bardot...

Shit. How in the hell was I going to sneak past him?

I slipped into the storage room and then went to the doorway, listening.

“I can’t keep running an arcade. I’m getting too old. And I want someone that loves this place that can handle its...

creepiness. Where would I even find someone that would want to buy?"

Oh my god, they were selling the arcade.

I peeked around the corner, spotting Buddy. He was dressed like an old wizard from a movie about a hobbit, his Motorola DynaTAC 8000S held to his silver sideburns.

I had enough in savings and could get a loan...And my family would be happy to help me out....

Excitement burst through me.

That would mean I could see Mantis anytime I wanted. And that he wouldn't have to be trapped here.

I had to buy GalaxyGames.

Before I could stop myself, I rushed out into the open, not caring if he wondered where the hell I came from or that my hair was a frizzy mess.

"Buddy," I said, startling him. "I can buy the arcade. I want to buy the arcade."

"Jamie!" he yelled, staring at me like I was an alien. "Where did you come from?"

"No worries about that," I blurted. "I love GalaxyGames and have been coming here for years. I want to buy it from you."

Please, please, please let me buy it from you.

I loved my job but this would mean I was my own boss. I knew I could run an arcade.

"Hold on Phil, I might have the answer to all my problems," Buddy said, ending the call. He put the antenna down and frowned, sizing me up. He stroked his long beard with a deep *hmm*. "Jamie, you've been coming here for years. And I know

you love that one game, but do you really love the whole place?”

“Yes,” I blurted. “And I’m a smart businesswoman. This would give me the chance to flourish.”

I’d never have to go back to the office again.

That thought made me feel giddy.

“Well...this place can be...different...”

“I know about the monster, Buddy,” I breathed out.

His eyes damn near bugged out of his head. “Keep your voice down, Jamie,” he said. “I mean. I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

I raised a brow and smirked. “Sure. You don’t think there’s a...creature here?”

He hissed between his teeth. “No one can know.”

“But I know and I’m cool with it, Buddy. I’m the perfect candidate.”

He shook his head and crossed his arms. “Are you sure you want this place?”

“I am.”

“Then it’s yours. Including that...monster...”

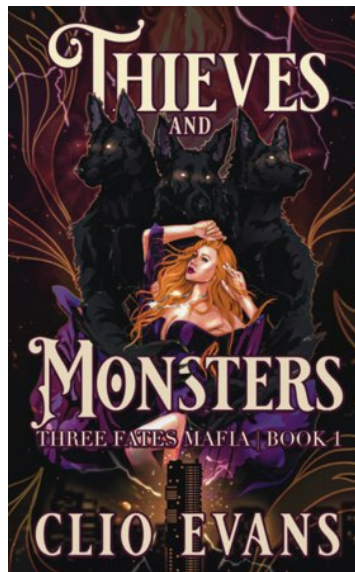
I grinned. I didn’t have the heart to tell him that the monster was already mine.

And that I was already his.



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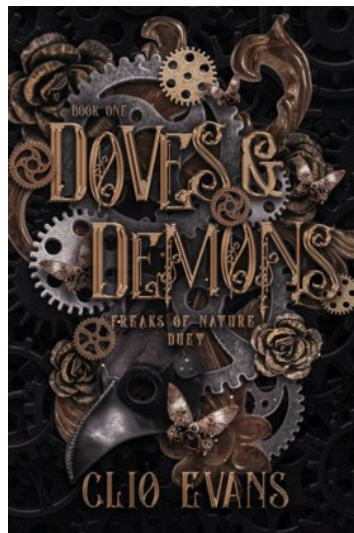
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About the Author

Hello Creatures!

My name is Clio Evans and I am so excited to introduce myself to you! I'm a lover of all things that go bump in the night, fancy peens, coffee, and chocolate.

IF you had the chance to be matched with a monster or alien— what kind would you choose?!

Let me know by joining me on FB and Instagram. I'm a sucker for werewolves (and swoony tentacle aliens) to this day.

[Clio's Creature Newsletter](#)



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FRANKIE'S FUNHOUSE

BEATRIX HOLLOW



Desperation for cash has led me down a rainbow painted hallway to Frankie's Funhouse—a children's gambling casino.

Or as my boss likes to call it, a pizza arcade.

The coworkers are strange, the patrons are disturbing, and the animatronics are possessed. Which I was willing to put up with until my boss died.

Well, he was murdered, actually.

Now I have to serve pizza and birthday cake while thinking about burning down the mall to hide a body for an animatronic that keeps hitting on me.

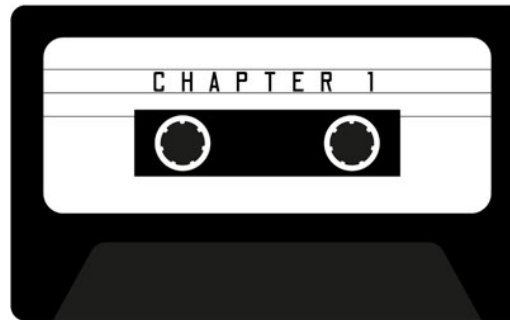
Drug dealings in the backrooms, puddles of blood seeping out from the storage closet, and parents threatening to talk to my (dead) boss if I don't get their screaming kids' pizza was all manageable...

Until I realized I didn't mind Frankie's possessed tongue in my mouth.



Content Warning:

MF human x animatronic; Explicit violence, gore, and death;
Explicit sexual content; Dubious electric play; Sudden
submission; Degradation; Side character drug dealing and drug
use; A beheading and other loss of limbs; Unrecommended
use of a chainsaw; Satanism; Violent use of a spork; Bad
pizza; (NO harm comes to any children).



ALL I WANTED WAS TO DIVE INTO A DEEP-FRIED PIECE OF bread and questionable meat on a stick before my interview, which was in...I looked around for a clock but couldn't see any around. Elevator music was playing from the mall speakers as I maneuvered around throngs of shoppers to get to The Good Char.

“Shit,” I huffed. My interview was likely five minutes ago but I was going to throw up on their lap if I didn't get carbs in me. My mom and I had cleaned out the wine coolers when no other family members felt inclined to imbibe last night. They stuck to their soda while we hackled like hyenas over sweetened peach-flavored alcohol.

Which brought me back to my purse, or should I say my mom's purse. I'd accidentally grabbed it since we had matching lavender pleather purses. How I didn't immediately realize something was wrong I was chalking up to early morning delirium. This thing weighed ten pounds and was digging into my shoulder.

It was bursting with Avon cosmetics that my mom was attempting to sell everywhere she went. I heard a lipstick liberate itself from the purse and drop to the floor. I kept

walking, unconcerned where it rolled and happy to be free of one of the contents.

The scent of yesterday's fresh perm wafted in my face—a biting chemical scent I found oddly nice. My fingers pressed into the tight, dark curls, enjoying the texture and bounce.

Man, I was hungry and hungover. Enough that the line at the corndog place didn't even bother me even though it should, considering I was running late. My eyes slid around the packed mall hallway. A thriving mall was a dangerous yet exciting thing—more shoppers than ever, bright smiles, and multiple full bags in everyone's hands.

Ten minutes later I rushed through the mall while forcing corn dog down my throat. I ran past a store mascot and shivered in displeasure at the sight of it. I didn't trust people in costumes. Ironically, clowns were my least concern. It was the ones in those cartoon character suits that disturbed me the most. I didn't like knowing there was someone inside its body. Some unknown person I couldn't see and couldn't get a read on. For all I knew they were jerking off in there while holding a knife. Bunch of sick fucks.

I sent the mascot that looked like some peculiar fuzzy monster a mean look he didn't see and hurried down a less crowded hallway. The people petered out as I continued toward the back of the hall. The less popular shops were down here. The mall swords, the antique shop that gave a frightening aura, and my destination: Frankie's Funhouse.

I pushed the last piece of the deep-fried cornmeal and hot dog into my mouth and chomped aggressively. The thing about eating bread fast was that it gave me hiccups. So as I swallowed a too-large mouthful of only partially chewed bread, I began to hiccup at an alarming rate.

Frankie's was empty, hopefully because of the time of day. It was like an arcade with a few fun games like Pac-Man and Asteroids, but it was mostly carnival games. Bowl a cue ball into the hole. Shoot a basket. Win points and get tickets, trade in the tickets for prizes.

Essentially this was a kid's gambling casino.

I'd never been here myself but I knew places like it. Cheap pizza, screaming kids, bowling alley carpet. This one was special though... This one had Frankie. He was a has-been now but at one point Frankie had been the biggest thing on kid's television. And this wasn't some copycat Frankie, it was the real deal. The very same animatronic featured on the tv show that was also called Frankie's Funhouse.

Welcome to Frankie's Funhouse, kids! I could hear the intro in my head. The chipper music, his eyelids blinking one at a time over big round plastic eyes.

I saddled up to the prize counter where a girl about my age was blowing a bubble with her bubblegum. The uniform looked like a cross between a clown and a street walker and it was one hundred percent weird as a uniform for a kid's place.

"Hey, *hiccup*." Fuck. She looked up at me. "I'm, *hiccup*, here for the interview." I hiccuped again but just stared her down as if this was perfectly normal. My glare could make grown men redecide their actions. It was a bonafide superpower. She decided to ignore the hiccuping.

"Back there," she said, waving towards an opening to a large room with a stage at the back. Thick red curtains blocked off the stage. I thanked her, hiccuping more, and then made my way over. When I pulled back the curtain and stepped through I grimaced. A collection of horrifying animatronics littered the stage. Their lidless, huge eyes were all aimed at me. It was a

strange ragtag of various human-like animals wearing black leather and chains as if they were a metal band.

Maybe I didn't need money for an apartment. I could just keep living at home for the rest of my life...

"Hey there, you must be Ramona." The voice came from the animatronics. I stared at them in a cold sweat. Then a man stepped from behind them, dropping a screwdriver into a toolbox.

"Gus?" I asked, eyeing him.

"That's me," he said, flashing a smile. He had rolled-up faded jeans, white socks, new balance sneakers, perfectly cut blonde hair, light blue eyes, and a college shirt that showed off lean muscles. Which was really weird given Gus was the store owner and this guy looked the same age as me.

"Your dad—" he started.

"Not my dad," I hissed with vitriol. Ray was my mom's ex-husband and the scum of the Earth. It was almost comical how unlikable he was. Then he had to do something stupid like help me get a job. Which made me hate him even more because now I felt like I owed him.

"Okay," Gus said, giving a long blink. "Did Ray explain what the job is?" He flashed another white smile. I eyed him suspiciously. Why was the owner of a rundown pizza arcade a preppy college jock?

"How old are you?" I blurted out, my face heating suddenly because that was weird. He probably thought I was interested in him. I saw movement from the corner of my eye and slowly looked to the left but there was nothing there except an empty spot where an animatronic might stand between two others.

“Older than I look,” he said with a chuckle, smiling even wider. God, he *did* think I was hitting on him.

“Ray didn’t say much.” I shifted the purse strap around on my shoulder to try and get a little relief from its weight.

“We’re low staff at the moment so there will be a lot of hours.”

“Perfect.” The idea of a large paycheck sat well with me. Plus, I was tired of my house, cram-packed with my three younger siblings always running around yelling and being annoying. Their puberty stank like sweat, hormones, and unwashed ass.

“Maureen will show you the ropes the first half of the day but then you’ll be on your own tonight. She has some concert she insists is necessary to go to or she’ll die.” I stood there a moment, slightly dumbfounded. Did that conclude my interview? It sounded like I got the job. He hadn’t even asked me anything about my work experience.

“So if you don’t know, this is a pizza parlor and arcade for kids all rolled in one.” There was pride in his voice. The dark carpet with neon geometric shapes practically glowed.

“Aren’t all arcades for kids?” I asked, looking back at the animatronics. There was a drawn-out moment of silence. I looked over at Gus and he was giving me the most scathing look I’d ever seen. My eyes bugged a little and I wondered what major offense I could have accomplished in my statement.

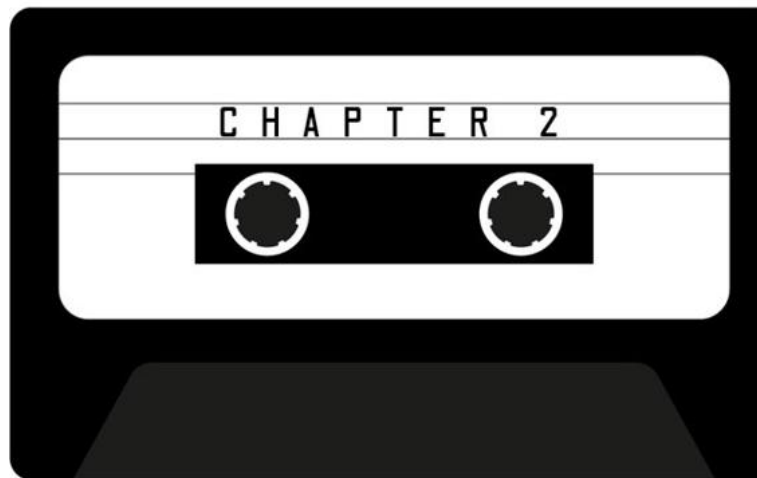
“No,” he finally said with a very long sigh, mumbling under his breath about respect and gaming.

“Right, okay, got it. *Kids* arcade plus a Pizza Hut.” Then I mumbled, “*Plus whatever nightmare fuel those are.*” I looked at the empty spot. It wasn’t empty anymore. How had I...the dim lights and the neon carpet were playing tricks on me

because there was no empty spot now, there was Frankie himself—a tall, humanoid coyote wearing a trim-fitted business suit of all things like some wall street banker who was rolling in cash. Broad shoulders, a thin waist. A smirk was on his face and his tie was rainbow striped. Christ, who designed him? Why'd they make him so...so...

Don't fucking say attractive, I growled at myself. He was *not* attractive. He was a fucking robot coyote and his eyes were oversized and practically lidless. I shivered, some archaic part of my lizard brain really disliked his almost but not quite human-like features.

Whoever thought that design screamed kid-friendly probably had the Night Stalker news reports recorded to video tapes to watch on repeat.



I WAS WEARING THE SLUTTY CLOWN OUTFIT AND IT WAS EVEN worse than I anticipated. Worse than anyone probably could anticipate. It was as if they intentionally thought of all the ways an outfit could make a job harder.

Some parts were sort of cute, maybe. The white collar that hung over my shoulders was okay until I realized it ended in points that had jingling bells attached to the ends. The rainbow thigh-high socks would be cool if they didn't keep rolling down my thighs.

“Shouldn't work outfits, I don't know, be convenient for working?” I asked Maureen the bubble gum chewer as I held up my arm and saw the six inches of extra sleeve hanging from the tips of my fingers. It was a loose-knitted turquoise sweater that went over a pink tank top that covered little more than my chest. “Won't this drag through the pizza?”

“And cake, yeah,” she said, popping a bubble.

“How do I grab things?” I asked in exasperation. My arm flapped around and I watched the extra half-foot of fabric sway back and forth.

“You have to roll them up every time. It’s a pain in the ass but you get used to it.”

“*How* do I get used to this?” I asked then my feet slid and I nearly fell on my butt because, of course, we wore roller skates. Of course. As I twisted around, trying to not fall, my rainbow-striped shorts crawled further up my ass.

“These are underwear, not shorts,” I hissed, trying to grasp the locker door through the sleeves. I eyed my own clothes inside the locker with longing. My mom’s purse was bursting with Avon products that wished for freedom. Dealing with that seemed like a piece of pie compared to my work outfit.

Maureen stood up and slammed the locker shut, making her point that complain-time was over. My arms spun around like windmills as I watched her glide towards the locker room door. Her blonde hair was blown out with a dreamy feathered look, her layers and bangs fluffy and with bounce. Practically a Farrah Fawcett stunt double, especially with how she skated with ease backwards, watching my arms spin around with both fascination and apathy. An expression I’d never seen anyone able to pull off before.

“You’ll get used to the skates too,” she offered.

“And what about the shorts?” I asked. Her ass was half out too but unlike mine, her butt was petite. Mine had underbutt cleavage and a jiggle. “This place is for kids, isn’t it?” I asked.

“Kids love the outfit,” she said. “Disturbingly so,” she mumbled as she flipped around and glided down the hallway. I

groaned and stumbled after her, half falling, half rolling the entire way.

“Ramona!” My mom’s ex barked out. He was seated at one of the long tables in front of the stage wearing a thick golden chain, a sweater, and chunky sunglasses. None of these things were appropriate for the location. It was hot, dim, and kids were not impressed by gold chains. A half-smoked cigarette clung to life on his bottom lip as he talked.

“Ray,” I growled, falling after Maureen. She turned and eyed me up and down, looking at me with a more critical eye now that she knew I knew Ray. He was ruining my reputation before my job really even started.

He scanned my outfit, glass blue eyes squinting, and barked out a laugh that was far too loud, spittle flinging from his lips and his face turning red in delight. His cigarette leapt from his mouth and landed on the table, sparks and ash flying out and dying quickly on the table.

“What are you doing here?” I grumbled. He had to wipe tears of laughter from his eyes before he could talk. The cigarette continued to burn unperturbed on the table and I watched as a small blackened mark appeared before he finally plucked it back up.

“This is my haunt, me and my buddies like the *aesthetic*,” he said with a weaselly little smile. Aesthetic? I looked around at the kid arcade and aged animatronics in horror. Then I looked back at Ray and finally gave the two guys with him a brief glance. They wore matching windbreakers and also sported the sunglasses and gold chain Ray wore. Whereas Ray had black hair, these two had hair so golden it had to have been bleached.

“You all look like criminals,” I commented. Ray spit out the soda he had been drinking from the yellow Frankie Funhouse cup. “Oh god, you are criminals,” I groaned. In theory, I had already known that. Ray was a drug dealer but I had not expected him to run his ring out of a kid’s funhouse in the mall.

“You need to learn to keep that pretty little mouth shut, Ramona.”

“Okay that was gross,” I practically threw up the words on the floor. “Is this why Mom finally dropped you? Because you sell coke at Frankie’s *Fucking* Funhouse?”

“Your mom couldn’t handle the fact that she didn’t put out enough.” He slapped one of his buddies’ backs with a bark of laughter. “Hansel and Lars get it!” The two blonde men didn’t give any indication they were part of the conversation. I’d learned not to be surprised by any crass or stupid remark from Ray’s mouth. The man was a walking joke of a human, an infuriating one that I thought about strangling regularly.

“You’ll learn this one day sweetheart—”

“Don’t ever call me that again,” I grumbled.

“When you get yourself a man, you need to be able to please his needs. Now I’ll admit I’ve got more needs than most guys. It’s all the extra testosterone,” he commented, petting the little line of hair above his lip that he called a mustache.

“Ray, stop talking,” I pleaded, my eyes shooting to Maureen.

“You listen here. I’ve got some fatherly advice.” I felt nausea roil up in my stomach. “Your momma didn’t spread her legs enough and when that happens I gotta find some extra snatch. It’s natural for a man to spread his seed. For some reason, your bitch of a mom had an issue with that.” I closed my eyes and

took a deep breath so I wouldn't fling myself across the tables and punch him in the face repeatedly.

"This is neither advice nor fatherly. Thank you for the traumatic conversation I'm sure to relive at the most inconvenient times." I suddenly found the will to skate better and glided towards Maureen who had witnessed the entire shitshow.

"Skate, please," I hissed through my teeth. She snorted a laugh and then did as I asked, taking us back to the front counter. As we rolled around the back of it I noticed there was a television set on top of a VHS player.

"You need to watch the tapes. I'll handle the floor as you work through those. You'll be on ticket duty while you do that." I let out a breath, thankful she wasn't going to bring up what just happened.

"Ticket duty?" I asked. She leaned against the counter and flicked her eyes out at the arcade machines.

"Kids win tickets for playing games then they come up here to trade in the tickets for prizes." She flicked her eyes at the wall behind us and I looked at it. There were a bunch of cheap-looking toys with numbers next to them.

She leaned over and pressed play on the tape player. Some static started, along with some warped music. Suddenly a woman dressed like us popped on the screen with a smile that looked stretched to discomfort. It never left her face, even as she began talking. It was a muffled noise under Maureen.

"Don't let them get toys they don't have the tickets for. It becomes chaos because they don't keep their mouths shut. They tell every other kid in here that you gave them free

tickets and five minutes later we'll have to call the cops again."

"*Again?*" I asked, eyeing the welcome tape. The woman was talking about how she was so happy I was part of the funhouse family. *Sooo happy*. Her smile stretched wider even though it seemed impossible.

"The cops usually have to come down every weekend," Maureen said. My eyes snapped back to her.

"You're kidding. This is a kid's...funhouse," I spouted, not finding a better word. She snorted and rolled her eyes. Just then a group of kids ran into the restaurant at full speed. One slammed into the side of a pinball machine and fell to the ground wailing. Two moms came strolling in a minute later with cigarettes dangling from their mouths.

"Get up, you're fine," one mom grumbled at the kid. Immediately the crocodile tears stopped and he popped up and ran to her, sticking out his hands. The other kids ran up doing the same and the moms dug in their purses before dropping money in their waiting hands. They ran over to the counter, smearing around snot from runny noses on their cheeks. They shoved the money directly in my face, so close I could see a booger clinging to a dollar bill.

Maureen plucked the money from their hands and slid it into the cash drawer before retrieving the golden tokens she dropped in their hands. She accomplished this all without touching them or the booger. Maureen was a seasoned pro. The kids ran off, yelling at ear-splitting levels and I groaned, picking up the golden coin one had left on the counter by accident.

A drawing of Frankie was etched into the metal. At the bottom the logo curved around the edge: "*Where everyone is always*

smiling".

"This is going to be a long day," I sighed. Maureen paused the tape and then pointed out the rates for coins on the wall behind me before she skated off toward the kitchen. I groaned and clicked play, starting the tape from where it was left off. The lady was showing a "new employee" how to cook Frankie's famous pizza. It involved a mechanical device that shot sauce onto a frozen dough circle before we were supposed to—with finesse and *significant* speed—drizzle shredded cheese on the top before shoving them in the oven to bake just enough for the center to be lukewarm at best.

My attention slowly drifted around the place as the video continued. The front was littered with arcade and carnival games. There was a ball pit in a mesh prison across from me. Behind the arcade, it opened up into a large eating room where people could sit at various sized tables. Off of that were the kitchen and a special "timeout" room for parents who wanted to pretend their kids didn't exist for a couple hours.

The stage was in the very back, the animatronics tucked away as if they feared putting them any closer to the entrance would frighten people off.

Right now the red curtain was closed but after a few moments of mindless gazing, I realized there was a small crack. A large mechanical eye stared out, appearing to be aimed directly at me. The hair on my arms lifted and I swallowed thickly. It was Frankie. I could tell by his purple eye and gray fur. Plus, there was a flash of his rainbow tie.

For a moment, I felt hypnotized—incapable of looking away. Perhaps too afraid that if I did, Frankie would move when he shouldn't be moving. The animatronics were turned off until dinner time, according to the tapes. My breathing quickened as

I stared into the eye, an odd sensation of being watched pressing on me. His gaze felt like something alive was observing me—watching my every move, learning my actions.

Fists slammed the counter in front of me, violent and loud.

“Tokens!” A kid wailed demandingly. A scream blasted out of me, my entire body leaping up from the stool I’d been sitting on. The kid began laughing raucously, his eyes bugging behind his thick-framed glasses. I sneered at him before looking back at the stage. The curtain was closed.

I spent the next few hours trying to convince myself that Gus was back there and had fixed the curtain. That it most definitely couldn’t be Frankie. That animatronics were not alive and had no soul or sentience. I began repeating to myself in a forced laugh that I wasn’t being watched by a robot coyote like a serial killer learning about his next victim.

Frankie’s oversized purple eyes wouldn’t get out of my head though. Whether my own eyes were opened or closed it didn’t matter. I kept imagining purple orbs behind the ball pit, beside the Pong video game machine, and peeking through the curtain.

By the time Maureen was bouncing from the back, wearing her normal clothes, I felt like an insane person. I was jumpy, my eyes darting around everywhere. Maureen snorted at me and leaned on the counter.

“Listen, it’s the animatronics, right? Bad news vibes,” she sighed.

“You feel it too?” I asked. She shrugged.

“It’s the uncanny valley,” she remarked.

“The what?” My eyes darted around the dim arcade.

“Uncanny valley. It’s when a robot looks almost human but not quite. It makes us uneasy and like...gag me with a spoon, revulsed.”

“Huh,” I commented looking her over. Robot nerd was not something I’d have guessed for her. She raised an eyebrow at me and smirked, reading my face.

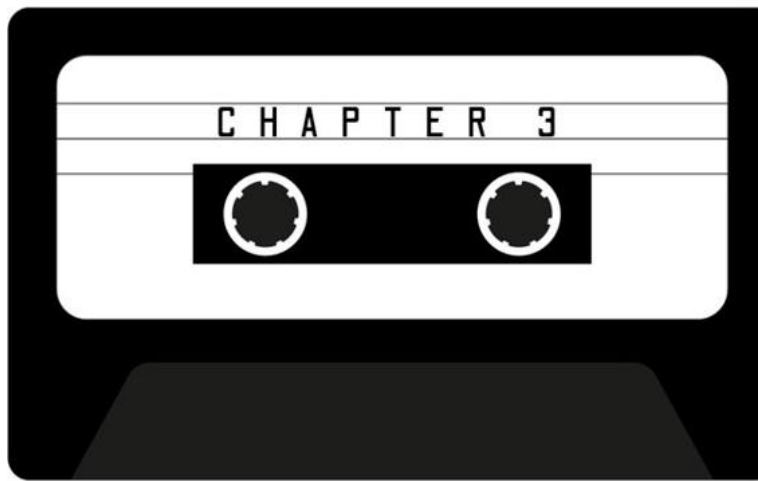
“Anyway, sorry to run on your first day. A Friday night too! Hah! You’ll want to kill everyone by closing but if you can manage to handle it, you’ll get as many shifts as you want and the pay is bitchin’.”

“Is that because Ray’s henchmen take tired moms into the parent’s timeout room and they come out looking like they are ready to run a marathon?” I asked. Maureen giggled while fiddling with the pastel bangles on her wrist.

“Probably but this job needs to pay well because dealing with this crowd is bogus. Plus people don’t like the overall vibes of the Funhouse, you know? Not just the uncanny valley. Most only last a day at the job.” She cleared her throat uncomfortably, her eyes darting towards the exit.

“The vibes...” I let it trail off, wanting her to confirm the unsettling feeling that thickened the air with the cigarette smoke. Her eyes held mine and I squirmed a little from the direct eye contact.

“You *know* what I mean,” she said before pushing off the counter and walking away. “I need to book it. I got Oingo Boingo tickets!” Then she was gone, leaving the dark cave that was Frankie’s Funhouse for the bright yellow lights of the mall hallway.



A FLOPPY DISK WAS FLAPPING AROUND IN MY FACE. I WAS IN the back with Gus, an office behind the stage that was filled with a massive computer. Or maybe it was multiple computers stacked one on top of each other. I wasn't sure but each black box had a label on it with an animatronics name.

Razzle Rizdog, Marabell Mozzarella, Dizzy Duck...

Gus was going over the finer details of the animatronic show that was about to get started and run until closing.

"Where's Frankie's floppy drive?" I asked. My eyes slid to Frankie, who was in the room with us. Not creepy at all. No, I definitely didn't have chills on my arms. He stood in the corner, his purple eyes aimed forward at nothing. My attention stayed laser focused on his eyes, half-expecting them to slowly shift my way.

"Frankie's a different model. He's special." Gus waved his hand around, the very one with a floppy disk.

“So how do I make sure the show for the night is installed for him?” Frankie hadn’t moved, had he? He wasn’t swaying slightly on his feet to keep balance, right? That wouldn’t make sense for a robot. His legs were made of thick beams of metal with a coyote suit stretched over top. Plus, I was pretty sure robots didn’t understand the finer mechanisms of balancing.

Gus sighed in annoyance.

“Look, I know Frankie is somewhat of a celebrity,” he started. “You probably watched him on the tv as a kid.”

“I was too old. My uh, siblings did though,” I said, hyperfocused on the robot. I hadn’t realized before but his dark suit was pinstripe—thin, deep red stripes so dark they looked black unless you were close. I swallowed thickly and took a step towards him. Perhaps if I conquered my fear I could get over this paranoia that he was alive.

Gus was rattling on about how he would handle Frankie because his system was more complex. Frankie really was different. He wasn’t as bulky as the other machine. He was big for sure, probably seven feet tall. But he was almost slim in the middle, compared to his broad chest and shoulders that were accentuated by the suit.

“What happened to his overalls?” I asked. On the show he wore orange overalls and a rainbow shirt. I’d interrupted Gus again. I couldn’t seem to stop because, for one, I wasn’t really listening to him; and two, questions about Frankie felt important. Like I needed to know so I could soothe that uncanny valley sensation inside me.

“He wanted an updated look,” Gus grumbled.

“He?” I asked, twisting around with wide eyes to look at Gus.

“I didn’t say that.”

“Yes, you literally just did.”

“I meant I. *I* wanted an updated look.” Gus’s gaze bore into me, something like anger swimming in his expression. Suddenly I didn’t like being in this room with him. I’d already been off put since Frankie was in here and not on stage where I expected him. However, I’d taken comfort that at least Gus was with me and I wasn’t alone. Now, I realized I was in a small room with a man I didn’t really know.

The door was open though and I could see out into the hallway. Plus, Gus hadn’t shown any signs that he was interested in anything like that. At that moment Gus started explaining again.

“It’s almost showtime. So each floppy disc is color coded for the animatronic. Pick out the Friday Fun Night. However, there’s a birthday party later and then you’ll need to come back here and switch it out for the Birthday Jamboree disc.”

Frankie’s fingers were thick, furred digits that ended in something metallic looking. I leaned forward, squinting.

“He has metal claws?” I asked in shock. That seemed like a major oversight. Why weaponize a kid’s robot mascot? Hands snatched me and twisted me around. Gus gripped my shoulders roughly and leaned in my face.

“Stop concerning yourself with him. He’s not even supposed to be in here,” he seethed, looking at the robot as if Frankie had walked himself in here. God, Gus was crazy, wasn’t he? He thought Frankie had asked for a suit and walked around all on his own. I backed up at step and my back pressed against Frankie. He was radiating warmth and vaguely I wondered if that was a fire hazard but the thought was fleeting as Gus continued to grip my arms, his fingers biting into my biceps as his furious eyes glared down at me.

My feet slipped a little from the rollerblades and I had to lean harder into Frankie.

“You’re a legit crazy person,” I said. “Let go of me.” My voice came out fierce and cruel. Fuck this guy. Fuck this job. I was almost happy Ray’s little favor was going so horribly, meant I could hate him more.

“Your generation has no work ethic,” Gus hissed.

“You’re the same age as me!” What the fuck was wrong with this guy? He smirked, his eyes still cruel, his hands still gripping my arms. He had about two seconds before I kneed his groin and took a cheap shot at his face while he grumbled about his precious balls I’d smashed. Actually, I hope he did keep holding me because I’d really like to do that. My nose twitched and I stretched my fingers in and out, gearing up for a fight. A smile stretched over my face.

Everyone called me a psycho when I got like this. Psycho or not, I loved the thrill of a fight and once I tasted a brawl in the air I got way too excited. The smiling was the part people didn’t like. The laughing upset people too. If I could just grimace while I threw a punch people wouldn’t call me a psycho but I couldn’t stop my expression of joy.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” He snapped. I hissed a little as his fingers dug into my arms. Go time, buddy. Time to knock out my boss’s teeth.

“Uh oh,” Frankie suddenly said and we both stilled. It was the first time I’d heard him talk in person. It sounded like a programmed phrase, the tone mechanical and barely human. The end of it messed up, dipping enough octaves lower that it sounded almost demonic. Gus slowly looked over my head at Frankie. All the color drained from his face and he pulled his hands from my arms like I was made of fire.

“Frankie.” Gus’s voice shook. He took a few steps back.

“What’s going on?” I asked and tried to take a step away from the animatronic. Frankie’s arm snapped up and then fell on my shoulder. My eyes bugged. “What’s going on!” I eyed the little metal claws on the gray hand.

“Is he malfunctioning?” My voice was getting high-pitched with panic.

“Th-th-th That’s not good,” Frankie said. Once again, the last word dipped down into a low pitch that felt startlingly ominous. The stuttering was off-putting too. Damn it, they hadn’t maintained the upkeep of the machines and now they were freaking me the fuck out.

“Frankie,” Gus said with a forced smile. “You can’t do this. I control you.” Odd chipmunk like laughter came out of Frankie—fast and chattering. Gus’s words sent me into a panic because there were only two reasons for him to talk like that. One, he was certifiably insane. Two, Frankie could do what he wanted.

“Sorry,” Frankie said, the entire word that deep growl instead of the normal pitched friendly tone. It was slowed down too, a low growl that stretched on. I felt chills race up my spine. The paw-like hand on my shoulder had me trembling in place.

Then Frankie moved. He lifted his legs and gently pulled me to the side so he could step one foot in front of the other.

“I’ve had about enough of your shit, Gus,” Frankie said, his voice suddenly completely human. A little wheeze left my throat as I clung to the back wall. That was no prerecorded phrase from a song or show act.

“Frankie—” Gus stopped talking and started screaming as Frankie lifted a hand and swiped. I saw blood drops splatter

the side wall—wet, red dots that sort of reminded me of sprinkles because sprinkles painted on the wall of the Funhouse made more sense than blood. Gus kept screaming.

“It’s quiet time, kids!” Frankie said in the pre-programmed robot voice again. What the fuck was going on? He swiped again, this time with his other hand. The metal claws splashed wet, red sprinkles on the other wall. The screaming cut off into a gurgle. Gus stumbled to the side and I saw four deep gashes in his neck, gushing blood between his fingers. His hand was on his throat, attempting to hold himself together and keep his blood inside.

Frankie shook out his hand, trying to flick the excess of blood off. He groaned with a sound of exasperation.

“I hate getting blood out of my fur,” he sighed. It was all too human. Nothing was making sense. I felt like the world was tilting. Oh wait it was. I was falling over. My skates flew from under me and I landed on my hip on the ground. Gus fell over too, choking on blood, gurgles and snotty blood bubbles coming from his mouth. His body jerked as he inhaled sharply, blood pooled out over the linoleum.

Frankie turned around when I fell to the floor.

“Ramona!” He gasped, sounding worried as he turned around and came towards me. My eyes bugged but there wasn’t much I could do except sit there as he knelt down next to me and pressed one huge hand to my hip.

“Does it hurt bad?” He asked, large, robotic purple eyes a foot from my face. Frankie was huge and powered by metal. He could crush me.

“What?” I asked with a raspy voice, my eyes sliding to Gus who was no longer moving or breathing. “Fuck!” I hissed,

pushing Frankie out of the way as I scrambled towards my boss.

“No, no, no.” I pressed my hands to his gored neck and pressed down, trying to stop the bleeding. I felt some of my fingers slide into the wound and gagged as I fingered someone’s insides in a way I never anticipated.

“He’s dead, Ramona.”

“Stop saying my name,” I snapped. It was weird. Robots weren’t supposed to just know your name and talk to you like a person.

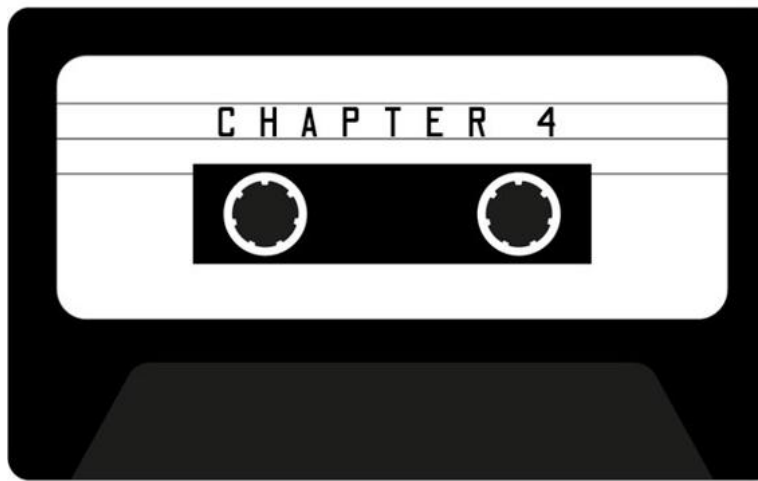
“Ramona, Ramona, Ramona,” Frankie sighed, his voice smooth and almost sing-songy as he said my name on repeat. His large paw-like hand dug into his own thighs, gripping them as he purred my name.

“Fuck me,” I grumbled under my breath, sitting on my ass with blood coated hands. Gus was certainly dead and there was no fixing that now. I heard the mechanical movements of Frankie behind me, making it clear he was indeed a robot. I stilled, my shoulders crawling up as I sensed his head hover near me. He leaned forward and I felt fur brush my ear.

“I think I love you, Ramona,” Frankie said.

“Fuck me,” I hissed again.

“Well if you insist,” Frankie rasped and I screamed, my fight or flight response finally kicking in again.



A KNOCK CAME AT THE DOOR. A LOUD RATTLE AND *BANG*, *BANG*, *BANG*. Frankie and I froze. I was certain the police were behind the door, ready to burst in. I could hear it in my head, an imaginary walkie talking giving a little beep and static.

“Uh, ma’am, we know what you’ve done and you’re going away forever.” Radio static, mumbled noise. “Oops sorry, not forever. Just until the chair is juiced enough to end your pathetic, short excuse of a life, boss murderer.”

“Excuse me!” I heard an irate woman yell in the real world, outside my anxiety created fantasy. *BANG BANG BANG*.

“I think you better get that,” Frankie said. Frankie, the animatronic who was...alive? I opened my mouth to ask him what he was but the banging continued and the woman was yelling some more, looking for an employee, a manager, a “goddamn district manager”. I scrambled up, my rollerblades slipping in blood. Jesus, there was a lot of blood. It had just

kept pooling and gushing from Gus like the mall's fountain—thick rivulets trickling out on the floor and spreading.

My legs were coated, my rollerblade wheels were dripping wet. My eyes briefly darted to the metal claw wounds and got stuck. They were just so...deep and violent. Frankie's claws had sliced through Gus' neck like butter.

When I tried to glide on my skates they slid backwards instead of letting me press off. My body lurched forward and I saw my own life flash before my eyes as the doorknob came hurtling towards my eye as I fell. Before I could brain myself, ginormous hands grabbed my waist and stopped my fall. Frankie's hands encompassed my waist. He squeezed a little, seeming to enjoy how his fingers could touch. It was very obvious that I was more the toy in this situation, he could pick me up and move me around like a doll.

"Mmm," he hummed, gripping me. I was as still as possible, a mannequin in a storefront, held in the air by an animatronic that claimed he loved me. The banging came again. Frankie took a deep, shaky breath and righted me, his furred, robot fingers slowly coming off me one at a time.

Immediately I reached for the door, turned the knob, and fell into the hallway into a blood-drenched heap.

"About fucking time," the woman said as I twisted around frantically to slam the door shut. *Don't see my dead boss. Don't see my dead boss.* That was this moment's calming mantra. Wasn't really all that calming.

It took several tries to get the lock twisted on the knob, on account of all the blood all over me. Finally, I flicked the lock it without my red fingers slipping off. Frankie and my dead boss were behind a locked door and I could take a breath.

Except apparently I couldn't because the woman was talking a lot and her decibels were increasing rapidly.

"And if we don't get our pizzas in three minutes then I'm calling the cops because we both know what Ray is doing here."

"Nonononono," I said quickly, scrambling up onto my rollerblades. My earlier imagination was in the back of my mind. I could feel the steel cuffs biting into my wrists as they picked me up and shoved me in the back of a chevy caprice squad car, whispering to me about how I was never getting out while pretending they were telling me my rights.

"Don't call the police," I blurted quickly. "What's the issue... ma'am?" Ma'am rolled out of my mouth like English was my seventh language because I never used that word. I think she thought I was gagging instead of saying ma'am because she took a step back. She also sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose.

"I've paid for the birthday package. It's six-twenty and the kids were supposed to have pizza at six, Frankie at six-fifteen." Apparently, my boss dying and the animatronics coming to life weren't going to end my shift. If this was going to happen to anyone, of course it would be me. Of course. This was just my luck. My eyes shifted around while I thought. My bloody hand was gripping the doorknob to keep myself up. It started to jiggle a little and my eyes bugged. I was losing it.

"Yes!" I barked out to the woman. "I'll get on that right away. I'm so sorry. There was an issue with Frankie." *He murdered someone.* "And I had to uh..." I looked down at my blood-soaked body. The woman did too. I expected horror, what I got was judgment.

“Haven’t you heard of a pad?” She scoffed. I looked at her in shock and horror. Were her periods capable of slicking her body from ankle to chest?

“Pizza sauce!” I said. “It’s pizza sauce. Frankie was flinging it around,” I said, making a confused face. No one would believe this. Apparently, that didn’t matter though. This customer didn’t give a shit what I was saying unless it was apologies and promises.

“Pizza in five minutes,” she hissed, turning around and stomping off.

“It takes ten in the oven!” I belatedly yelled after her. She flipped me off and kept walking. The doorknob rattled again.

“Ramona,” Frankie whined. “Let me out,” he growled demonically. My eyes bugged.

“No,” I hissed. “You killed my boss and it’s going to look like I did it,” I murmured to the door.

“Gus?” He asked, sounding shocked. “Gus is—”

“Shut up shut up shut up! You aren’t supposed to talk.”

“Would you like me to sing instead?” He purred in amusement.

“Oh my god, I have to go. If I don’t make shitty pizza and defrost ice cream cake they are calling the cops and I’m going to prison.” I skated off before Frankie could say anything else. I was pretending his banging and demands to be let out quickly were simply my mind breaking after what was already a too-long shift and only about to get way, way longer.



THIS WAS HELL. I SHOULD HAVE JUST QUIT ONCE MY BOSS WAS murdered but noooo, I had to pull up a clean pair of rainbow booty shorts and give kids partially cooked pizza and tasteless ice cream cake.

“Frankie! Frankie! Frankie! Frankie!” The kids had all joined in, the entire colossal, over-filled room of them, chanting like they were performing satanic rituals I wasn’t sure wouldn’t work to summon a possessed animatronic. Their fists were caked in pizza sauce and spit and banging into the table with each syllable.

The parents and Ray’s crew had all left. That’s how bad this was. I was now the babysitter of the entire restaurant while all their guardians had slithered into the parent “break room” to make extremely questionable choices. They weren’t here but a massive crowd of chanting, filthy children were and they had violence gleaming in their eyes.

I slid another partially cooked pizza on table three and they dove in, canines glistening. At least if I kept the pizzas coming they wouldn’t eat me. That’s all one could hope for at this point. They were furious that the animatronic band wasn’t playing. Tonight was a full booked birthday bonanza and apparently, I was ruining everyone’s year. A little girl had been inconsolably sobbing in the corner for thirty minutes because I wouldn’t let a murderous coyote robot sing her children’s songs and play guitar.

I bent down next to her. In the back of my mind, I recalled I'd left a pizza in the kitchen oven and it was likely burning. Maybe it would set the whole place on fire and hide the evidence of the murder and animatronics. That would likely mean burning the whole mall down. *Worth it.* This was my plan now. Burn the entire mall down.

"Sweetie," I said gently to the little girl wearing the pastel dress and hyperventilating. She shot daggers at me while tears rolled down her reddened cheeks.

"I want Frankie! I want to see him play guitar!"

"Oh, I see. You know, Frankie doesn't actually play the guitar right? He just holds it in his hands and the music is played from a tape."

"I want to see Frankie play guitar!" She was shrilling so loud I was certain she'd be hoarse for days.

"Well I want Frankie to go back to hell where he came from!" I snapped. Her mouth popped open and I sighed, skating off. There hadn't been an extra pair of skates so I'd been forced to keep wearing the bloody ones. They were still leaving blood trails wherever I skated. That was not going to work in my favor when someone realized Gus was dead.

When I looked over the room, I felt something had shifted in the air. Across the sea of kids, I noticed they were all glaring at me, faces coated in blue gel icing and chaos. My eyes bugged and I tried to skate backwards, out of the room. My extra long sleeve dragged across a slice of pizza some kid had peeled the cheese and pepperoni off of. Sauce coated the fabric and not for the first time. The sleeves were filthy which only added to my stress overload.

“Frankie, Frankie...” They started the chant. It started as a whisper but was gaining momentum and the kids were walking towards me as if they meant to claw me like their favorite *funtime* coyote had clawed Gus. “FRANKIE! FRANKIE!” I felt pressure in my throbbing head. This shift would already be a nightmare without the animatronic murder.

“FRANKIE! FRANKIE!” They were screaming now, their little voices breaking. And then it happened.

They began picking up handfuls of cake and flinging it at me. The ice cream cake came dangerously close to my new perm and I lost it.

“FINE!” I shouted, wiping off the cake from my neck. A slice of pizza slapped my thigh and slid down. “You want Frankie?” I yelled. The kids went quiet and nodded. “Okay!” I said breaking off in a deranged laugh. I’d lost it, they’d broken me.

“Buckle up kids, it’s time for Frankie!” I growled out, chomping my teeth together. They went wild with cheers while I skated away, my entire body shaking.

“They want Frankie,” I said, talking to myself. Probably not a good sign. “They can have Frankie.” I got to the back hallway and stopped. There was about twenty feet between me and the door of death but it felt more like a hundred. I could see a puddle of blood had seeped into the hall. I grimaced. The lights back here were dim track lighting where the floor met the wall. Which created weird upwards shadows of everyone in it. It was also painted in rainbow colors—one wall red, one blue, the ceiling orange, yellow, and green. I swallowed thickly and skated down the hall, coming closer to the disturbingly quiet door.

I settled my hand on the knob and leaned close, listening for any noise. There was nothing. My hope was that I’d gone

insane and imagined the animatronic killing my boss. I'm sure such delusions were an occupational hazard that everyone here had. Maureen had said the place was weird and most people didn't last a single shift. I was likely just one in many who skated myself into hallucinations involving murder and Frankie propositioning sex.

"Yeah," I whispered, nodding to myself. "I'm sure we all think about it." Well, the boss meeting an untimely end...maybe not the animatronic fucking. I wasn't going to linger on whatever subconscious trauma had made me hallucinate *that*.

"Okay," I said, standing tall and shaking out my shoulders. I licked my lips and twisted the lock. "Okay," I said again. Say it enough times and it's true. My mom always said that and right now, that saying was genius. I twisted the knob and pushed the door open a crack.

"Okay," I wheezed, looking down at the puddle of blood that was still there. A little whine left my throat. "Fr— Gus?" I asked. Better not to ask for the animatronic to respond because that had just been a hallucination. Just a hallucinat—

Frankie burst from the room, causing me to fall backwards. With one hand he grabbed my arm, stopping my fall. He held me dangling in the air as he slammed the door shut and twisted the lock again. A wheezing sort of whimper came out of me. Banging rattled the door and that's when my mind went from budding mental breakdown to confusion.

"Wait...who's banging on the door?" Frankie did some special move where he gave his arm a quick jerk. It caused me to fly back up and land against him. His arm wrapped around me and I looked up with wide eyes at him. He was smirking, his mechanical eyes half-lidded as he squeezed me a little tighter against him. His mouth opened up.

“It’s Gus banging the door,” he rasped the voice magically coming from the depths of his body. I peered inside his snout for a moment and only saw teeth, tongue, and blackness. Wait, why did he have a tongue? Another whimper came from me as I pressed my palms to his pinstripe suit and tried to push us apart. Too bad he was so strong he didn’t even notice I was attempting to get away. I leaned back and he leaned forward.

“Ramona,” he whispered.

“Frankie,” I said high-pitched, my voice wavering. “What are you doing?” His tongue came out, licking his gray snout. “Oh my god, why do you have a tongue!” I slammed my eyes shut and shivered in his arms. I felt his warm tongue press against my jaw and slide up my cheek. It felt wet but when I slapped my hand to my face to try and wipe it off, my skin was dry.

Frankie pressed forward, his tongue pushing into my mouth. It was bigger than mine, maybe three times as large so when it went past my lips and filled my mouth it was huge. It was long too, sliding in deep. His tongue filled my whole mouth to my throat and he was licking into it over and over again. I shuddered, the action far too reminiscent of sex. My body felt lax and I was turning into a puddle as his huge tongue kept licking inside me. I squeezed my thighs together as the idea of his tongue in other places hit my mind because that size tongue could fully fuck a person. Oh my god, what was I thinking about?

He pulled back and I gasped for breath, my own drool on my chin. He lifted a furred hand and wiped it up. Then he gave a little pleased laugh.

“Whoops, I just smeared blood on your chin.” He was smiling like it was cute and it broke me from whatever evil magic spell he’d put me under.

“What the fuck!” I wailed. The banging on the door came again.

“Let me out of this FUCKING room, Frankie!” Gus yelled. I looked at Frankie and saw a demure blush creep up on his fur. The ears on top of his head flicked a little, giving a little mechanical noise as they did.

“I shouldn’t have sliced open his throat,” he whispered. “He’s really moody now.”

“*Moody?*” I barked. “He was dead!”

“Gus doesn’t really die,” he said, brushing my face and humming in pleasure as he looked me over. “Oh Ramona, I’ve never felt like this with anyone before.”

“Like what?” I asked in a screech, eyeing his snout where that large tongue hid.

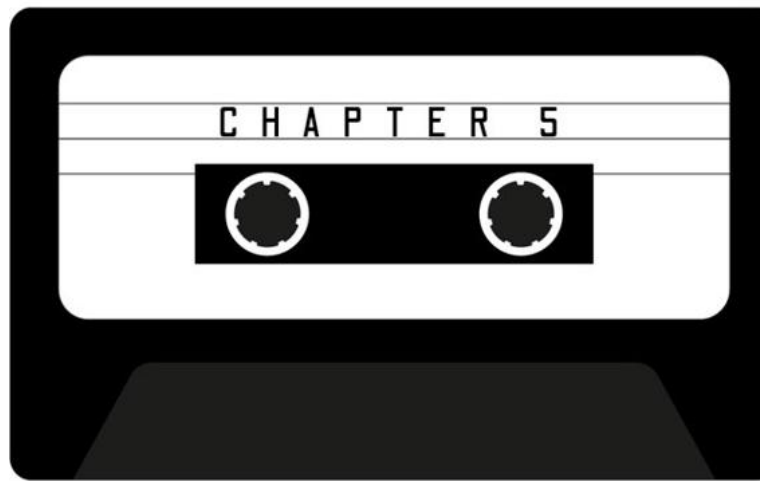
“Like...” He looked off smiling, he gave a little laugh of delight. “Like the very first episode of Frankie’s Funhouse, the way the kids all looked at me with awe.” He looked back at me with a wide smile. “I love you, Ramona and that’s why I hurt Gus. He was grabbing you,” he growled, his eyes flickered into a glowing red as he bared his teeth.

“Frankie!” Gus yelled and Frankie’s eyes stopped glowing and he looked like a dog with its tail between his legs.

“We need to get everyone out before he breaks through the door,” Frankie said.

“What?”

“Yeah, he’s probably going to want to kill everyone. He’s like that.” Frankie explained it like saying someone didn’t like pineapple on their pizza.



“RUN,” FRANKIE WHISPERED. MY EYES BUGGED, MY FINGERS tangling with the fabric of his suit as I clutched it harder, fear ramping up inside me. Pretty sure this was a very expensively tailored suit jacket. I did not run, I was glued in place because there was something terrifying about an actual monster telling me to run.

My arms were shaking a little as I looked up at him. Gus kept banging the door and then I heard it start to splinter but I couldn't stop looking at Frankie's purple eyes, the metal lids sinking lower and lower over his eyes until he was giving me a glare.

“Ramona,” he said, pressing my face gently between his clawed hands. He leaned forward, his snout peeling back from metal teeth painted white. They were sharp and excessive and my breathing was getting quicker.

“Don't kill me,” I whispered.

“To be honest Ramona, I can’t make that promise,” he said and an undignified whimper came from my mouth. I was dead meat. “But if I do kill you, I hope you’ll remember I didn’t want to.”

“Well,” I croaked. “That makes it all better.” Frankie chuckled.

“You are too cute.” One of his hands slid down to my ass and I felt his claws graze under the shorts’ fabric. “And these rainbow shorts are fucking killing me,” he rasped, giving my ass a good grab. The thing was, he was so strong it lifted me clear off the ground and when my skates came back down to the floor I nearly fell over. My hands left his suit as I tried to balance.

“Shit,” I snarled before I got my balance. I looked at Frankie and all the color drained from my face. The door cracked behind him and I saw an honest to god fire ax poke through the splintered wood. Gus’s angry eyeball peered out.

“Frankie!” He yelled. Frankie only had eyes for me and he looked fucking terrifying because there was anger in his stance. With a creature as dangerous as that, even the smallest show of anger sent my fight or flight wild.

“Get the kids out,” he growled at me as Gus tore through the door behind him.

“What?” I asked.

“Get the kids out and *run!*” He growled and that did it. I flipped around on my skates and attempted to get away. I couldn’t run on skates though and to be honest, I couldn’t even skate fast. The arch in my feet was burning in pain from using poorly fitting skates for multiple shifts and there was still a little blood in them. Which meant I flailed down the hallway barely going anywhere, screaming the entire time and shooting

looks behind me at Frankie just standing there staring at me. He stood far too still for something alive. I didn't like it.

The rainbow hall seemed so much longer and almost as if it was twisted like a legitimate circus funhouse. But when my hands pressed against the green wall it was solid beneath my fingers and not moving. I was probably having a panic attack. And I could still feel the way Frankie's sharp, murderous claws had tickled the flesh just beneath my shorts. And oh my god, the way his tongue had literally fucked my mouth.

Now all types of weird visuals were in my head as I got to the end of the hall. Like Frankie running at me and tackling me to the ground, spreading my legs and ripping my clothes to tiny shreds until his massive tongue could plunge—

“God dammit,” I hissed at myself. I needed therapy. To combat that alarmingly horny imagery I thought about what Frankie tasked me with and decided that yeah, the kids should probably not be inside Frankie's *Deathhouse*. Maybe I was a bit of a stickler but kids playing in a shitty pizza parlor arcade with murder robots and immortal bosses sounded sort of bad.

I flailed into the main room and the kids all turned to look at me as I panted and tried to speak without any breath.

“Where's Frankie?” They asked and I looked around at the crowd of kids, sitting and waiting for the animatronic band. Uh oh.

“You need to leave!” I blurted. The chanting started again, so loud they couldn't hear me trying to poorly explain Frankie was alive. The kids that did hear me looked at me like I was insane.

“Of course he's alive,” they said. I screamed in frustration and nearly tugged on my perm before I remembered to not do that.

I gently patted my hair with the sweater fabric and tried to calm down.

“We are playing a fun game of hide and seek in the entire mall!” I said, stretching what probably looked like a horrific smile across my face. I tried to give a charming chuckle like Frankie did but it came out too high-pitched and manic to sound anything but alarming. I felt grubby hands on my ass and jerked around to see a group of young kids running off giggling after harassing me.

“The job doesn’t pay *that* good,” I snarled. Fuck this, I was quitting. I could do it right now instead of trying to get the kids to safety. I let out another frustrated yell. Of course, I couldn’t do that, even if they were a bunch of little shits. Even if the timing was perfect because Gus was no longer dead which meant I *couldn’t* be charged with murder.

“Hide and seek in the whole mall?” A little boy asked with eyes as big as saucers.

“Yes!” I said, happy this was working. “The only rules are you can’t hide in Frankie’s Funhouse and can’t leave the mall unless it’s with your parents.” I shot a look at the closed door to the parent’s lounge. I’d uh, deal with that later, once the kids were safe. First things first.

“I want to see Frankie!” One troublesome kid wailed and enough joined in that it became clear to me these kids were not leaving until they saw the stupid fucking band play a happy birthday song.

Suddenly the curtains to the stage slid open on their own and the whole band was standing there motionless, including Frankie with his pinstripe suit and rainbow tie, guitar in hand. His empty eyes were aimed somewhere near the edge of the

stage and it sent chills up my arms. He looked genuinely like a turned-off robot.

Then the whole band snapped up from their quasi limp positions and smiled at the sea of kids. I skated backwards as kids gasped in awe. Either this was going to be okay or a blood bath was about to start.

“Hi kids, welcome to Frankie’s Funhouse. I’m Frankie!” My eyes bugged. His voice had a pre-recorded cadence about it, the exact phrase from the tv shows my younger siblings used to watch.

I wasn’t insane. There was still blood on one of Frankie’s paws. Which meant I hadn’t imagined everything in the back. But this was fucking with my head.

“I heard it was someone’s birthday!” Frankie went on.

Marabell Mozzarella, the opossum creature thing in a pink dress chimed in, “Oh I just love birthdays!”

This was insane. I couldn’t handle this. The only thing I could do was straddle the back wall in terror as I eyed an entire group of animatronics, wondering if they were all alive and not opposed to homicide.

The birthday song started and Frankie’s lifeless eyes stayed aimed at me. Maybe it was a trick, some type of optical illusion. I didn’t think so though. I scrambled across the wall back and forth and I watched as his eyes followed me the entire way. That was until I bumped into my boss.

“Gus!” I barked out in shock, leaping away from him. His shirt was drenched in blood but the mess Frankie made of his throat was nowhere to be seen. His skin was a smooth, blemish free expanse and by the angry flush creeping up his face apparently he had blood again.

“Oh my god, I thought he’d killed you,” I said in shock. This was a good thing, right? I mean of course Frankie was upset Gus was alive because he’s the one who tried to kill him. I should side with the human, not the animatronic. Team Human for the win.

“You fucking bitch,” Gus snarled, his short blond bangs falling in his eyes as he lunged at me. That’s when I noticed one of his hands had an honest to god chainsaw in it.

“Holy fuck!” I snapped, ducking under his arm and then giving him a sharp jab between his legs. He wheezed, doubling over in pain. I tried to lift my leg to kick his face. That was always a great move—a broken nose, blood spraying out, their eyes tearing up. Except I was still in skates and fell over on my ass.

He loomed over me and I sent my skate directly into his gut. He barked out in pain and a smile stretched over my face. As he bent over clutching his stomach I sent my skate into his face and could actually hear the bone crunch. A little zip of excitement made me chuckle.

“Take that, fucker,” I hissed. Guess I wasn’t Team Human. Or hell, maybe *he* wasn’t Team Human. I wasn’t exactly sure what was going on here. However, the kids were still wide-eyed in awe as the birthday song continued. It wasn’t the normal birthday song but some special thing about having fun at the fun house on your birthday and it was far too long at this point because I think I needed to re-kill my boss.

While the kids clapped and Frankie smiled and the band all swiveled on their robotic parts Gus stood up tall above me. He spat blood on the ground then reached up and pinched his nose, roughly jerking it back into place. I made a noise of

disgust and shivered in displeasure to hear him crunch it back in.

“Frankie!” Gus wailed above the cheery music and giggling, happy kids. “Kill mode!” Frankie jerked to a stop, his eyes began to glow red, and Gus stomped through the kids and tossed the chainsaw to him. Frankie snatched it from the air with enthusiasm.

“Oh wow, this is gonna be messy, kids!” Frankie said, his voice a robotic, pre-recorded phrase from his show. It was... unsettling to say the least to see a childhood sweetheart mascot gleefully and with no hesitation talk about the mess one’s body would make when he put a chainsaw through it. Particularly with the same enthusiasm and upbeat words used for when it was time to get pied in the tv show.

Slowly Frankie’s entire body turned in my direction. His metal eyelids blinked one at a time, like some ancient reptilian beast. Then his large round eyes were on me, glowing red. I swallowed wondering if he was still in there or if this was something else entirely, just a killing machine operating on a floppy disc that told him *murder sure was fun, yipee!!*

Frankie laughed, still looking at me. Welp, I was dead. Hopefully, the chainsaw went for the throat first. I’d bleed out quickly and wouldn’t have to labor myself with a bunch of screaming and cardio. Frankie lifted his hand and I heard his robotic parts humming under the suit as he waved at me.

“Bye-bye for now, kids!” Frankie said. The kids had gone quiet once the chainsaw came into play, awed by his ability to pluck it from the sky. One of his gray fingers played with the chainsaw’s drawstring a moment before he gripped the thing steady in his hand and jerked his arm back. The machine came

to life, buzzing loudly while the blade spun its teeth round and round.

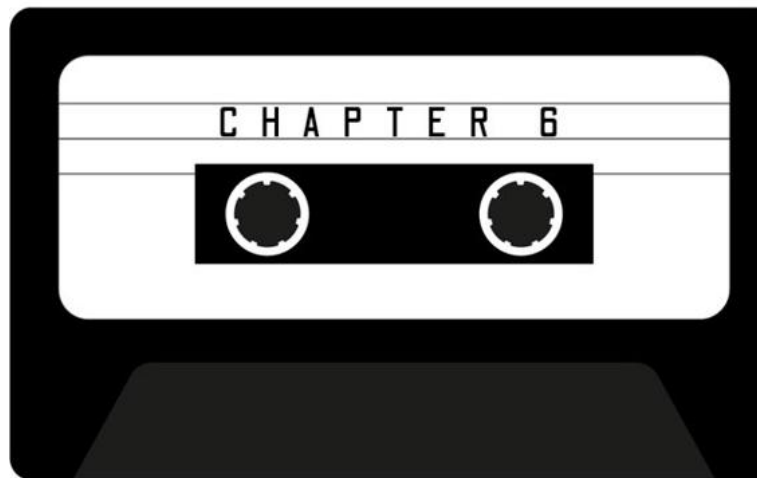
Oh shit, someone was about to die.

“I’m going to make you regret what you did to me, Frankie. You were very bad,” Gus reprimanded. His smile was cruel and I saw what he wanted. He wanted Frankie to murder the kids and it’s something Frankie couldn’t stop himself from doing.

“Hide and seek time!” I wailed. “I’m starting to count now! One, two, three...” Half the kids immediately scrambled for the exit, gleeful in the excitement of playing in the entire mall.

“Frankie’s coming too, better hurry! Four, five...” The rest of the kids took off while Frankie robotically moved to the edge of the stage and tipped his head to the side, watching the kids flee with red glowing eyes. Gus growled, turning around to spew vengeance and hate from his eyes. He opened his mouth and Latin began tumbling out.

“What the fuck!” I yelled. Clearly, I was in over my head. Before I could turn and run, the parent lounge finally burst open and the adults came tumbling out like an overenthusiastic wave crashing to the shore. Some even fell over, their pupils blown. Ray had so much of one chick’s ass in his palm that I was actually impressed he had managed to grab so much of it.



THE ANIMATRONIC BAND WAS STILL PLAYING WHICH LED ME TO believe they weren't monsters, just regular creepy animatronics that tickled the uncanny valley. They finished off the birthday song complete with a group moment where they congratulated each other on how good they played. All the while Frankie slowly turned towards a bunch of stumbling parents and their drug dealers who had yet to notice he was holding a chainsaw that had a sloshing full tank of gas.

“Funhouse Band,” Frankie yelled with chipper glee, getting their attention. The animatronics all swiveled to look at Frankie.

“Time for some death metal,” he growled, holding the chainsaw higher while his red eyes glowed violently. The animatronics looked at each other then Dizzy Duck, or whatever his name was, stepped up and started to riff his guitar.

That got the adults' attention.

“Hey, where the fuck is my kid?” Some dad yelled out, already belligerent before he knew what was going on. He was wearing a Frankie’s Funhouse adult tee shirt that he’d cut the arms off of to make a muscle shirt. Admittedly, he had quite a bit of muscle. It was flexing right now—veins popping and his neck throbbing like an overfed eel.

I opened my mouth to suggest running and to tell them their kids were hiding in the mall. But I was in a very stressful situation and mangled the entire thing.

“I hid your fucking kids!” I screamed and they looked at me in a terrified expression that quickly morphed to rage. Luckily Dizzy Duck and the rest of the Funhouse Band really kicked off the song. Death metal blasted, Marabell Mozzarella was slamming her drumsticks on her set like she desired to obliterate them. Dizzy Duck’s beak opened and Japanese lyrics came spilling out.

“What?” I said, not that anyone could hear me over the guitar, drums, and bass. Oh and Frankie’s chainsaw. The belligerent dad stepped past the stage, coming at me like a silverback gorilla that intended to rip a throat in half. Frankie bent down while giving a squeaky, manic giggle that sounded wildly inappropriate as he dug the chainsaw into the throbbing eel neck of Belligerent Dad.

Frankie didn’t bother trying to work his way through the thick neck. He ripped the chainsaw back out with a wet slurp and blood rained down from the chainsaw as the neck geysered red in an impressive, high-powered fountain half fueled by cocaine.

The parents started screaming, Frankie giggled, and Gus turned towards me and ran. I tried to work off my skates as fast as possible, shooting up looks at Gus barreling towards

me. Frankie leapt off the stage to butcher an arm off one of the moms. She stood there watching in shock, screaming as good as any scream queen as he sent the weapon through the limb and it fell to the ground.

Dizzy Duck was now singing Welcome to the Jungle in Japanese. I must have accidentally loaded the wrong language floppy disc during the brief training Gus gave me. Man, I was shit at this job.

I battled the long, pizza and frosting coated sleeves of my work uniform sweater. I grabbed at the fabric, pulling and rolling to simply get use of my fingers so I could untie the skate laces.

It was too late though. I only got one knot untied by the time Gus got to me. I prepared for a fight, rolling onto my back and getting my skates ready for pulverizing his balls until his kids felt it. But then he just ran past me through the exit to the arcade area. Well, that was disappointing. I was all hyped for another round of fighting. The screams and music were really getting me pumped for it.

Then I heard the rattle of the metal door at the front of Frankie's and felt the floor drop out from underneath me. He was closing the place up with all of us inside.

"Fuuuuck," I wailed, scrambling back up to my skates, with no hope left to get them off. My shorts were riding up my ass fiercely, and the untied skate's lace kept getting dangerously close to the wheels. My arms windmilled with the extra fabric spinning around as I raced towards Gus at the entrance. He was most definitely pulling down the metal partition.

I slammed into it at the same time he pulled a deadbolt from his pocket and slid it into the lock.

“You fucker!” I snarled, slipping my fingers through the gaps and shaking the metal curtain hard enough to hopefully knock him in his preppy face. He stood up with a smile, pushing back his blonde hair and smiling at me.

“You’ll all be dead by morning,” he promised and I could see the complete surety on his face. I bared my teeth and thrashed the metal again.

“Why?” I hissed.

“Because I’m in a bad fucking mood,” he said, glaring at me as he gripped his neck where Frankie had previously slashed it open.

“Who are you?” Because something was going on. Normal people didn’t come back to life. Normal people didn’t have their fatal wounds disappear without a trace. He just smirked so I screamed at the top of my lungs. He reached up frantically to grab the second metal partition, this one wasn’t a meshwork but a solid steel wall. I watched the neon lights of mall signs blink out as he slid it all the way down with an ominous thud.

With the mall fully cut off, the screams and carnage behind me were louder. I felt cold as I realized there was a lot less screaming than before. A whole lot less. Then Ray rammed me and we went sprawling to the ground. My hip burned with pain from falling on it. Ray looked over his shoulder and two other people slammed into the metal partition that locked us in, hyperventilating and banging bloody hands against the metal while screaming for help.

Suddenly Ray had his hand wrapped around my arm so tight it hurt. I tried to jerk out of his grip, briefly wondering if it was the same hand just buried halfway in someone’s ass.

“Get off me,” I hissed.

“Where’s a room we can go in? One we can lock,” he asked, his bright blue eyes darting around. I heard the chainsaw revving like a streetcar getting ready to race and nodded, scrambling up and skating towards the back rooms. Ray and the two others followed me as I went past the kitchen. I could smell burning. Fuck, I really did leave a pizza in there.

“I got to get a pizza,” I said.

“How are you this dumb?” Ray asked, not even angry, just shocked.

“It’s burning, it could set the whole place on fire with us in it,” I hissed, pushing past the swivel double doors. The others followed as I raced towards the oven and pulled open the front. Black smoke came barrelling out making deep coughs rattle out of me. I noticed the others suddenly dart behind stainless steel counters and turned to look at the door.

The shadow of Frankie was there—two red glowing eyes and a purring chainsaw.

“I see you,” he sang out before giving his little high-powered chipmunk laugh.

“Fuck, I hate that laugh,” I said. He pushed the doors open as I flipped the oven off. The pizza wasn’t on fire, just a blackened husk so I left it in there and booked it.

“Gather close kids!” Franky chipperly said, his sweet tone offset by the blood dripping from his dark suit and the deep growl of his weapon of mass murder.

“R-r-r Ra *mona*,” the last part came out a garbled, deep mess. It sounded like he was malfunctioning. I stopped moving and looked at him standing in the middle of the kitchen. He was looking at me, his eyes flicking between his normal purple and glowing red. I felt for him all of a sudden. It suddenly hit me

that he was trapped in his own body, a slave to whatever Gus programmed him to do. And he was fighting it hard, his eyes flicking while he called my name. Called *me* for help.

Then one of the other people in the room knocked over a stainless steel bowl sending shredded cheese everywhere and Frankie's eyes went full red as he turned towards the noise.

"I see you," he said chipperly, moving towards the person with intent to harm while waving his chainsaw around. He dove for the person and the rest of us weren't stupid enough to intervene. Frankie was huge and made of metal. His size and strength were far beyond what a normal human could accomplish, even what three humans could accomplish when working together...maybe. Honestly, I didn't think we were about to make a three person game plan to save the random person, especially since Ray was already running out of the room, even tossing a chuckle of relief and "sucks to be you" over his shoulder while a chainsaw dipped into the other guy's gut like he was gelatinous instead of muscle, sinew, and bone.

Blood splashed up on Frankie's smirking face as the rest of us made it out of the kitchen.

"This way," I said, skate-flailing down the hallway. I was scared, yeah. But I also still had the ultimate wedgie from hell, rainbow fabric tight in my crack and rubbing in a way that I didn't want to think about. I mean I could feel it in the front too, the tight fabric inching up both places and my legs stretching to skate, making me unable to ignore the sensation. People were being killed back in the kitchen. I saw something pink in the gore and was trying not to think of it and yet here I was squirming in rainbow booty shorts with a flushed face because my clothes were trying to get me off.

“I hate this fucking outfit,” I said, trying unsuccessfully to pick the shorts out of my crack.

“Can you stop picking your ass a moment to tell us where to go?” Ray offered unhelpfully.

“Can you stop watching me pick my ass?” I snapped.

“You think I want to watch that? Your ass is so fat I can barely see the rest of the hallway behind it.”

“Can you two shut up?” The other person hissed. I realized it was the mom from before who threatened to call the police if I didn’t get her kids undercooked pizza.

I huffed and opened the stock room. It was filled with all the surplus cups, plates, unrefrigerated food, along with broken arcade games. Ray pushed his way inside quickly and the woman quickly slid in past him before I closed the door and turned the lock.

We all turned around and stared at each other, catching our breath. Then a box fell over in the corner and two eyes blinked out from the darkness. My breath caught as the light reflected off the eyes.

“Hey,” a male voice whispered, then a normal guy came crawling out.

“Dillon?” Ray asked in surprise.

“Hey Ray,” Dillon said. He looked like a douchebag and apparently worked for Ray. His eyes immediately flicked to my bare thighs and he readjusted his pants.

“Really?” I asked in exasperation.

“Shhhh,” the woman hissed, spit flying everywhere, her eyes bugging in rage and panic. We heard footsteps. *Heavy* footsteps that were accompanied by the creaking and

wheezing of a machine's moving parts. Oh God, where was the Frankie with his tongue in my mouth? I missed *that* Frankie. It was much better than murder Frankie.

“Ra-Ra-Ra mooooooona,” his voice called out. “Wh-wh-where are youuuu?”

“Fuck this,” Ray said before lunging for the door.

“Don't go out there!” I whisper hissed.

“Me?” He scoffed before reaching back and grabbing my arm, he thrust me towards the door.

“What are you doing!”

“It ain't my name he's calling.” Ray forced me out the door but I grabbed onto the frame, fighting for my life to stay inside. “Maybe,” Ray huffed while pulling up his foot and kicking me in the gut. My hands slipped from the frame and I fell into the hall. “We give him what he's asking for and he stops killing.” Ray smirked then slammed the door shut.

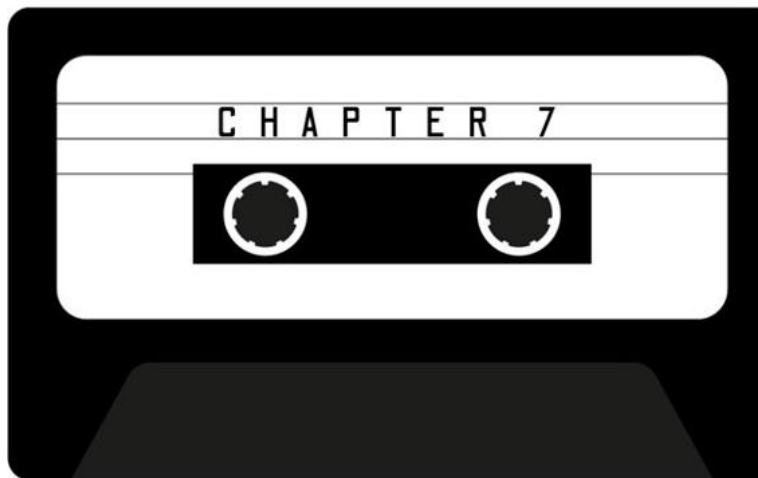
“Raaaaamooooonaaaaa,” Frankie's voice came. I could see his shadow coming around the hallway corner.

“Fuck you, Ray,” I hissed, grabbing onto my untied skate and ripping it off. I ripped off my sweater, fully revealing the hot pink crop top underneath before trying to get the other skate. I forgot about the bells on the collar I was wearing. They jingled as the sweat went over my head. Frankie stopped moving. I swallowed.

Frantically I began working on my other skate. My fingers shook as I worked to open the knot I'd tied.

“I see you.”

I ripped the skate from my foot, leapt up, and ran. The sound of heavy robotic thuds were fast behind me.



“RAMONA!” FRANKIE GROWLED. CURRENTLY, I WAS DIVING between arcade games, working my way to the ball pit while plucking the bells off my collar and tossing them as far away as I could. Bad guys always fell for that. Not that I thought Frankie was a bad guy. Gus was certainly the bad guy. Frankie though, *was* trying to kill me.

Guess everyone had their faults. I tried to remember him telling me he didn't want to kill me but that minor detail was fairly unimportant while he chased after me. At least the chainsaw was gone.

I threw a bell and darted out from the Pong game towards the three skeeball games lined up together. Unfortunately, I didn't realize Frankie was in direct sight of them. He ran at me. I screamed and leapt on the skeeball ramp, clawing my way towards the top of the machine. My plan was to crawl up there and then...well I'd figure that out when I got there.

A furred hand grabbed my shorts at the waist and tugged me back down on the ramp. I landed belly down with an oomph.

“Stop running,” Frankie growled.

“I’m not going to make it easy!” I raged back at him. *Don’t run?* Oh yeah, sure, why don’t I just stand there and wait for him to kill me! I clawed at the green, fuzzy fabric of the ramp and Frankie wrapped his enormous hands around my waist and held me down tightly, squeezing just enough that I had little hope of getting free. I donkey-kicked behind me and wailed as I made contact with metal.

“Stop that!” Frankie insisted and then he was on top of me, his body pressing against my legs to keep me from thrashing.

“Ramona,” I heard him say over top of me, his hands moving from squeezing my waist to tracing down the curve of my hips. It was anyone’s guess how he planned to murder me by feeling me up.

“You don’t want to do this!” I blurted.

“I really do,” he rasped. He lifted off me the barest amount. I took the opening, rolling out from him and onto the neighbor skeeball ramp. I kept rolling until I hit the floor and then ran through the maze of games.

I dove behind a Pac-Man game and listened. I heard Frankie stomping around and decided to take my chances.

I crawled on my hands and knees across the black and abstract neon carpet towards the ball pit with the last jingle bell in my mouth. Once I got to the ball pit I spit it out in my hand and gave it a big toss before slowly, and with as much delicateness as I could manage, submerged myself in the ball pit.

Rainbow plastic balls buried me. It was the only thing I could see minus the tiny cracks that showed the net ceiling above

me. Then I waited, motionless and breathing as quietly as I could. Which was harder than I anticipated. My body wanted to adjust as the balls dug into my back, my lungs told me I needed to breathe heavier, burning inside my chest to get the oxygen they needed.

I heard him walk up to the ball pit and just stand there. I closed my eyes and held my breath, praying to Mary in case she wanted to listen. Frankie didn't move at all. No swaying, no blinking, nothing. Like a machine without power.

"I see you," that machine said, a moment before he tipped forward and fell into the pit with me. I screamed and thrashed, trying to find the bottom of the pit so I could kick off of it to get away.

There was no getting away though. I felt his hands grab my ankles and hold me. He didn't move an inch as I attempted to free my legs.

I kicked him with my one free leg but all I accomplished was hurting myself. I wailed as my ankle rang with pain. He quickly grabbed my leg and held it back down.

"Stop hurting yourself. I'm not trying to kill you," he said. I heard the words but I'd been running for my life for who knew how long. One minute running for your life might as well be a whole day. I was exhausted, jittery, wild-eyed, throat hoarse.

"Prove it," I hissed.

"How about pleasure instead of pain?" He smiled, looking between my legs. I swallowed thickly and nodded, telling myself this was the only test possible when there were likely a million other ways. But I didn't care about those other ways. I cared about this one.

“God, these fucking rainbow shorts,” he rasped and then one clawed hand tore into the clothing, shredding them down to the skin.

I felt his tongue dip between my thighs and I shivered, all the fight leaving me. Suddenly the exhaustion weighed me down, the adrenaline leaking out of my body as I felt Frankie’s snout press against my body. His tongue pushed into me, making my back curve up, my soul trying to escape my body. I inhaled all the air in the room as his massive tongue breached my entrance, diving in as he hummed in pleasure. It was better than the brief imaginations before. My thighs shook and I wasn’t even coming.

This was so wrong but I deserved a little treat after the shift from Hell.

He licked into me then pulled back a little.

“Don’t you dare stop,” I rasped, grabbing his coyote ears and thrusting myself up toward his mouth.

“Good girl, Ramona,” he growled before his tongue pushed in again and again, licking into me, fucking me with his tongue. He lapped at the damn thing, long strokes over everything between my legs until I was squirming and panting, rubbing the little metal pieces hidden behind the soft fur covering his ears.

The large purple eyes, half-lidded with metallic lids were creepy, I had to admit. It had me half wanting to wriggle away but his tongue kept fucking me like nothing I’d ever felt. The pleasure and simmering fear that hadn’t quite left made my toes curl in near ecstasy as an orgasm crept up.

“Frankie,” I rasped, rainbow balls all around me, my face half buried in them as he hummed in pleasure, licking me in ways

I'd never once been licked. His tongue thrust inside me hard then he pulled it back to roll it over my clit again and again.

Was he covered in blood? Yes. Although to be honest that was probably not the most important detail to me at the moment. That would be that he was an ex-children's show host. That was weird. Oh yeah, and that he was a possessed animatronic.

He licked like he knew how to fuck though and I nearly gave myself a Charlie horse straining as he gripped my legs and pushed his tongue in again. I could feel the press of sharp metallic teeth denting my body as he buried his face between my legs, moving his tongue faster, rubbing it over my clit back and forth before pushing it deep inside me.

I came and I came loudly. Frankie made me a screamer. My body tensed in a rainbow ball pit as pleasure exploded across my body all the way down to my very marrow. Melting was the perfect description, all that tense build-up turning into gooey, warm ecstasy as he concentrated on my clit before pressing his tongue inside me again. He was being selfish now that I'd come, exploring how deep he could get with his mouth, how hard he could lick, how wide he could spread me.

Once I was a full puddle, staring dazed at the netting above me Frankie finally pulled back.

"Can I fuck you, Ramona?" He asked.

"Pretty sure you just did," I sighed in a daze, loopy afterglow. Frankie maneuvered himself in the ball pit until I could see his hips and crotch. A hand went to his pants and unzipped. Then he pushed the fabric down and my eyes bugged.

"What is that!" I was almost afraid to look at the thing. Okay, I wasn't afraid at all but the damn ball pit was making it difficult. I think I saw flashing lights.

“It’s my cock,” Frankie said chipperly, a smile on his face. I blanched.

“Why the fuck do you have a cock!” I screamed.

“Of course, I have a cock,” he yelled back in confusion, matching my decibels. “Gus is a bad guy but he’s not a *monster!*” Frankie looked horrified.

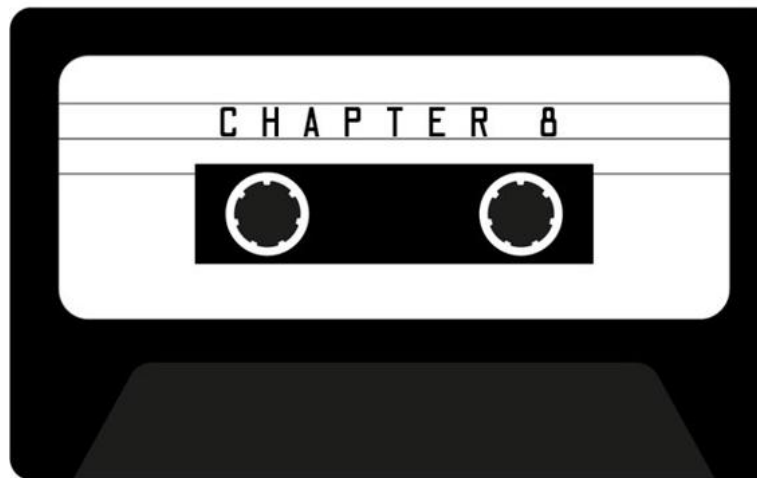
“Gus gave you a cock?” I asked in equal parts fascination and horror. Frankie shrugged and began eyeing between my legs. “No,” I said. “No way.”

“What?” Frankie asked in dejection, his ears turning downward, his eyes almost looking capable of tears. It was odd with all the gore smeared over him. Oh my god, his eyes were actually watering. Which just made my trepidation about fucking a possessed animatronic even stronger.

“I’m not fucking you until I know what exactly I’m fucking,” I said. Then I frowned. Wait, why am I a-okay fucking a mass murdering animatronic?

“Oh!” Frankie was back to being cheery as he rose up a little higher in the ball pit to begin showing off his cock. It was rainbow metallic with flashing light bumps on the side and it was big.

“It can even vibrate,” he said in pride, flicking the tip with a metal claw. I heard it ding. My legs snapped shut as my mouth fell open.



A LOUD NOISE DISTRACTED ME FROM THOUGHTS OF HAVING SEX with Frankie. The metal partition was being lifted up. I heard the sigh of Gus and shifted to the edge of the net cage, peering above the rainbow balls I was swimming in.

Gus was bent over, fiddling with the lock for the metal grate.

He was already back? The clock in here still said it was the middle of the night. I guess he suspected Frankie to have easily killed us all by now. Body cleanup probably required this sort of witching hour, to avoid people getting suspicious of all the garbage bags shaped like humans being carted from Frankie's Funhouse.

Though what did I know? Maybe that was normal and he was just here to get an early start. It was going to take a lot of cleanup and I certainly wasn't going to help. Officially, I might still be a Funhouse employee but body cleanup was definitely janitorial and I had never agreed to that.

Gus pocketed the lock and pulled up the grate.

The very thing I was freaking out about at the start of this night, was what I now wanted badly.

“Frankie,” I whispered. “I need you to kill Gus again. More permanently would be ideal.”

“I can’t,” Frankie wheezed. I twisted around with an incredulous look.

“*Now* is when you get squeamish about murder?”

“What? No,” he dismissed before sighing. “I can’t kill Gus. It’s not that I don’t want to, I *can’t*. I was lucky to have hurt him at all earlier. I think it was because he was caught off guard and wasn’t sure what to do with you in the room.”

“What would happen if you tried?” I asked.

“He can control me. Turn me off, make me kill. He’s going to make me kill you,” Frankie said in a panic, zipping himself back up his suit pants.

“Frankie?” Gus called out, trying to locate him. Frankie’s eyes shifted back and forth, indicating he was nervous. He was also breathing heavily despite not needing to breathe.

“Frankie, where the fuck are you? Those damn kids.” We could hear his voice drifting around the place as he walked through the maze of games. “Thirty kids running around the mall with no parents in sight. The police are probably already on the way because they all had very interesting things to say about being at the Funhouse, Frankie wielding a chainsaw, and one of the employees screaming at them to run.” Frankie grabbed my hand, looking at me with big eyes. He was scared and this asshole Gus was to blame. Slowly I pulled us out of the ball pit and into the room.

The only things I had on were the rainbow sock thigh highs, the clown collar, and the hot pink crop top. My coochie being

on full display wasn't an ideal way to enter potential combat.

"Frankie!" Gus yelled. I heard a door in the back open up and Gus went stomping back there. I off towards the entrance but Frankie halted, not moving an inch outside the store.

"Will you stop it!" I yanked on Frankie but he wouldn't budge.

"We got to go now, Frankie."

"He'll find me. He always finds me," Frankie whispered and my stomach dropped at the terrified tone. "You should go though. If I go kill mode again I'm not sure I'll be able to stop it. Like...yeah I think I might be in love with you but..."

"But what?" I asked, glaring. He grimaced.

"It's like a barely twenty-four hours type of instant love. I don't want to test that against Gus' magic."

"Well, that was enlightening," I grumbled. I jerked my hand from Frankie's and stomped back into the kid's arcade.

"Ramona! I didn't mean anything by that—"

"Stop," I sighed, twisting around to look at the animatronic. "This isn't about the limits of your love for me against Gus' magic. Magic?" I asked.

"He's a much better satanist than I ever was," Frankie sighed. I took one long blink, then another.

"Let's revisit that later. This is about me killing Gus with a little thing I like to call Bloodlust," I said holding up my fist because I'd named my fist Bloodlust when I was in fights. I nodded, biting my lip and smiling at Frankie. He blinked at me.

"What?" He finally asked.

“I’m going to kill Gus,” I said in exasperation. I turned around and started walking through the games again. I eyed the ball pit and a flush crept up my neck as I thought of getting eaten out by an animatronic not ten minutes ago in there. Now I was going to have to live with the memory of fucking around in a rainbow ball pit for the rest of my life. I was probably going to develop a fetish for the rainbow balls. I looked over at Frankie stepping up beside me, keeping pace. I wondered if he had balls and if they were rainbow.

No, stop. He wouldn’t have balls. I snorted.

“What?” Frankie asked.

“Nothing. So like, how does one go about killing...whatever Gus is. A wizard?” Frankie snorted.

“Gus is human and in a demon deal...like me. I wanted to be famous so they made me famous,” he huffed, shrugging. “Kind of thought it would be more Guns N’ Roses instead of the Muppet Show but can’t really ever trust a demon, Ramona.”

“I’ll remember that next time I see a demon,” I joked. “Why isn’t he an animatronic?”

“He wanted power, not fame. So they gave him power.”

“He got magic powers and you got turned into an animatronic?” I gave him a look.

“No, he got put in charge of me. My manager. Power.” Frankie began laughing and I joined in, it was contagious. Demons made some shit deals. This barely even made sense to me. The whole story felt vaguely unbelievable but I was chalking that up to the idea that actual demons existed.

“Well then why does he have magic and come back to life?”

“Gus is a committed Satanist, killing people all the time to stay powerful. He knows all those Latin spells.” I looked around and then moved us off to the side. Gus was going to be back soon and I wanted to find a weapon.

“So you were a Satanist too, right? Because you also made a demon deal?”

“Not really, I just went to a crossroads like most musicians looking for a deal with a demon. All I wanted to do was play music for a crowd, see people happy because of what I created. Give them an experience.” That was actually a really nice dream.

“How are you so sweet?” I asked.

“You’re whose sweet,” he said, smiling. I swallowed and tried to will a blush away.

“Right,” I cleared my throat. “So how do I kill Gus?”

“You have to decapitate him,” Frankie said.

“Why couldn’t you do that when he was bleeding out earlier?”

“He’s done his work protecting himself from me. If I killed him, I’d die too.”

“You won’t die if I kill him, right?”

“Is that concern I hear?” Frankie teased.

“No,” I snapped out quickly, too quickly. Shit, I was being obvious. My face felt hot. How annoying.

“Mhm, sure,” Frankie rasped, grabbing my arm and twisting me against a tall arcade game. My back pressed into it and he was just so big, blocking me in. “Look at your cute blush,” he whispered to me.

“I’m not fucking cute, I’m cool,” I grumbled.

“You are the very coolest, Ramona. I could tell that as soon as you stepped through that red curtain.” Oh god, he was going to kiss me again. I was also still naked from the waist down and he was dragging metal claws up my thigh until I felt the pads of his fingers rubbing me just right. I gasped, gripping his arms to stay up.

“You like me,” Frankie teased.

“I don’t,” I gasped, my hips moving back and forth for more delicious friction. Those claws could nick. I felt them skimming over my thighs as he rubbed me so excellently. I didn’t care, I just didn’t want him to stop because I was going to come and it was going to be glorious.

“Are you fucking the animatronics now?” I heard Ray ask. I screamed, pleasure scurrying away like a frightened woodland animal in the presence of something god awful. And that god awful thing was my mom’s ex-husband, the person I hated most in the world, walking in on Frankie the fucking animatronic fingering me.

“You are fucking dead!” I screamed at him. Mostly because of me wanting to die of embarrassment but also because he’d pushed me out of the safe room I’d shown him in the hope my death would keep him alive.

“Hey!” Ray yelled out over his shoulder. “Frankie’s right here, Gus!”

“Where’s the other two?” I asked.

“Well Gus said I can live but the other two had to go,” he shrugged.

“Ramona, I don’t think I like your dad,” Frankie said.

“He’s not my fucking dad!” God, how many people were going to make that god awful assumption?

“Wait...he’s not?” Frankie asked. Ray jabbed his finger in Frankie’s direction.

“Is that thing fucking talking?” He asked, eyes bulging.

“He’s my mom’s ex and I’m disappointed he’s one of the survivors—” I didn’t even finish the sentence before Frankie lunged forward, sinking his claws right into Ray’s gut. Ray began to croak.

“My girl doesn’t like you,” Frankie said with a chipper voice. Ray fell off Frankie’s claws into a heap on the floor. Blood gushed from his belly and he clutched it and began trying to pull himself in a crawl away.

About that time Gus came from the back with a look of rage on his face as he spotted me.

“Frankie!” He yelled. Frankie shifted back, his eyes wide in terror as he shot a look at me. I felt what I had to do in my bones. Save Frankie. Release him from the control of this evil man. I spotted the chainsaw over Frankie’s shoulder, sitting on the edge of the stage, covered in dried blood.

“Kill her!” Gus barked out. Frankie was still looking at me with a pleading expression when his eyes went from purple to glowing red.

“Fuck,” I snapped, running right at him. I had to get past him and to that fucking chainsaw before he killed me. Then I had to behead someone. Obviously, I could also choose to turn and run the fuck out of here to never see these two again but Frankie needed me. The poor puppy dog musician who stumbled into a dark deal with a demon didn’t deserve this life. He deserved to be free.

I ran past Frankie just as the chipmunk giggle burst from him like a pinata spewing candy. He lunged towards me, claws

striking out and scraping my arm as I passed.

“Ow!” I hissed but kept running at my weapon. I’d never killed someone before. Sure, I thought about it. Probably got close a couple times even. This was going to be way different. This wasn’t going to be a brawl that could accidentally turn south. This was going to be a liberation of the head from the body.

I heard heavy footsteps behind me. Frankie didn’t move super fast but he was huge, with long legs that ate up the space between us. I ground my teeth and reached for the chainsaw, noticing chunky bits on the blade before I grabbed the string and tugged.

I flipped around and faced Frankie, the chainsaw growling to life in my hands. I held it at my hips as a vicious smile cut into my face. The lust of a fight settled into my limbs. Frankie stood there eyeing me, his metal eyelids blinking one at a time, his smile wide to show off his many sharp teeth.

I looked over his shoulder and saw Gus standing there like a mannequin, waiting for my death to come quickly so he could get on with all the cleaning and fleeing that he wanted. That fucking bastard. He was doing something terrible to a sweet guy. A sweet guy who ate me out.

“Time to behead my boss,” I grit out under my breath, twisting to the side and darting around Frankie. I ran as fast as I could at my intended victim.

“Don’t worry Frankie! I’ll free you from this bastard soon!” I yelled over my shoulder as I leapt over Ray, still crawling on the floor bleeding and grumbling. Gus’ eyes bugged like a cartoon at my words. His eyes darted to Frankie in something akin to horror. Which was a bit rude considering I was the one waving a chainsaw near his face.

“No!” He yelled, throwing up his hands as I swung towards his neck. The machine went through two of his fingers like they weren’t even there. I kept my eyes on the prize—that pale stretch of neck my weapon needed to plunge into.

Gus screamed and leapt back, missing my swipe of the chainsaw. I nearly fell headfirst into the carpet from my momentum before I whipped the chainsaw around, spinning in place like Leatherface in Texas Chainsaw Massacre. As I spun I saw Frankie stomping slowly towards me and grimaced. I didn’t have a lot of time to kill Gus.

“You don’t understand!” Gus wailed. I ignored him. Best not to listen to the cries of a dead man. “He’s not what you think he is! He was a mistake! My burden!” This all sounded a bit concerning but also pretty vague and like bullshit.

“Come here you fuck!” I yelled as he took off through the long tables, leaping over all the dead parents I’d been ignoring. I grunted and ran after him. I laughed a little as I leapt over dead bodies and held the chainsaw aloft. I really needed to stop doing that laughing thing when fighting. Even I could appreciate how unhinged that was.

“Ramona! If you kill me you’ll let him free!”

“That’s the fucking point, preppy boy!” I yelled. Gus tripped and fell and I leapt at him, lifting the chainsaw high. I had to do this quickly because the hair on my arms was raised, hearing the quick stomps of Frankie coming up behind me.

Gus held up his bleeding hand with its two missing fingers. I began to bring down the loud, rumbling chainsaw as Gus tried to talk some more.

“He’ll kill everyone. He’s a—” The sentence was cut off as the weapon’s metal teeth ripped into him. Blood splashed up on

my face, stinging my eyes. I had to squish them shut and just keep bearing down as hard as I could until I was hitting the floor.

I turned off the machine and didn't hear Frankie's footsteps. I swiped at my eyes and looked behind me. Frankie was standing there, blinking at me with red glowing eyes, not moving.

"You did it," he said before he began to laugh...a lot. I laughed a little too, I mean we just defeated the bad guy! I smiled at Frankie and tossed a quick glance at Gus to make sure the job was complete. Uh, yep, the head was *definitely* detached.

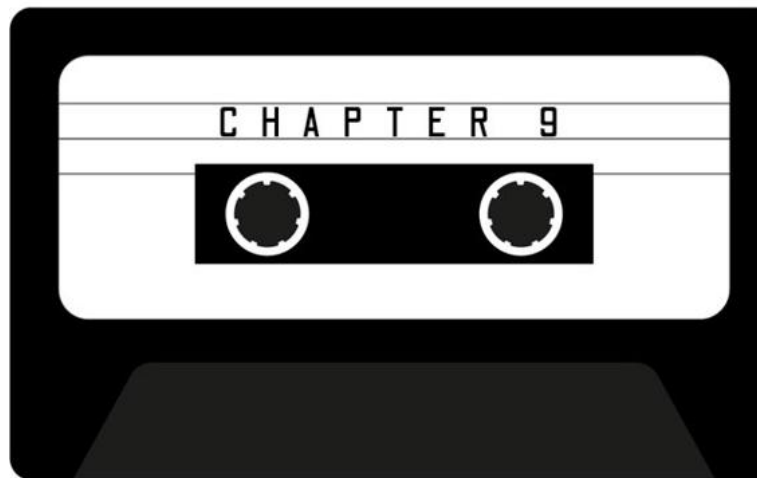
Frankie was still laughing though. He took a big breath and laughed some more even. This was getting weird. It wasn't the chattering chipmunk thing, thank god. But the cadence was deep and almost evil villain sounding in its nature. I chuckled a little with him, I mean it was contagious even if off-putting.

"You sure are happy I saved you, huh?" I asked. Frankie came walking up to me, a smile stretched over his face that could only look evil as he flashed all those sharp metal shark teeth. His hands came up and held my face tenderly. I bit my lip, feeling a little self-conscious being the hero and all.

"You are..." he trailed off with a laugh.

"So cool? Perfect? Lovely?" I suggested. I could really get down with being someone's hero. Especially when they had such a big tongue.

"So gullible," he said before breaking off into more laughter. My face dropped. Well, fuck.



I STARTED TO STRUGGLE OUT OF FRANKIE'S GRIP BUT HE powered down. Red glowing eyes faded to nothing, he sagged forward slightly and became stiff. I backed away, looking around at the carnage.

What was it Gus had been saying before I beheaded him mid-sentence? His words felt a lot more important now. Like just maybe he was actually telling the truth and that killing him was a bad idea.

Oh yeah, he said Frankie would kill everyone. Cool, cool. I should probably run and pretend I wasn't the person who started whatever shit show was about to rain down in Creepy Court Mall, maybe even Southern California as a whole.

Frankie still wasn't moving as I slowly shifted backwards. As I inched my way around my beheaded boss, I realized belatedly I definitely wasn't getting a paycheck for my hours. This sucked.

All the television sets in the room suddenly turned on, loud static hissing out. The pizza parlor showroom had about eight TVs strapped to the walls. They were snuggled high up so kids could watch reruns of Frankie's Funhouse, the tv show, during the daytime when the animatronics weren't in service.

"That's unsettling," I whispered. The static grew louder and then the TVs cut off one by one until there was only one left. It blue-screened before fading to a gray glow. Two glowing red eyes and a big glowing smile filled with tv.

"Thank you so much for freeing me, Ramona." Frankie's voice came from the tv, the mouth moving in time with the words. The hair on my arms rose up.

"Mmm, yeah. No problem. I'm just going to..." I flipped a thumb over my shoulder towards the dim mall hallway in the distance.

"Trying to leave already, Ramona?" Frankie asked.

"It's been a long shift." It certainly had been. I was exhausted, half-naked, *and* a murderer. Not sure anyone had ever accomplished this much on their first day before.

"I don't want you to leave." An electrical cord slid up my leg, wrapping around it tightly.

"What the fuck!" Another cord grabbed the other leg. I struggled against them but couldn't move. I dived to the ground and tried to crawl.

"You see, Ramona. I told a few lies," Frankie said. "And you ate them up so easily." He laughed and the cords pulled me across the floor, dragging my body closer to the tv he was talking out of.

"You don't say?" I grumbled, trying to scratch at the carpet.

“All I had to do was throw a few puppy dog eyes at you and act like a fool.” Clearly, I wasn’t getting away so I gave up trying and looked at the tv.

Admittedly, I was embarrassed I fell for his act. My face was hot as he shamed me about it. The cords on my legs tightened and shifted higher. Yet another cord slipped around my body and headed between my legs, dragging itself across my center.

“What are you doing!” I gasped.

“Well, I didn’t lie about liking you. What do you say, Ramona?”

“Say about what?” I squeaked as the cord lifted up, holding itself up like a snake with a pronged head. It hovered there a moment before it darted in like it meant to bite. The prongs dove towards my thigh, the metal sliding across my skin before a small shock of electricity jolted me.

As I gasped, the pronged head dove between my legs in a snap, delivering an electric shock right to my center. The sensation made my whole body jerk, my walls to tighten, and a chaotic pleasure to unfurl deliciously in its wake. It was a revitalizing jolt of pleasure that made me suck in a sharp breath before I let out a throaty groan.

“You gullible girl,” Frankie rasped. “The truth is I’m the demon. Gus was a Satanist who managed to trap me inside the animatronic body to do his bidding and give him power. The little shit.” The cord snapped forward again, the prongs sinking into me and jolting me with a sharp electric bite. My eyes nearly rolled in the back of my head as a shudder rolled over me. The pleasure was energetic and explosive, a fast-paced jolt that brought me higher.

“Demon,” I rasped. “Why are you in the TV?”

“I’m incorporeal in this realm. But I can possess any device with electricity.” More cords came from who knew where to slither across my body, sending tiny pronged bites of electricity to my skin over and over. My head fell back with a thud on the floor as I writhed in a frenzy of pleasure.

“Oh Ramona, look at you. I like the way you twitch on the floor from a few little stings. Pathetic, *gullible* Ramona.” His words burned inside me, I felt like I was on fire, ready to rage like I normally do. I could feel the need to jump up and fight tight inside me like a knot.

Then it just snapped, melting away. My entire ego cracked open and left me feeling warm and guileless. My muscles went lax and my brain went numb. It felt like all my stress and anxiety had been taken out. The need to defend myself was completely absent.

I *wanted* him to keep calling me names and I wanted to nod my head as he did it.

“Gullible, Ramona,” *Yes*. “So naive.” I was and it felt good to admit it, to agree. All the tension leaked away until I felt malleable and soft, warm and gooey. All the while he kept teasing my body, getting me off, complementing the way I squirmed, and laughing at the way I agreed. I wanted him to laugh, I deserved it. I’d *earned* his teasing and disappointment.

I couldn’t recognize myself, writhing submissively on the floor. It felt good to step outside all my roles—let them slither away until there was nothing left to care about. I cried out as the jolt of electricity hit me, my body shaking in charged revelry.

No one had ever talked to me this way. Or if they had, I didn’t like it. But I totally loved this. Frankie, the tv star. Frankie the massive robot. Frankie the demon.

“More,” I begged.

“Oh Ramona,” he chuckled, a condescending edge to his words. The tv’s light bathed the dark room, lighting my skin and leaving harsh shadows. I watched black cords tense on my thighs as a heavy one slid across my belly. It gave an electric kiss that made my muscles tense.

My back arched as I squirmed and moaned. Then a large coyote animatronic blocked out the tv’s light. I looked up to see red eyes glowing down at me. The tv clicked off and the cords fell away. I kept laying there, waiting for him to do as he pleased, and hoping desperately it was fuck me.

Frankie reached down and grabbed me, pulling me from the ground and carrying me through the arcade all the way up to the ticket booth. His arm swept over the top and a handful of golden coins with his cartoon likeness fell to the ground. Then he set me on the counter, leaning over with a growl as I waited for what came next. Massive clawed hands settled beside my head.

The cold kiss of smooth metal pressed between my legs. The soft fabric of his suit and short fur brushed my thighs. Huge glowing red eyes looked down at me with curved eyebrows of judgment.

“You want to fuck an animatronic, don’t you?” He asked.

“Yes,” I rasped, reaching out and gripping his arms. He shook his head in disappointment even as I felt the tip of his metal cock brush my entrance. I gasped, twisting his jacket’s sleeves, my body melting instead of tensing. All the fight was gone for *him*. I was loose and lax and needy.

His tip started to spread me open.

“You’re such a disappointment,” he rasped, causing a shudder to roll over me. Right next to my ears, I heard his metal claws digging into the counter as he pressed deeper inside me.

“I am,” I mumbled in agreement. It felt so good just to agree, to not fight it, just be who I was even if it was the shittiest version of myself. He accepted those parts and even wanted to indulge them for me. I inhaled sharply as I felt the bumps up the side of his cock rub against my walls. I whined his name and he groaned, looking down to see how deep we were connected. Not deep enough.

“I’ll give you what you need,” he promised, pushing in further. “How couldn’t I give someone so pathetic what they want?” He murmured tenderly to me. He sounded almost breathless. His claws punctured the counter and a growl worked its way from his mouth as he thrust into me.

Despite his evident pleasure, he acted like this was all for me—because of how much I needed it. It did things for me.

“This is what you want, right?” He hissed with entertainment, buried to the hilt, my body clenching around him.

“Yes,” I moaned. He pulled out and thrust back in, giving me what I needed. A gasp left my mouth. His cock was unforgiving, no give to it at all, barrelling its way inside me, the bumps rubbing.

“Tell me *how* you want it, Ramona. Maybe I’ll torture you slowly,” he said drawing himself back out before slowly pressing back in.

“No,” I rasped. “I need it faster.”

“That’s good, Ramona, telling me exactly how you need your perversions fulfilled.” He thrust into me fast, over and over, growling, claws scratching the counter. “Let’s see how you

handle what I can really do though,” he whispered into my ear. He reached between us and pressed something on the bottom of his cock. The bumps on the side of his shaft lit up in blue, yellow, and red and the entire thing began to vibrate and twist.

He looked down at me with a shark’s smile—manic, wide, unhinged. Then he pressed my thighs flat against the counter and pushed himself inside me again.

“Oh God,” I whined, eyes rolling in the back of my head as vibrations and movement lit up inside me. I couldn’t do anything but come while crying out and whining. And when it was over all he did was chuckle and keep fucking me. My legs tried to curl up and close but he held them down as I felt another orgasm burst through the surface and take over.

I clawed at his arms—whimpering as my legs shook with enthusiasm. The pleasure just wouldn’t stop. I wanted the ecstasy but I felt like I was losing control. Tears pooled in my eyes and fell down my face. Frankie clicked his tongue.

“This ride only stops for emergencies. Crying is not an emergency,” he said with a deep laugh, fucking me senseless until a third orgasm started to claw its way from the depths of me. I whined and my body tensed in preparation.

“I’m giving you just what you want,” he groaned, fucking me faster, the vibrations a relentless attack on my sanity as the orgasm fully burst from me. I cried out, shaking and tensing as pleasure rolled over me.

A guttural growl ripped from him. I felt something hot gush inside me as my hips bucked on his cock, my body mastered by its pleasure. Not that I cared. I was still in that special headspace where it didn’t matter how fucked up or embarrassing I was. I could just be everything I was, acknowledge it and enjoy it. I didn’t even have to do any work

to enjoy it, Frankie was there to give it to me. My reward for melting and losing all my fight.

Finally, his hips were still as he moved his mouth to my ear.

“The moment I saw you walk behind the red curtain I *wanted* you more than anything I’ve wanted before. I was determined to make you mine, even if I had to lie along the way.” I laid there catching my breath and relearning how to be me. Frankie pressed his mouth to mine, his tongue owning my mouth. I moaned lazily, kissing him back.

“My pet,” he rasped around the time I started to get post-orgasm clarity.

“I’m no one’s pet,” I hissed.

“How cute that you think you have a choice,” he said with a laugh. Frankie pulled out and I felt something wet between my thighs. My fingers brushed through the liquid. It was white and plentiful.

“What is this?” I asked.

“Ectogasm,” Frankie said with a wide smile, eyeing my pussy like he was considering ending my life via sex. He shifted closer, a gleam in his glowing eyes, and I scrambled away, behind the counter. I snatched up a pair of Frankie Funhouse basketball shorts and slipped them on before running through the arcade and back into the showroom. I would literally die if he fucked me again right now. I’d left exhaustion behind two hours ago. I was running on pure will to live at this point and it felt like shit.

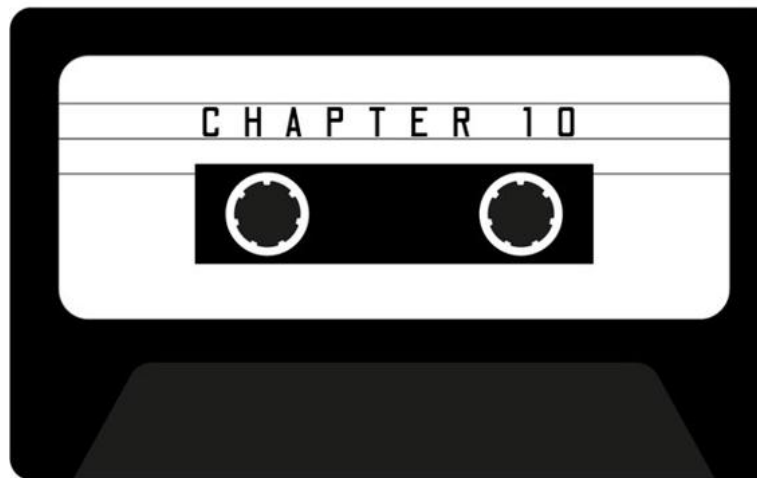
“What’s wrong, Ramona?” He teased while hot on my heels. I darted to the other side of a long pizza table and eyed him across it. He curved an eyebrow, a shark’s smile with zealous eyes.

My legs felt like they could barely hold me. I was clutching the plastic chairs to keep myself from falling into a heap. I could just imagine him descending on me if I did, killing me slowly with one orgasm after the other while telling me death also wasn't a good reason to stop enjoying the ride.

"What do you want, Frankie?" I asked. His eyes tipped down to my body.

"To fulfill all your sick perversions," he purred. I swallowed thickly.

"I meant other than that," I rasped before clearing my throat.
"Why did you have me kill Gus?"



“WHAT I WANT IS FREEDOM TO LIVE MY DEMONLY WAYS without restraint,” Frankie said. Then he began to go off in an excited rant about murdering the entire state and bringing an end to the world. Several times I tried to get a word in but he wouldn’t let me.

“Frankie!” I snapped and he finally seemed to realize I was trying to talk. “So Gus killed someone and used Satanist death magic to trap you in the animatronic?”

“It’s more complicated than that,” he said, brushing the blood-stained arms of his suit. “He had to perform a massacre. Gus wasn’t a good guy. I hope you don’t feel bad about killing him.”

“Not really,” I said, looking over at the headless body. Though I wished I’d waited until he explained in full about Frankie. I looked around at the...massacre around me. Okay, I was forming an idea. One that might just save the lives of a lot of people.

I saw something glimmer near the edge of the room and realized it was Ray's glassy eyes staring at me. That bastard was still alive! I ignored him for now. Ray might be useful in some way.

I walked slowly around the table and then went over to my beheaded boss. Frankie watched me, standing his ground and observing me with oversized eyes.

"Uh actually maybe I do feel bad," I said, bending down and trying to discreetly pat Gus' body for a book of satanist spells or something.

"What are you doing over there, Ramona? You don't have a... *thing* for dead bodies, do you? I'm not sure I'm up for that." Interesting line in the sand to draw for him but okay. There was no book of spells. I lifted his shirt's sleeve and there on his arm was a tattoo, something scribbled in Latin. This had to be it. A fail-safe if he died and someone had to contain the demon again. I read over the words a few times, trying to memorize them before Frankie decided to get closer and see what I was looking at.

Discreetly, I eyed Ray again. He was leaning against the wall, holding his gut where Frankie had gored him.

Okay first, I was going to murder Ray and count that as a bonus. I wasn't sure if I had to kill him to make the spell work since there was already a massacre but no point risking it. Then, if that worked, I was going to be forever tying myself to Frankie and his really big tongue. Uh, I meant his demonic soul.

He was ranting again about his plans of pain, torture, and death.

To be honest, I didn't dislike the demon but he was far too cocky without someone controlling him. Rivers of blood wasn't really my aesthetic and I could never trust he wouldn't kill me or those I cared about when given the freedom to do whatever he wanted.

"Okay," I blurted, interrupting Frankie as he talked about ripping flesh from bones across the golden state. He was really attached to this idea. I pushed myself up from the floor and looked at the demonic robot.

"Okay?" He asked, the lids of his eyes sinking lower.

"Okay I'll be your sex pet," I said, my face burning as I glared at the wall, pissed I had to say this.

"Really?" He sounded unconvinced. "Why?" I swallowed my pride.

"Because then you won't kill me," I hissed. He kept staring down at me in anticipation of more. I groaned loudly and threw my hands up. "Because I'm into you, okay? You're a lying, mass-murdering demon and I kinda think it's bitchin'. I'm not totally normal, you know? I just beheaded my boss because of one thinly veiled lie an animatronic gave me."

The sad part was, I was telling the truth. Man, I was fucked up.

"Aren't you just the cutest, Ramona." Frankie sounded absolutely enamored and I tried not to swell with his compliment but my heart felt light and fluttery. I knew I was already addicted to whatever he had given me before, the moment with zero ego and pure sloppy pleasure.

"I'm not fucking cute," I said, shifting closer to Ray who glared at me, not trusting me one bit. He shouldn't. Bastard tried to get me killed, he deserved what was coming.

“Let’s see how cool you remain when I test out just how many volts you can handle,” Frankie rasped. My eyes bugged and I pressed my thighs together. I was hot over a possessed animatronic threatening to electrocute me. That was honestly a more surprising revelation learned at work, than realizing I’m capable of wielding a chainsaw against my boss.

I cleared my throat and focused.

“Tell me about your apocalypse plan again. I missed some of the big parts.” I shuffled closer to Ray. He was in no shape to flee, thank god. Frankie had essentially already killed him, even if it was a slow death. I was practically doing him a service by ending it quicker. Plus the asshole might actually go to heaven considering he was being used to stop a demonic apocalypse.

“Oh you are going to love this,” Frankie hissed in glee before he began to rant and rave again. He paced across geometric neon shapes on the carpet as he talked. There was a far-off look in his eyes and a smile stretched over his face, no doubt visualizing mayhem. Frankie had clearly been waiting a long time to talk about this with someone. The fact I asked him for more info seemed to spur him into a greater hyper-focused deluge of details.

Perfect, it was now or never. I launched at Ray, grabbing a plastic spork from the table as I descended on him.

“You bitch,” he hissed, grabbing my arm and ripping the spork from me. “I’ll do it myself,” he spat. He wasn’t even going to allow me the joy of ending him—annoying until the end. Ray dug the plastic utensil into his belly. A final gush of blood left his body and he sagged to the side, limp.

That’s when I whipped back around to Frankie and started to speak Latin. He twisted around with red glowing eyes and a

furious look on his face.

“Ramona!” He yelled. He stood there looking furious with me as I spoke the spell. “Why do I have to like someone so difficult,” he grumbled as I said the final line. Nothing happened and Frankie massaged his temples.

“You pronounced something wrong,” he sighed before saying the word correctly for me.

“Uh, thanks,” I said awkwardly before launching back into Latin. Frankie shook his head. I felt something snap inside me, a tight elastic band that was anchored to my heart and reached out, attaching to Frankie.

We stood there a moment in silence, staring at one another, and letting what just happened to sink in.

“Guess this means we are sort of forever now, huh?” I asked. Frankie gave a deep sigh. I expected him to be angrier—to have attempted to kill me actually. However, he just stood there like we were having a couples fight and he was being the bigger person about it. As the adrenaline settled and I realized nothing else was going to happen, I smiled.

“I’ve got a good feeling about us,” I said, standing taller and putting my hands on my hips.

“I was this close to killing thousands of people,” Frankie said, holding up his hand to show a tiny pinched space between his fingers.

“Yeah,” I laughed. “That was a close one.”

“Very close,” he said, his eyes dragging down my body.

“I need some OJ before we do that again. Maybe something from the food court.” I’d yet to try out Broth with a Bite but

the smells it omitted were fantastically meaty. Frankie huffed in disappointment but looked resigned to my words.

“Hey, so do I have powers now?” I asked.

“Not unless you perform satanic rituals,” he commented. I frowned.

“Well, do I at least become immortal?”

“Again, satanic rituals.”

“Damn it, Frankie. You’re supposed to be, like, a demon! What do I get out of this deal?” I asked. Frankie took a moment to think and then a smile spread over his face.

“Let me kill the rat,” he said with excitement.

“The...rat?”

“Yes, the conniving bastard who stole my fame! A rat selling pizza, come on,” he scoffed. Ohhh *that* rat.

“Is he a demon too?”

“Of course he’s a demon. I’m trapped in a mall and he gets made for tv movies!” He growled in rage. “Gus never wanted me to kill him or the execs that canceled my show. He was punishing me for trying to kill him one too many times.” Frankie rolled his eyes like Gus was being dramatic.

“Oh,” I commented. I wasn’t sure what to say to all these revelations. “Well, I mean I’m cool with killing Chuck. You want a show again?”

“We can have so much more than a show, Ramona.” Frankie strode towards me, his hands brushing down my arms before he held my hands in his. “We could have movies, theme parks even! Frozen pizzas in every supermarket. Gas station if we wanted to. We could be filthy rich.”

“Gas station sounds random but the filthy rich part I like a lot,” I said with a wide smile.

“We are going to have a good life, Ramona,” Frankie promised, pulling me into his chest. His arms wrapped around me, giving me a tight hug. “I think I knew things were going to end up this way,” he admitted.

“Can’t say the same,” I said, giving in and hugging him back. I pressed my face against his chest and inhaled. He smelled like blood and pizza.

“I really do like you, Ramona,” he whispered. I bit my bottom lip to stop myself from smiling.

“I really do like you too, Frankie,” I admitted softly. “Let’s kill the fucking animatronic rat.”

About the Author

Beatrix Hollow survives in a puddle of mud sometimes called East Texas. She writes morally questionable paranormal romance that frequently has horror themes. Sometimes there's even a strange kink and interesting appendage. She finds dark, steamy, and humorous themes fun.

Beatrix studied creative writing and psychology at Virginia Tech, used to be a professional ice cream maker, and enjoys looking at artwork of raccoons.

<https://linktr.ee/beatrixhollow>

Also by Beatrix Hollow

[Cute but Psycho](#)

[Run & Hide](#)

[Hookah Smoking Caterpillar](#)

[Flawed Creatures](#)

[Monster Island](#)

LOST AND FOUND

VERA VALENTINE



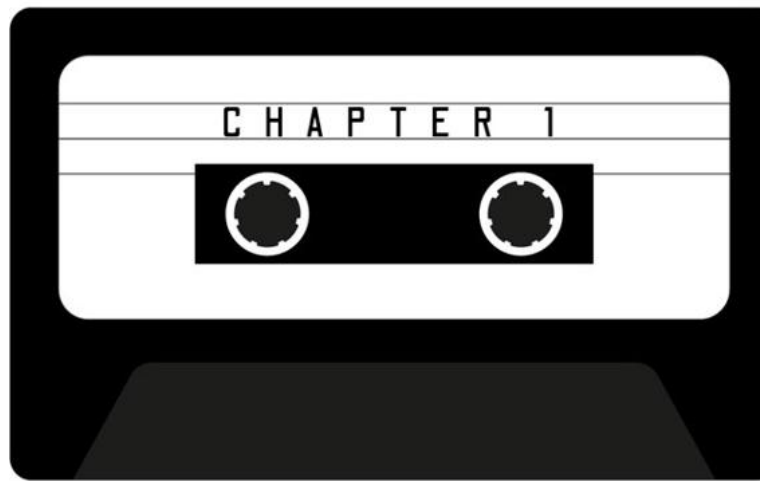
Ethan is a displaced Nix - a water spirit bound to a mall water fountain thanks to the tender mercies of unethical mosaic stone sourcing. When a plumber's son presents an interesting diversion to Ethan's days working the Lost and Found at the Creepy Court Mall, the handsome hunk may just be the one thing he's been searching for.



Content Warning:

This short story contains mature themes, including explicit oral, anal, and manual sex, dirty talk, discussion of breeding, egg production (by MC, during climax), talk of breeding (non-pregnancy-causing), unprotected sex, and a magical coercion-into-mating situation. While MM pairings never need a

warning, consider this your heads up that this is a love story
between two men.



I CLOSED MY EYES, GRINDING MY JAW AT A LOUD SPLASH followed by raucous, idiotic male laughter and the echoing slap of retreating sneakers on linoleum. The sharp points of my teeth pricked at the inside of my lower lip before I got them under control again, soothing myself with a deadly glare at the source of the noise. The worst plague to ever descend on humanity, monsters far more destructive than anything I could call kin.

Teenagers.

Before I could indulge in any mental fantasies of drowning the little shits in the makeshift grotto I'd built beneath the mall, the phone rang.

“Mall Facilities, Ethan speaking.” I bit back a sigh as I fruitlessly attempted to untwist the perpetually-tangled phone cord. Everything felt in disarray today. There were pizza grease smears on the curved edge of the information desk,

whatever foulness the rowdy boys had left on the surface of my fountain-water, and now this knot of ugly beige coils, too.

A wailing, shrieking child in the background nearly drowned out the female caller's voice. "My Brittany's teddy bear is missing, has anyone turned anything in? We were in the food court and—"

"Nope, sorry." I cut off her pleas as I dropped the handset into the phone cradle, taking solace in the satisfying clunk and faint bell noise. Maybe one day I'd "accidentally" break the infernal thing and have an afternoon of peace for a change. The phone was my least favorite part of the job, one I'd begrudgingly had to take to stay close to my water source.

The phone immediately rang again, testing what little patience I had left. I was overdue to submerge myself—there had been an unusual amount of nocturnal activity around the mall the last few nights, which meant I couldn't safely slip into my grotto. The despair of feeling disconnected from my water had soured my mood and dried my skin. Yes, I could dip a hand into the coin-studded turquoise water without getting strange looks, but it wasn't as if I could ease my body into the fountain the way I longed to.

I lifted the receiver again, willing my voice to stay calm. "Ma'am, as I just explained, we don't have any toys here."

"No toys? Damn. What the hell am I going to play with, then?" The unexpected answer was delivered in a baritone smoother than the soft jazz muzak that murmured through the speakers overhead.

"I—oh. Um. Right, sorry, I mean—" I grasped at words, at sentences, with all the grace of that new gluttonous hippo game the toy store across the mall could barely keep in stock. Mercifully, the rumbling laughter of the voice cut in instead.

“Don’t worry about it, man, I’m just messing with you. This is Ryan Gold, with Flo-Rite Plumbing. I’m calling about some kind of fountain leak, it says here. I know my dad scheduled your appointment for the beginning of next month, but we had a cancellation and we could come today, if that works?”

“Oh! Yes. Yes, we’re leaking, definitely. The fountain is leaking, I mean. I’d love it if you came today, yes.” Why did my face feel so hot? My nails shimmered blue-green, sharpening against the rubbery beige phone cord as I twirled it aimlessly. A strange current of anticipation rushed through me at the thought of seeing the man behind the voice, stomach tightening.

“Mhm. Good, that’s perfect. We’ll be there right around 2, then. Hey, listen, if you could shut off the water to the fountain beforehand, that would be super helpful.” There were faint scratching sounds of a pen or pencil on paper as he wrote something down.

“Okay. See you at 2 then, Ryan.” As I hastily hung up the phone to prevent further embarrassment, my face heated in an uncharacteristic blush. I dabbed curious fingertips at my warm cheeks, skin that normally ran water-cool and threatened to reveal my inhuman nature if I ever allowed contact. Why in the depths had I called him *Ryan*? That was stupid. Too familiar. I was at work, I should have called him Mr. Gold.

My stomach tightened with anticipation again as a jolt of recognition hit me.

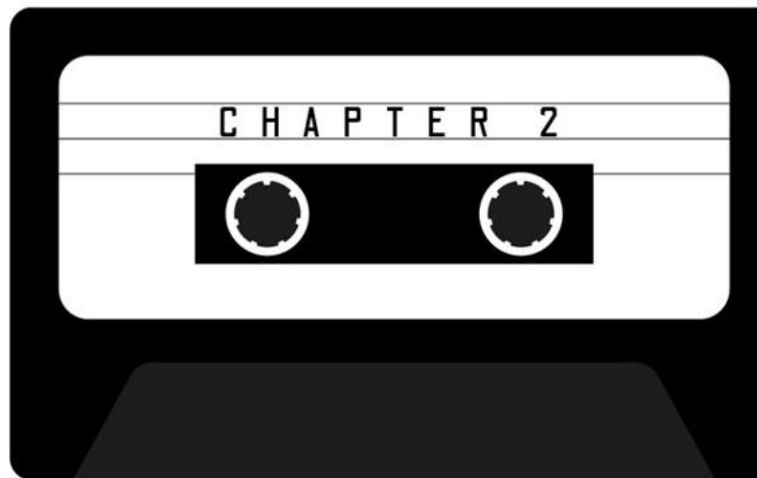
I wanted to *collect him*.

That impulse was the only time I felt this way, when I shimmied after a particularly bright coin or lost bit of jewelry in the water, or when I spirited away something set with

sparkling rhinestones from the dented cardboard box under the counter.

These little things I found? Those treasures tossed in the water or abandoned elsewhere in the mall? Those were *mine*.

This Ryan would also be *mine*.



THE GIANT NEON-RINGED CLOCK THAT HUNG OVER ONE OF THE escalators read 12:30, an annoying distance from the 2 pm appointment I now eagerly awaited. Well, more time to get ready, I supposed. I grabbed the creased “We’ll be right back!” sign and plunked it down, the peeling lamination scraping along the counter as I lifted the gate and squeezed out of the tiny kiosk. I swallowed with a wince at my pinched throat as I made my way through the mall—I was *very* dry, and I’d need to get into my grotto and relax my form tonight, no matter what.

I subtly leaned and trailed my hand through the highest part of the fountain as I passed it, a small relief against the dryness. My submerged pinky brushed the slick, cool surface of the tiles as the water swirled in eddies against my finger-webs with every step. I had to pull the thin membranes back in as I approached the far edge of the fountain and removed my hand, but it was worth that quick effort for the relaxation of touching my water.

I was a Nix, an ancient aquatic monster far from my ancestral home, forced to adopt a human persona for periods far longer than we were intended to. Countless years ago, a meddling adventurer making a name for himself stole a ring from my grotto, one forged from my own scales, and gained power over me. He'd been, unsurprisingly, an absolutely insufferable asshole about it, and once he'd commanded me to kill his enemies, fetch him wealth, and the usual array of boring mortal bullshit, he'd thankfully died without an heir. The ring settled into the silt of some forgotten river, and so did I, until an enterprising countryman unknowingly sold it in a load of decorative river stones slated for a mosaic. I was abruptly woken and forced to stow away on a ship to an unknown country, following the pull of my ring against my will.

The annoying checks and balances of that cursed jewelry kept me from finding it, reclaiming it, and eating everyone involved out of sheer irritation. I didn't have much of a taste for human flesh anyway, though I'd heard some of my local brethren weren't quite as discerning. No, I had to subsist on over-processed fish, practically dehydrate myself to avoid detection, and wait for the impossible: another human to find my ring and willingly give it back. Until that happened, this job kept me close enough to water infused with my ring's magic to survive.

Oh, I'd still looked for my ring, believe me. Night after night that first year or two after my awakening, squinting at every inch of the hideous mosaic edges and walls and floors that shimmered under the foot or two of chlorinated water. But no glint of gold called to me, leading me to reluctantly admit it must be buried somewhere deep under the ugly tile shards and sloppy grout. I'd have to smash the entire fountain to even hope to find it, and the "monster" movies I'd rented from Red

Light Video told me that sort of thing would get me the wrong kind of attention. The kind that landed you splayed out on a dissection table like a biology test.

No thanks.

Besides, the teenagers here were annoying, and loud, but overall life at the mall was far better than the one I'd had as chattel under the so-called "hero." I ran a lost-and-found that never really returned anything, because anything that remotely interested me ended up down in my grotto, neatly arranged on makeshift shelves. No one was ever really sure where their lost items ended up, so I escaped suspicion with a bored shrug now and then. Humans were simple, forgetful creatures and I liked pretty things—I wouldn't apologize for being what I was meant to be.

After spending a long minute drinking deep pulls of cold water from a nearby water fountain, I entered the "under renovation" bathroom that mall staff had effectively claimed as theirs with a fake sign. I locked the door behind me, wrinkling my nose at the persistent stench of perfume, hairspray, Marlboros, and weed that was practically tangible. Flicking a dirty hair scrunchie off the sink, I gave myself a once-over in the mirror, squinting through the crude layer of marker-scrawled curses and spurting cocks.

I looked like most of the 20-somethings behind counters at the mall, if a bit lanky and long-fingered. I'd modeled my look on mannequins in one of the nicer menswear stores when I first broke into the mall, following the mosaic artisans to this suburban oasis in the making. I'd recreated the outfits with clothes swiped after closing, furtively sneaking around before it occurred to me to try for a job here. My first pay envelope of off-the-books cash went to getting a simple haircut: a short

tousled top and trimmed sides that made the most of my dirty blond hair, a look I hadn't deviated from since.

Light denim jeans, white sneakers, a button-up dark plaid shirt, and a black denim jacket made me just another face in the crowd. My features were soft and empathetic, a species trait that made it easier to tempt humans into drowning. Grey-blue eyes and a white smile that would give a Crest ad a run for its money put me on the right side of handsome, even surrounded by image-obsessed teens and college students on the weekends. My teeth were flat now, but if I didn't get these strange nerves under control they'd start showing points again, and I couldn't risk that.

I wet my hands under the faucet, letting the water wash over my palms for a few blissful minutes before finger combing my hair. My reflection's features took on the ethereal, dewy look that told me I'd chased away the worst of the dryness, and I was as attractive as I could manage in my strange pseudo-captivity. I didn't know why I cared that this *Ryan* saw me as beautiful, but I did. I knew it was likely futile anyway; unlike the ways of my own kind, some of these humans seemed to discourage intimacy between certain pairs for baffling reasons.

With a sigh, I eventually realized I was lingering too long and took one last look at myself before reentering the busy stream of bodies in the mall. Scores of parents were dragging squalling children after them, insisting they needed a new coat, boots, or a scarf for the fast-approaching winter. Even as obstinate as some of the little ones could be, I still found them charming. Lost children were the one thing I *did* return from my kiosk, mostly because reuniting them made the tiny humans so joyful. When you were designed for violent aquatic murder by magical creation and primal instincts, you enjoyed pleasant moments wherever you could find them.

Once back at my kiosk, I perched on the battered stool in the center and sullenly watched the neon clock, willing time to pass more quickly.



I'D BEEN FIDGETING, FROWNING AT THE 8-MINUTES-AFTER-2 on the clock, when an older man in grungy overalls cleared his throat directly in front of me. He smiled and thrust a callused hand in my direction, giving me a curt nod as I reluctantly took it and shook.

"Afternoon. Bob Gold, my son called you this morning. We're here to take a look at your fountain? I'm pretty confident we can get it patched up today, based on what your folks told us last month." He tilted his head back, indicating the large fountain directly across from my kiosk.

"Ah. Yes. Did Ryan come out with you?" I may have come across more blunt than I intended, but bitter disappointment *the voice* hadn't come with his apparent father colored my tone.

"That he did!" Bob laughed loudly, clapping a hand on the counter. "I'll tell you, that boy has more work ethic than I ever did. I told him this probably wasn't a two-man job, but he insisted. You two friends?"

I gave a faint nod, suddenly wanting nothing more than to find Ryan and resenting this small talk. "Yes. I'd been hoping to say hi."

Bob jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “Well, he mentioned something about getting a corn dog at the food court, our morning job took longer than we thought it would. Where’s the leak in the lines? I’ll get started while you track him down.”

A cold dread pooled in my stomach; I’d *heard things* about those corn dogs, I needed to steer Ryan to another food booth. I slapped the sign back on the counter and hastily exited while waving for Bob to follow me, the shorter man jangling behind me with a toolbox in his hand. I dropped to a knee by the far edge of the fountain, swinging open a small panel on rusted hinges and pulling down a switch that brought the rush of the central water jet to a gradual halt.

Ignoring the man’s audible disappointment that I hadn’t turned the water off beforehand - I’d been busy with more important things, like making myself irresistible—I hurried to the food court without a second thought. Halfway there, I realized that I had no idea what this *Ryan* even looked like. The sight of an equally-grungy pair of overalls over a blue work shirt blessedly solved the mystery for me. I gently tapped the man’s arm as he stood in line to order, making him turn towards me.

“Ryan, right? Trust me, you want to eat elsewhere. This place—uh—failed...health inspection last month.” I wrinkled my nose in a quiet, exaggerated show of distaste.

His appearance hit me like a flood-swollen river, all golden blonde perfection and chiseled features, marred by the slightest smear of dirt along his jawline that I longed to brush away. His smile was devastating, as was the equally-golden brow that arched above his bright blue eyes. “Toy boy?”

My legs went weak at that voice murmuring what sounded an awful lot like a pet name. It took a beat to realize he was

joking with me, mind flickering like the stubborn fluorescent lights in the back storerooms. “Oh, um yeah. Heh. That’s me. I’m Ethan, by the way. Do you like fish?”

“Love it.” He craned his head over his shoulder. “Why, is there a place in the food court? I’d definitely prefer that over mystery meat hot dogs.” He laughed, and it was clear to see that Bob was his father, his eyes crinkling the same way. My stomach writhed in equal parts anxiety and happiness, like I’d swallowed a mouthful of minnows that were fighting digestion.

I nodded and moved back to allow him to step out of the ordering line, and his hand spanned my lower back for a long moment as he guided me to lead the way. It was a gesture easily ignored at any other time, from any other person, but it felt electric coming from Ryan. I moved on autopilot to my go-to booth, ordering two of my usual fish and fries baskets and carrying them to a nearby table before I even consciously thought about it.

I shyly pushed one of the red plastic baskets towards Ryan as I dropped into a seat across from him, trying my damndest to act normal and promptly forgetting what the hell *normal* even looked like. He probably thought I was a nutcase, and I was certain I was blushing again. What the hell was it about this perfect stranger that made me feel so out of sorts?

“So. *Ethan*. I guess my dad’s already working on the fountain? And look at me, over here slacking off, practically on a date.” He folded down the checkered wax paper and popped a fry in his mouth, studying me with an intensity that belied his casual tone.

I elegantly choked on a piece of breaded fish at the word *date*.

Ryan seemed to deflate at my shock, his confidence rushing out as his brow creased with concern. “I mean, you know, just fucking with you. Not saying you’re one of those—you know. Heh.”

He quickly broke off a piece of his fish filet and chewed at it, a sadness creeping into his eyes for only a moment before he plastered on a smile. Desperate to put him at ease, my gaze fixed on a metal band button pinned to his overalls. Opportunity was knocking, and I flung the door open as wide as I could.

“So you like Nøkken too? I love them, especially the lead singer. He’s...really awesome.” It was a careful gambit to show my hand, the lead singer in question recently making headlines for kissing the band’s drummer—the band’s *male* drummer—on stage at an international show.

Ryan’s fingertips brushed his pin as his smile softened again, voice quieting. “Oh yeah? Even with all the, uh, *stuff* recently?”

I swallowed thickly, and this time it had nothing to do with dryness. I was anxious to either pursue this strange, insistent attraction to someone I barely knew or to write it off and get on with my life.

“*Because* of the stuff.” My nerves surged and I was worried for a moment my few bites of fish would be reappearing.

Ryan looked over his shoulder nervously before leaning over the table, tantalizingly close. His voice, just as sexy in a whisper, told me everything I needed to know. “Me too.”

He jumped nearly a foot when a callused hand landed on his shoulder before I could answer. “*There* you are. I thought you were just getting a corndog? We’re going to need some tools

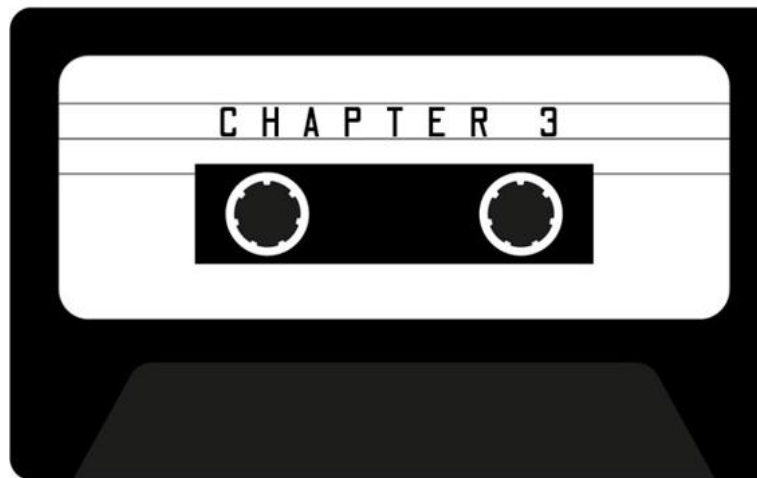
out of the truck, there's a half-busted junction in there, it's not the simple swap I thought it was. Oh! Good, your friend found you."

I smiled as broadly as I could, nerves sparking at Ryan's sheer look of panic. *Ah*. So his father didn't know. I wasn't surprised, what little experience I'd had with our current conversational subject told me that most humans kept it as private as possible. "Yes! Thank you, I insisted on buying Ryan lunch. He got mine last time we hung out. We were just discussing...football?"

It was another calculated gambit, if Ryan wasn't into the oddly popular human sport, I could always feign a one-sided enthusiasm. The way his shoulders relaxed told me I'd hit the nail on the head, though, and Bob launched into a spirited defense of a local team's latest game and ensuing fumble as Ryan quickly finished his meal and rose, dusting off the front of his overalls. Our hands brushed as he handed me his empty basket. We locked eyes for a long moment while his father was facing the other direction, rambling on about valve caps.

Ryan *winked* at me.

I was grateful my hands were obscured by the baskets and my coat was long-sleeved; the scales that rippled over my skin with delight would have outed me for sure.



I'D TRAILED THEM BACK TO THE BROKEN FOUNTAIN AND settled onto my stool, doing my best not to drool at the way Ryan moved. He was the kind of muscular that hid behind clothes, making him unexpected eye candy as he toiled alongside his father. The way his bicep bulged when he turned a wrench made him look like a work of art. The flex of his thigh when he stretched out alongside the utility door made my mouth water. The phone rang and I simply picked it up and dropped it right back on the phone cradle, cutting off the call that was attempting to cut into my precious sightseeing time.

Whoops. Technical difficulties.

I slipped away to the bathroom to check my hair again when I got restless, but most of the afternoon was spent staring at my new crush. As it looked like the project was making some headway, an unexpected splash of water sounded against the linoleum. I stood up to peer over the counter when a strangled curse and a *very wet* Bob struggled up from the floor, swiping water ineffectually at his overalls.

“Ry, what do you mean you don’t see the part? It was *right there*. I don’t understand how it could have gone missing, I damn well know I brought it in. If you can’t find it, I’m going to have to stay here after closing to reroute that pipe manually, it’s the only one we had on the truck!” Bob grumbled, cradling his head in his hands and glaring at the trickle of water that died off as Ryan pulled the shutoff lever.

“I’m sorry dad, I was just under there with the flashlight and everything it’s just *gone*. Maybe it went into the pipes or something, it’s a small valve. Listen, it was my goof, let me stay and do the repiping. I need the practice anyway, right?” Ryan gave his father a sad, wide-eyed look. I almost believed he was genuinely apologetic until he threw another wink my way.

Sneaky boy.

Bob sighed, nodding and clapping a hand on Ryan’s shoulder. “You’re a good son, Ry. Always working hard. Normally I wouldn’t abandon you to all that work, but the game’s on tonight and I’m already pushing missing kickoff. You really sure?”

Ryan gestured towards the exit, pulling keys out of his pocket and handing them over. “Absolutely. Enjoy the game, dad. Cheer them on for me! My friend Ethan will give me a lift home.” He grinned as Bob grabbed the keys and gave him another pat on the back before hustling out.

Wait, what? I didn’t have a car! My teeth pricked at my lower lip as I talked myself out of panic: plenty of humans didn’t have cars, right? That wasn’t suspicious. I’d just call him a cab when he was done; it would be easy enough to say it was part of the plumbing charge.

We both watched his father vanish through the mall exit before he pivoted on a heel and walked over to me like he had all the time in the world. Sliding a hand in his pocket, he produced a small white plastic piece, threaded on one side and sturdy-looking, setting it on my counter with a smirk.

“Damn. Would ya look at that, must have put that in my pocket and forgotten all about it. Makes this after-hours job more of a quick fix. Whatever will I do with the rest of my evening, Ethan?”

“You could, uhm, spend it with me. If you wanted, I mean.” I nervously plucked at a loose denim thread near my knee, rocking my heels against the bar on the stool.

Ryan spun the plastic part like a top, playing with it on the counter and sparing me the intensity of his blue-eyed stare. “And do you want to talk about...football?”

He’d used the same long pause I had earlier, and delicious tension teased through my body. My voice took on a slight rasp, unable to believe that this pretty golden fish had swum directly into my lair. “Not particularly. I think I want to talk about...not football.”

“Well that’s a particularly fun conversation, I promise. Do you have a place we could talk about...not football, Ethan?” Now his eyes met mine, and my teeth sharpened with excitement, forcing me to speak more carefully.

“I do, but it’s different. Like, *really* different. Promise you won’t laugh or think I’m weird?” I winced, certain he’d turn tail and run the moment he saw my shelves of trinkets, and oversized bed dressed with everything from stolen curtains to clearance accent pillows.

“The only thing I’m planning to be focused on is you.” He said it casually, like we were talking about the weather, and something about that tone filled me with devastating lust. I was used to pursuing potential partners, albeit awkwardly and usually unsuccessfully, and I’d *never* taken anyone to my grotto. I don’t know what was different about Ryan, but I wanted him in my sanctuary almost as much as I wanted him in me.

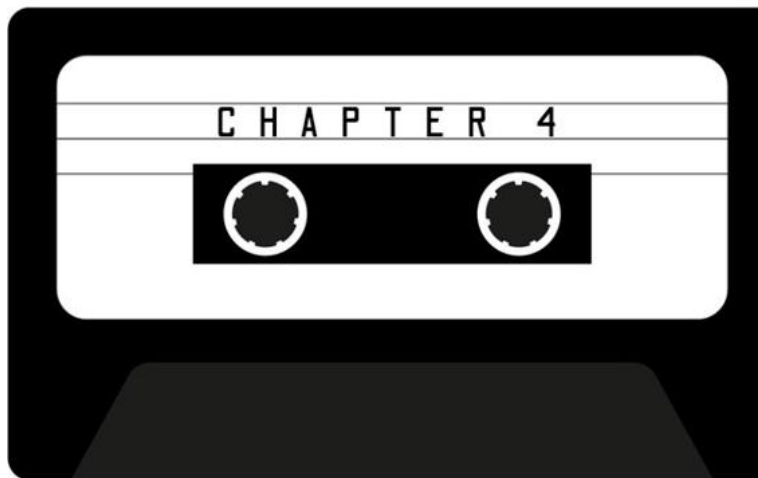
At this point I was reasonably certain I’d cursed the clock over the escalators with all the glaring I was doing today. An hour until closing? An *entire hour*? My body felt like I was swimming through a thermal vent, need cresting impatiently against unforgiving denim walls. Watching Ryan get back on the ground to finish installing the part he’d hidden didn’t help anything, knowing I’d get to trace those muscles with my hands after an *eternally long hour* had passed.

Even though time stretched like taffy, I eventually got the call to read the evening announcements, politely telling everyone to get the hell out of the mall in corporate-speak. The lights started shutting down, section by section, the dimmer evening illumination taking over as I read the increasingly-insistent script: 10 minutes to close, 5 minutes to close, the mall is now closed. Ryan was seated on the fountain’s edge across from me now, watching, the overhead lights reflecting off of the water to shimmer against his beautiful blond hair.

It was now or never. Taking a deep breath, I opened the gate on the kiosk, smiling at Ryan as I walked over. “Ready to go?”

He took a long look at me, gaze snaking up from my sneakers to my collarbone, hot and hungry as he grasped his toolbox against his thigh. “Been ready, toy boy.”

The distance to my grotto had never felt so long.



IF RYAN HAD QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STRANGE PATH WE WERE taking down a forgotten hallway, he didn't voice them. As things got darker and less accessible, I held panels out of the way for him, mentally chiding myself for not picking up a flashlight. As we got to the darkest part of the secret shortcut to my grotto, I heard a few clicks behind me and light pooled suddenly at my feet—I'd forgotten that Ryan had a flashlight in his toolbox.

“So, feel free to tell me to mind my business, but do you...live down here, Ethan?” His voice held no judgment, but concern was plain to hear. I'd been so nervous about his reaction to the appearance of my grotto, I hadn't even considered how he'd feel about the situation surrounding it.

“I'm - well, I guess the best way to put it is that I'm an immigrant. The kind without papers, you know?” My voice echoed faintly off the walls: we were deep in the access tunnels now, sections of the foundation management didn't even know about. “It's just easier for me to stay here, no one

bothers me and I have what I need. Plus the commute is pretty low-hassle.” I chuckled humorlessly.

His hand closed on my arm, warm and firm, and he turned me to face him, letting the flashlight beam play at our feet. “I hope you know I’ll never tell anyone. Lord knows I’m good at keeping secrets.” He hesitated, about to drop his hand, but changed his mind, pulling me closer to him and slanting his mouth over mine.

I groaned aloud at the relief of it, the contact with him at last, backing him into the clammy surface of the tunnel wall as our kiss deepened. It was everything I’d hoped for and more, particularly when he roughly flipped our positions, putting the wall at my back instead.

Oh yes.

The light danced around us as the hand holding the flashlight dropped to cup and squeeze at my confined cock. Ryan broke our kiss, panting softly against my mouth as he rubbed and squeezed at me. “Fuck am I glad I wore that pin. Please tell me you’re a bottom, because every fantasy I’ve had since our phone call has gone in that direction.”

I nodded mutely as I crashed my lips into his again with a soft whine. The flashlight clattered to the ground as he reached behind me, grabbing my ass with both hands and kneading it in strong fingers. I thrust up against him, hardness meeting hardness, the friction of fabric making me even more hungry for him. “Oh Ryan, please. *Please.*”

He trailed kisses down my neck, mouthing and nipping at it roughly with a low chuckle. “Damn toy boy, you beg so pretty. Come on, let’s get to a bed so we can do this proper or I’m going to end up banging you against this wall.”

That'd be just fine by me.

Still, we untwisted ourselves from one another, and I waited just long enough for Ryan to retrieve his flashlight before I grabbed his free hand, hauling him faster down the hall and eventually our destination. My grotto was a large circular concrete block room, the mall's main water line standing as a column in the center. It was the closest I could get to the water steeped in my ring's magic and the place I felt most at ease.

Along a curved wall, a huge pile of stolen cushions and padding created a harem-bed situation, walled off with mismatched sheer curtains hanging suspended from overhead pipes. Strings of colorful Christmas lights filled the space with a warm, festive glow, powered by loops of extension cords that probably wouldn't pass fire code. Shelves made out of discarded display racks and slats held a staggering variety of "lost" items, including the latest addition, a threadbare teddy bear I'd found in the food court. Stacks of rare coins, jewelry, and tokens from the arcade-pizza place upstairs spilled every which way, glinting in the low light.

"Oh. Uh. Wow." Ryan turned all the way around twice, taking in the mismatched belongings, decor, and makeshift lighting before finally looking back to me. "It's not what I expected. But it's nice! It's got kind of a grown up treehouse thing going on." He clicked off his flashlight and shoved it back in his toolbox, setting it down on the floor and moving to me. "You still want to...you know?"

This time, I reached down between *his* legs, boldly palming the substantial bulge I found there. "I do, if you do?" He grunted happily in reply, thrusting against my curious hand.

"I'll admit, I brought rubbers because I was kind of hoping for this. Do you have grease, though? I don't have any with me

and I'm...kind of big. I don't want to hurt you." He reached up to unstrap one side of his work overalls as he posed the question and my pulse quickened with pleasure. This was *really happening*.

"I can take you, I promise. It'll feel good. And you don't need rubbers if you don't want to use them, I don't have anything. I've been tested." It was a white lie, but monsters like me didn't need to worry about those sorts of things hopping the species barrier. It was effectively the truth, he was safe, and I *really liked* to feel my lovers bare. I shrugged off my coat, feeling self-conscious about my slender-bordering-on-scrawny body.

Ryan finished prying off his work boots and left his overalls in a puddle on the concrete floor. The front of his boxers tented obscenely forward, the fabric soaked and translucent with precome as he grinned, tugging me up against him and nipping my earlobe. "Why toy boy, are you asking me to *breed* your tight little ass?"

My momentary self-consciousness vanished in a puff of mental smoke and I shuddered in his arms. He'd said the magic words that went straight to the heart of my deepest kink. My fingernails shifted to scales against his forearms and I couldn't even find it in me to care, my need a throbbing, living thing inside me now. "More than *anything*. Please, Ryan. I'll do *anything*."

He shoved me roughly towards my floor-bed, sending me sprawling, giving me a quick, reassuring wink when I looked back up at him in shock. "Get on all fours where you belong then. I've got a lot to give you tonight and you're going to take all of it."

I squirmed and left a trail of clothing in my wake as I obediently crawled to the bed, snapping off one of my shirt buttons in my haste to undress. Once I was naked, I settled heavily on my knees, lowering my chest to the puddle of blankets and presenting my ass to him wantonly.

He left his work shirt on and unbuttoned, the edges of the fabric whispering on my hips as he kneeled behind me, his cock hot and throbbing against my ass cheek. “No underwear, even. Tsh, hit the jackpot with you, toy boy, you’re the perfect breeding slut, aren’t you?” His lips curved in a smile against my skin as he pressed a kiss between my shoulder blades, his hand reaching beneath me to grasp my cock in a firm, possessive grip.

I fucked his hand slowly, unable to resist the contact, and whimpered, babbling without a single coherent thought, pleading. “Yes, I am. All for you, just for you, fill me up, breed me.”

“Ah, wait just a sec.” He slapped my ass playfully, leaving me with the perfect sting as he dropped my cock and got up again. He returned quickly, and the snapping sound of something opening made me look over my shoulder to find a blue-topped jar in his hands. “Lucky for you, plumbers occasionally need vaseline to waterproof valves. Not the fanciest stuff, but it’ll do. I meant what I said about not hurting you. Now get that head down and show me what’s mine, toy boy.”

His fingertips nudged between my ass cheeks, sliding the makeshift lubricant against my entrance. His wonderful tactile swirls paused as he dropped to his knees in front of me, tapping my jaw with his unlubricated hand. “Open up. You’re going to get me ready to take you, aren’t you baby?”

My cock bobbed at yet another pet name, in heaven and ready to be penetrated any way he wanted. I opened my mouth happily, tongue extended for extra credit, because Ryan clearly had more experience than I did at all this and I was *definitely* hot for teacher. He slid his surprisingly thick cock into my mouth, little by little, a preview of what I was sure he intended to repeat elsewhere. My eyes rolled back in ecstasy at the taste of him, sucking so eagerly his hips kicked. “Mmph, careful now, toy boy. Ease it back. I got plans for that load and it’s not going down your throat.”

I went slowly, licking along his underside as he wrapped his clean hand around the back of my head, using my mouth the way I desperately wanted him to. “Fuck, okay, okay. Damn. You’re too good, baby, we gotta stop for now. We’re gonna do this later though. Give me a kiss.”

He let go of a handful of my hair to tilt my chin up, stooping to kiss me thoroughly, licking his own taste off my lips. He maneuvered me onto my side as we kissed, grasping my thighs to yank me down flat on my back under him. “With head like that, I need to watch you get bred, pretty thing. Do me a favor and hug your knees for me, now.”

I did, pointed teeth nibbling at my lip as he busied himself between my legs, stroking his fat shaft with a glistening layer of vaseline. He planted his clean hand beside my head, biting his own lower lip as he lined himself up against my ass and leaned forward. “Let out a breath and push, baby. It’s going to help you take me.”

I did exactly that, but I was too eager to wait any longer, and I shimmied further down to impale myself until he gave a deep groan of satisfaction. He was a *lot*, but the burn was worth the pleasure once my body adjusted, and the first full stroke was

pure heaven. I cried out, bracing my knees against his rolling thrusts so I could reach up and hold onto his shoulders. I whispered his name over and over in encouragement, my nails digging into his skin as our bodies crashed together in a perfect, primal rhythm.

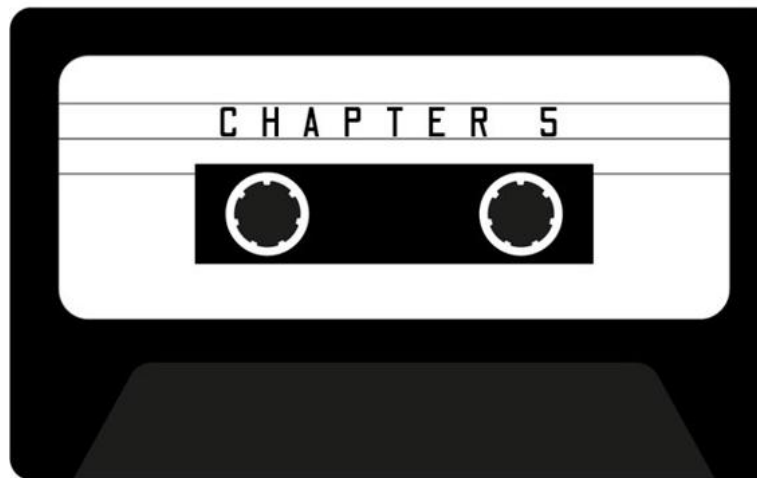
He leaned forward, rocking as much as thrusting, resting his forehead on mine as our eyes met, chests heaving together. “You ready to be mine, Ethan? I’m going to breed you so deep you’ll taste it.” He grinned fiercely, grinding against me on the downstroke, angling against that sweet spot inside me that made me see stars. “Fuck...oh fuck, here it comes...”

He tossed his head back, golden waves sparkling in the multicolor lights as his cock swelled and shot his climax into me, holding tight to my hips to keep us locked together as he shouted in ecstasy, thrusting instinctually into me in hard, short jerks.

I watched him in rapture, wholly unprepared for him to divert his attention to me. Before I could stop him, Ryan wrapped a slick callused hand around my rock-hard cock and stroked me with purpose, turning his grin on me again. He was going to make me come with him, whether I liked it or not, and *oh* did I like it. That’s why I forgot entirely. I was so lust-drunk that any thoughts of self-preservation were busy milking the cock in my ass and tightening my balls instead of keeping my secrets.

“Oh...oh god...don’t stop...OH!” My hips thrust into the air, my ass tightening on him again as I shot an arc of luminescent white between us, splashing brightly on my chest and his stomach. I might have been able to explain the glow away as a trick of the light, had my egg not bulged up my shaft and spilled out the tip of my cock. It opened like a flower, ejecting

the slick, glowing oval that settled into the curve of my stomach between us.



AFTER THE BIG, UNEXPECTED REVEAL, RYAN HAD IMMEDIATELY eased out of my body and sat cross-legged on my bedding. He didn't say a word, but continued staring at the egg on my stomach, which rolled lightly with each of my panting breaths. His shocked expression told me I was in a precarious situation, one that would probably end with his death or mine if I couldn't calm him down.

“So. Uhm. This is probably pretty weird for you, but I'm going to start out by saying it's not going to hurt you and it doesn't hurt me, okay? Can we be cool about this?” I carefully palmed the egg, wrapping my fingers around it to obscure some of the glow. I winced as the luminescence shone through my webbed fingers. Fuck, I was losing my form, too. Too much emotion carried the risk of some features slipping out, and I was feeling a *lot* right now. Good, with a side of dread.

“What. The fuck. Is that.” Ryan's voice was tight, just this side of hysterical, but I noted with a begrudging admiration that he was still half-hard. Now that was a libido I could get behind.

Or under, for that matter. Maybe I'd found one of the rare monsterfuckers that was actually into creatures like me.

"It's my...well, I mean, I'm not going to bullshit you. It's my egg. Don't worry, it's not fertile, we can't have kids unless we, you know, we both want to. We'd both have to come on it again to kickstart...whatever makes little nixes, I guess." I uncurled my hand to look at the egg, which seemed bigger and brighter than previous eggs had.

"I'm a Nix, a monster, I guess. Kind of like that Monster from the Black Lagoon, you know, the one from the movies?" I gestured around me at my grotto. "It's probably not a huge surprise, given how I live. I have to, though. Very long story short, I'm bound to a ring that's buried somewhere in the fountain upstairs so I kinda make the best of it. No you're not high, no, this isn't a dream." I sighed the last bit, having had to give this speech twice before. One man, I'd had to kill, and the other had just taken off screaming. I'd never seen him again.

"Are you going to...eat me? Or something?" Ryan just looked so damn *worried* that I couldn't help but bust out laughing.

"No. *No*. I'm definitely not going to do that, though I'm happy to make you my own personal lollipop, if you want." I flicked my tongue teasingly along my lips. "You did say you wanted more of that."

Ryan got to his feet, clutching his temples as he paced, naked, across my bedding. "This is *insane*. Oh my god, is this like, punishment for being gay? Was dad right about this shit?"

I frowned, gently placing my egg on a pillow: fertile or not, it was still something precious and I always treated my eggs that way. I got to my feet and stopped Ryan's circuit of my bed by pressing a palm to his chest. "Absolutely not. You can be scared of monsters, of me, if you want to, but I'd like to think

that what we did is never a *punishment*. Don't cheapen it like that, please. I'm not some penalty for loving a different way."

He had the decency to blush with embarrassment, wrinkling his brow as he looked at me. "No, not you, Ethan. No, I'm... I'm sorry, I just don't know what the hell to make of this. Of you. You look like you're going to kill me, man. Those *teeth*." He backed up a step, tugging at my heart.

"I can't help it, certain features come out when I'm experiencing heightened emotions. You affect me like no one ever has, Ryan. Even your voice...there's something about you that's turned everything upside down." I offered him my palm, webbed fingers and all, hoping with everything in me that he'd take it. He did, albeit cautiously, and I wrapped my fingers around his with a smile.

I squirmed, squeezing his hand as I rubbed my thighs together reflexively. His eyes dropped to my inner thigh, where a slow, sluggish trail of his cum flowed out of my body. "I couldn't stop thinking about you either. I - I needed to do that. Needed to be with you. God, I need to be with you again, to be honest, I don't think I've ever been this turned on. I'm terrified and turned on at the same time, and I think I like it."

He abruptly pulled me against him again, kissing the side of my neck and running his tongue along the fin-like membranes that had unfurled at the edges of my ear. My Nix form was really coming through now, and judging by the state of Ryan's cock tapping against my stomach, he was into it.

"Fuck. God you're hot. I have to have you again." He dropped his head onto my shoulder, kissing my skin with surprising tenderness. "Your ring, Ethan. Does it...is it magic or something?" His fingers had already crept down my body to

tease at my entrance, two thick tips wedging inside of my well-lubricated, well-filled ass to thrust lazily.

“It grants a heart’s desire to the wielder, but why do you... ask?” My voice notched up on the last word as he buried his fingers to the first knuckle inside of me, fucking me with them.

“Because I found it while I was fixing the junction, put it in your lost and found box while you were in the bathroom, and this was literally all I’ve wanted since that moment. Get down on all fours.” He purred the order against my ear, pushing me down gently but insistently. He dropped behind me and immediately notched his cock into my hole, pushing forward with a sigh of deep satisfaction and riding my ass with hard, demanding strokes.

He grasped my hair again, tilting my head forward to kiss the back of my neck. “My second O always takes longer, so get comfortable, baby. I’m going to fill you up again and you’re going to make another egg for me. Sound good?”

“Sounds like the best fucking thing I’ve ever heard, Ryan.” I smiled at the wall in front of me as my new lover made the most delicious sounds of enjoyment, rocking my body back and forth against his.

A human had found my ring and returned it to me willingly, and my heart’s desire was barreling the both of us towards a second orgasm with enviable, singular focus. As his hand wrapped around my cock and stroked, a second egg tunneled up my shaft to fly up and out, landing with a soft clink against the first on my pillow.

Ryan tensed at the sight, his cock jerking deep inside me, frantically whispering my name like a desperate prayer against my cheek as he came. Each hot jet in me came with babbling

words of affection and loyalty, and in the afterglow he pulled me to him, stroking my hair with a softness more suited to magical mates than nearly strangers.

Dating was for mortals, after all, and Ryan had been *mine* from the start.

As we curled up to sleep wearing nothing more than matching smiles with a lifetime together in front of us, I knew the ring had done its *true* work. This was the happily ever after a monster like me—and a man like Ryan—truly deserved.



The end...for now!



Thank you so much for reading *Lost and Found*! If you'd like to read more sexy monster goodness, try my MMMF paranormal romance novels *Carnal Cryptids: East Coast* and *Carnal Cryptids 2: Southeast*. For more unique / unexpected characters, including balloon animal shifters and a door shifter, stop by my website, ValentineVerse.com for a freebie story, titles, content notes, and more!

About the Author

An unapologetic book-huffer and devourer-of-stories, Vera Valentine has carried on a torrid love affair with the written word for nearly all of her 41 years. Grown in the diner-laden wilds of the New Jersey Pine Barrens and transplanted to North Carolina, she lives with her husband, eight cats, and two dogs, most of whom are house trained. An avid fan of the Paranormal Why Choose genre, she tossed her author hat into the ring in September of 2021 and never looked back.

A self-professed chaotic copybara, Vera can usually be found spending too much time on social media, chilling with fellow authors, or scribbling down ever-expanding plot bunny ideas in her trusty paper sidekick, the Bad Idea Book™.

If you'd like to stay up-to-date on Vera's latest projects and preorders, stop by her website - ValentineVerse.com for information, links, newsletter signups, ARC opportunities, and more!

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FED AFTER MIDNIGHT

LATREXA NOVA



Billie Beringer has teased me relentlessly for the past five years. As a friend. But ever since she kissed my cheek, I've harbored a raging crush on her. Only problem is, if I give in, the monster in me might just get out. And once he's out, who knows if he'll ever stop.



Content Warning:

This is an unusual MF turned MFM friends-to-lovers story. Intrusive sexual thoughts, edging, denial, self-repression (and some familial), a sexually free FMC, an MMC that becomes two, 3 special rules get broken, unreliable narrators, public play, sweet kisses, nearly screwing each other in public, fucking in the center of the after-hours mall, absolutely

drenching oneself in pussy worship, interrupted sex scenes, mild body horror, ethically ambiguous doppelgangers, body transformation, size difference, grinding on a giant cock, some stupid cute shit, love bombs, getting fucked by two giant oversized cocks, and magic precum that makes that possible.



WILLIAM

SUMMER 1980

BILLIE BERINGER WAS THE GNARLIEST GIRL I'D EVER MET. SHE wasn't supposed to be. Her parents were bankers.

But her? She was a rockstar.

I knew I shouldn't have gone near the stage the first time I saw her perform, but I couldn't resist. She was deadly up there with her neon pink leggings and gold spandex. She might have belonged in one of Jane Fonda's workout videos if it weren't for the spiked belt and gartered fishnets. Or the beaten up pink leather jacket.

Billie could have been singing anything and I would have looked on in awe.

But I messed that all up the second I got close. The speaker system went on the fritz. Electronics and the Liu's do not mix—thanks to our family trait. The feedback was killer—everyone covered their ears when moments before they too looked on in awe of her. Even I had to clutch my hands over my ears, as much as I tried to stay my ground. At least I knew why it was happening, unlike everyone else.

“What is doing that?” one of the mallrats shrieked from her posse of pink.

“So this is the future of music,” an elderly man whined, pulling his wife away.

The band started pulling out cords, trying to stop the feedback from whichever instrument was the cause.

Me—I was the instrument of discord. So much was happening all at once. I couldn't move to stop any of it. I watched in horror as the crowd dispersed. Chaos overtook the stage, the sound only worsening as the band ran out of cords to unplug. People rushed to the exits, desperate to free their ears. The pups over at the Twisted Whisker howled in pain. Poor things. They couldn't escape like everyone else.

Billie looked on, glaring at the crowd from behind her smokey eyes—how dare they run from her. Even her bandmates bailed. She didn't budge, simply tried to find the source of the problem, ready to take whatever it was head on. The aggravated noises and screams of the stampede nearly overwhelmed the ever-growing whine of feedback.

And then it was just me and her.

A quirk of her lip, drawn up at the corner...

And then she smiled at me.

My heart flipped, did somersaults, and scored a perfect ten.

But the beast within me? He wanted out.

Did she know it was me? Was it that obvious? There was something showing, there had to be. Why else would she be looking at me?

I looked around frantically, worried that someone would see. It didn't matter that monsters lurked around every corner of this mall. No, the Liu family was perfectly normal. We weren't like the rest of them.

At least that's what mom and dad wanted everyone to think.

The feedback needed to be stopped. My thoughts were already jumbled enough in Billie's presence. I ran over to the sound system and ripped out the last plug, like I wish I could rip out that monster from within me. It was the one that keyed everything into the main power, not one that led back to a specific instrument.

Silence. Except for my parents' warnings cycling through my mind.

'Stay out of the light, William.'

They didn't just mean daylight. No, attention was a much worse sin.

"God, that is so much better, isn't it?" Billie called from the stage, rubbing at her ears. "You just don't notice what a relief it is until it's over. Felt like I was going to hear that noise forever."

I dropped the cord and started shuffling away.

"Happy to help," I mumbled, wishing she'd ignore me like everyone else.

Doing anything but admiring her from afar was too much. Too dangerous. But my body still slowed, hoping for kernels of her

attention.

She hopped off the stage and pressed closer to me, until she was so close her perfume drowned my senses. It was a heady concoction of sin, bad decisions, and nights spent driving through town, dancing drunkenly in the open sunroof of a stranger's car. They should ban the scent from the cosmetics counter in Frillard's.

"You didn't run," she observed. *Like everyone else.*

"No," I said, noting the irony that at current I *was* trying to run away.

"Thanks," she said, reaching a hand out to take mine in hers.

Callouses lined her fingers from playing guitar. I don't think I'd ever held a woman's hands before. Too afraid of what I might become. But there we were, holding hands, and the monster stayed within. My fingers traced the outline of her fingerless gloves before I realized what I was doing.

"No problem," I said quickly, pulling my hand away and turning to leave.

"You got a name, Gizmo?" she asked.

I stopped in my tracks. "Gizmo?"

She shrugged. "You're at least useful enough not to run away until everything's fixed."

My eyes narrowed. "Are you calling me a tool?"

She grinned widely before leaning forward and planting a *wet* kiss against my cheek.

An innocent move. Or maybe less than innocent.

But one that would cost me.

"William," I got out before I felt my cheek pulse.

Not here, not in the middle of the mall. My hand covered the spot where she kissed me as my legs bolted out of there, running back to the shadows. Who knows if she laughed behind me, or what. I was a ticking time bomb, and the only person who could help was on the other side of the mall.

I bolted down the restroom corridor, pushing open the Employees Only entrance to the backrooms. Pushed past a few other disgruntled mall employees on break and didn't stop running until I got to the Past Present, our antique shop. My lungs burned from the effort as I shoved the door to the storage area open. Climbing over the older and broken pieces of furniture we couldn't sell, I made it to the front-facing door and paused. After taking a breath, I pushed it open slowly.

“A fine selection—oh! This one is four hundred years old. You must be careful with it,” Dad urged, carefully wrapping an old vase in paper.

“Wicked,” his young customer exclaimed, some teenage skater punk. “Mom will be psyched.”

Dad chuckled as he finished bagging the centuries old artifact.

I tapped on the door as unobtrusively as I could, trying to get Dad's attention. Mom was at home, prepping the house for a visit from my grandparents, so he was all I had for help. When that didn't work, I cleared my throat. When his eyes caught mine, I turned my cheek slightly towards him so he would see the issue.

“All done,” he said quickly as his eyes flared wide, shoving the wrapped vase in a bag and into the guy's hands.

“Don't I need to pay?” the teen said with astonishment.

“It called to you,” he made up, pinching his nose. “It's yours.”

“Legit? Righteous, dude!”

“Treat it well,” Dad spat out, coming around the counter to chase the teen out. “Thank you, enjoy!”

As soon as the teen was gone, Dad spun around and stared me down. The growth on my face felt heavier with every passing second. So did his disappointment.

“Three rules,” he grumbled, rushing over to the storefront to pull down the grate. “Xiǎo guǐ.”

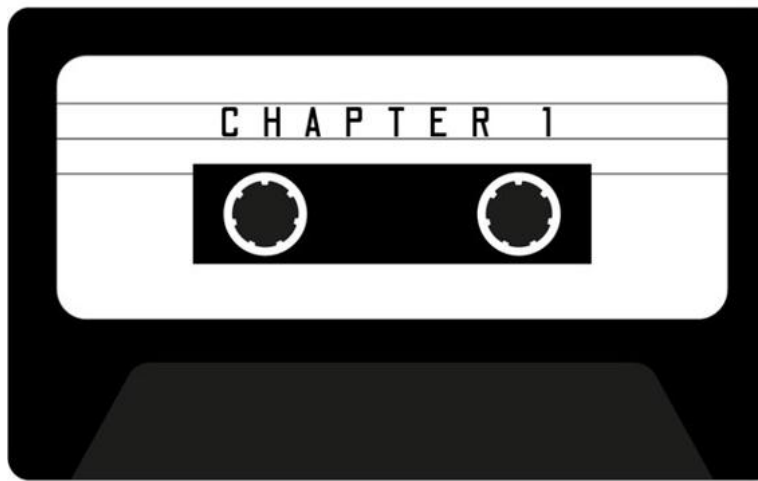
Little demon, roughly. The words didn’t come out in anger. But they were incredibly patronizing, especially because I was not a child anymore. They took me back to when I would sneak food after bedtime and he’d wake up to me fully transformed, or when I ran outside to play in the rain. The words were drenched with as much disappointment as love.

“I’m sorry, father,” I said through gritted teeth as the curse swelled against my cheek. “I know better.”

“Reckless.”

He pulled me into the back room, lit the torch we kept there for emergencies, and placed the flame against my cheek. I held back the scream as much as I could, but I have always been weak.

It’s not enough to be nice when you’re fighting the monster that lives inside you.



BILLIE

SEPTEMBER 27, 1985

“WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME YOU LEFT THIS PLACE? THE START of the decade?” I asked, joking.

William got this faraway look in his eyes that made me think for a minute it’s true. Except I knew he’d left the shop. I had it on good authority the little gremlin found ways to help every single person in the mall, should they need a hand.

Except for me. Maybe he’s a one wish genie. I already got my good deed five years ago.

Which meant five years of watching everyone sing his praises. Five years of hearing how helpful he was from everyone I encountered in the mall. Five years of trying to lure him into

my grasp by way of having him help set up for Non-specific Symptom—my band.

Serves me right, I guess, for smooching that smooth cheek of his. But he just looked so cute back then, I couldn't help myself. Not that he wasn't still choice, just that he made it pretty clear he was off limits by booking it away from me at light speed after I made the most innocent of moves. That cheek of his was still smooth, though. Except for a light scar that I didn't remember seeing when I first met him.

Everyone else abandoned me that day, but not him. And that goes a long way in my book. That's why I hunted him down and forced him to be friends with me. It was hard for him to say no. Actually, I think he had trouble saying no in general. Though he did seem to practice on me an awful lot. I wished he would find someone else to practice saying that word to.

With my gig all done for the day, I threw my guitar in its case, said goodbye to my bandmates, and made my way to the quaint little antique store in my favorite semi-abandoned corner of the mall.

He jumped as soon as he saw me. Tried to pretend like he hadn't even noticed. But the funniest thing about this guy was the mild look of fear I seemed to instill in him every time he saw me.

And god, I couldn't help myself. It was fun to dig into that.

“Afternoon, Miss Beringer,” is all he gave me.

So polite. There's something inside me that wanted to break him wide open. Figure out all his secrets and find out if he's ever more than just a perfectly nice guy.

“Miss Beringer?” I cooed. “William, if you wanna call me that, you'll have to put on a collar.”

His face bloomed red instantly, and he turned away.

“Okay, *Billie*, Jesus,” he whined, finally turning back at me.

“What’re you drawing this time?” I asked, peeking over the counter.

He leaned over the drawing, trying to hide it with his body until he realized it brought him closer to me. Instead, he slid it off the counter and shoved it under, out of sight.

“It’s not good,” he grumbled.

“I just wanted to see.”

William didn’t answer, just set his jaw, staring at me. He was still blushing. Being that he was so much paler than me, it was fun to bring the color into his skin. He had a narrow face and high cheekbones. His puppy dog brown eyes made him look like he was still in high school, even though he was only a few years younger than me. The pout on his face, the attempt to seem stern and unaffected, really did me in. He was too easy. Maybe so was I.

Stop crushing on William Liu. It’s pathetic to be this hard up for a guy who doesn’t even want you to touch him.

I let out a sigh.

“What I do to put a stick up your ass this time?”

He shook his head.

“My parents went back to China to visit my grandma. Someone has to hold down the fort.”

He stepped out from behind the counter, made his way over to the back wall that housed various cabinets full of porcelain—plates, bowls, dolls, you name it.

“Didn’t you say last week that you were reconsidering working here another holiday season?” I asked, trailing behind him at a respectable distance.

He readjusted the porcelain cabinet, trying to occupy himself so he wouldn’t have to show any emotion. William never showed emotion if he could help it. At least nothing that would expose him as anything short of the poster boy for customer service. Teasing him was essential. He’d never get better if he stayed cooped up inside his own head all the time.

He wasn’t answering because we’ve already talked at length about how he feels trapped here. Telling him that maybe going outside the mall might help always ends in him shutting down completely. *‘You just wouldn’t get it.’*

“How long are they gone for?” I asked, leaning back against the cabinet instead of pushing us into an argument.

He pulled away, like I had some sort of disease. *Too close*, apparently. Went behind the counter and pulled out a rag. He lifted up all the items on display and wiped underneath, dusting the shelves and tables as he spoke.

“They don’t really like Halloween, so they’re using a couple of festivals and my grandma’s fake ailing health as an excuse not to come home ‘til November.”

I sucked in a breath. “Look at you, Mr. Responsibility for an entire month.”

He shot me a look over his shoulder, his hand gripping on a rather naked brass torso that served as the base for a lamp.

“Don’t you usually make fun of me for being Mr. Responsible every month?”

I moved away from the cabinet to hop up on the counter. His jaw twitched. I could see him fighting the urge to tell me to get

down. He still had his hand on the lamp base, his thumb pressed between the feminine figure's breasts.

"I think you should use this time as an excuse to live a little," I said, kicking my legs.

"That sounds like the exact opposite of what I should do."

His eyes followed the movement of my feet. Today was a Doc Martens and fishnets kind of day. I wonder if that did anything for him. If he's a fan of the short shorts. No, of course he isn't. But a girl can dream.

Sometimes I liked to think the reason he didn't go after me is out of some sort of sick familial dedication. Like he had to give up his whole life for them. Not that I would know what that was like. My mom wanted me to have kids, my dad just wanted me to stay out of trouble. Neither of their dreams were coming true since I chose the life of a punk rock musician, but they were coming around to seeing how my idea was much better than what they ever had in store for me.

Even if I was still struggling to get cheap mall gigs. Last week I worked a kid's birthday party but at least we were so good those babies started a mosh pit. Proudest moment of my life.

"No, hear me out," I said, jumping down and advancing on him like a predator. "They're all the way in China. You've been helping them run this store ever since you were a kid, and now you'll be thirty any day—"

"I'm younger than you—"

"And you've never had a selfish moment in your life."

His eyes fell to the floor. "I don't think that's true."

I crossed my arms over and glared him down. "Prove me wrong."

“I’m not telling you.”

I scoffed.

“Sure. That sounds more like you can’t even be bothered to make something up.”

“No. I’m just not telling you.”

I laughed, gloating that I was right, and followed close behind him.

“Liar.”

“No.”

“Pants on fire.”

“Are you twelve?”

“No, but I’ll call you king of the jungle, cause you’re li-onnnn.”

He spun around quickly, so fast that I didn’t have time to process what was happening. Next thing I knew, he had me pushed up against one of the sturdy, ancient cabinets, his hands on either side.

“Don’t you ever stop?” he growled.

Growled.

William Liu. Growled. At me.

“How much do you want me to?” I said, not backing down even when he did have me practically underneath him. We weren’t too dissimilar in height, but it was the presence he had in this position.

It was the most dominant I’d ever seen him. The closest he’d been to me in *years*. And I fucking loved it.

“I’m not telling you,” he repeated one more time.

His eyes dropped, a move that should have been submissive, but in the moment felt like he was laying me bare. Like he could see right through my clothes and savored every inch.

His eyes flicked up, meeting mine finally. I swear I saw the strangest flash of red. Maybe the reflection from one of the glass lampshades. But the look that was in his eyes was one I couldn't believe was real.

When we were younger, I showed him I liked him. And he always had his life so together. So if he was attracted to me, he should say it. We were both almost thirty. That meant we acted like adults now.

Or it should. Except that I haven't spoken of it since that day. But in my defense, he practically ran screaming after I kissed his cheek.

My breathing had grown noticeably fast, and I realized we had been in this position just breathing at each other for a whole minute. That's some fucking tension.

Every fiber of my being begged for me to lean forward, for me to force the kiss that lingered in the air. But I already sent out the first move half a decade ago. If William Liu wanted me as much as I wanted him, he'd have to prove it. Cause I refused to beg.

...Anymore than I kind of already did.

I mean, I'm hot shit. I'm in a rock band. Maybe I was a weirdo in high school, but getting older only proved how much high school just couldn't handle me. If he didn't want me back then, then he didn't deserve me now. *Not that he knew me in high school*—I don't think.

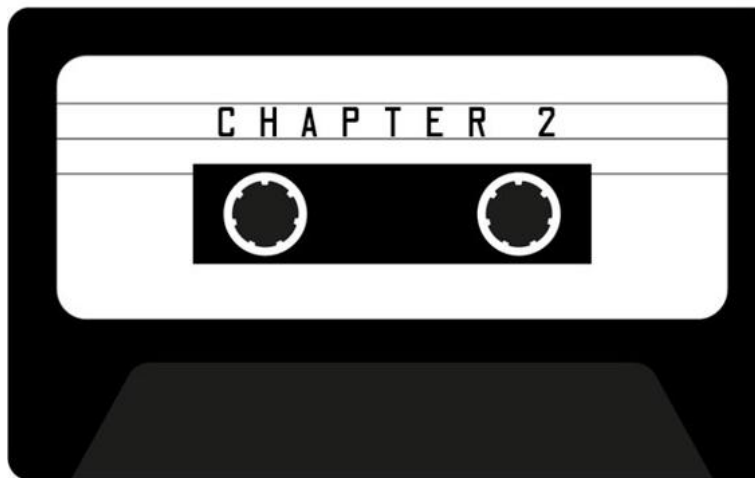
These are all the things I told myself as we stared at each other. As despite my head saying 'don't beg,' my eyes didn't

get the memo.

“God, you really know how to mess with a girl,” I grumbled, shoving him away.

I hated it when guys played with my emotions. Too many of them have taken advantage of the fact that it doesn't take much to get me in the sack, and then change as soon as they get what they want. I'm not asking for their sweet words or their offers of love. If a guy just straight up told me he wanted to fuck, that's all I'm asking for. Just a little honesty.

But not even the best of them, William Liu, could be honest with me. Or maybe he was. Maybe I was the problem, because I wanted too much and he'd laid it out for years that he didn't.



WILLIAM

OCTOBER 1, 1985

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING?” I ASKED BILLIE.

She had barged her way into the Past Present every day, ‘to check up on me.’ She insisted if she didn’t, ‘who knows, maybe you’d get lost in all the piles of antiques and never make it out alive.’ That without my parents to look after me, there was no one who cared about me.

Really knew how to make a guy feel special, that girl.

Today, she had a whole box of ridiculous knickknacks.

“You heard what Chesa said, you need to decorate for Halloween.”

The hella peppy mall admin came in yesterday to tell me about her plans to bring in more traffic. My instinct was to turn her down—the thought of keeping all those kids off the furniture and their grubby little hands out of all the delicate, ancient artifacts was headache-inducing even as a thought experiment. But Billie jumped in, talking a mile a minute about what a great addition to the trick-or-treat map the Past Present would be. She even offered to fill out the paperwork for me, which meant I really had no idea what was going on there.

“None of the kids are going to come back this far for Trick or Treat Street,” I sighed.

“You really underestimate the draw of candy. Plus, I bet you could totally get people buying some of your old looking shit to zhuzh up their houses for the holiday.”

“What?”

“You have old shit. People need to decorate.”

“No, what is that word?”

“Zhuzh? Make fancy. Get with it. There’s all sorts of like vampires and witches and ghosts that are going to be running around.”

Billie didn't know about the monsters that ran the mall, so what was she talking about?

“C’mon, dude, this isn’t your first rodeo. I just assumed you guys never decorated because your parents are set in their ways or something. But I bet you could show them how good you are at managing the business if you pull in a bunch of extra customers with all your fancy decorations.”

I stared at her—because I loved watching her talk. But also because she was right. Except that I didn’t want to impress my parents. This shop was not something I wanted, only

something I was stuck with because who could hire a guy who can't even go out in the daylight? The Creepy Court Mall was a sanctuary for people like me. Where we wouldn't have to face the world or be ridiculed or hunted for what we were.

“What, is it that insane of an idea for someone to try and help *you* for once?”

That shook me out of my reverie. *Of course, Billie had no idea. She was just trying to help. Maybe I should just let her.*

“No, it's fine. Go ahead.”

She paused over the box, pursing her lips in a variety of directions as she thought. It made her look ridiculous, but I liked it when she looked a little ridiculous. A little less cool rock star and more like the girl who kissed me on the cheek half a decade ago.

When she didn't move, I sighed and looked through her box. There were a bunch of pumpkins in there, some stuff that looked like it had been painted as well. Black cats, bats, skulls and paper skeletons.

“Hey, wait, I'm supposed to be doing all that,” she asserted when I pulled out a string of paper ghosts to hang across the sign outside.

“You said you were here to help, right? So that means I can do things too,” I said. “Never heard anything about you doing it for me.”

“Why do I still feel like you're helping me when this was my idea?” she grumbled.

We got the decorations all over the store before lunch. To be honest, it surprised me she was even here so early. I wondered what she was trying to get at.

“Man, I’m hungry after all that,” she said, taking a big breath and patting her stomach before she looked at me.

My eyes flicked up towards the food court.

“I won’t keep you. Thank you... for making the store more, uh... festive.”

She smiled at me and leaned forward.

“C’mon, my treat!”

She pulled at my hands, but I didn’t budge.

“No one’s here to watch the store. We just did all this work to bring in customers and you want to leave?”

“They’ll try to pop their head in and see what’s going on in there. It’ll add to the mystery. Trust me, not being able to go inside is just going to make people want what’s in there more.”

She smiled back at me with so much moxie I had trouble separating if she meant the store or me. I mean, obviously the store. Not me. I think she got over whatever kind of crush she had on me five years ago while mine only deepened.

“I really can’t, Billie. If anything happens to the shop while I’m gone...”

She let go of my hands and dove behind the register, looking through the counter.

“Stop, what is this, a stick-up?” I asked, laughing to hide how incredibly anxious it made me she was back there.

Not like any of the pictures I drew of her were back there. Other doodles, yes, but none of the stuff that would be find-the-nearest-coffin-and-die embarrassing to find. No, what I was worried about was all the stuff that looked like a bunch of

odds and ends to regular humans. Some of the stuff behind the counter had serious magic.

“Hey, please don’t touch anything back there, okay? The uh... oils on your hands can really mess them up. Some of that stuff is like thousands of years old.”

Her head popped back up over the counter.

“What the hell is a cheesy antique shop in the Creepy Court Mall doing with ancient artifacts? Shouldn’t you guys be a museum at that point?”

I just shrugged at her. Explaining to any sort of proper authority how valuable the stuff we sold here was would bring the government on us. So we just sold them all as “tchotchkes” as Billie liked to put it. Most of the things we had, we had to undervalue. The monster in us meant we lived a lot longer than most humans. What we sold was a mishmash of things my parents, their parents, their parents’ parents, etc, had all collected over at least a thousand years. I was a kid still, compared to all those years of history, which didn’t help me feel like I’d ever get out from the store.

“You’d be surprised at how worthless some of this stuff is,” I explained. “Like it has value cause it’s old, but people don’t have a genuine connection to it. If you tell them a story, they’ll spend a lot more, though.”

Billie gasped, looking at me with a slight smile tugging her lips.

“William Liu, are you telling me you lie to sell your stuff?”

I blushed.

“Well, I mean. We’re just uh... ‘zhuzhing’ things up.”

“You never cease to surprise me,” she murmured.

Her eyes caught on something under the desk.

“Aha!” she cried out, holding the keyring above her head.

“No, c’mon. I thought you were just getting distracted with all the stuff under the counter. I didn’t think you were still serious about leaving.”

“Yes, I’m serious. You’re always out and about in the mall when I’m here, doing errands for everyone else. Well, here’s an errand for *me*. I don’t know how I’ll find the food court without you.”

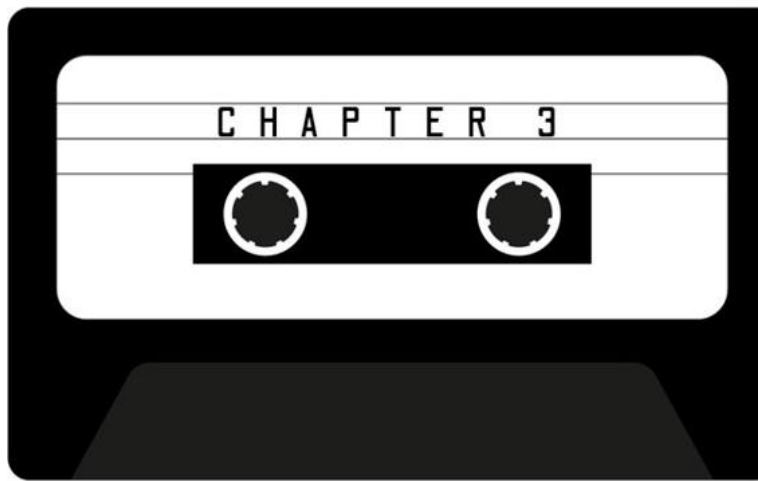
Her stubbornness made me smile. She always had such an easy time twisting me to her will, though she didn’t know it. Sometimes I’d have to imagine saying yes to her just to let go of the desire to follow her every whim. But ever since that day she kissed my cheek, I had to learn to say no to her.

So here I was, imagining now what it would be like to follow her out of the shop. For us to pull down the gate and leave a ‘back in 30’ sign. To have our bodies brush against each other, and that familiar speed of my heart rate grow just from touching her. To us sharing soup and smiling over our meals at each other. Watching her lips as they suck up the noodles and wondering what it would be like to kiss them. To giving up on the fantasy of it and throwing everything on the table to the side.

To prowl over the table and press my face to hers. The whole restaurant freaking out. Screaming. But our kissing turns more and more primal, our teeth biting into each other. Pulling her up on the table and feeling her all over. Sliding my hand against her sex and feeling that she wants me as much as I want her. Ripping her clothes off and growing into the monster I know is inside me. Fucking her in front of the whole food court and feeling completely satiated for it.

But that can't happen.

“Knew I'd be able to talk you into it,” she grinned at me, having just pulled down the grate.



BILLIE

SOMEHOW I HAD SUCCEEDED IN SWINDLING SOME GENUINE personal time out of William.

“Make it quick,” he grumbled. “Or I can drop you off and go back, you know, *so you don’t get lost*. I really shouldn’t have left.”

“That’s too bad, because we’re about to pass Frankie’s Funhouse. You want some pizza?”

“Absolutely not,” he groaned.

Maybe an arcade is exactly what he needed. Though... maybe not Frankie’s Funhouse. The screaming of all the kids hopped up on pizza and candy was grating, even from the opposite side of the walkway. Peering in, it was clear there wasn’t a parent in sight. Maybe there’s a room in the back or something for them. My parents were always too busy to take me there,

but they did drop me off at the mall with five dollars on their date night. So whatever happened to the parents in that place was a mystery to me.

Frankie always made me smile, though. The animatronic did *not* keep well—in that it looked pretty close to terrifying nowadays, and the fancy pants Wall Street suit they put him in recently did not make him more approachable. But I grew with the show. Sometimes it would be nice to be a kid again, not have responsibilities or anything.

“Did you ever watch the show?” I asked William.

He shook his head. Sometimes I thought that guy never had a childhood.

“Tragic,” I mused, and pulled him away from the house of screams.

We passed by Broth with a Bite, and the smell made my stomach growl.

“Soup?” I asked.

Being fall, it was finally soup weather. But William stayed stoic, just kept walking. Like he had something against the place. Someone would think they served people or something.

“I thought you liked soup,” I muttered.

He looked around the food court and folded his arms, looking at me. “Soup takes too long.”

“Ah, so you’re just trying to get rid of me,” I mused.

“As I’ve said,” he pouted.

I saw him tilt his head towards the Good Char, just slightly, as the smell of it wafted through the food court. His throat worked.

“Hot dogs?” I asked, tilting my head much more obviously towards the stall.

Not that they served anything I could eat, but I’d sit there and pretend to eat one just for him.

He narrowed his eyes. “You don’t eat meat.”

Shit. Did William *actually* pay attention to me?

I shrugged. “I could start.”

“For *me*?” he balked. “For *the Good Char*? They’re great, don’t get me wrong, but I expect a vegetarian to have issue with the fact that they could grind up just about anything and put it in the hot dogs.”

“You’re impossible! I thought you wanted me to choose something fast!” I laughed, throwing my hands up in the air. “If you’re so picky, you choose.”

“You’re the one that’s hungry.”

His stomach growled.

“Okay, kettle,” I teased. “If you don’t choose in three seconds, I’m picking and you can’t argue.”

William sputtered all through my countdown as he tried to make his choice.

“Great! Creepypasta it is!” I exclaimed, linking my hand through his arm and dragging him over to the *slow food, sit-down restaurant* at the edge of the food court.

The restaurant was bustling with customers. We were lucky to get a seat squished into a booth in the corner. I was so elated to be eating with William that I didn’t really pay attention to what was going on around us. He seemed to have his focus completely on the plate in front of him.

“Imagine you could do anything. What would you?” I asked.

That got his attention. His deep brown eyes met with mine as a flurry of hidden emotion passed over his face. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw his knuckles turning white, his fists balled. When I shifted my gaze, he pulled his hands under the table and out of sight.

“What’re you doing down there, William?” I asked with a lurid tilt to my question.

His hands were back on the table, spread flat in a second.

“So jumpy,” I laughed.

To be fair, I was feeling jumpy, too. Not just because there was some strange buzzing in the back of my head, almost like feedback or static. But also because our knees kept brushing against each other under the table. Because our hands were close enough to touch, to hold each other. Because the lighting was dim in our section, and there were other couples sat near us on actual dates, doing things I wanted to do to William.

I think the server came to take our orders, but I couldn’t remember. Minutes later, two steaming plates of pasta set down in front of us. I went for a simple Linguine al Pesto—green food always made me feel better.

William, on the other hand, opted for *pizza* carbonara.

“I see, you wanted pizza, just something more extravagant than what they had at the kiddie arcade,” I laughed.

He shoved a bite in his mouth, glaring at me. “I said fast.”

“And I,” I said, spinning the linguini around my fork, matching the challenge in his gaze, “really know how to milk a fast date.”

I cringed at my phrasing as I sucked a noodle into my mouth. I was a slurp-the-whole noodle kind of gal, I didn't like cutting it off. The taste of cheesy basil spread across my tongue, and I closed my eyes, indulging in the taste of it. When I opened them, William was staring at my lips, pizza held just before his mouth. A jolt of excitement went through me.

I think I've gotten it wrong all these years. William Liu might actually be into me!

I licked my lips slowly to lap up all the drippy pesto and oils. His breathing slowed. My heart sped up to a million beats a minute. I ran a finger across my lips before sliding it into my mouth. When I moaned in appreciation (of the food)—*really pushing it*—that might have been going too far. He dropped his pizza in his lap, hit his knee on the table. He also managed to knock his drink over, sending the liquid splashing across the table and onto me.

He was blushing now, hardcore, and I savored every second even as the cool liquid froze my tits and lap.

“Ah, shit, Gizmo!” I laughed. “Watch yourself.”

Instead of grabbing napkins or a waiter, as you would expect of a perpetual helper like him, he jumped up and out of the booth like it was lava moving across the table and not water. The other pastafarians in the room all gawped at us, one woman coming up behind me to help pat me down.

William was breathing heavily. I liked to believe it was because he was so turned on by my impromptu wet t-shirt contest entry, but there was something fearful about his behavior.

“I need to go,” he said, his voice strained like he didn't want to say the words.

“Okay, fine,” I grumbled, looking around for the waiter.

When he came by with the check, William paid. I offered to pay my portion, but he insisted he’d pay since he ‘ruined lunch.’ He tried to leave, but I scooped all our food up into boxes and chased after him.

“What was that about? A glass of water kill your parents or something?”

He didn’t answer, just kept speed walking back to the Past Present.

I grabbed his arm, stopped him. The bag of leftovers swung wildly from the inertia and I winced, thinking about all that sauce I’ll find at the bottom of the bag.

“Seriously, dude, what gives? You treat me different than *everybody* else, like you’re always on edge. I was starting to think that maybe you liked me back, finally, but... I should just give up.”

His eyes softened, a flurry of anxieties flashing across his forehead as he stared down at the place where I’d grabbed him. I thought I’d grabbed him too hard, but I was finding that William was a lot stronger than I’d realized. He hadn’t moved my hand away, which meant I could feel the muscle under his sweater. I sucked in a breath, even though I was trying to have a serious adult conversation with him for once.

His other hand brushed against the top of mine, sending tingles up my skin and down my spine.

“There’s a lot you don’t know about me, Billie,” he breathed. “A lot that would probably send you running. Whatever you think I am... I don’t know why you’re attracted to me. But you don’t deserve to have to deal with my crap. There’s a lot I want, if I didn’t have to be me. *A lot.*”

My heart twisted at his words. He was letting me down.

Wait. Wait, wait. He was also...

Admitting he liked me enough to look out for me. To try and protect me from whatever it is he thinks is too big for me to deal with. That 'a lot' was dripping with innuendo and promises I wanted him to follow up on.

Well, if that isn't the sweetest thing anyone has ever done for me. Nobody looks out for me first.

Before I could overthink it, I leaned in, parted my lips.

His breath was shaky, but I waited for him to complete the connection. He was like a deer in the forest; I didn't want to spook him by moving too quickly this time. I almost wanted to make myself small and docile so he wouldn't think I was attacking.

The next three breaths we took were the longest moments of my life. Our lips moved towards each other, drawn by some irresistible magnetism between us.

Then, at the last moment, he turned away from my lips. I started to grumble, until his mouth found my neck and left the sweetest, most arousing kiss just under my chin.

"I want you too much," he whispered against my ear.

His hot breath sent a fire across my nerves. My eyelashes fluttered. I felt wobbly for a second.

Holy fucking fuck.

We didn't even *kiss*.

My vision blurred except for him. Nothing else in the mall mattered.

He bent down low, grabbed the bags from my hand and peeked into them before handing back my linguini, his eyes barely straying from mine.

“But I can’t do just anything. So... give me a break. Please.”

I stood there, flabbergasted at how honest he was being. That I didn’t imagine all the signs he gave through the years. That my feelings were actually reciprocated.

He walked away, and when I tried to follow, he turned, gripping my shoulder like he wanted me to stay still.

“Please?” he asked again.

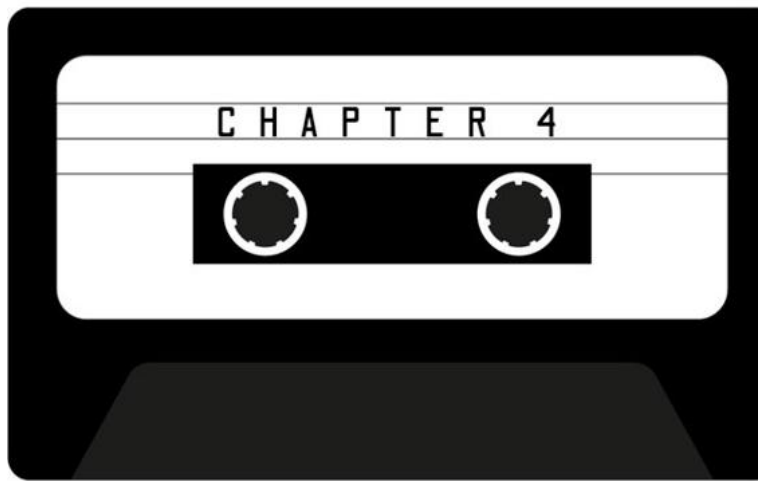
My whole head was a mess. But I let him go.

This time.

The thing is... I really liked it when William begged. And I liked it when he told me he liked me *too much*. I needed to hear it again and again.

Giving him space didn’t get me that result. No. It was berating him until he had to finally admit everything to me.

So no fucking way I was going to back off now.



WILLIAM

I KNEW I'D REGRET TELLING HER HOW I FELT. IF SHE WAS A nice person, she would have respected when I told her to back off.

But instead, she dragged me off to a new destination every day during lunch. Lunchtime before was spent standing over the counter at the Past Present while the occasional customer wandered in, filled their eyes with our trinkets, and left.

Today, we shoved pastries in our mouths as she pulled me to GalaxyGames. I groaned, knowing how this would go.

Neon flickered as I passed under the sign. The owner, Buddy, was busy tormenting some kids in his Gandalf costume, and didn't notice when I walked in. The stoners on the games near the entrance sure did, though.

"Aw, come on!" one of them growled, shaking his machine.

“The fuck, I HAD THAT!” another shouted, kicking the machine before looking around for Buddy.

I bit my lip, hoping Billie would grow tired of the games malfunctioning quickly so I wouldn't get in trouble. Maybe Buddy didn't know exactly what I was, but he could connect the dots.

I pulled Billie towards the games that weren't so technologically advanced. Like the coin pusher that was essentially gambling. It was largely mechanical except for the display. And the sensors.

There wasn't much I could do. She pulled out a few quarters and put them in, squealing with joy as the coins fell off.

“You're like a lucky charm!” she beamed, grabbing my arm and pulling me close to her.

I could feel her soft breast press against me. The heat of her. The way her hips wiggled with delight.

“Look at them go!”

I wanted her, wet and wild for me. Screaming my name as I pound into her. I wanted to rip off her clothes and fuck her right here in the middle of the arcade.

“I am a servant of the Secret Fire, wielder of the flame of Anor. You cannot pass!” barked a withered voice from behind me.

Then I felt him tugging against my neckline from behind.

We twisted around to see Buddy Bardot in his stupid Gandalf costume towering over us. The shtick was so much.

“Come off it, Buddy,” Billie chided, shocked he was talking to us like this.

No surprise to me.

“He that breaks a thing to find out what it is has left the path of wisdom,” the overdramatic wizard spouted off.

I got the hint.

“C’mon, let’s go,” I mumbled, pulling Billie towards the exit.

“What the?” she asked, still looking back and forth between me and the owner.

Buddy slammed his staff against the floor. “I said beat it.”

I felt Billie stir to fight back and pulled her a little too hard to get out of there.

“The fuck did you do in there?” she asked, her face full of awe.

Another emotion ran across her face before she turned it towards the store.

“Your stupid games are on the fritz anyway, loser!”

I reached my hand towards her mouth before realizing my error and slipped it to the back of her head, pulling her focus forward.

She let out the sweetest noise. It went straight to my cock.

“William,” she purred. “How’d you know I liked it rough?”

I pulled my hand away. Thoughts of twisting her hair in my grasp, shoving her to the floor, mounting her from behind, using her hair like reins as I rode her ass. Nobody wanted to see some guy hard outside an arcade. This wasn’t fair.

“Lunchtime’s over, Billie.”

She pouted.

I felt shaky all over. We couldn't keep doing this. Fighting the monster was too much, and the sexual impulses were the least of my problem. It was the desire to destroy, to hurt, to maim. It was the lack of all control that she inspired that was scariest to imagine letting loose.

I should have told her the whole thing was off. Whatever *this* was, this tentative 'oh they're not dates, we're just having fun' thing that I know meant more to both of us than we were admitting. She was too good at working around my boundaries and wedging herself deeper into my heart.

Truthfully, I didn't want any boundaries with her.

"When are your parents back?" she asked out of the blue, easily switching away from the heavy flirtation. She knew she went too far. We walked back to the Past Present.

"In a few days."

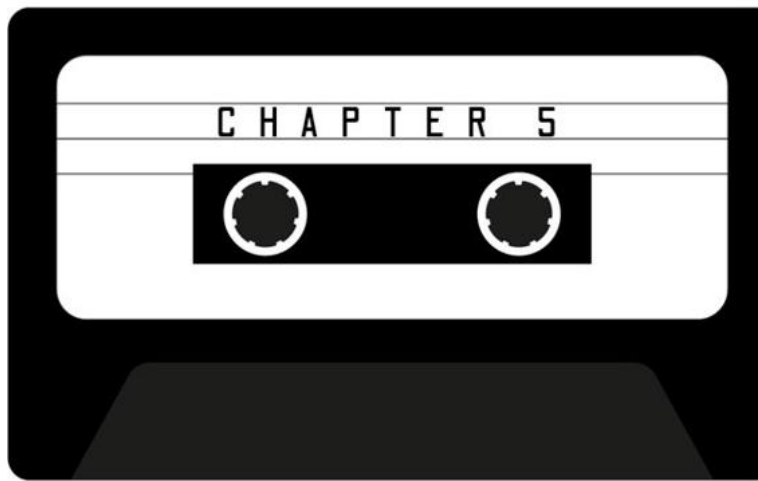
"Just in time for Día de Muertos," she grinned.

I didn't know much about the holiday, but Billie told me about the sugar skulls and the ofretas. She always joked about being a mutt—some mishmash of Mexican, Jewish, German, Russian, Irish, and Italian that could only happen in America. Not that China wasn't full of a bunch of disparate identities within itself. But to Americans, we were just Chinese.

And to humans, *mo guai* like me were just monsters.

I was half-terrified to see my parents again. I was worried they'd be able to smell the way I'd grown lax over our rules. That they'd stop me from leaving the Past Present at all, keeping me there and home only.

"Can we go on a real date?" she asked, turning to me as we stood outside the antique shop. "Like... out of the mall?"



BILLIE

OPERATION WILLIAM LIU'S DAY OUT WAS A GO.

He seemed terrified to leave the mall at first, but once we got to the mini golf course, he actually started having fun. A couple of times, our balls went into the fountain and he yelled at me as I stepped over the barrier, ignoring the “stay out of the fountain” sign to get them. When I dropped his red golf ball back in his hands, he dropped it, wiping his hand quickly.

His behavior was a little strange after that. It occurred to me that maybe William was a germaphobe. He kept looking at his hand strangely, like he expected it to grow fangs.

“Lighten up, Gizmo, it’s your ball,” I said, nudging him playfully.

I still couldn’t believe he agreed to an actual date. We must have looked a bit ridiculous, him in his sweater vest and t-

shirt, me rocking a lazy punk outfit, complete with a ridiculous tutu to really give people a shock. The prep and the loser. I gloated at the juxtaposition, at how people gave us strange looks for even being together. It fed that hurt kid inside me that used to get made fun of, even if I was mostly past that.

Finally, when a chestbuster did not rip out of his hand, he shook it off and took his putt. When it bounced off the side and landed four feet from the hole, he just chuckled.

“I really thought more stuff would go wrong today,” he said, watching me putt.

My hips wiggled extra for him. I checked to see if it worked, and was pleased to see the way his eyes followed my ass.

“Cause I’m such a troublemaker?” I asked.

He snorted. “I wasn’t worried about you.”

I stood straight and looked at him. Stepped closer, dragging my putter behind me.

“You, Mr. Responsibility?”

He shrugged from where he sat on a rock. I leaned down, putting my hands on either side of him. Our breath slowed, hitched. I gulped, knowing that I was about to push him again.

“You don’t know what I’m capable of,” he whispered.

This time, I wouldn’t wait for him. I pressed closer until our mouths hovered just next to each other.

“I’d like to see it,” I whispered back before closing the gap.

His hand fisted against my button up, pulling me closer. I fell into his lap, slid my arms around his neck. He growled, pulling me right on top of his erection.

His erection.

I'd fucked tons of guys, but William got me excited to dry hump him on a rock. That's how desperate he made me after all this time. I bit his bottom lip, dragged it between my teeth as he thrust up. I moaned at the feel of him. He was the perfect size. My pussy ached for him. His hands slid up my shirt, squeezing at the soft flesh beneath until he forced his fingers under my bra. I broke from the kiss and buried my face in his neck.

"Yes," I hissed, dragging my teeth across the soft skin there.

In the next moment, I was on the floor, my legs up in the air.

"Excuse me, this is a family establishment!" came a man's voice. "Security!"

We stopped, stared at each other for a moment. Giggling, William pulled away from me and helped me up. He turned to the man, blushing scarlet.

"Sorry, sir. We'll show ourselves out. We're so sorry for what you had to witness."

William *bowed*, as subservient as he could, and then grabbed my hand and started running back to my car. He didn't have one, so it was mine or bust.

"I'm so sorry," he eked out as we bolted from the mini golf course. "I totally ruined your outside-the-mall date."

"No you didn't," I huffed out once we got to the car.

I leaned back against the car, trying to catch my breath. He was huffing and puffing too, but that didn't stop him from pouncing on me like a lion, attacking my neck, my chest, my lips.

You unleash the monster, and he really goes at it.

“Stop,” I laughed, even though I was afraid I’d break the spell. “We have to go somewhere way less public or we’re gonna get arrested for indecency.”

“I want to be very indecent with you,” he growled, his hands teasing along my waistband.

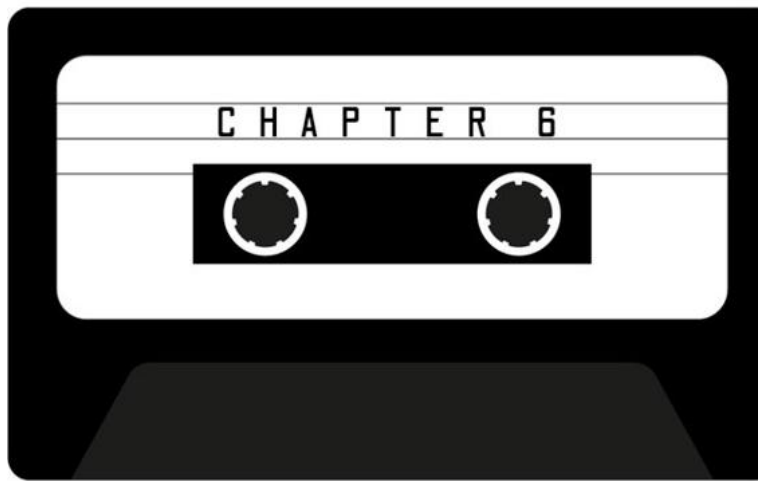
“Oh my god, yes. Fuck. Agh!” I squealed. “Stupid other people. Fuck. We can’t go to my house. My roommates are...”

He shook his head. “I can’t take you home. There’s stuff at my house that...”

My eyebrows furrowed. “What does that even mean?”

“I’ll explain one day. But... we could always go back to the mall. There’s like no one there and we do have the shop to ourselves.”

I quirked a brow at him. “God, you’re a lot kinkier than I could have ever expected.”



WILLIAM

BILLIE WAS SINGING SOMETHING THAT SOUNDED VAGUELY familiar until I heard the words “at Frankie’s Funhouse.” It must have been the jingle for the TV show. The Funhouse in question was right in front of us. As soon as she sang the words, a strange mechanical sound emanated from the kids’ arcade.

Billie grabbed my arm and started laughing. “God, that place is so creepy at night.”

I tugged her in the direction of the employee corridor. Being here at night terrified me, and if I wasn’t so horny when I suggested coming here, I would have thought of literally anywhere else to make love to her.

Oh god, I was going to have sex with Billie Beringer.

I'd never had sex with anyone. I didn't have a clue what I was doing.

Okay, that wasn't true. I'd slipped into the back of Red Light Video enough times to have a *very* good idea of what I was doing. The guy who ran it had to be a sex demon or something. He had all the best shit and knew exactly what you wanted just by looking at you.

Billie had grabbed us each a can of beer from the trunk of her car, but we hadn't even started drinking yet and she was already being silly. Maybe she knew I'd be anxious. She didn't have any idea I'd never had sex before, though. 'Almost thirty' as Billie kept putting it, and still a virgin. Maybe I just wouldn't tell her.

Oh god, there was a lot I was *not telling her*. I'm such a tool. No wonder she calls me Gizmo.

When we got to the Past Present, she pushed me in and tried to kiss me, but I was freaking out in my head too much to kiss her back.

So she cooled it.

"We can just have a sleepover, no rush," she said, trying to play it cool.

I could tell she was just as *not cool* inside as I was. I just hoped she didn't think I wasn't into her, that I'd changed my mind. The real issue was I couldn't figure out how to tell her everything.

She grabbed a fairly sturdy looking bottle from a cabinet and pointed it at me. "Since it's a sleepover..."

"I am not playing spin the bottle with you," I grumbled. "What are you, twelve?"

“Truth or dare?”

I sighed.

“C’mon, William, we’re having a sleepover in the mall. Where’s your sense of nostalgia?”

“It ran off with my sanity. I don’t know. I’m nervous we’re going to get caught?”

“You like literally work here.”

I groaned and lay back on the antique couch. It was shitty to continue anything without telling her. But also I was so worried I’d lose her after everything.

“Truth or dare?” she asked again, plopping next to me on the couch.

My body angled towards hers, pulled in by gravity.

I groaned. “Dare.”

She grinned. “Still hiding your secrets. That’s fine. I dare you to do something that scares you.”

I turned, looked up at her from my position on the couch.

If you could do anything, what would you?

The thing I couldn’t get over was how my hand didn’t start growing that awful boil that used to when I got wet. Rain did it. *Billie’s lips did it*. Except... now they didn’t. And my hand didn’t mutate after she dropped the wet golf ball in my hand. Maybe getting older had cured me. Or maybe I had some semblance of control after all these years of trying to fight back against what I was born to be.

Maybe all the things that used to hold me back weren’t anymore. That clarity I felt when she started kissing me at the golf course flooded my mind again. There was nothing to fear.

I sat up and turned towards Billie, kissing *her* this time instead of being kissed. Slipping my tongue between her lips and exploring what it was like to French kiss. She giggled a couple of times and told me to loosen up (still so tense, I guess). Her hands smoothed across my chest.

“Fuck, William, you’re so sexy like this,” she whimpered. “I like it when you take what you want.”

Her words sent a hunger into me, gluttony for more. For the taste of her all over. All the porn I’d seen from the video store gave me ideas on just how much of her I could taste. With a growl, I pushed her back, so she was the one lying on the couch. She squealed with surprise when I ripped her shorts away.

“God, you wear so many fucking layers,” I huffed, threading my fingers through the laces of her Doc Martens, eyeing the fishnets and tights.

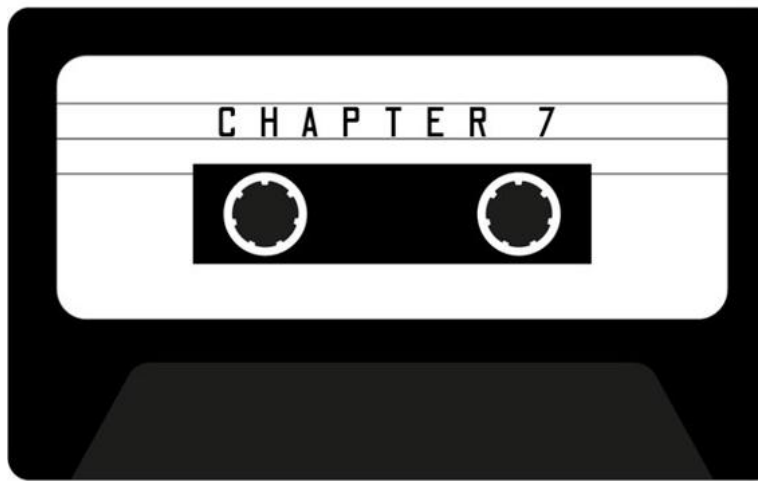
I couldn’t stop myself, kissed the bared flesh that poked through the ripped sections of her tights as I worked those stupid boots off of her. It took everything in me not to rip the laces off.

“Believe me, I would have made things simpler if I had any inkling you were such a beast,” she giggled, leaning forward to run her hands through my hair. She shoved her tits in my face, and my mind went blank for a moment. She was so soft underneath all that punk crap.

Her hand snuck to my waistline, under my belt, and then to my aching cock. I whimpered, realizing how screwed I was if she got to play around there. She felt amazing. Her hand was so small against that inflamed skin, it made me feel huge. I always felt I was average at best, especially compared to the guys in the porn.

I shoved her back against the couch, finally freeing her feet of the Docs so I could pull down her leggings. Except I didn't pull them down... I might have ripped through them. At least the fishnets. I realized what I was doing and tried to be gentler with the second pair, pulling it down fast, but without the strength that took over me.

“Fuck, William,” she purred. “Are you for real?”



BILLIE

JESUS FUCKING H. CHRIST, THIS MAN ATE PUSSY LIKE HE needed it. Who would have thought underneath that sweet exterior that William Liu was a sex fiend?

And *the moans* coming out of him. I've been with a lot of men who thought they knew how to eat a girl out. Some of them *exceptionally* confident. But William? Even if I didn't enjoy every single thing he was doing right now, I could get off on the noises coming out of him alone. It really changes things when a guy lives to eat pussy, I swear.

I watched in rapt fascination, surges of even more heat rushing through me as his gaze trailed up to meet mine.

Whatever that lustful fire in him was, it burned so strongly it turned his eyes red.

But...

Wait, like, actually.

This totally can't be happening.

"Billie," he groaned, his voice almost coming out like a growl.

"You taste so fucking good."

Those lips of his were coated with me. I couldn't help myself and dragged him away from the meal he was so enjoying. The glistening pink of his mouth did me in. He growled as we connected in a fury of lips and teeth and tongue. His body rolled against mine as I felt how much he was enjoying this, too. His fingers dug into my sides, gripping so tight his nails nearly cut into my skin.

He dragged his mouth down to my neck, licking and biting in feral possession.

"Fuck," he muttered, his voice almost whining. "You're so wet, I shouldn't be—"

I shut him up with a bite to his neck. He whimpered and when I pulled back to look at the gorgeous expression on his face, my breath caught. He looked something between terrified and deadly.

His eyes seared red now, almost glowing. And his face?

"Oh no," he groaned, pushing me away. "Fuck, I thought—"

Wow, William Liu swearing. This night was full of surprises.

I was almost so distracted by his eyes I didn't see the way his lips drew apart wider and wider. Something strange was growing from inside his mouth, like skin.

I think he was trying to swear again, but whatever was in his mouth made it so all that came out was choking sounds.

"William, are you okay?" I said stupidly.

It occurred to me that maybe I could help him after what felt like an eternity of gawping at him while he continued to choke. Running forward, I circled around to his backside and wrapped my arms around him. I wasn't sure if the Heimlich was the right move, since I had no idea what that weird skin thing in his mouth was, but I was sort of out of options. Especially since we were in the mall sort of illegally.

He wretched as I thrust my fists just under his ribcage and hoped for the best.

“Really thought I was going to make you ejaculate something else tonight,” I bit out in between thrusts.

He pushed my arms off him and fell forward. I watched in horror as something slimy and flesh-colored spilled from his mouth. And didn't stop spilling out of him. When I ran forward to put a hand to his back, he pushed me back.

“William!” I cried out.

I might have started to tear up, feeling so hopeless and useless that someone who might be my boyfriend now was having a medical emergency.

I should have called the stupid cops.

William slumped forward, finally no longer wrenching. I crawled on my hands and knees to get close, but the dark light of the hallway made it difficult to see. He rolled onto his back, revealing the fleshy mass that had come out of him.

It was... for all intents and purposes... *him*.

Naked.

And slimy.

“William?” I let out, now afraid to get too close.

What *was* that? What *was he*?

The clothed William lay panting on his back. His eyes turned toward me, lashes fluttering.

“Shit, Billie, you shouldn’t be here,” he groaned.

The him that he... puked up? The naked him writhed slowly, as if it was testing out its limbs for the first time. Which, I guess it was?

I couldn’t help it and backed up until I was pressed against the wall. My heart was hammering in my chest, my breathing erratic. The nakedness of the slimy William reminded me that I had nothing on my lower half except a stupid neon tutu. It made me feel excessively vulnerable considering the situation.

“What the fuck is that?” I spat.

I didn’t know what to call it. William Two? Twolliam?

“You should run,” William choked out, looking absolutely wrecked.

Twolliam’s back muscles moved like a wave as it—he?—acclimated to his new body until he could rise onto his hands and knees. His head turned oddly to look at William, then circled around to look straight at me.

His face was something like William’s, but like he had a permanent evil grin etched into his face. Lines warped his features, and his eyes were resiliently that odd red.

“Billie, you taste so good,” he said, his voice a bastardization of the reverence to which William had said those words earlier.

“No!” William groaned, turning onto his side. He was still huffing from the exertion of coughing up this strange chimera.

I tried to hold my ground, unsure if it was a mistake to run or stay. At least if I stayed, I could help William if Twolliam tried to hurt him.

His body contorting like a snake, Twolliam rose onto his feet, rolling out his muscles along the way.

It was unfortunate that my first sight of naked William was by way of his creepy doppelgänger. Even worse, that I couldn't get over how hot he was. Twolliam's cock was quite a surprise, not just because of its size and girth, but for the strange markings around the base, and the odd shape to his shaft. Is that what I felt under his jeans at the mini golf course? In my hand just moments ago? He was surprisingly ripped for someone so lithe, and I wondered how much of this creature was just like William himself.

Because I wasn't entirely sure William Liu was human anymore.

"Come here, Billie, I wasn't finished," Twolliam purred.

William grunted behind him, still attempting to get up.

"What are you?" I repeated, this time to Twolliam directly.

His terrifying grin spread wider. "In love with you, don't you know?"

His eyes flicked to William for a split second. The original blushed fiercely, even as he struggled to stand. The words made my heart leap. And at the same time, a sinking feeling formed in the pit of my stomach. Was he making fun of me? Yes, I'd finally worn away at William enough to convince him to have sex with me. And he had said he liked me a lot, but *what did that actually mean?* That he found his head between my thighs only moments ago wasn't much to go off of—most guys would be pretty happy to get laid.

Except that William wasn't most guys. I think he would have jumped at the chance years ago if that's all he was in it for.

This is not the time to have a love life crisis.

"Don't touch her," William growled.

Twolliam just laughed, spiting William by stepping closer to me.

"I won't do anything you wouldn't do," he giggled.

William's eyes flared as he struggled forward. "Billie, run!"

I shook my head. "I'm not leaving you. He said he wouldn't do anything you wouldn't do, so I don't think I'm in danger."

No, I was not getting the sense that Twolliam would hurt me.

"What the fuck is going on, William?" I tried again.

"So used to keeping everything kept under lock and key," Twolliam murmured, now just a foot away from me.

It was becoming very difficult to not think about the fact that he was hard. If he stepped any closer, he'd poke me without lifting a finger. My body didn't know what to do. As far as it cared, that was William in front of me, even if my head knew differently.

Or did it?

"I am William," Twolliam cooed. "Just as in love with you, just as curious to know every bit of you..."

I shuddered, his sensuality dripping from him in a way the real William kept locked up.

His hands reached forward, one wrapping around my hips as the other wrapped around my neck. His thumb lingered behind, stroking up and down my neck like a sexy threat.

Before I knew what was happening, his mouth pressed against mine. His cock against my stomach as well.

“Stop,” William said weakly from behind his double.

I shook Twolliam off, but he just redoubled his efforts, kissing my neck instead when I turned my face away from him. His hands slid up my t-shirt, quickly seeking out my breasts.

“You should really stop that,” I panted, caught between really loving this and feeling incredibly guilty for having the guy I like watch from only a few feet away.

Twolliam just chuckled, shifting so that his cock slid between my legs instead of pressing up against my stomach.

“C’mon, you’ve wanted me for years,” he hissed against my neck.

Could William see it too? Or was that just his evil twin who could see right through me? I thought he always dismissed me as just trying to push his buttons until tonight, but everything was so new I didn’t know where we stood.

“Stop it!” William grunted again, this time wrapping himself around Twolliam’s naked shoulders as he attempted to pry him off.

“Ohh, a threesome?” Twolliam laughed, holding on to me even tighter so William couldn’t pull him back.

“I’m not having a threesome with anyone until someone tells me what is going on!” I screeched, pushing back at Twolliam until he finally let go.

The fucker just laughed. But next to him, William looked on, his face full of worry. It all bottled up inside of him, his lips pursing as he tried to keep it inside.

For once, he couldn't. It came out in the form of him punching Twolliam. That just made the doppelgänger laugh harder.

“Tell her, I'm sure she can *take it*,” the doppelgänger laughed, thrusting his hips forward for emphasis.

I'm not going to blush just because a very lewd copy of the guy I'm into makes dumb innuendos.

“Fuck!” William said, the word growing more and more comfortable on his lips with each use.

Wild to think he never swore in my presence before this night. There's a lot of things I never knew he was capable of. You think you know a guy.

Finally, he stopped hitting Twolliam and calmed himself, taking a wide stance and breathing in deeply. When he looked up, the red of his eyes seemed to be gone. The lines around his face softened again to almost nothing.

“I guess what's happened is crazy enough it won't sound completely insane for me to tell you the truth,” he said with a sigh.

I nodded passively. “I'll take any explanation after what I'm seeing.”

He reached a hand forward. I stared at it a moment before realizing he wanted me to take it. As soon as I did, he guided me over to an antique chair covered in plastic. He pushed on my shoulders, urging me to sit. I got caught up in the smell of him, the heat of his body bringing out the smell of his soap.

Both of them looked down at me as I sat there, Twolliam with an almost gleeful smirk on his twisted face and William himself wide-eyed with worry.

“I come from a long line of *mo guai*... ah... basically... monsters. Ogres? Sort of...”

This probably should be a bigger deal than it felt. But now I was just curious.

“Why have you never had problems before?” I asked. “You’ve been like the picture of sweetness the whole time I’ve known you, well, except for...”

The day I kissed his cheek was the last time I ever tried to get close to him. He made it pretty clear he didn’t want me to touch him. Well, that’s what I thought. Until today. He rubbed at the mark on his cheek. My eyes flared wide.

“That’s not from me, is it?”

He shook his head and blushed all at the same time. “No... Not entirely. It was a very... um...”

“Wet kiss,” Twolliam interrupted. “We love wet kisses.”

Twolliam bent to sit next to me, wrapping his arm around my shoulders as he looked directly at William. “Don’t we?”

William kicked the doppelgänger’s shins. Twolliam leaned forward to rub the sore spot, removing his arm from behind me.

“When my great-great-great grandfather fell in love with a human woman, he desired to live with her among the humans. For him, it was hardest, because he was full yao guai. Much of the time, despite his best intents, he was chased out of the villages. It didn’t matter how well-mannered he was. But my great-great-great grandmother loved him anyway. Their children came out human—at least they thought so at first, except for their dislike of the sun, which caused them to wail and scream. But then the eldest took his first bath—and

suddenly they had far more than just him. Like you saw, wherever he got wet, more of him sprouted.”

I was so engaged in William’s story, I didn’t notice Twolliam getting closer again—so close that his breath was hot on my neck.

“I love being wet,” Twolliam whispered in my ear before licking my neck.

William let out a growl and pounced on Twolliam, caught between trying to pummel him and hold him down. Twolliam giggled all the way through.

“Stop it!” I called out, trying to wedge myself between them. “Fight later. I’m still trying to understand.”

William stopped aggressing, but was still straddled across his double’s lap. Twolliam reached out fingers to tickle him with, which sent William flying back off the couch.

“Dick,” William hissed.

“Right here,” Twolliam said with a smirk, rocking his hips to show off his *still very naked cock*.

I looked away, staring at William’s feet instead.

“So your family, what, reproduces by budding? Like a sponge?”

“That’s a good one,” Twolliam guffawed, slapping his knee.

William shook his head. “No, that would imply he’s my brother. Or worse, I guess, my child?”

His nose wrinkled.

“I already told you,” Twolliam said, lowering his voice as he leaned in closer. “I *am* William.”

I shrugged him off, feeling him trying to get close again.

“Well, I mean, that’s weird, yeah, but not really monstrous,” I concluded. “So I guess that explains why you’re such a baby about sunlight... and I guess I just won’t get you... wet.”

Now I was blushing again. Hard. I wanted to go back to that moment in the hallway when I was riding his mouth and he was lapping up my enjoyment like he’d been parched for months. I guess, in a way, he has been. Wait... has he ever...

“Have you ever been with anyone else? Has this happened before? I mean, it did happen because... because of how...”

“How wet you were,” Twolliam purred. “I wonder if you still are... just waiting for us.”

Breathing got a little harder for a second as I turned away from Twolliam to focus on William instead. And William was also affected by his double’s words. I could see it in the protrusion in his pants. The one that I wanted so desperately to grind on earlier.

Twolliam’s fingers grazed along my arm, teasing up towards my neck.

“You are the only one,” William bit out, stomping his foot as a sign to his double to quit it.

My heart flipped.

“Does that mean you’re a virgin?” I asked before I could stop myself.

I guess it made sense, if he had this big terrifying change looming over his head, that he wouldn’t have had sex like most of the guys I knew.

“It’s embarrassing,” he groaned.

I stood up, took his hands in mine.

“I don’t think that at all,” I said, waiting for him to look at me.

His eyes seemed transfixed by where our hands joined. To be honest, my eyes fell too, wanting very much for more connection. A reminder of how just minutes ago we were worlds more intimate.

“Besides, if that was your first time eating pussy, I don’t stand a chance,” I laughed.

That got him to look at me.

“Stand a chance?”

“Dude, you’re going to destroy me.”

“I can’t do it again, though... not if...” he looked over to Twolliam, who sat on the couch with a strange expression on his face.

“Does it only happen to the original, though? That’s the question,” his double murmured. It was the most serious he’d sounded since William spat him up like a bad hairball.

William pulled me close, putting himself between me and Twolliam, like he was trying to protect me.

“No experiments.”

“No fun,” Twolliam pouted. “Such a big stick up your ass.”

“Don’t I get a say in this?” I cut in.

They both turned to look at me.

“You can’t possibly...” William mumbled.

“Oh, please tell me that’s where this is going,” Twolliam giggled.

“No! I’m just saying that obviously I was attracted to William, and he’s who I was doing things with, right?”

William nodded fervently. His double did too.

“You’re absolutely right. I still remember how you taste,” his double said.

There I go blushing again.

“No, I mean... *That* William, obviously.”

“Did that kiss on the cheek after your gig mean nothing?” Twolliam pouted. “Because you know, I had to run back to our store as fast as I could. It was such a wet kiss... Dad cauterized the bud before it could grow into another me.”

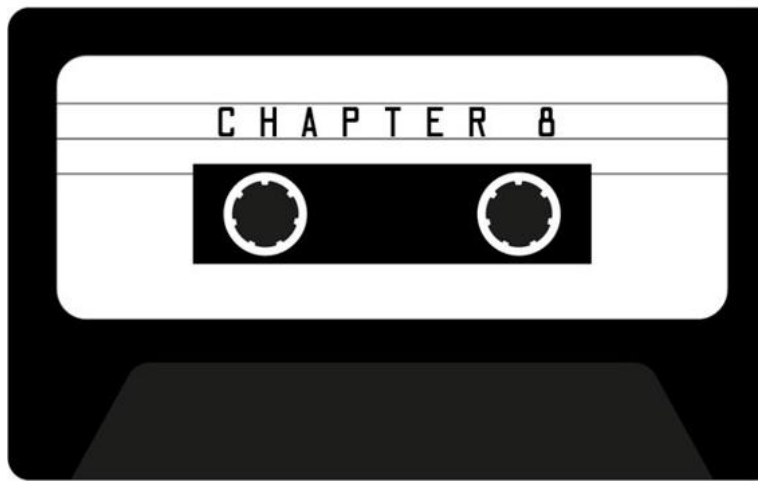
“Shut up!” William grumbled, nudging his double with his elbow.

If they really are the same... I’m not sure I can figure out loyalties. I *really* like William. I always have. He’s always been so sweet to me, but I wish he would have taken the initiative with me so much sooner. And Twolliam seems just like William, except that he’s so much... looser. Like he never wants to be bottled up again.

And if I never get eaten out like that again, it will be a crime.

“I think maybe we do try some experiments,” I said, my voice a bit uncertain.

My stomach twisted as I tried to pick an ethical stance on this. But my pussy seemed to be more in control.



WILLIAM

THIS MIGHT HAVE BEEN MY WORST NIGHTMARE.

She's actually choosing my fēnshēn?

“Why?” I asked, my voice far weaker than I liked.

She shrugged and let out a huff.

“He’s you. But... More...” she lets out a breath, trying to find the words. “Greedy, I guess.”

My stomach dropped.

I could be greedy. I felt so greedy all the time. Like I want too much. Like I want the world. But all the years of being told to hide what I am meant that it was second nature to pretend. To always give up those dark desires in me for the sake of everyone else.

I guess that’s not greedy at all.

“I can be greedy,” I snarled. I wouldn’t let the *fēnshēn* win.

“Prove it,” she scoffed.

I grabbed her by the throat and pulled her close. Only hesitated for a moment as years of keeping everything inside warred with me to stop, to back off, to stay away. But then our mouths crushed together.

When she kissed me after I went down on her, it was a revelation. But this... This was dominance. It was staking my claim on what was mine. She was mine. She needed to know that.

She whimpered against my mouth, and it was the most beautiful thing I’d ever heard. My teeth pulled against her bottom lip, drawing out another delicious sound. My other hand dug into her hips, pulling her tight against me. I pressed my hips forward, making sure she could feel the desire between my legs. There was no way she could let that *fēnshēn* touch her if I gave her everything she needed.

Her hands clawed into my back as her head fell backwards, away from me. I felt him brush against my thumb before I realized what he was doing. He was kissing her fucking neck. And she wasn’t stopping him. She was into it.

I grabbed her by the back of the throat and pulled her back to me. Moved my hand at her waist down, filling it with the plump flesh of her ass and ground into her.

“William,” she gasped when I came up for air.

“Mine,” I growled. “You’re all mine.”

Hands pushed against me, his hands, as he wrapped them around her and began to tease at her breasts. His mouth moved to her ear, nipping and biting. Licking at the space below.

“You’re right, she’s mine,” he teased.

His hand snuck low underneath the elastic of her stupid tutu to play with her pussy. No. Mine. I grabbed him by the wrist with one hand while I sought out her pleasure with the other. If anyone was going to touch her there, it would be me. Not the fucking *fēnshēn*.

“So *wet*, isn’t she?” he mused, his exploration of her neck slowing to watch my hand on her soaking cunt.

Fuck.

I pulled my hand away like it was on fire. It almost made me want to cry. How fucking stupid is this? All I wanted was to have sex with the girl of my dreams, but if she got too wet, then I’d have to deal with another fucking *fēnshēn*. Billie squealed with neither of us touching her, the *fēnshēn* only holding her.

“Don’t you want to try our little experiment?” he cooed. Fucking cooed.

But she looked so hot, desperate and panting.

“Please, fuck, I don’t care who touches me, I’m so fucking—”

The *fēnshēn* didn’t even wait for my input. Not that I could have protested. Maybe he was right. He is me, right? And I don’t want to deprive Billie of a lifetime of stimulation just because I could produce another *fēnshēn* if I do too good of a job.

That possessive monster in me wanted to keep fighting. To forget about the consequences and take our pleasure. But I was too good at holding back.

Be greedy.

I couldn’t. Not truly. The *fēnshēn* could be greedy for her.

And she loved it. She writhed in his grasp, twisting her head back to match his lips as his fingers plunged into her wet core. It felt so weird. Like watching custom porn or something. That was me behind her, fucking her with his fingers. As erotic as she looked, as much as she was a treat that felt designed just for me...

It was so strangely arousing to watch someone who looked just like me, who treated her just as I would if I didn't feel so restrained all the time. Who acted on all the impulses I buried.

"Oh fuck, William, are you jerking off to this?" Billie moaned, her eyes heavy with desire.

There was so much I was already giving up. I refused to give this up. I kept stroking myself, in time with the movements of my *fēnshēn*'s hand. To imagine what it would be like to press myself between her legs with more than my fingers.

"You're so hot like this," she said, her face rapt with fascination.

At least I was more entertaining than kissing the *fēnshēn*. That was a nice boost to the ego. That she would rather watch me stroke my cock than make out with him while he fingered her. I grinned smugly.

"Where has that expression been my whole life? Oh fuck," she panted.

Her eyes couldn't decide where to land, my face or my cock. The *fēnshēn* was whispering something in her ear, something I couldn't hear. It made her bite her lip as her eyes raked me up and down. Like she had laser vision or something. Like she could see through the clothes I still had on. Clothes I very much regretted wearing at this juncture.

“Yes, please, I need it,” Billie gasped out in answer to whatever the *fēnshēn* said.

A grin spread across his face as our eyes locked.

“Experiments,” he said simply before dropping to his knees.

He looked up at her, pulled her towards him. I growled. The least he could do was let me watch. But I still felt guilty about interrupting, so I moved to the stupid couch they were sitting on earlier.

“Take this stupid thing off,” the *fēnshēn* grumbled, tugging at the tutu.

“Yeah,” Billie eked out, pulling the tutu up over her head. It dragged her shirt up, revealing her breasts.

“All of it,” I added. “Holy shit, Billie, your tits. Fucking unreal.”

When her clothes were off, she looked back at me almost... demurely. Like she was amazed I thought she looked so hot. As if I could think anything else. Imagining what Billie looked like under all her little rock outfits had been my pastime for over a decade.

Nobody knew self-repression like I did.

But here, with the real thing right in front of me... It was a mistake to sit on this stupid couch and watch. Maybe I couldn't go down on her, maybe I couldn't finger her...

Maybe I couldn't even fuck her with my cock...

But I sure as hell could touch her.

She slumped forward as the *fēnshēn* kissed between her legs. He was surprisingly gentle, tentative. It felt like the opposite of how I'd devoured her. Maybe with that experience behind

us, he wanted to take his time. I know I would. Fuck. It was so unfair.

“So good,” he murmured.

I still remembered what she tasted like. The memory of it sat on my lips as I bolted forward, wrapping myself behind her so I could kiss her neck and play with her breasts. All the immediacy of our battle over her affection had dulled into an effort to bring pleasure to the person we both loved.

“Shit, you feel so good. Both of you,” Billie mumbled between her sweet whimpers.

My nose filled with the scent of her hair: apple-scented shampoo and the slightly burnt smell of her curler. I ground my hips against her ass, reveling in the feel of her cleft. Of the three of us, I was the only one still wearing clothes, and it both felt like a mistake and a necessity. My cock was going to break out of my pants. The fact that I wasn't wearing a shirt anymore meant feeling the soft skin of her back against my chest.

I bit into her shoulder, fighting not to bite too hard. The monster within me wanted to, but I didn't think she was ready for that. That kind of bite meant more than she could handle. Pinched at her nipples as I gyrated against her. Her hips matched mine as she ground herself into my *fēnshēn*'s mouth. He pulled her forward until she was fully sitting on him—

“No, I'll crush y—”

He lifted her legs, and we held her upright between the two of us. The *fēnshēn* groaned as she dug her hands into his hair and bucked into him.

“I don't want to break your neck,” she whimpered.

“You'll have to try way harder than that,” I hissed in her ear.

“Violence is in our DNA.”

“Oh,” she said simply.

To prove it, I forced her hips to ground even harder against the *fēnshēn*'s mouth, until she slid forward on his shoulders, forcing his neck back far more than any human should be able to.

“Oh fuck,” she groaned.

The impossibility of it seemed to do her in. She came loudly, a noise that rattled through my bones. I heard a noise that reminded me of the strange creatures that wandered the mall at night. Those that would love a tasty human treat like Billie. I covered her mouth with my hand as we guided her through her orgasm. My other hand roamed over her body, teasing out the shivers and quakes that fell over her.

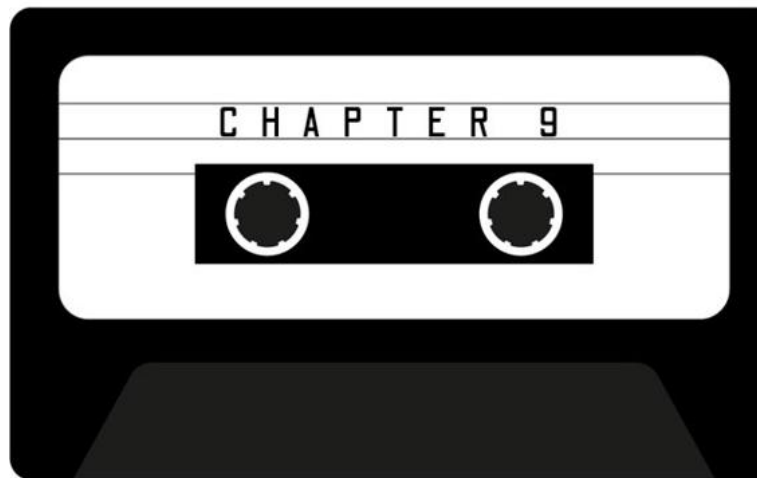
“Shhh, you're okay,” I murmured against her ear.

My eyes locked with the *fēnshēn*'s. The strangest little thrill ran through me from looking at him, still licking and sucking his way through her release. He seemed so carefree. So pleased. Happy. Like he could do this forever. Like he was made for this.

And it occurred to me that maybe he was.

Because he wasn't bent over, coughing up a *fēnshēn*. Maybe he was made to do all the things I couldn't. All the ways to please her that I wanted.

Life was real fucking unfair.



BILLIE

I WAS DAZED, AND THAT WAS PUTTING IT LIGHTLY.

I thought William had ruined me the first time he went down on me, but the combined efforts of him and Twolliam *destroyed* me. And what's more, they were still kissing me, licking me, holding me. We were nestled against the couch, not that I knew how we got there. Twolliam stroked at my legs, running his fingers along the skin with featherlight caresses.

William, on the other hand, held my head in his lap. Unlike Twolliam, whose gaze caressed me as much as his fingers did, William was staring into space as his hands played with my hair. The look on his face...

"You okay, Gizmo?" I asked, reaching a hand up to stroke his cheek.

His eyes fell to meet mine. His smile turned up.

“Peachy.”

“Penny for your thoughts?” I asked, a little worried. Something was off.

He leaned down and pressed a soft kiss to my lips in answer. “I’m just glad one of us can give you what you need.”

He tried to pull away, but I held him to me. Kissed him just that much harder as my heart ached for him. I didn’t know why his doppelgänger could pleasure me and be fine. Maybe because he was just a copy. But it made me ache for William.

“God, I’m starving,” Twolliam interrupted the tender moment. “You guys could go for some food too, right?”

William lifted his head slightly, his eyes searching mine with an energy that made me almost think he was looking for a way out. And at the same time, that he was looking for any excuse to stay near me.

“Everything’s closed, dude. It’s after hours.”

Twolliam clucked his tongue. “It’s a *mall*, dude. C’mon, let’s break into the Good Char.”

He slid his hand up between my legs playfully. “I bet Billie could really go for some sausages.”

I squirmed until he took his hand away. “You know I’m a vegetarian, but I’ll allow the innuendo.”

“Feisty,” he laughed, lifting my foot up to place a kiss on the inside of my arch. “Let’s get your energy back so you’re fun again.”

He jumped up and turned to us expectantly. “Well?”

“You’re a fucking nuisance,” William hissed.

“But a useful one, no?” Twolliam sniggered, holding out a hand.

I didn’t want to get up. I could melt into this couch for all I cared.

“Leave me,” I said with a great level of theatre. “Tell them that though I have died, it was a little death.”

“What does that mean?” they both asked in unison.

My cheeks blushed. “You guys didn’t take french in high school, huh?”

They shook their heads, William biting back his words when Twolliam spoke.

“My parents said Spanish would be more useful. This isn’t Canada.”

“How many languages do you speak?”

They shrugged.

“Four-ish.” In unison.

“Hot.” I smiled.

They both blushed. Cute.

“Maybe someone... friendly... is still up. We’re not going near Broth With a Bite.”

“Man, soup right now, though? No one there is friendly?” I pouted.

They both looked at me. “No.”

“What, is the secret ingredient people or something?”

“Hot dogs are out too. I’m not eating that around her, it’s... dangerous,” William added, glaring down Twolliam.

“For sinners like us?” Twoliam joked. I think. Whatever the joke was, I wasn’t in on it.

“Cookies, then?” Twoliam said with a sigh. “C’mon, I need *something*. Don’t tell me you’re not as hungry as I am.”

“One of us has all the self-restraint,” William grumbled.

“Thank god it’s not me,” Twoliam laughed.

He leaned forward, took my hands in his, and pulled me up.

“C’mon, Water Wiggle, let’s get on your feet.”

Proving him right, I almost slid right out of his hands and onto the floor. He laughed and pulled me close.

“I’ll take the excuse to hold you,” he murmured, before placing a kiss on my lips.

Kissing was nice. Kissing didn’t require thought. The heat radiating off his body was another problem. It made me want to nuzzle into him and cling on like a koala.

“I can carry you,” William said quickly, shooting up from the couch and pulling me off of Twoliam.

“You’re like almost the same size as me, no you can’t,” I scoffed.

He didn’t listen, just wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled my legs up around his hips.

“I stand corrected.”

That whole *mo guai* thing came with a lot of perks, I guess. Satisfied I didn’t have to move a muscle, I tightened my hold around his neck.

“I’m not choking you, am I?” I asked against his neck.

His shoulders tightened. “I’m stronger than I look.”

“He gets off on it,” Twolliam chuckled.

William kicked towards his twin. The double stepped away, laughing before shoving his hands in his pockets and leading the way down the corridor.

“Cookies taste better the second day, anyway. Gives the sugar time to age a little or something. I don’t know the science behind it. But one of the girls who works there always has some for us at the end of the day,” Twolliam said.

“Yeah, she’s really nice,” William agreed idly.

She’s really nice. Has he ever said I’m really nice? Who is this girl? I’m trying to remember if I recall what the stupid cookie girl looked like. If she was prettier than me. I mean, guys go for me because I’m unattainable in their heads. Because I come off like a bitch and they like a challenge. But sweet cookie girls are the kind that you settle down with. That bake for you and cook for you and raise sweet-faced kids. Nothing like me.

“I don’t want your girlfriend’s cookies,” I grumble.

Twolliam just laughed. William cocked his head to the side, slowing his pace a little as he tried to look back as he carried me.

“They’re just cookies.”

I hardened my jaw. Of course, they were just cookies. I’m being ridiculous. But I feel like I was dealing with a lot tonight, what with finding out he’s a secret monster or something and watching him split off into two people right in front of me and then getting pleased so hard I felt drunk. It was like running on giggle juice, but if everything that wasn’t coming at me wasn’t just our little world, the whole universe

felt like it was crashing in on me. Couldn't we just fuck and cuddle and kiss and do nothing else forever?

"Yeah, obviously," I said.

I wish it had sounded more natural. But it came out like an accusation instead.

Then William made a strange sound. A choked sort of laughter.

"Oh my god, you're jealous."

If I didn't feel the vibrations of his voice through my chest, I could have thought it was Twolliam talking. A shiver ran through me at the realization that they were one and the same, ultimately. I buried my face in his back.

"No," I pouted. "She obviously has a crush on you, is all I'm saying."

He readjusted his grip, his hands grabbing just under my ass before giving my cheeks a squeeze. It made me yelp.

"Shhh," he laughed. "Wow. Jealous, huh?"

The stupid man had a spring to his step the whole trek to the cookie stand. I refused to say anything else in case it only encouraged him. Twolliam, at least, seemed wholly preoccupied by his stomach, which felt like a blessing, so I didn't have to deal with two smug dicks. Maybe William felt like it was payback.

"Are you really okay with this?" I asked, keeping my voice low so it could stay just between us.

I felt sort of bad leaving Twolliam out of the conversation. I mean, he was a whole person. A whole William, too. But he seemed so much more carefree. Maybe being a copy of

William meant he didn't have as much pressure holding him back. It certainly seemed that way.

He slowed a little, losing whatever spark had flitted through him from gloating about my jealousy. Not that I was trying to rain on his parade.

"He's me, right?" William sighed. "So if he can do what I can't... and it makes you happy... That's all I want."

I hummed against his back and squeezed him lightly. He coughed faintly, which made me giggle.

"Too strong for your big, tough muscles?" I purred.

"If you're gonna be a brat, missy, I can carry you like one," he grunted.

I giggled. "What does that mean?"

Maybe I shouldn't have. He crouched low and slid his hands away. When I didn't move, he chuckled.

"Off."

I grumbled. "No, you were carrying me."

"Look at you, you are a brat. I'm still going to carry you."

He wiggled under me until I slid off, despite my best intentions.

"Rude," I said.

He spun around to face me, his mouth spread in a grin that made my heart melt. It was the most devilish expression I'd ever seen on *him*.

Who are you?

Then he bent forward and threw me over his shoulder. I squealed.

“Put me down!”

“Act like a brat, get treated like one,” he laughed.

“Aren’t you a virgin?!” I huffed out indignantly as my ass raised to the air and my head dropped low.

Needing something to grab onto, I wrapped my arms around his waist.

“You wouldn’t believe the sinful stuff they’ve got in the back of Red Light Video.”

This mall was proving to be way beyond anything I could ever expect.

“I’m beginning to suspect this whole mall is made up of people like you.”

He bit into the side of my ass playfully. “You have no idea.”

The worst part about hanging upside down is I felt like I could fall at any moment. And my stupid arms didn’t know where to go. Holding tight around his hips jostled my head way more than I liked, although I had to appreciate the proximity to his beautiful little butt. It occurred to me it might be slightly more comfortable if I just held him at his hips and pushed myself slightly away from him, and I’d get a better view.

The best part? Fuck, it made me feel all twisty inside. Exposed... and like a little plaything. Like *his* plaything.

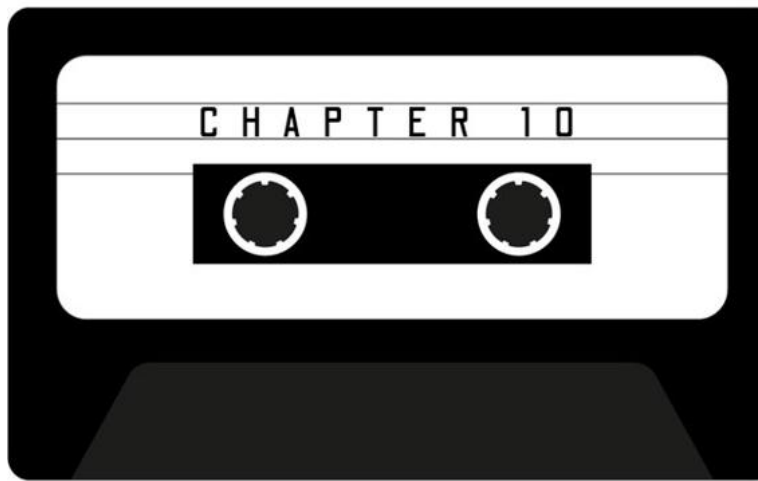
“Why are you squirming?” he asked, his voice caught between amusement and something much more lurid.

“Maybe one day I’ll carry you over my shoulder and you can tell me how comfortable it is.”

He patted my butt condescendingly. “I’d like to see you try.”

“We’re practically the same size.”

“Monster strength,” he pointed out.



WILLIAM

MAYBE IT WASN'T THE WORST THING.

This whole sharing her with my *fēnshēn* thing. He wasn't terrible. I mean, he was me. In a way.

"You want any?" he offered, extending the bag of stolen cookies out to me.

They were warm and everything. The *fēnshēn* made a point of warming them up in the microwave like Candy did. I did not miss out on the way Billie's eyes lingered on his fingers as he sucked the melted chocolate off them.

"I'm good," I said.

There was a little sneaking thought in the back of my head as soon as I heard my watch beep midnight.

Never eat after midnight, my parents had told me.

But the *fēnshēn*? He was free of all the stupid restrictions I had to endure, right? So it didn't matter for him. He was like an alternate universe version of me who didn't have centuries of repression to uphold. I wanted him to be free. Wanted to see one of us enjoy ourselves.

Getting to be with Billie at all was enough for me.

“God, these really hit the spot,” the *fēnshēn* moaned. “So fucking good.”

“I'll swing by and leave some money with Candy tomorrow,” I said, knowing we didn't have a way to pay since the cash register was locked up tight.

“You're always so thoughtful,” Billie grinned back at me.

I wasn't carrying her anymore. Instead, we walked hand in hand. It was everything I could have ever dreamed of. All the years of repression built up a million kinky ideas in my head, but fuck if I didn't want to just hold her at the end of it all. And that smile of hers? Those perfect lips, lipstick smeared after the way we pleased her earlier, her eyes gleaming back at me, frizzy hair sticking out in all sorts of odd angles...

How could I not be in love with her? Every moment with her just reinforced that I would do anything for her. It only solidified how important it was that I be the responsible one.

“Can't get enough,” I heard the *fēnshēn* groan.

Despite my pushing for moderation, he'd grabbed the entire tray of semi-sweet chocolate chips and dumped it into a bag. That bag looked like it was almost empty. Billie only had a couple of cookies before patting her stomach and claiming she was more than full. I don't know if she was just being a girl or if she really wasn't hungry anymore.

I know I was.

But truthfully, I always felt hungry. It wasn't the kind I could satiate, though.

Billie gasped, like she just had a thought.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Can we swing by the fountain?"

"Aren't you tired yet?" I laughed.

We were coming up on our thirties.

"I want to make a wish," she said.

I narrowed my eyes at her. "Be careful making wishes in a place like this."

She cocked her head. "That sounded like a threat."

"More like a warning. We really shouldn't bother the guy who..."

She lifted a brow.

"Kind of lives... there..."

"There *is* something weird and magical about this mall. How else could it stay in business?"

We were walking back through the main part of the mall. As much as it worried me the security guards would catch us, I did know all the places you could slip away in a pinch. Billie's sloppy, wet kiss on my cheek wasn't my last foray into hiding what I am.

"I don't really like being near the fountain," I sighed.

Too much freaking water.

She halted. "Oh. That makes sense, actually."

"Yeah," I said.

“Oooh, let’s take a picture. I just want to remember this night.”

“Um—”

She ran ahead and put a quarter in the photo booth, then turned back towards me. I really didn’t like bright lights. Under normal circumstances, I would avoid the photo booth like the plague. But she just looked so beautiful looking back at me. So earnest and hopeful. I couldn’t resist.

She sat me down on the stool first and slid in after me.

“Hold on,” she said, “Where’s Twolliam?”

“Twolliam?”

“Your uh... doppelgänger.”

That sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach was back.

The light flashed.

“Shit, it’s just us then. We’ll do another round with him.”

She turned towards the camera and beamed. I did not.

Flash.

“C’mon, smile, you dork.”

‘Twolliam’ wasn’t like me. He could be bad, he could break the rules without the same consequences. Right? He didn’t need to worry about getting wet or eating after midnight, because he was just a *fēnshēn*. *Fēnshēn* didn’t work the same way.

“William, c’mon. Kiss me, then. I want at least one cute one.”

She pulled my mouth towards hers and cleared my thoughts as her tongue dove between my lips.

Flash.

“That’s better,” she breathed, smiling back at me.

I returned the smile. Fuck, she was so pretty. Made me feel like I didn't have anything to worry about.

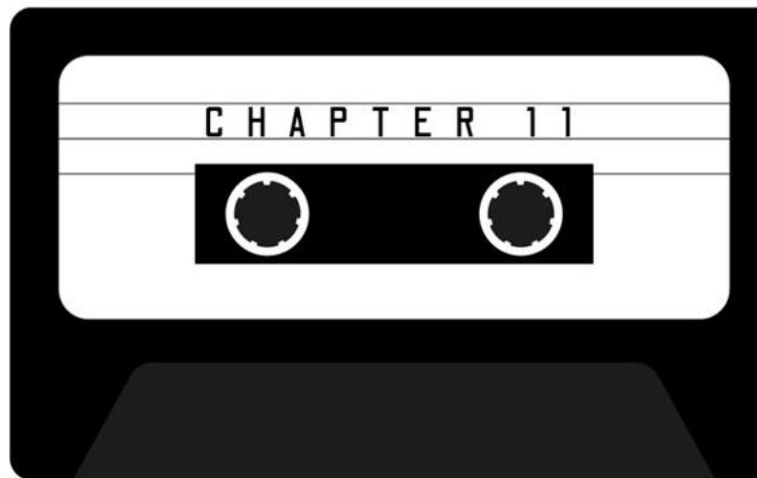
"I love you," I whispered, our lips still close enough we could feel each other's breath.

Hers hitched.

Then, a flash of green pushed through the curtain and tugged at her.

She screamed.

Flash.



BILLIE

AS I GOT DRAGGED FROM THE PHOTOBOOTH, ALL I COULD think about is how annoyed I was that William had just told me he loved me, and the moment was ruined. We almost had that shit on camera.

Being whipped around was enough to drag me out of sulking. I could hear William shouting, but with how much I was being thrown around, it was hard for me to get my bearings. All I could really think about was *green*.

Some sort of monster had hold of me. William and Twolliam kept insinuating there might be other monsters in the mall, but I guess I just didn't expect to find any. Not really. I mean, it was hard enough coming to terms with the whole doppelgänger thing.

"Smell so good," came a low, deep voice.

And then I felt something hot between my legs. I was no longer being whipped around.

Huge, piercing red eyes stared back at me from across a snarled nose and mouth. A long, thick tongue pushed out between those terrifying lips. This thing's head was huge, like three times the size of a normal person. I squeezed my legs together, realizing where its tongue was going.

The monster frowned.

“C’mon, Billie, you liked it so much earlier,” it said.

“What the fuck—were you watching us?” I squealed.

The monster burrowed into my legs, attempting to spread them open again.

“I can fill you so much better now,” it said with a gleeful little laugh.

One that kind of reminded me of Twolliam.

I looked away, desperate for help, and saw William below us.

Kind of far below us.

Like we were on the second story, except that we weren't. The monster was holding me up with a single hand across my back, laying me out like a pastry, ready to consume me. He pressed one thick, huge finger down between my breasts, down my stomach. It sent shivers across every part of me. And deceitful waves of heat to my core. I did not know I got off on being terrified.

“Stop!” William yelled up at the monster. “You’re going to scare her!”

He kicked at the monster and jumped back, holding his foot.

“Fuck, I should have stopped him from snacking,” William muttered to himself, nursing his foot.

The monster huffed and looked down at William.

“Aren’t you hungry, too?” the monster grumbled.

With one easy scratch of its claw, my leggings ripped apart, leaving me exposed. Cool air rushed across my pussy as I squirmed. The monster groaned and smiled. It moved its hand away from me and reached down for William, grabbing him before he could outrun the creature’s huge limbs.

“Ahhh fuck, fuck, fuck,” William yelped out, writhing in the monster’s strong grasp for freedom.

“Have a little fun, William,” it cooed. “Look how free I am. That could be you, too.”

“Don’t touch her!” William grunted out.

“She’s not even afraid of me. You should smell her, you’d recognize the scent.”

The monster flipped William over and mashed his face into my lap like we were Barbie dolls. Unlike a Barbie doll, though I had genitals, and I was pretty uncomfortable with this monster just assuming things about me just because he could smell my dirty little secret.

“Let go, *Mo Guai*. What’s the worst that happens? You are free.”

“I’m sorry,” William mumbled against my pelvis. “Fuck, you smell so good.”

That traitorous heat between my legs spread them apart. This whole situation was so fucked up, but I mean, I’d already been eaten out tonight by William’s doppelgänger while he dry-humped me from behind. How much extra fucked up was it to

get turned on by a monster shoving my maybe-boyfriend's face in my crotch?

"I can't," William whimpered, dragging his hands across my hips, sending sparks of need through me.

He kissed everywhere but my cunt. I ached for him. My legs spread wider. Both he and the monster groaned in unison.

"Please, William," I begged.

The monster's claw curled around my neck, pressing into it.

"You can't deny her. We never could."

The realization that this monster might be Twolliam settled in, making me feel a whole lot better about the insanity of this situation. His sharp claw grazed across my chest, leaving in its wake a ripple of biting pleasure.

"Shit. Fuck. Shit," William spat out, his hand moving between my legs.

Until finally, he grazed across my clit.

"Yes!" I gasped, bucking my hips as much as I could while held within Twolliam's grasp. "Please more, yes!"

"Fuck, Billie, when you beg like that," William groaned.

He circled my clit again and again until I wanted to scream.

"No more teasing, please," I begged.

Our eyes connected. In my peripherals, I saw how he bit his lip. Unfair. He slid his fingers down, spreading them all across the slickness he'd created.

"So wet," he groaned. "So fucking wet."

Two fingers pressed inside me. My legs flailed about, trying to hook onto his body and pull him close. I wanted so much more

than his fingers, as good as they felt.

“Not enough,” I moaned.

He let out a shuddered sigh as he slid in another finger. When I whimpered and twisted, trying to drive him deeper, he slid in a fourth.

“Fuck me, please,” I begged. “This is torture.”

“My fingers aren’t even enough for you,” William sighed.

He stared down at his hand, flexing it like he was expecting his hand to break or something. He looked at me and then back at his hand and licked up the wetness. Moaning over his fingers, he stared at me as he sucked up my arousal.

“If you don’t, I will,” Twolliam mused.

The monster drew me away from his original. When I tried to latch tighter, the monster just lifted me over William’s head. He laughed when William grabbed at my hips, trying to keep me close.

“Stop!” William cried out. “I will!”

The monster shook his head. “Still too afraid.”

And then I was straddling the monster. Being so high up meant I never got a good look at the rest of him. Obviously, he had busted out of the clothes we’d found for him earlier when he grew three times the size of a normal William. What also should have been obvious is that the size of his cock would grow as well.

William was the perfect size. Perfectly shaped, and I still wanted to know what he felt like inside me. But this monster? The strange decorations I saw on Twolliam’s cock looked terrifying.

The monster pulled me along his cock, stroking himself with my whole body. I let out stuttered moans as the ridges stroked along my pussy.

“Oh my fucking god,” I whimpered. “Oh, William...”

Before I knew it, William was behind me too, straddling the monstrous cock with me. He wrapped his arms around me, rubbed my clit. Kissed my neck.

“If you can’t beat em,” he grumbled into my neck. “Fuck.”

I chuckled. “One hell of a fuck.”

His fingers teased my clit as he ground his cock against the cleft of my ass. His free hand pulled my mouth back to slide our tongues against one another.

Twolliam rubbed the precum from his cockhead and brought his giant finger in front of me.

“Taste,” he urged.

William held my chin as his doppelgänger stroked his huge fingertip against my lips. The precum got all over my face, tingling like mint.

“Oh,” I groaned, opening my mouth wider and licking at his fingertip with my tongue. “Why does that taste so good?”

“You think humans fuck monsters without incentives?” Twolliam chortled before sliding his still-wet finger down my breasts, down my stomach, and pressing against my clit. William moved his hands to hold my legs wider.

It tingled there too. A rush of pleasure burst through me, just shy of a climax.

“Did you know?” I gasped out, writhing against William behind me.

“He’s me,” William huffed. “I just didn’t realize you’d be such a slut for me even before.”

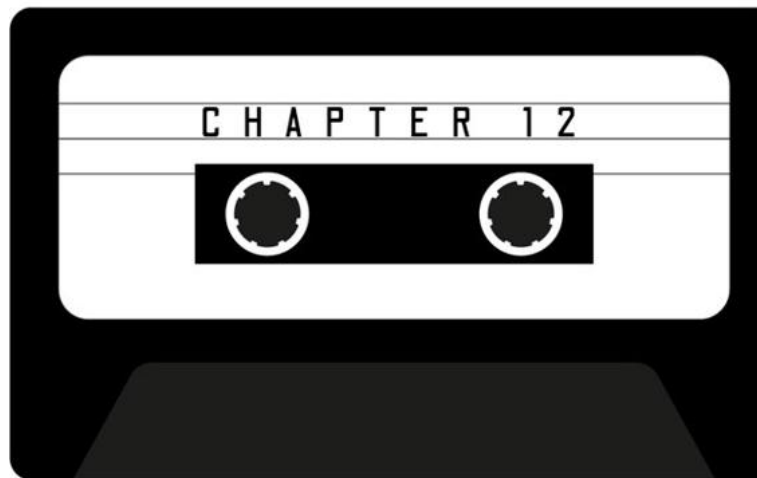
“Oh, Jesus,” I groaned.

He had a fucking mouth when he wanted.

The monster pulled his finger away, readjusting his grip on us smaller beings as he continued to slide us up and down. It was agony. Torture. I just wanted to get fucked—I *ached* to be filled.

“Please fuck me,” I whimpered. “Please.”

William squeezed at my tits before sliding his hand back down between my legs. “She’s so wet. Let me fuck her.”



WILLIAM

MY LEGS WERE SHAKY AS THE *FĒNSHĒN* SET US DOWN. BUT Billie looked like a goddamn treat, bent over and whining for me. She held her hips up in the air, her face sweaty, blushing, and desperate.

“Bratty little Billie, desperate for my monster cock,” I mused.

Not that I was going to let the *fēnshēn* fuck her first. Though I knew our precum had magic in it to aid our girth, I didn’t want her broken. Or unable to even feel me. I was grateful he at least let me go first.

“Fuck me already,” she whimpered.

My cock twitched. It was nice to hear her beg outright after all the years of her trying to manipulate something like this into being. Well, something she probably didn’t expect to be quite so... complicated.

I leaned down, palmed her ass, marveling at the way she pushed back into my grasp. That cunt of hers was absolutely dripping. Surely whatever magic had spawned my *fēnshēn* wouldn't torture me twice. It seemed I could palm her wetness without breeding more *fēnshēns*, so maybe I was confused as to why he spawned in the first place.

Yes, I was just looked for excuses to eat her out again. Her taste was unbelievably addicting. I pressed my mouth to her cunt, sighing at the taste of her. Even if this spawned another *fēnshēn*, it had to be worth it. Plus, I could only think about how we might be more fulfilling with three of us.

“Oh, oh! William—ah—but—ffff—I'm so wet!”

She was. She was so wet. She drenched my face, washed me away in a tidal wave of arousal. I could swim in her cunt, learn to breathe in her.

Hungry. So hungry.

My tongue couldn't reach deep enough. I could not suck on her strongly enough. I needed more. So much more.

She let out a wailing cry as finally I felt like I could fill her enough. Her hips bucked against my mouth as she screamed, “Yes! Yes! Yes!”

After all these years of practicing “no” on her, those were my favorite words. I brought my hand up to scratch along her back and marveled at how small she felt beneath my palm. I licked through her orgasm, sucking and fucking her with my tongue until her cries turned to blubbering ecstasy, eating my fill of her.

When I lifted my head, I jumped at the strange green hand on her back where I thought mine was. Clearly I was so enraptured by eating her out that I didn't even feel the

fēnshēn's hand on mine. I tried to move mine out from underneath, but the *fēnshēn* moved his too.

I pulled my hand back against my chest. The *fēnshēn*'s hand—

No. No, that was my hand.

I was the fēnshēn. Or... No, I was the original. No copy.

Mo Guai.

The monster inside of me got out. This is what I was afraid of all those years.

But I felt powerful. Right. I was fucking the girl of my dreams right in the middle of the mall and I didn't care who saw. If there were security guards here, they knew better than to interrupt this. This was destiny. Primal need. Inevitability.

Looking over, I saw my *fēnshēn* staring back at me, a mirror image.

I spun Billie over until she could look up at me, see me for what I was. I stroked back her sweaty locks, the perm completely gone from her hair. She looked up at me, her face twitching with a swirl of emotions.

"You're so big," she slurred with a happy giggle. "C'mon, big boy, let's see what you've got."

"My tongue wasn't enough for you?"

She moaned, whimpered, tittered. Her hands covered her face, barely any strength left in them.

"Never greedy," she teased.

I wrapped my thumb around her throat as I licked up from her cunt to the lips of her mouth before choking her with my tongue. She moaned with approval.

"Careful what you ask for," I hissed, pulling apart.

My free hand spread her wide, the pad of my thumb rubbing against that tender little cunt. My cock was just as decorated as the *fēnshēn*'s now. I thought it a small tragedy I never got to feel what she was like in my human form, but something told me this would be even better. As I rubbed the head of my cock against her pussy, she giggled as the tingling sensation overtook her. I wasn't sure how much the precum would loosen her up. It seemed an impossible fit, but my father always said our bodies would adjust to each other. I shook off the thought, not wanting thoughts of him to taint this moment.

Impossibly, after everything, I was still a virgin. I couldn't help but laugh.

And then I pressed in. Softness. Heat. Tight. Good. Wow. Bliss. Absolute bliss. I would do anything to be inside her twenty-four-seven.

Billie whimpered, writhing against my grasp on her torso. Her head lolled, as a strangely blank expression took over her face.

"Billie, okay?" I asked, my whole body tensing with worry.

She nodded, but that wasn't enough for me. For all I knew, she was possessed. Gone from this world, though.

"Tell me," I urged, pressing my too-large lips against her shoulders, nuzzling as much as I could against her neck.

"Fuck me, Gizmo. Be greedy."

It didn't matter how many times she told me. I was still so afraid. But I let it go. Pressed harshly within her and she yelped in delight. Her breaths came out in shuddered moans to the rhythm of my pistoning. I pulled her close to me, to move her like a doll on my cock. Looking down between us, I watched in fascination the point of our joining. My eyelids fluttered when I could see the shape of my cock through her

womb. That couldn't be comfortable, but I couldn't stop now. Well, unless she asked.

“Okay?” I asked again.

She yipped yes with each thrust. Her pitch went higher and higher until she was sobbing another orgasm. Her walls spasmed around my cock as her delicate arms came around to grip me tight.

“More,” she slurred, drunk from the nirvana of orgasm.

I chuckled, ready to pull her off even though I hadn't even come yet, but the *fēnshēn* stepped up behind her.

“As you wish,” he murmured, teasing his own cock against her ass.

“You'll break her,” I protested.

“You haven't,” he pointed out, his finger tracing the shape of my cock along her torso. I hissed, feeling the pressure of his finger through her.

As it was, Billie seemed pretty beat. I felt bad that she had to hold herself up at all, so I lay back against the cool marble of the mall and lay her against my stomach, holding her still against my cock. She nuzzled her head into me, pawing her fingers into my stomach. The *fēnshēn* groaned as he drenched her backside with his precum, squeezing at her ass to keep her attention.

“Please,” she begged, too frustrated by his teasing.

And then he slid into her, and I felt the pressure of him through her walls. It was too much. I slid out, letting him slide in fully. When he slid out again, I slid back in. She writhed against my stomach, her voice growing hoarse with every

moan. She drew her head to look up at me, her face a canvas of blotchy red joy as she reached her hand towards mine.

My heart squeezed. I was far too big to hold her hand properly. But I held it anyway. Her entire hand closed up within my giant grasp.

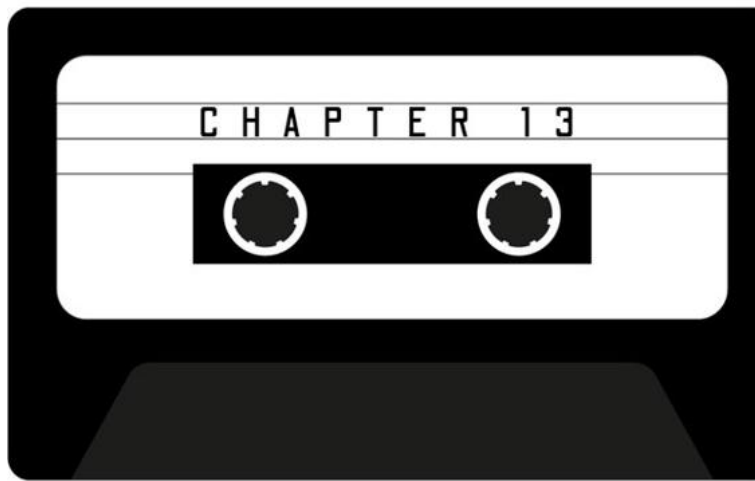
“Love you,” she whimpered, on the verge of another orgasm.

She turned her head back to the *fēnshēn*, too. Reached out for him. He took her hand too, as awkwardly as I did. Her tits bounced as we continued to pound into her.

“Love you,” she repeated to him, her whimpering moans growing higher and higher pitched again.

As finally I felt the surge of orgasm rush through me, the same happened to the *fēnshēn*. I wanted to tell her I loved her, but it was hard enough to keep holding her hand as release filled my every cell. We kept pounding into her until the *fēnshēn* collapsed forward onto her.

I was afraid he was going to crush her until I realized we had both come back down to human size. We wrapped ourselves around her, kissing her and telling her how wonderful she was. The *fēnshēn* started to doze off, but I woke him when I realized we were still in the center of the mall. I groaned, pulling at him until he woke up and we carried her back to the Past Present between the two of us before passing out on the centuries-old furniture there.



BILLIE

Wow. So. MONSTER BOYFRIENDS.

If anyone had told me I'd be going into Halloween finally dating the guy I've been lusting after for half a decade, I might have laughed. But two of him?

William and Twoliam weren't the same person anymore. They both started to experience things differently—and especially because Twoliam was much more spontaneous, he wanted to do so much more than William had ever allowed himself.

The Lius were coming back tomorrow. We'd have to explain to them, or hide Twoliam.

“We can't both be William,” William grumbled. “It'll be too confusing. The easiest thing to do will be to tell everyone you're my twin brother who grew up in China.”

“So, what? I’m not changing my name.”

I laughed. “You’re both being stubborn. You could always split the name down the middle.”

“What do you mean?” they asked in unison.

“Will,” I said, nodding towards William, then towards Twolliam. “And Liam.”

I’d never tell Twolliam that Liam was actually short for Twolliam in my head. I’d grown too attached to calling him that.

They looked at each other, testing it out in their minds.

William reached out his hand first. “Liam.”

Twolliam—Liam—took it as they shook slowly. “Will.”

Then they looked at me.

“Are we splitting you right down the middle, too?” Liam asked, a mischievous quirk to his smile as he stripped me with his eyes.

I bit my lip. “I mean, you can try. With your dicks. If you manage to split me in two, you can each take a part.”

Will made a face, but still laughed. “You have such a weird sense of humor.”

“I like that challenge,” Liam grinned, stepping over to kiss me.

He reached his hand around to squeeze my ass and pull me against his already hardening cock.

I looked out towards the mall, afraid someone might see. Will growled, pushed Liam out of the way.

“I’ll win.”

Just then, I saw some people walking over and pushed them away.

“Boys, boys, there’s enough of me to go around.”

They each reached a hand behind me, stroked along my back and my ass where no one could see. Heat rushed to my face as the new customers entered.

“Welcome to the Past Present!” we all three said in unison.

Liam squeezed my ass, making me jump forward. My hand brushed against my water cup and I squeaked as it flew towards Will. He didn’t seem bothered, though. Didn’t even try to wipe it off this time.

“Are you sure?” I asked, my eyes wide.

He shrugged. “What’s the worst that could happen?”

About the Author

Latrexa Nova's mind is a Rube Goldberg machine of puns and monsterfucking.

A California native, Latrexa has always seen the weird in the world and seeks to share their outright lust for the strange and unusual. Their hobbies include sculpting unnatural horrors, running from their inner demons, and trying to celebrate Halloween all year round. They write for the weirdos, with a lust for darkness and off-beat humor.

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PLAY

SABRINA DAY



“Welcome to Red Light Video: Purveyors of your deepest darkest desires. Yes, even that one.”

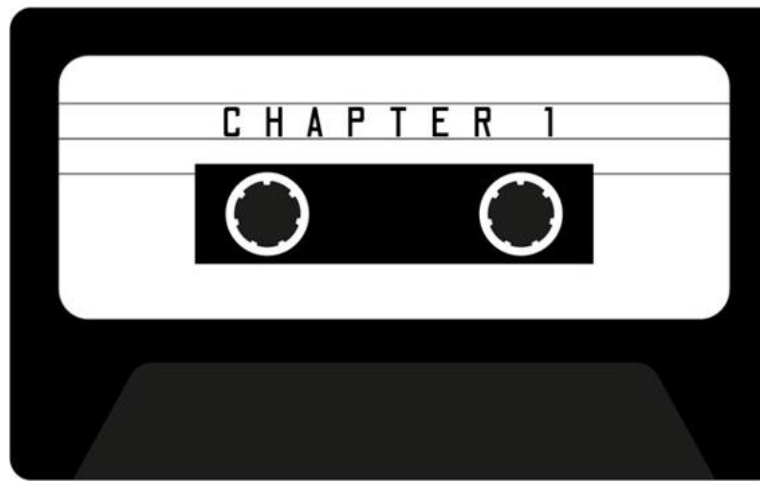
The first rule in the Red Light Employee Handbook? Never go behind the curtain unless you’re willing to sacrifice everything. But when punk video store clerk Seren finds herself suddenly broke, homeless, and staring down a 24-hour pawn shop deadline, her only solution is to break the first rule — and her gorgeous, mysterious boss is only too happy to accept her sacrifice.



Content Warning:

Due to mature themes, parental discretion is advised. This love letter to the VHS tape features: a nomadic art punk, dream

invasion, extensive role-play, “I want to F a priest, a hot one” energy, irreverent and constant 80s movie references, an incubus with big Jareth vibes, a toxic friendship, misuse of a fax machine, HR violations of employee-boss fraternization, a “Please, Mr. Serial Killer, don’t kill me, I want to be in the sequel” primal chase sequence, fang-play, knife-play, copious fluids, a confession booth that’s seen some things, memory-removal with consent, dream pregnancy (no actual pregnancy), and graphic depictions of sex between sentient and consenting adults, sometimes with an audience.



HELL IS A BARREN PAWN SHOP, MANNED BY A ROID-ED OUT, Magnum PI look-alike.

“Just give me my stuff,” I hiss at him. I can see my whole life staring up at me from behind the glass display case, sitting on a piece of filthy, thread-bare velvet.

“No marker, no gear,” the overly-muscled owner of Hock It to Me says again.

“But it’s mine! I’m not the one who pawned it.”

He snorts with a raised brow. “How do I know you’re not just trying to steal it?”

“Do I look like a thief?” I snap the heels of my 10-holes together and straighten up to make my five-foot-nothing self as intimidating as possible, hoping the shit-kicking abilities of my favorite pair of oxblood Docs can get me through another round of this endless argument.

These leather boots have seen me through shittier situations. I fled NYC in these boots. These boots outran cops who took issue with my sprawling tribute to Basquiat tagged on the side of a railcar depot in Oakland, all while Janie did a performance striptease protesting the demonization of sex workers. We got away both times. These are my lucky boots, and I'll be damned if a two-bit pawn broker in this sleepy Southern California beach town's weird-ass mall breaks my lucky streak. Why else would the universe make sure I slipped these puppies on today? It's a sign that I'm not leaving this shop without getting my entire life back from this man-shaped mountain of muscle squeezed into a pair of acid wash Z Cavariccis.

Fueled with the righteousness of the perfect pair of shoes, I reach back in time and summon my best Mother Constance glare of divine outrage — the one she'd unleash during class whenever she'd find me drawing one of my “infernal” cartoons of the nuns engaging in their favorite vices after school hours.

The key to nailing the glare requires the upper lip to do a lot of heavy lifting to sell the “Obey me or I will crush you” undertone. Do it wrong, and you're looking at an immobilized jaw for at least a day, but it's well worth a lip cramp if it means I look like the last person McGruff the Crime Dog would haul in for questioning.

“Don't matter what you look like.” His easy-going, Cali drawl grates on my Brooklyn-born-and-bred ears as he shrugs a boulder of a shoulder. The action drags the obscenely deep vee of his Hawaiian shirt wider, exposing the thick gold chain wrapped around his neck. The chain glints under the fluorescent lights as he settles onto the stool behind the pawn shop's display case counter. Shrewd, deep-set amber eyes

assess me, lingering at the base of my throat. He fixates on the small metal spike I punched through the stiff tab of white paper tucked under my button down's black collar. His gaze drifts lower, tracing the silver chain dangling from my neck.

He jerks his chin at my chest. "Might want to flip that guy right side up if you want to sell the man-of-God look, Sweet Cheeks. Better yet, you should get some padding down there." The owner's smirk is swallowed up by his mustache as he nods towards the crotch of my black pants. I'd hurriedly grabbed the cross I fished out from Red Light Videos' lost and found; now, I'm cursing under my breath—it's inverted.

"Told you there's no such thing as lady priests." The pip-squeak standing beside me chimes in. Jelly's esses come out in a lisp through the mouth slit of his Darth Vader mask.

I palm his tiny head and scoot him back. "Stuff it, Jelly. I'm negotiating here."

"No, she ain't." The jerk contradicts me with a chuckle that makes me want to hock it to him, preferably with the nearest sharp object.

"Yes, *she* is..." I glance down at the yellowing business card taped to the counter, "Drake Krabopolis. She, I mean me," I shake my head, "*I* am one second away from calling the police."

No, I'm not.

"No, you're not." Hazy, gray curlicues of smoke rise from the smoldering stogie clamped between Drake's meaty fingers, the ember a third glowing gem wedged between two serpentine signet rings. Unbothered by my threat, he moves his smoking fist with a grace at odds with his size and rests it on the sign propped up on the counter, tapping the glass front with

calloused knuckles. A snowfall of ash floats down as I read the bold, block print.

NO MARKER, NO REDEMPTION.

Yeah, I read it.

“See, here’s how this goes. You call the police. They send Kelsey from Creepy Court security down to scope out if it’s worth the police’s time. Kelsey gets here, gets the lay of the land, remembers that top shelf Scotch I gave him at Christmas last year, and then he boots your cute little ass out of my shop. You know why?”

“Because I don’t have a marker.”

He grins grossly. “Because you. don’t. have. a. marker.”

I swallow back a frustrated scream. I don’t have a marker because the marker is with my best friend, the bane of my existence, the person who pawned all my belongings in the first place before stealing my car.

Freaking Janie.

A soft burr buzzes against my hip, the vibrations rattling the spikes dotting my belt. I snatch my pager from its clip and hope bubbles up in my chest. Maybe Janie has felt my imminent melt-down, wherever she is, and finally decided to make contact.

To my dismay, instead of a random pay-phone callback number, a series of digits scrolls across the display so familiar, I don’t see the numbers, just what they stand for.

Red Light

The back of my neck tingles as I clip my beeper to my back pocket and ignore the persistent buzz. The pushy bastard can

wait, and even if he can't, what's he going to do about it?
Come and find me?

Actually, he might.

“Fine. Just sell it back to me.” I fish out my wallet, the metal chain connecting it to my belt loop clinking against the counter. It's the one thing I took with me when I came to Creepy Court this morning. My plan was to shoot some eerie, mostly-empty-mall and parking garage footage. I wanted to fan the flames of the stories of a Rat Lady scurrying around the grounds by editing some suggestive footage together on a VHS tape. I had this idea that I would leave the videotape out for a group of teens to find, start my very own urban legend. I'm grateful for my own devotion to sowing chaos, because taking my wallet is all that saved my remaining cash from Janie.

Still, wallet half-out, I pause. Until I get paid next week, this is all I have. Sure, I'm flush with more cash than usual, thanks to Chessa insisting on paying me for helping her out, but if I spend all this on liberating my stuff, there will be nothing left for the butt-load of problems I still have. I'll still need money to make those issues go away, including a ride to hunt down Janie's ass.

I stare across at the glass case, finding six years of bootleg cassette tapes, Polaroids of strangers with their secrets scrawled across the back in red Sharpie marker, and videos from every place we touched since we fled Our Lady of Unsavory Memories. Those tapes, those ones right there, are the infant beginnings of the Creepy Court documentary — a film I just started shooting a month ago. All of it will be lost if I leave it behind to chase Janie.

Not this time. I'll chase her down just like she wants, but I'm doing it on my terms, not hers. I'm not going to play her game anymore. It's too much; I can't let it go.

I shove the sweaty wad of money at the pawn broker. "There. That's five hundred, double what everything back there is worth."

In a flash, the wilted twenties disappear from the counter and into Drake's hairy hand.

With agonizingly slow movements, Drake reaches down into the case. The scrape of his stool against the linoleum briefly drowns out the music tinkling up from Creepy Court's atrium. "Five hundred gets you this," he grunts as he tosses a bundle covered in pins and frayed, colorful fabric onto the counter.

"Are you kidding me? Five hundred dollars gets me my backpack?" My backpack—held together by a riot of band patches—is a sight for sore eyes. My "kind-hearted degenerate" button pinned to one strap winks at me under the fluorescent light. Even as I protest, I snatch it up and hug it to my chest, wrinkling my nose when a whiff of Drake's Drakkar Noir wafts up from it. I quickly unzip it and take stock, confirming he didn't take anything out.

Clutching the fabric close, I ask, "What about my camcorder, tapes, and clothes?"

My punk-ified priest outfit, complete with a huge, severe bun in the back and oversized crimson glasses swallowing my face, is probably the most respectable look I've worn in forever. Baby needs her shredded crop tops back.

The bastard shrugs. "Not for sale."

"Of course it's for sale. This is a pawn shop."

"So?"

“So, it’s not like you have a stampede of people throwing cash at you. Why not take five hundred for it all? If you think there’s a thriving market for beat-to-shit camcorders, I’ve got some tough news for you friend.”

I do an exaggerated scan of the store, taking in aisle after aisle of no shoppers and empty beige shelving, save a knockoff Teddy Ruxpin bear and a demonic, oversized, Raggedy-Ann doll. Despite the treasure trove of high-end gear spilling out of the stockroom, attracting customers is clearly not Drake’s strong suit.

“Everything back there is mine and stays mine until I decide otherwise.” He smiles blandly.

It’s over. There’s nothing I can do. If he’s going to keep it all, he’ll keep it, and I’m stuck with the sticky end of the lollipop, like always. Utterly destroyed, I motion to Jelly, and we turn to leave.

Just as I reach the door, though, Drake calls out to me. “Hey.”

I whip around, probably looking more hopeful than I have the right to.

Drake sighs as I hurry back to the counter, Jelly on my heels. “Lookit, I’ll give you one chance to get your stuff back, free and clear.”

“All of it?” My pager rumbles against my ass again, and I, once again, ignore it. Instead, I snap my gaze to Drake’s, trying to read the impassive slabs, looking for the catch.

“All of it will be yours, Sweet Cheeks, if you can answer one question.”

“I suck at Jeopardy,” I blurt out. “Unless the category is how to jimmy the lock to a Ford Pinto in under two minutes, I’m useless.”

“Noted,” he says, his mouth twisting up. “I promise this is a question only *you* will know the answer to... because it’s about something you own.”

“Oh, okay.” I frown, unsure where he could be going with this.

“Tell me, how did you get this?” Much to my astonishment, Drake whips out a trick too fast to track, and bands of delicate silver are suddenly twisting around his arm to form a familiar cuff, complete with my crimson opal soldered to its center. It’s the most beautiful stone I’ve ever seen—the deepest shade of merlot—and it’s around the wrist of a stranger when it should be around mine.

I’m momentarily shocked into silence by the whole situation. Jelly gasps beside me, clearly impressed by the magic trick, but Drake the Magician ignores the praise and grunts in annoyance.

“Tell me where you got it, and I’ll give you the whole lot without a marker. I promise you, girlie, giving you something from my horde for free? That’s an offer I’ve only made to one other person in all my years running this shop. So, answer honest and answer true, because this is your only shot.”

I stare at my opal in chagrin. A bone-deep itch starts up around my wrist, calling to the stone that was pressed against my skin until late last night. I was really hoping this bastard hadn’t rummaged through my backpack, but obviously, that was too much to expect.

Thinking carefully, I scratch the inside of my wrist through my sleeve. The stiff fabric doesn’t dull the itch or the pain from where I had already rubbed that same spot raw last night.

I hadn’t taken that cuff off in months — *couldn’t* take it off, honestly — until right before I fell asleep last night. Yesterday,

the urge to scratch the crap out of the skin beneath was off the charts, and I had to spring the release or go mad. Of course, I had to leave the one piece of jewelry I love behind this morning and let it get packaged off to Drake's emporium of whack-assery.

"Well, what's the answer, girlie? How'd a baby punk like you get a rare piece like this?"

Any happiness I was feeling about this shot at freeing my life from a cologne-scented prison evaporates into thin air.

"She got it cause she's a princess like L-L-Leia," Jelly announces.

"That so, princess?" He raises a brow.

"It's t-t-t-true," Jelly says, nodding emphatically. "She's a princess, and that's her..." he pauses for a moment, searching for the words before he says triumphantly, "her token of affection. From a prince."

"A prince, huh?"

"No, I got it at a...at a party," I answer quickly over the whoosh of blood in my ears. My skin goes hot then cold at the mention of that night.

"Mm-hmm, very convincing. Go on. Tell me more about this party. Who saw their princess there and had to make sure she left with a token of their affection?"

The thing is, I can't tell him. I can't because I don't know who. If it was a prince like Jelly said, then the charming lad must have slipped me a quaalude—or four—because that night is a blur streaked in neon. Trying to jostle the memory free only brings forth a cocktail of adrenaline and the feeling of a high so pure and intense, it beats the euphoria I get after finally nailing a tricky film edit.

Drake doesn't care about what I felt that night. He wants facts.

"There were people there," I start vaguely, but the harder I strain to bring those people's faces into focus, the more a familiar ache builds behind my forehead. I've done this dance a million times, always with the same result: a splitting migraine and the thick taste of defeat.

The facts are these: Janie and I rolled up to an abandoned warehouse on the edge of this sleepy town, our party pitstop for the night. One of the club kids back in L.A., who loosely follows the same party circuit we do, said the next best DIY show was going to be there. He raved it would be a total body experience, an insane collision of performance art, drag, and hardcore bands breaking shit and releasing our collective rage into the night sky. It was a feast I couldn't wait to tape, and something Janie couldn't wait to debauch herself in. So, we did what we do: we set fire to our existence in L.A. We loaded up my hearse, Elvira, with our meager haul of permanent belongings and took off down the coast, following a shitty set of directions until — mostly by chance — we stumbled on the warehouse, just as the sun was setting.

That's it. That's the last memory I have until the next day, when I woke up in Elvira's driver's seat, an overexposed Polaroid crumpled in my palm with an address written on the back and the cuff cinched around my wrist. I was still struggling to understand what was going on when Janie banged on my window, startling me so much, I cracked my head against the steering wheel.

Janie ignored this, telling me in no uncertain terms that I needed to get my hungover ass up because her new boy toy — as of last night — Eddie the drummer was going to show us where to get banging chilaquiles for breakfast.

Janie was no help when I cornered her later that day and asked what happened. My head was still fuzzy from the drinks and scent of cinnamon and lavender seeping from my pores. She said we got separated early on, that she caught sight of me doing my thing, asking strangers questions and snapping their picture while they answered. Then, she “bumped” into Eddie after his set was over, and her memory became almost as unreliable as mine.

“You know how horny drummers make me, Seren! They can multitask like a mother and can keep a beat doing *anything*.” So that was it for my safety buddy. She lost track of me after she went off to test Eddie’s finger dexterity in his band’s van.

Drake’s dark brows are raised in expectation, still waiting for me to answer, and I know none of this is going to satisfy him.

“I just... went to a party, and someone gave it to me.”

Drake frowns. “Right. ‘Fraid that’s not going to cut it. Get me the marker for lot 2306 and you can have this,” he taps my cuff to the counter, “and the rest back.”

“Come on, man, there has to be a price, please. What are you going to do with a bunch of pictures and VHS tapes?”

“For starters, Imma look to see if you took any other topless photos with poems by Rilke written across your tits.” Drake smirks.

My stomach twists. “You shouldn’t go through people’s stuff.”

“Course I did. ‘Cause it was mine at the time. Weird little menagerie of items you got going there, but that pic was a nice surprise. You’ve got a banging rack, baby.”

At that moment, Jelly’s new stepsister and his current babysitter, Molly, appears behind us, returning from whatever errand she’s been on. Her name is Molly to everyone else, but

she's PB — as in Peanut Butter to Jelly's jelly — to me. Hearing Drake's description of my attributes, PB gasps, whispering my name.

I ignore her because, first of all, I have bigger problems, and, second of all, Drake may be a douche, but he's not wrong. I *do* have a banging rack, and the least Drake can do right now is give it the respect it deserves.

"I don't care what you say. You have to give me a price. Otherwise, I'm going to post flyers all over this town about your shady business practices. Give me a chance, a real chance, to get my stuff back." That's a thing suburban moms would threaten, right? I slam my fist on the counter to sell it. If there's one thing I've learned from hanging out with Janie, it's that when in doubt, cause a ruckus.

"Is that so? Well, I wouldn't want my good name dragged through the mud," Drake says dryly. "You're pushing it, Sweet Cheeks, but since I've got a soft spot for nice tits and early nineteenth-century expressive poets, I'll give you a price tag." He studies me with an enigmatic expression. "Let's say ten grand."

"You've got to be shitting me?"

"You kiss the big guy upstairs with that mouth? Yeah, you heard me. Marker or ten grand by this time tomorrow. I'm breaking all my rules for you, sweetheart, and I have no problem with yanking this offer back, so think long and hard before you pull the trigger on whatever you're about to say." Rocking back on his seat, Drake takes a pull from his eternally smoldering stogie and puffs out a perfect ring, as if he wants a frame to capture the rage stroke paralyzing my face.

"What's the matter? Ten grand is nothing. Ditch whatever this is." The cigar draws a line of smoke down my unholy priest

outfit. “A pretty girl like you just needs to toss on a mini skirt and bat her lashes at any of the marks wandering around out there to get the moola in no time. Now, get out of my shop before I make it twenty.”

“But that’s not fair!” I yelp. Shame, hot and heavy, blankets me head to toe. The urge to strangle the childish retort and shove it deep back inside is instantaneous.

The discordant screech of Hock It to Me’s fax machine cuts in, saving the day from whatever shit I was about to spew that would most assuredly get me kicked out. Drake shoots the machine a surprised look, like he’s just now noticing its existence, before he snatches up the paper being spit out. He gives the message a cursory read, and his face splits into a grin so wide, even his ridiculous mustache can’t cover it. Deep lines of amusement crinkle around amber eyes as he slides the fax across to me.

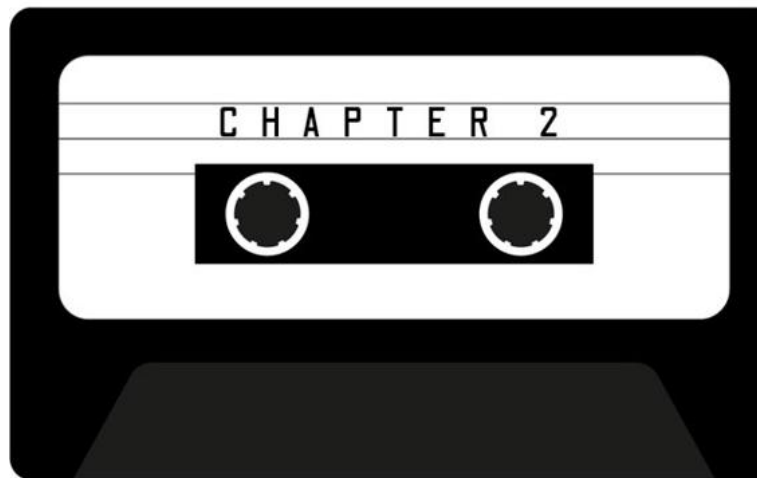
“Life ain’t fair, kid. Now, get. You’re late for work.”

Red Light Video’s trademark logo and star stand out from the stark white of the sheet on the counter. Below the header, in slanted, looping script, two short sentences send a sweet-sick twinge to my lower belly:

“My star isn’t where she’s supposed to be. Send her back. Immediately.”

I jerk my head up and scan the ceiling. There, in the corner, I find what I’m looking for: the spy that took over when my pager failed to bring me to heel. Through the dusty lace of cobwebs, Hock It to Me’s security cam blinks a red light down from the darkness, sending the same message my beeper tried to.

Time to go to work.



A GROUP OF NUNS SCATTER LIKE A FLOCK OF JUDGMENTAL pigeons, clucking their tongues as I storm past them, Molly and Jack hurrying along in my wake.

“And a good-day to you too, Sisters.” I toss a mocking nod to the bobbing black habits as I yank my collar open and release my hair from its cage. With a sniff, the scandalized lead nun gathers her group together and pointedly turns back to joining the winding line of corndog groupies at That Good Char’s kiosk.

“It’s weird that the Sisters come here so often for lunch.” Molly examines the nuns with curiosity. “It must take them an hour to get to Creepy Court one the bus. The Lagerfeld Mall has a bigger food court, and it’s just a few blocks away from their nunnery.”

Bad mood temporarily forgotten, I grin at her. “Trying to drum up business for your new family?”

I went too far, and I know it as I watch PB's dusky cheeks turn rosy with anger. "You know that's not how it works. It's their family's money, not mine. Mom and I are just the low-class interlopers."

PB is PB to me and Jelly, but she's Molly Lagerfeld to everyone else. She used to be Molly Bhattacharya, but her mom decided she was done being the wife of a convenience store owner and ditched her dad last year. She traded slushies for ski-slopes and married the patriarch of the Lagerfeld family. Lagerfeld owns the "good" mall and pretty much anything else worth owning in Dorian Bay, the très chic enclave for Southern Cali's old money.

"That's not true, Molly. You're not a 'loper. You're the best sister I've ever had." Jelly, earning his nickname, glues himself to his stepsister's side with earnestness you only get from a seven-year-old as I make a sharp detour to the mall's payphones on the other side of the atrium.

"I'm your only sister, silly."

"Yeah, but I love you more than Ruthie, too. He never takes me to the video store and lets me hang out with Seren." Darth Vader's mask can't hide the pout adding a tremble to Jack's defense.

"Stop it. It's not a competition, and don't let him hear you say that."

I let their chatter fade to the background. I prop up against one of the payphones and rummage through the front pocket of my bag.

"Need my phone card, Seren? Mr. Lagerfeld-"

"Just call him Dad!"

“*Mr. Lagerfeld* just got me a new one, so there’s tons of time left on it.”

“Naw, that’s okay, PB. I got my own calling card right here.” Triumphant, I produce a paperclip from the grody bottom of my backpack. Why pay the man when you can get your phone breaker on instead?

I bend the tip of the paperclip against the lip of the payphone booth, right under the “Rat Lady Iz Real” graffiti, working it until it’s just one smooth, metallic line. I take the straightened bit of metal and poke one end into the receiver and the other end in the keyhole where the coins are collected, and viola, free phone call. Score one for Seren.

I dial the number to what *was* our apartment until this morning, when I found myself locked out. From what I could see from the window, Janie had packed everything up except for our answering machine. Listening to the phone ring, I twist the phone cord and hope that she at least left a message to explain this little bomb she set off.

“We aren’t home right now because we’re off being imperceivable amorphous concepts of grace and beauty.” My husky voice greets me. “And objects of mass destruction!” Janie’s soprano screeches from the background before descending into peals of laughter. “Please leave a message, and we’ll make sure to haunt your dreams until you go mad as soon as we can.”

Tears prick behind my eyelids. Stupid Janie. If it was time to blow out of this town, she could’ve just said so. Through blurred vision, I tap in the code to listen to any stored messages.

**click* Hey, uh, Serena, I mean Seren. It’s Glen. Gotta say, I’m disappointed. I rented to you girls even though you looked*

flighty as hell. To wake up to a note scribble on the back of a diner napkin that you were breaking your lease and not paying this month's rent is a shit way to start my day. It was a month-to-month lease! If you girls wanted out, we could've worked something out. Now, I hate to take action against you, since it's just you on the lease and not your roommate—and I get the impression this is more her doing than yours—but unless I get this month's rent by Monday and a visit from you apologizing for all this mess, I ... Well, I'm going to have to do things I don't want to do. You take care now.

Dammit, I really am going to kill her. I squeeze the phone until the plastic creaks and whines in protest. Why did I think Janie would limit her exit to just disrupting my life? No, she made sure to go full scorched earth so I would have to follow her.

“What’s the matter? Finally realized the gutter punk lifestyle isn’t all it’s cracked up to be?” Rutherford “Ford” Lagerfeld the Third’s chiseled jaw widens into a smirk as he leans on the other side of my phone booth. His dark hair smoothed back, his cool arctic gaze scans the defeated slump of my shoulders, nostrils flaring, as if he can scent that I’m wounded.

Not one to get kicked without kicking back, I fire back, “What’s it like wanting to bang your stepsister so bad, NASA can see your hard-on from space?” Ford’s neck practically snaps as he tries to both check his fly and guiltily whip around to see if Molly heard me. Luckily for him, she’s distracted with wringing out Jake’s cape, which he somehow dunked in the atrium’s fountain.

Because I stay ready, I grab my Polaroid camera and snap a pic of Ford sporting a rare look of disheveled, horny self-loathing.

People have to be poked before they drop their masks and show you their truths, but capturing that moment is worth pushing them to the edge.

Maybe now, he'll stop being a tool to Molly and just admit he has it bad for her, even though, in his eyes, she's just one step up from my gutter punk status.

"Jacob, bring Mole girl and meet me at the south parking garage entrance. Lagerfelds have better things to do than slum it with the Creeps." Ford sneers the last bit at me, shoving his lacrosse-fit body away from the phone booth with enough force to send the chained Yellow Book Pages careening out of its cubby and swinging wildly in the air. With one last look of disgust, he pops his collar and spins away in a smooth move they probably teach all the rich dicks in private school.

"But Ruthie, Seren was going to make me a character sheet on her break. She said I could play D&D with the AV kids at Red Light tonight!" Jake whines over Molly's frantic shushing as she drags him behind Ford. She mouths an apologetic "sorry and good luck" over her shoulder at me.

click click

Thanks to Ford's interruption, I forgot the answering machine was still playing all our stored messages.

This is your last message.

A velvet-edged timbre flows out of the receiver. The command underlying the caller's soft vocal fry strokes a path from the shell of my ear down to an invisible hand around my throat.

Starlight, star bright, you are missing work tonight.

I wish I may, I wish I might, have the pleasure of punishing you tonight.

Seren, Seren.

I'm a generous benefactor, but standards must be maintained.

Be where I can see you soon, or a penance must be paid.

Hurry back to me, Star girl.

End of messages

The nice robotic lady severs my connection, leaving me alone with the persistent bleat of the dial tone.

Right. That just happened.

I need to scare up ten grand, get written up by my stalker boss with a fetish for hacking anything electronic to keep tabs on me, and sling some tapes.

Gotta love Friday nights.



CREEPY COURT IS THE FUN, KITSCHY KIND OF CREEPY, LIKE A roadside tarot card reader draped in dollar store scarves with a pack-a-day cough, who you're sure is pickpocketing you, but damn if their fortunes aren't dead-on creepy.

In a way, Ford isn't wrong. People go to Lagerfeld Mall to shop and be seen; they come to Creepy Court's beautiful, slightly gothic walkways to slum it and satisfy urges they can't feed anywhere else. Tucked away on the east end of the mall, Red Light Video is a perfect fit for this place. It's why working here is the most enjoyable legit job I've ever had. Where else would I be given carte blanche to run the store like the anarchist film punk I am?

I hustle past two wide-eyed teens taking in the waterfall of gauze streaming down the front window. It's lit with spotlights of pink and blue, a soft frame to the glam rock horror scene of crushed disco balls and a ripped and bloody backdrop. Their attention is stuck on what looks like a nearly-nude, waifish mannequin dressed up as a ballet dancer frozen on pointed toes, her pink mouth a perfect O of terror as a masked dance instructor looms behind her, gloved hands wrapped around her throat. The tagline of the movie of the month is spray-painted above the couple's head: *"The Only Things More Terrifying Than the Last 12 Minutes of This Film...are the First 80."*

Amid all the stress of today, a small curl of satisfaction blooms as a pair of permed high-schoolers decide my Suspira display is "bitchin". So, it's with a light step that I finally make it into work.

"You're late." The dry, vaguely Germanic-accented admonishment sounds out as soon as my Docs touch down on Red Light's galaxy print carpet.

"Whoa, Ronnie, careful with the emoting. Your face might crack." I try and fail to stifle my laughter when the only other employee at Red Light raises a perfectly-manicured eyebrow in confusion and not one muscle else.

One of the AV kids swears that Veronica, with her stone-cold looks and accent, must be the love child of an Eastern European model and an African oil tycoon undercover as an international assassin. She rocks a complexion so dark and perfect, it looks like she was carved out from the night sky, coupled with a bone structure and figure Annie Lennox and Grace Jones would die for. Ronnie's remote androgynous sex appeal has men and women tripping over themselves for a hint of attention.

I swear, she's why half of them come in.

"Look, you're lucky I'm here before the Friday night parade of perverts comes through." I skirt past the hollowed-out TV I converted into a fishbowl and scoop up Nyx from his perch above the goldfish as I slip behind the rental counter.

"Ronnie, would it kill you to keep Nyx from eating the goldfish?"

"It would not kill me, no."

I roll my eyes. "So, why is our devil kitty threatening death from above to our babies?"

Ronnie glides over to the front of the rental desk, looking like she just got in from Milan in her slim-fitting suit, manicured onyx nails clicking on the counter as she considers the purring bundle cradled to my chest. "It wouldn't kill me to keep the young master away from the fish, but it is also not within the scope of my responsibilities to prevent it." She makes a gesture with her fingers, as if to say her hands are tied. "It *is* within your position's responsibilities to not refer to our patrons as perverts."

"Yeah, yeah. I know, but the point stands: I still beat our patrons here. Besides, Friday nights are all VIPs who only have eyes for whatever you and the bossman do behind the curtain with your stable of pretty young things." I waggle my brows at her and set Nyx down. The cat grumbles his displeasure and leaps off the counter, disappearing behind the stacks.

That's the difference between Ronnie and me. Front of the house is my domain, in all its film nerdery glory. Her role is to serve as the stern-but-sexy guide to the backroom. Between the two of us and whatever our invisible boss does, there's no

reason to go to a chain rental place when you could come to ours. Here at Red Light, the tapes are shelved according to actor or director or mood. The shelf of movies to watch when you need an ugly cry so you can feel something again? It's behind the beanbags. Want all of John Carpenter's movies sorted from best (The Thing) to worst (Starman)? Under the mounted TV that only plays David Bowie movies. Taking a break from movies but need to disassociate from reality? How about you take a load off in our Gary Gygax Grotto with the AV kids; they'll pair you up with just the right tabletop game.

"Movies my invisible boss thinks are good but are not and we should shun him for his bad taste", "Movies where Ronnie has made out with someone on the cast -You'll never guess who!", "Movies my invisible boss thinks are bad but are Perfect and this is proof that he has no soul." All of these shelves exist and bring me joy.

Yes, most members are here for the other half of the store, but since I joined the team six months ago and implemented this stocking system, I've found my ragtag collection of geeks, punks, and oddballs, along with a small group of stray normies. Janie thinks I'm a freak for what I've built here, and maybe she's right, but I kind of love the thought that this quirky corner of the world will persist once I leave.

I check the register and make sure I have enough singles and fives to break all the twenties that will come through tonight. Satisfied with what I find, I snap the cash drawer closed and turn to check the returns bin to see which dipshits didn't rewind, but before I can start checking cases, a glaring problem presents itself.

"Stop putting Die Hard as Movie of the Month, Ronnie! We voted on horror as the theme." I snatch Bruce's bloody mug

down from its perch and place Suspira back where it belongs.

“Yes, we voted and nominated a horror movie, but our employer and I thought that would mean something with oversexed-camp counselors and phallic knife shots. Not,” Ronnie puckers her lips in a wan expression of distaste, “stressed-out, dancing Italian girls.”

“Slashers are fine, but Argento’s subtext-”

Bored with me already, Ronnie drifts away and returns to her post in front of the crimson velvet curtain hiding the entrance to the back room. Customers have started to trickle in, along with the impossibly beautiful VIP room employees who sashay past Ronnie, leaving a cloud of Clavin Klein’s Obsession in their wake.

The customers circle the shop, gawk at the back-room staff, and dawdle like they don’t want to be caught making a beeline for Ronnie to ask for the eight-page application to become a VIP member and gain access to whatever raunchy goodness happens back there.

I ignore the looky-loos and do a quick loop around the store to make sure everything is in order, acutely aware of the five different security cameras slowly tracking my progress.

When I was first hired, the cameras pissed me off. After my first day, I flipped them off and told Ronnie I quit, that I wouldn’t work for a boss who was going to monitor the black girl as if I was going to make off with the cash register.

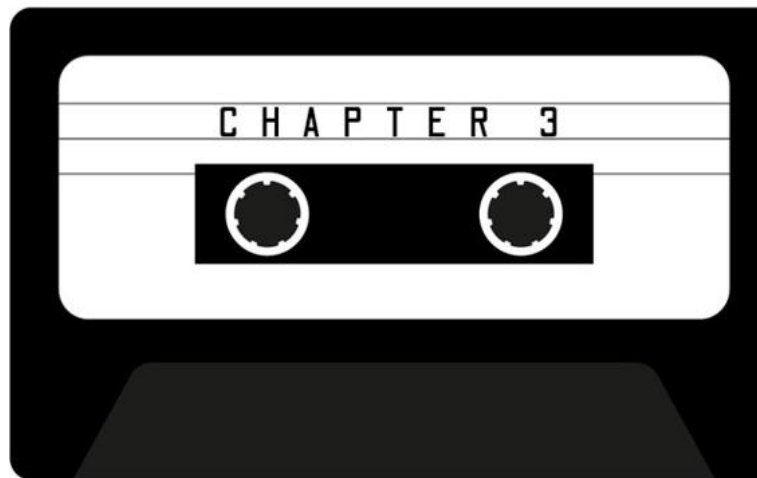
Ronnie smiled in response, and the sight of her stunning cheeks scrunched in laughter stunned me enough to stop me in my tracks. “He isn’t watching you because he thinks you’ll steal our money. He’s watching you because he regrets hiring

you for up here and not back there. His penance is seeing what he's missing.”

At the time, I'd calmed down enough to remember I needed this job to fix up Elvira, who promptly shit the bed the day after Janie and I attended the warehouse party. I thought Ronnie was full of shit, but I decided not to care.

But now...

Now, after months of the quiet whirr of cameras following my every move, I'm starting to wonder—maybe having a stalker for a boss could solve all my problems. If only I can work up the courage to ask.



FAX

To: Bossman

From: The Employee of the Month

You know, I thought your fetish for faxing was just a quirky, “while we’re working” thing, not a “you control an intricate web of security cameras around the mall and will fax unsuspecting asshole pawn shop owners” thing.

FAX

To: Employee Number Two

From: The entity who controls your paycheck

The beauty of faxing is that I can reach you whenever I need to. That’s the whole point.

Creepy Court’s administration team appreciates my efforts to man their security cams, and if I should happen to spy a tardy employee exchanging explicit photos with a business rival during my efforts, then I think I’m well within my rights to use

any means of communication to remind said employee that her shift has started, and she is needed where she belongs.

Unrelated, do I need to add a section to the HR handbook about outside of work conduct?

FAX

To: Sauron, the All-Seeing Eye of Capitalism

From: Does this mean Ronnie is Employee Number One because no

I am a model employee who has never done anything wrong in her entire life.

Currently, the employee handbook is a single page, and the only rule listed is “Front of house staff must adhere to the same rules as Red Light Video’s patrons. They will never go behind the back-room curtain unless they are willing to sacrifice everything.”

Cryptic, passive aggressive, and vaguely threatening. You conveyed so much with so little. It’d be a shame to add more and throw off the perfection of this one.

Now, speaking of you being the entity who controls my paycheck, I’m willing to overlook the managerial overreach of obtaining my real phone number (and pager number!) when I definitely gave you a fake ones if we can talk about renegotiating my salary.

FAX

To: The person who’ll be tasked with telling Veronica she’s now Employee of the Month

From: Your Video Overlord and Master

I cannot wait to see where this is headed.

FAX

To: My Master

From: Your humble but plucky servant

Given the uptick in walk-ins and memberships due to my window dressing and marketing efforts (did you even look at the Giallo Spread in the front window? The local PTA committee wrote a letter against it, and we got twenty new VIP members the day I put it up), I think I'm overdue for a raise, but I'll settle for a simple advance on my next ten paychecks, effective tonight. Sound good?

FAX

To: Call me that again, but slower and to my face

From: You may be my servant, but you are anything but humble

No.



No. THAT'S IT? *No?* I UNBUTTON THE REST OF MY SHIRT, baring an opaque, black lace bustier underneath and fanning away the flush that started creeping up my chest when I read the first line of his last fax. It had been a joke—*just* a joke—calling him master. His reaction was unexpected, and honestly, so was mine.

How could he end it, just like that? We were having fun abusing the store fax system, as usual, unexpectedly dipping our toe in flirty banter, and then just *no?* I fall back into my

childhood self-soothing habit of running my fingers through my hair, teasing the wiry strands out until my head is hidden from that asshole's camera by a dark cloud of hair.

The store phone clatters to life. Annoyed, I answer it and plop back in the desk chair, throwing my feet up on the counter. "Hi, you've reached Red Light Video, Where You're the Star."

"Hey."

"Janie!" I snap upright. "Bitch, what the hell? Where are you?" I scan the store for Ronnie and find her huddled with a golden surfer dude and his reedy friend, walking them through the thick VIP application. Clutching the phone receiver, I duck under the counter and sit crossed-legged in musty semi-darkness. For all I know, our boss can read lips through those cameras, and I don't need anyone to hear this conversation.

"What the hell do you mean, what the hell? You had to know this was coming. I told you it was time." The sound of honky tonk and rough male laughter muffle her response.

"No, you didn't."

"Yes, I did, over and over again. You just didn't hear me because you lost sight of the mission, playing with all your new little friends."

"Janie, I wasn't playing. I was working. Remember that massive car bill?"

"The one you finally paid off last month? Sure, I remember it, because that's when I brought up ditching this place and heading somewhere new. You shot me down and said you wanted a little more cash before we headed out, but guess what? Week after week, it was always some new reason why we couldn't leave. Some made up urban legend you wanted to interview people about, or batty old lady you wanted to tape

talking about which president she banged in 1920.” Janie is crescendo-ing into another register as she lists all my crimes. “You brought home a butter dish from Southstrom’s and *paid full price for it* because you thought it was cute! What was next, investing in a home security system? We are not home security people!”

I frown. I’m proud of that butter dish. I named her Mrs. Butter-Tits because the sloping top looks like a perky set of boobs. If that’s really what set this shitshow of a day in motion, I don’t know what to say. The staticky silence grows between us.

“You weren’t going to leave unless I blew up our lives here, Seren.” Back to soft and coaxing, Janie wills me to see it her way. “You were being lured into the capitalism of it all, working in that damn mall. Life isn’t about how many toasters and butter dishes you can buy. It’s about art-”

“And art is trash,” I finish dully. *Life is art and art is trash* was the motto we coined when we were two seventeen-year-old, Catholic school dropout runaways. It was supposed to remind ourselves that our mission in life was to fuck up the status quo wherever we landed, but always be ready walk away in an instant before any of those places could turn us into the suburban walking dead.

“You’ve pulled me out when I’ve started getting too comfortable, and I owe it to you to do the same. When you figure out how to get out of there, you can meet up with me in Vegas. I’ll be crashing with Dennis for the next few weeks. I got a line on a rager coming through out in the desert next month. A nomadic commune of hippies and freaks are throwing it. It’ll be just what we need to forget that stupid beach town.” Janie sounds tired but resolute. “I’m not sorry.

You got in too deep, Seren. You aren't built for planting roots. Sooner or later, all your new friends are going to decide you're too loud, too weird, too angry, too into sex, and everything you stuck around for will fall apart."

"Right." Every sentence of hers is a splash of cold reality. She's right. I *am* in deep. I have wings; I don't plant roots.

As my invisible boss just proved, it's all fun and games until I ask for a little too much, and then I get shut down. I may have poured more of myself into this store than I have anywhere else, but it doesn't count for anything. It's all trash.

"So, you'll come to Vegas, yeah?" Little kid yearning breaks through Janie's tough exterior. She's always been the more insecure one, convinced I was going to ditch her once someone better came along. That's what started all of this; I can see it now. She thought Creepy Court was seducing me away from her. This was her latest test to see if I would finally make good on her prediction.

"Yeah, Vegas." Janie is Janie. I know her; she's my constant. Where she goes, I go.

But not quite yet.

"Tell Dennis I'll be out there in a week or two. You hocked things that you know I love and would've taken with me, and I need to figure out how to get them back before I join you."

Janie mumbles something about how she needed the money for a bus ticket to get to Nevada.

"Whatever. It's done. Try not to bang all the drummers before I get there."

"No promises, bitch. Get your ass out here before I burn this city down." Janie laughs and then hangs up.

I crawl out from under the counter and flop back into my chair. My stomach is churning with a gross mix of guilt, anger, and melancholy. Until I got Janie on the phone, a tiny part of me was hoping I could talk her into coming back. I pull out my sketchpad from my backpack. As I press the pencil to paper, I let my worries run away as I start to storyboard a movie I will probably never make. Even I know it's pretty pornographic, but that's the point. Too much, too intense, too sexy.

I channel my mess of conflicting thoughts into an orgy of aristocratic vampires feeding on the plump cunts and cocks of writhing, rosy-cheeked servants as the Queen of the Damned watches with approval high up on her throne.

“Why the face?”

I loll my head up to find Ronnie inches away, staring down at me and my sketchpad.

“Personal space, Ronnie! We've gone over this.” I wheel back a bit and snap my sketchpad closed.

Ronnie holds up her hands silently, but she doesn't apologize, and she doesn't back away. She just stands there, watching me, her hands at her sides and her face calm and even, like she knows that I'm about to tell her everything. And here's the kicker: I want to tell her.

I swallow hard before I open my mouth. “My face is because the real world sucks. I need cash, a lot of it, to...fix some problems before tomorrow, when I-” I frown and look behind Ronnie to the blinking red light tucked into the corner above her. The Big Boss is watching, which means it's definitely not the time to share that I plan on leaving as soon as I get my tapes and cuff back. “Before I lose some belongings that mean a lot to me.”

“Bullshit,” Ronnie says without heat, except it sounds more like “Boo-Sheet.”

“What’s bullshit? Money is a hard-to-come-by thing for most of us working stiffs.”

“It is bullshit that you can’t think of a way to acquire the money. You dress like this.” Ronnie reaches over, and one slender nail scrapes gently against the swell of my breast to pull the edge of my lace bustier away. She holds it there for a single breath before letting it snap back. “You look like this. Where I am from, people would pay to be in your presence.”

“Got a plane ticket there?” I cock an eyebrow at her.

Ronnie cocks her perfect head to the side. “In a way, yes. The VIP experience has been a success, much more so than our employer anticipated. We’ll need to bring on more backroom staff.” A sly smile ticks up the corner of her lips. “Just imagine getting paid more money than you’ve ever had just to exist. You should come back and ask for an interview.”

I stare at her, utterly dumbfounded. I don’t know what to say first—thank you for implying that I’m hot enough to get paid for it? No one has ever actually told me what happens back there. Preternaturally beautiful people go in, followed by VIP members, and the members come out with dopey smiles, clutching jet-black VHS cases, not the fire engine red cases I package all the front of the store tapes in. The black tapes never get returned.

“It’s against the rules,” is what I croak out instead.

Ronnie lets out a delicate snort. “I thought the spikes and the black make-up and all your costumes meant you didn’t concern yourself with such things?”

I scowl at her and grab my camera, quickly snapping Ronnie's picture. Fanning it until her stupidly beautiful face appears, I write "Get Bent" under her portrait and tack up on our wall of renter shame.

Unbothered, Ronnie loosens her tie and leans over the counter, booping me on the nose. "Back there, I do the bending of people over, but for you, mein lieblich, I might make an exception. It would be like getting mauled by a little kitten. Fun." She smiles, and for the first time, it actually reaches her eyes that glitter with mischief and humor. "Besides, Boss likes people with an eye for a good scene."

Unable to process an almost *playful* Ronnie, I can only sit as she taps a finger against my fantasy goth, vamp orgy sketches. The way she lingered over the word *scene* makes me shiver just a little bit. "How else do you think we live up to this?" She points to the "When you're here, you're the star" neon sign hanging over the velvet curtain to the back room.

"You know that if I go back there, I risk being fired."

Ronnie sniffs and saunters back to her post, but I hear a muffled "squawk" as she goes.

Jittering with the prospect that I could beat Drake's deadline if I just stormed back there and asked the jerk for a new job, I pace around the store. I shelve and reshelve the "Motivational sportsball movies that actually are good" section before popping in *Die Hard*, fully intending to borrow some of Bruce's walking-on-shattered-glass energy. I can do this. I can risk my job and do this.

There's nothing I'd be giving up of myself, my true self, if I worked one night behind the curtain. So what if giving a handie to some local I'll never see again after I beat it out of

here next week? That's just the sacrifice I have to give Red Light. Joke's on the bossman, because I've done worse.

Before I can talk myself out of it, I task Georgie with watching the checkout counter. She's our D&D DM, and she practically lives here on Friday nights anyway. Then, I roll my shoulders, take a breath, and plow through the curtain as if I've done this a thousand times.

I'm greeted by a dark hallway lit with neon runners, which cast a technicolor glow that makes it difficult to see where the hall ends. In fact, a few steps in, and I can't even tell there's an exit behind me. The floor vibrates with a faint bass, but I can't hear any music. I can't hear anything.

As I creep further down the passage, neon red signs appear on the wall, illuminating dusky paintings of writhing bodies.

TRUST ME

LOVE ME

FUCK ME

The signs go on, but I can't see any doors or any hint of where all the VIPs could be. Disconcerted, I almost run into the final sign mounted to a door that's cracked open an inch.

BAD DECISIONS MAKE GOOD STORIES

"Is that advice, or a warning?" I ask under my breath. Moving as silently as I can, I peer through the crack in the door and catch sight of a flash of Ronnie's tan suit jacket and dark skin. I'm triumphant, and not above shouting Ronnie's favorite movie line to rub it in her face that I didn't chicken out of her challenge. I kick the door the rest of the way open and jump inside.

"Yip-kay-yi—what the fuck?"

Blue-black wings spread wide in surprise, and pure crimson eyes, two sets of them, blink out of a face I know but don't. Ronnie, still dressed in her slim linen suit, cradles a stack of papers to her chest. The rounded ovals of her manicure have elongated into sharp onyx points that make her nails indistinguishable from her fingers, and her night sky complexion is polished to an iridescent sheen. It's like looking at a beautiful, black marble gargoyle come to life.

“Ronnie?”

Crystalline lips glitter as my co-worker smirks at me. “Seren. So happy you could join us. I was just talking about you.”

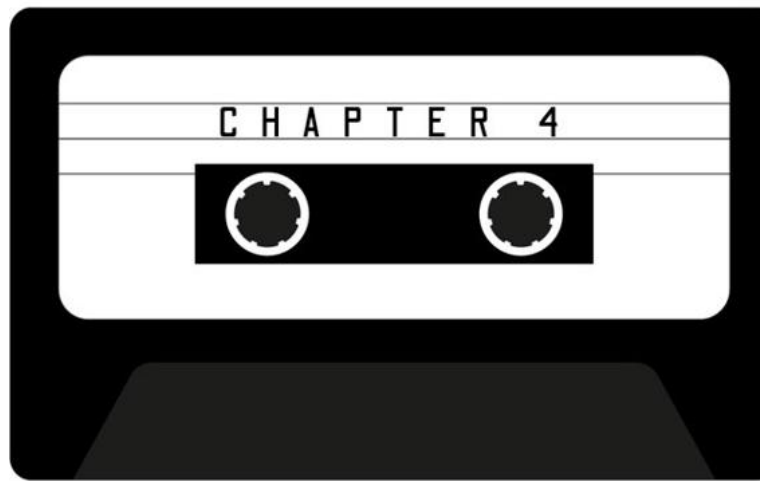
A cough jerks my attention to the brutalist concrete desk to her right, its sleek surface barren, save for a TV perched on the left of the creature sitting behind the desk. Four merlot eyes stare out at me.

Pain cracks down the center of my forehead with an explosion of static, the feeling of the inside of my skull being roughly fine-tuned by an indifferent god too much to bear. My knees hit the floor as my vision clears, and a memory surfaces: endlessly deep merlot eyes, navy skin, delicate fangs pressing into a sinfully lush bottom lip, and taloned fingers tapping a tune I know but don't know.

The world boils down to a single word, a name, one I always knew but didn't know until now.

A name from my lost night.

“Poe.”



“I KNOW YOU!”

His name is Poe—a soft, round name at odds with the sharp creature staring at me. I clutch the name to me in a tight fist; it’s the first solid bit of evidence that a hazy night six months ago is just waiting to be unlocked somewhere inside me.

“Do you?” Poe steeple his talons under his chin and contemplates with an unreadable expression.

“You were there that night! The night I—” The ache starts to build again, pressing in on the back of my eyes. I rub my wrist in frustration, uncertain again about everything besides the name of the monster looking at me like he might casually tear me apart and study my insides.

Tired of being on the defense, I do what I do best and go on the offensive. “If I don’t know you, then how do I know your name?”

“I am your boss.” Gucci-clad shoulders, the same shade as Poe’s navy skin, shrug. His smooth baritone rolls out and hits

my right in the chest, the sound ten times as potent as it was on my answering machine. “I’d expect you learned my name from the training manual, like any obedient employee. You know the one in the same drawer as the Employee Handbook? The handbook that contains the sole rule of this store? A rule that you have blatantly violated?”

“Who needs to be trained on how to rent tapes? I used that book to prop up the Kindergarten Cop cutout of Arnold my second day here.” I plant my feet and call on the power of my Docs for the second time today. “Besides, I can’t be in violation of any rules, because you’re not human. Therefore... the Geneva convention.” There had to be something about informing your employee that you were... whatever Ronnie and Poe are.

“How limiting. I expected you to have a more expansive mind, Star.”

Ronnie beams at the both of us. It’s the second smile she’s given me today, and the sight is vaguely threatening. “I’ll see myself out,” she says gleefully. “You,” she flicks one talon at Poe, “audition her. You,” she turns to me, “don’t be a little shit, but make him work for it.”

Work for what? Bewildered, I don’t get a chance to ask, because Ronnie just winks out of existence. Poof, and no more Ronnie. Just me and Poe.

Why does she even have wings if she can do *that*?

“She likes you,” Poe muses, staring at the void where Ronnie once stood.

“I’m pretty fucking likable, unlike other entities in this room.” His abrupt dismissal of my request still hurts, but if he’s bothered by the simmering anger in my voice, I can’t see it. In

fact, he bares his fangs in a viscous grin at my prickly response.

“That you are, Star.”

“Stop calling me that,” I snap.

“I’ll make you a deal,” he continues, as if I haven’t spoken. “Ronnie informs me you are in need of money. I presume it’s for that meathead dragon. He won’t give you your belongings back, will he?”

“Drake is a *dragon*?” I can almost feel my eyes bugging out of my head at the knowledge.

“Yes, and like all dragons, once he comes into possession of something, it will take a much stronger force than yourself to get it back. Hence the deal you’d be wise to take from me.”

“I’m listening.” I saunter forward and drop into the wingback chair opposite his desk, like I make deals with monsters every day. My heart is pounding, my stomach fluttering, but I throw my boots up on the edge like it’s nothing. I don’t miss the way he tracks the bounce of my breasts as my back hits the chair.

Eat up the view, monster boy.

“I am not going to hire you for what we do back here. You’re not a good fit,” he states.

It takes more willpower than I like not to curl in on myself at yet another rejection, especially now that I know the person rejecting me looks like a fallen angel.

“But I *will* get you the marker you need, in exchange for a night.” Poe tilts his head, a fringe of silky white hair shielding his gaze from mine.

“A night of what?”

He shakes his head. “If you had read the handbook, you would know that the only people allowed back here are those willing to sacrifice everything. It’s in the contract you signed as an employee, and these things are ironclad. So, for my help with your matter, I need a sacrifice from you.”

I blink slowly. “What does that mean?”

“It means I want to play with you for a night.” He snaps his fingers, and the darkness behind his desk clears. I watch in astonishment as row after row of lights flicker to life behind him. Floor to ceiling racks filled with jet-black VHS tapes line the walls as far as I can see.

“I have watched you, Star. I’ve watched as you make your little tapes, your fantastical bits of truth and fiction, watched as you gloried in collecting other people’s secrets and leaving them all over town.” Poe circles a finger behind him. “Some of them have made their way here. I was just watching this one before you came in.” Plastic scrapes against concrete, sending a shiver down my spine as Poe nudges the TV screen to face me.

Bea’s soft, wrinkled face grins back at me as Poe clicks the play button at the bottom of the screen.

“Woodrow loved to have his balls licked and then kicked. My god, I could come on the spot when that man went down on me. Didn’t matter if we were in the presidential motorcade or on the desk in the oval office; the man ate my pussy like a five-course meal.”

Bea’s face dissolves and another old face appears, telling an equally raunchy story involving a cucumber and a drunken sailor. The film I spliced together from years of asking people to tell me a secret from their sex life rolls on as Poe turns the weight of his gaze back on me.

“I want to make a tape with you.”

“Of me asking you about your sex life?” I mirror his self-serious pose and steeple my fingers under my chin.

“Of us acting out our secret fantasies.”

I snort rather unattractively. “That seems a very intimate thing to do with someone I just met.”

He quirks a marble brow. “Have we just met? I like to think I know you better than most after all our time together.”

I think back to the reams and reams of faxes that have piled up between us over the past six months.

Arguments.

Debates.

Sketches.

Snippets of my past.

Goddammit, he’s right. He knows me almost as well as Janie, maybe more so.

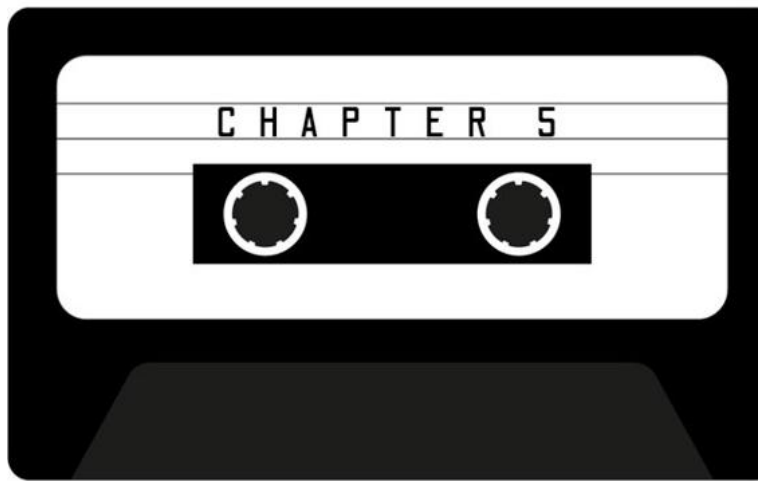
Sensing my self-doubt, Poe presses on.

“Let’s play together. One of your deepest secret fantasies and one of mine.”

“That’s it? Then you’ll get the dragon to give me my stuff?”

“That’s it. I’ll even throw in the ten grand.”

I blink once before I answer. “Okay. Let’s make a tape.”



“So...THIS IS WHERE YOU MONSTERS MAKE YOUR BESPOKE porn, huh?” We’ve traded Poe’s office for what looks like a miniature high-end movie theater. Loops and loops of brocade curtains in alternating maroon and black hang down the walls, and thick, maroon carpeting squishes between my toes. Against my protests, my Docs were confiscated at the doorway.

Can it be a theater if there’s only one seat in front of the screen?

“Bespoke porn? Is that what you think I do?” Since he left his office, the hard-to-read corporate stooge mask has fallen away, and the edgy, kinetic Poe from our faxes is here. Bouncing on the soles of his feet, he stretches side to side, a taunting slice of navy abs peeking out from where his shirt has worked itself loose from his low-slung pants.

“Want to grab your camera?”

Caught, I cough and look away. “About the porn—it’s not hard to put two and two together. This is obviously some kind of sex club, where you make videos of your time with the VIPs. Am I getting warm?” Our voices are muted to half their usual volume, the sound swallowed up by all the fabric. I could scream, and I doubt a whisper of sound would escape this space.

“Do you mind if I get comfortable while I answer you?” Poe prowls closer and circles behind me. My knees buckle as the art deco movie seat I thought was bolted to the floor is shoved at me. I fall backwards into the seat, and before I can spring up, tight bands of film tape cinch around my arms and torso, tying me to the chair.

“You’re handling things surprisingly well, but just to be on the safe side, I’m adding some restraints to make sure you stay in place.”

Poe emerges from behind the chair as a new man. A cropped corset cinched tight around his feline frame, he looks like a wet dream version of a marauder. Golden skin, kohled eyes, billowy canvas pantaloons set so low, a crispy trail of hair peeks out of the band—it draws my attention to the shadowy bulge swinging freely as he settles into a chair across from me, one he has conjured out of nowhere.

“Which of these is the real you?” I twist stealthily to test the bonds keeping me in place, but they only tighten more with each movement.

“I’m whatever feels right in the moment. Sometimes this, sometimes that, sometimes a little kitty-cat,” he sings-songs, kicking his leg back and forth over the arm of his chair.

I blink as realization dawns. “You’re Nyx!” The asshole has been prowling around, sleeping inside my shirt as the store cat.

He chuckles but doesn't deny it. "Moving on. Where were we? Right, what we do back here. You're a bright star, darling, and you aren't far off. You might have sensed this whole mall is a little off. Different from everywhere else, yes?"

I think of the fanatics who clamor for hot dogs from The Good Char and the sheer number of unusual sightings and happenings around the mall. Yeah, I would say it's a little off. It's part of what drew me here.

Accepting my silence as an answer, Poe continues. "There's a split in reality here. Runs the length of the mall, actually. It makes it easy for all sorts to slip through, including us."

"What are you?"

"I'm far more than you can comprehend. For now, let's make this easy and say I'm an Incubus. I—*we*—feed on desire and need. The more intense the better. Only strong passion can summon us to this plane, and even then, we still have the process of hunting amongst the dull and uninspired sheep to find a mind that contains the kind of true desire that calls to us."

"Poor babies."

"Indeed; that's what I thought. Poor babies, all of us." He nods approvingly, missing my sarcasm in his zeal for storytelling. "Sure, the break gives monsters like us opportunity and access, but what good is an escape if we have to hunt so hard for receptive minds to feed on?"

Poe rolls his chair closer. "To find open..." He wedges a knee between mine, and buttery leather kisses my ankle as his booted foot kicks my leg wide. "...hearts to accept us. Others hunted in the streets, but I figured, why work hard when we could work smart? So, I built a honeypot and baited it with the

sweetest nectar.” He strokes one talon up the inside of my thigh. “I embraced this modern place and found a way to have our meals come to us. It’s a non-stop smorgasbord of the kinkiest, horniest, dirtiest fantasies served up to us every night, all night long. Partners who are desperate to come back again and again because it’s only here their true desires can come true and be committed to celluloid to watch again and again whenever they want.”

Poe’s saturated image shimmers and distorts in time with the static of the screen behind him. His slutty pirate crop top and corset melt into gray, pinstripe pants, the knifepoint edge of his crisp white, popped collar embroidered with a tiny crocodile with blood-soaked fangs. Sexy bluebeard is gone, and in his place, a coke-eyed Gordon Gecko slouches forward and throws a wink at me. “It’s all about the ABCs, sweetling: Always Be Coming.”

He claps and leans back, looking entirely too pleased with himself, white hair practically crackling with excitement, the restless hunger of a predator about to strike dancing in his eyes. “But first, before we get to the coming, we mustn’t let Veronica down. Time for your audition, Starling. I need to see what I’m working with before we can truly begin our dance.”

I start to struggle in earnest again, rocking back and forth. The brass fasteners holding my seat to the floor groan as I throw my weight around, but it doesn’t stop Poe from eating up the space between us.

“How can I audition like this? Want me to whistle Dixie? Do a seated tap dance for your viewing pleasure?” I bat my lashes at my captor; the second he cuts these film stripes, I’m introducing his balls to my foot.

“Whistling, hm? No.” Sharp talons skate across the thin skin of my throat, one claw circling the jumping pulse at the base. My eyelids flutter as Poe’s hand burns a collar around my neck, forcing my face to tilt up to where his mouth is just a hair’s breadth away from mine. “But I do want you to pucker those pretty lips together,” he adjusts his grip higher, catching my chin in his palm as sharp talons dig into my cheeks, “so I can blow.”

Silky trails of pitch-black smoke billow out of Poe’s mouth and into mine, sliding an icy-hot path down my throat before settling in my belly. Sweet, hazy disorientation immediately sets in.

“I knew you would take me so sweetly. Now, swallow every last bit, Seren, and we can begin.” What had been a thin stream of smoke becomes a fat column as Poe dissolves into the black fog. My jaw aches as he slithers inside me, tendrils of him twisting and writhing down my throat, invading every hidden part until I can’t tell what is him and what is me.

The exertion of consuming Poe is overwhelming. My eyelids droop, and I struggle to keep them open as I slump back into the pillowy softness of the seat. I register that the lights are dimming, and the sound system lurches into action as a distorted jingle starts up. Through slitted eyes, I watch as a trio of stoned looking cartoon popcorn, fountain soda, and pack of Red Vines smile with vacant eyes, shuffling and jiving across the screen while singing a warning that our feature presentation is about to start. They dissolve into the glitching static, replaced by the words “Let’s Play” growing larger and larger on the screen.

The theater spins, turning into a carousel of lights and sounds. Just when I think I’ll be sick, it all stops, and I’m tipped

forward into the vortex of static devouring the screen.

Then, I'm gone.



CAGED WIRING CRISSCROSSES THE YELLOWED, DIRTY WINDOW. Through the decades of grim coating the glass, I can make out the view I saw every day for most of my childhood. A slice of Brooklyn's overgrown, red brick jungle sprawls out and up, the muted roar of buses and taxis battling it out below soothing white noise. Taken aback at seeing the wrong coast staring back at me, it takes a second to realize that I'm standing up. I'm free.

I cautiously turn around, only to find that I'm alone and not unaware of where I am. The cracked webbing of linoleum, the ancient metal coffee service gathering dust in a cart by the door, the stack of chairs just waiting for a rowdy group of CCD teens to come in and set them up—that means the thing that haunts my dreams more than I care to think about, the anachronistic treasure our lead priest was so smug about landing from a condemned Cathedral in Queens, sits behind me. The ornate confessional booth.

It's almost laughable how out of place it looks now that I'm older, but back when I spent most of my afternoons on my knees inside it, the last thing I wanted to do was laugh.

“Seren, Seren.” I scream and whip around to find Poe, now dressed in a blue-jay colored habit and neat nun's dress, curiously examining the old rectory room. “I have to say, I didn't expect a basic priest and parishioner scene to be what

your mind conjured up. The bones of a good fantasy are here, but you're holding back." Blinking his bottom set of eyes open, he examines me. "You took all of me, Starling, and you're still able to resist my poking around in your mind." He nods to himself. "You know what you need? A costume change to get in the mood."

I look down and find I'm back in my faux-priest get up from earlier.

"No more of that outfit. Strike it, reverse it. You can't submit to me if you're wearing that, or if we're out here. Now, how does it go? Forgive me, Daddy, for I have sinned." With a wicked grin, he snaps two claws together, and I'm plunged into the velvet darkness of my teens. There's no light, but I don't need it to feel the barely-there nightgown.

He truly *is* inside my mind. Deeper than anyone else has ever been, apparently, because I've never shared this place with anyone, not even Janie. This was my secret place, where I was broken and then born again.

It's funny how absolute darkness isn't actually pitch black. Used to being surrounded by it, I widen my eyes and wait. This is the kind of absolute dark that's so encompassing, you start to imagine acid trip-worthy strobes color if you're patient enough. I've been chasing this type of dark since I left Saint Mary's School for Wayward Girls years ago, but I've never been able to find it anywhere else.

Slowly but surely, pulses of purples and blue emerge from the darkness. The absence of a floor or ceiling makes me feel weightless, like I'm Alice, endlessly falling down the rabbit hole.

"Now, tell me, child: why do all the paths in your dreams lead back here? What is it about this place that makes it so special?"

Confess, and you will be rewarded.” Poe’s sonorous voice wraps around me from all sides, and I swear I catch a glimpse of crimson pupils among the shifting blacks and blue shadows.

So used to being stripped bare and being brutally honest in this space, the words flow out of me without hesitation.

“I was a difficult teen. Too loud, too much, too womanly when I was too young.” *An upstart tart*, Mother Constance’s voice echoes off the sides of my invisible cage. “There was a sister who was determined to break me. She knew the only thing I feared was the dark, so that’s how my confessions started.” The pulsing swirls of purple start to solidify into gloved hands, the thick fingers steepling together to form eyes and mouths until I’m surrounded by makeshift faces. Other hands reach out from the darkness and grasp my arms and ankles in a firm grip, anchoring me in place. A stray hand ghosts up the curve of my ass and settles there.

“What did she do?” the finger-mouths ask in unison.

“She knew the reason why this confessional booth was stored here instead of on display in the main nave. The door to the parishioner side jammed, locking whoever was inside in until someone could let them out. So, she boarded up the partition and would drag me in here every day after classes to reflect on how I was not the center of the universe. I was small and inconsequential, and I should think on how I could better shrink myself to be what the world expected of me, which was nothing.”

“But that’s not what you did, is it?” The finger-faces frown down at me, and more stray hands appear to tug off my nightgown, the cool air my only cover.

“Nope. I spent the first few times having panic attacks, but eventually, I distracted myself with a little game. I spent hours

coming up with the wildest, most sacrilegious fantasies to get off to, and I'd see how many times I could come before Connie dragged me back out. A particular favorite was Father Andrew, the hot young priest, deflowering me during midnight mass while she watched."

Huh, maybe *that's* where my vampire orgy scene came from.

Pleased with my answer, the hands lift me higher and tilt me forward, throwing me off balance. Strong, invisible arms pull my legs apart as nimble fingers spread the lips of my cunt wide, a thick finger pressing in, stroking in and out, making a mess out of me. The sensations of so many hands, exploring, teasing, slipping into my mouth, my ass, plucking my nipples to the point of pain, drives me out of my mind with need. This is better than anything I imagined back then. Being used by an invisible, godlike force that I couldn't stop even if I wanted to is everything I didn't know I could ask for, but it's something I know I'll crave from now on.

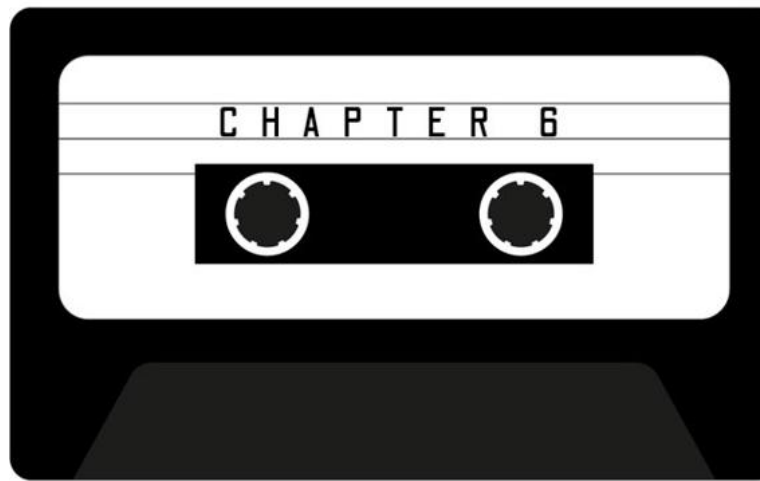
Poe's face emerges in front of my own. A hand—his hand—collars my throat, trapping a groan and forcing me to swallow it back down.

"I knew we would be a match made in hell." Poe emerges from the darkness, back to his creature self now, but dressed in my priest's outfit. As he places an affectionate hand on my head, the even whiteness of his sharp smile is alive with delight.

"Let's drop deeper."

All my anchors disappear, and my stomach swoops up as I freefall down.

Poe's ivory grin is the last thing I see as I tumble into the darkness.



I'M IN THE WOODS.

From a nearby cabin, Duran Duran's *Girls on Film* sounds, mixed with whoops of a party reaching its peak. The chorus of bullfrogs and crickets hiding in the forest circling the lake try to compete, but they're drowned out by the rhythmic chants of "kegger, kegger."

The full moon hangs in the night sky, and I'm... on a wooden porch with a bunch of hot camp counselors? Tiny, tight orange shorts with white piping cover everyone's impossibly tight asses, and mulleted dudes and feathered-haired girls alike rock crop tops with the words "Camp Titicaca 1979" across the chest, with socks that stretch to their knees.

What in the teen-coming-of-age-movie nonsense is this?

Everywhere I look, it's a mess of beer bottles and groping, half-naked bodies. A breeze brushes against my stomach and the bottom of my butt cheeks.

Oh, jokes on me, I'm wearing this ridiculous outfit too. I twist and try to catch my reflection in the glass window. These shorts are doing things for my ass.

"Oh cool, you made it." A lean arm circles my waist and spins me around, gluing me to a hard body. The golden surfer boy I saw with Ronnie earlier tonight grins down at me.

"I was worried your kids wouldn't go down easy and you'd miss this rager."

"My kids?"

"Your cabin? The cabin 44 girls? They drank the punch at dinner, right? Cody laced it with enough NyQuil to put down an elephant."

I stare at all the other counselors in horror. A bonfire rages out of control down in the front yard as a group of guys streak past to go skinny dipping. Who is in charge of licensing this place?

"Uh, yeah. My kids are asleep, but I should probably get back to make sure none of them wake up and come looking for me." I shuffle back and try to break Surfer Dude's hold.

"Nah, you're good." Cocky and confident may do it for me when it comes from Poe, but on this jerk, it's just obnoxious. "I was thinking, after all that eye-fucking we've been doing all summer across the arts and crafts table, I could take you down to the Stabbin' Cabin tonight." The douche thrusts his hips against mine, grinding himself into me, leaving no doubt as to what kind of *stabbin'* goes down there.

"Who signed off on that name for that place? Because I want a word."

"See, this is why I like you, Serena. You're so funny."

"Seren," I automatically correct.

He frowns and then shakes off the correction like the golden retriever he is. “Babe, c’mon. Loosen up.” Wine cooler and weak beer-laced breath hits me as Surfer Dude leans in open mouthed. I duck to the side and stomp on his foot, but unfortunately, I’m wearing tennis shoes and not my Docs. Still, his squeal of pain is satisfying as he releases me.

“Serena, what the fuck? Why are you being such a bitch?” Surfer Dude stalks away from me and snaps his fingers at the reedy guy manning the keg. “Cody, brah, beer me. I’m going to see what Brittney is doing. She’s someone who knows how to have a good time.”

“Whatever, dude. Enjoy peaking at nineteen,” I mumble as I escape off the porch to put distance between myself and the party.

I follow the lip of the lake, my path illuminated by tiki torches. The burning kerosene mixes with the funk of the algae coating the surface. Whose fantasy is this? It sure isn’t mine.

I kick a rock and mutter about stupid hot demons under my breath. I passed the audition, and he drops me into a lame-ass party?

Rude.

The farther I walk, the more my tiny shorts ride up until, with every step, the crotch grinds against my clit, still swollen and needy from all the teasing Poe did in the confessional booth. The ache grows and grows until I can’t take it anymore.

I step off the path and lean against one of the towering oaks at the edge of the forest. Not wasting any time, I look out at the rippling surface of the lake and trace a path along the rucked band of my shorts before dipping my fingers inside the slick mess between my thighs. Bracing one foot on the ground, I

bend my knee and plant the other against the rough trunk behind me, widening my legs so I can dip two fingers inside my pussy. I coat them with my dripping arousal and then swirl a path around my clit.

I close my eyes and conjure up Poe in the movie theater, blocking out everything, forcing his essences inside of me, stuffing me full of him. I imagine that instead of smoke, it's his cock I'm choking on. Saliva pools in my mouth, as if he's already pressing against the back of my throat.

Snap.

I scramble away from the tree and peer into the evening gloom.

"Hello?" There's a flash of white out of the corner of my eye deeper into the forest, followed by some childish giggles. Surfer Dude's comment about the sleepy punch comes back to me. Maybe some of these kids decided they weren't thirsty.

I walk a few feet deeper into the forest, and the undergrowth soaks my socks with dew in seconds. Did the kids wake up and decide to have fun while the counselors got wasted?

Wait, why do I care? None of this is real.

None of this is real!

"Oh, you asshole. This. *This* is your fantasy?" I call out into the night air.

I double over laughing until my ribs ache. Poe is a lot of things, but being this square with his fantasies is not what I expected. "Is all of this because you're still mad I chose *Suspira* instead of *Sleepaway Camp* as movie of the month? So now you have me playing the role of the slutty camp counselor wandering around in the dark, fingers in my pants,

flicking my clit, when I should be finding the nearest cabin and locking the door?”

“That’s exactly what you’d do if you knew what I’m about to do to you.” Warm breath skates down the side of my neck, accompanied by a slicing, fiery line of pain down my forearm.

I gasp and stumble backwards, tripping over a root and landing on my ass. Now covered in mud and leaves, I scuttle backwards in an ungainly crabwalk, away from my attacker, but there’s no one there. The leaves on the top of the trees rustle in the wind, but I’m all alone.

My new injury is here, though. Blood flows from newly-opened skin, the moonlight rendering the red river black as it drips from the tips of my fingers. I slap a hand over the wound to slow the bleeding. The cut doesn’t feel deep, but in the low light, I’m flying blind. Swaying, I get up and run. Light-headed, from blood loss or adrenaline, I’m not sure, I miss the turn that would lead me back to the well-lit trail. I’m on a less maintained path, kicking up rocks that slice my shins with each stride.

This isn’t real, but it is.

It’s a game, but is it?

How far does this slasher fantasy go with Poe? I thought I knew the game being played. Even now, huffs of nervous laughter puff out of me. Exhilaration like I’ve only felt once before hums through my veins. I half want to get caught to see what he gives me. Pain? Pleasure? Both? Still, my throbbing arm says I’m a fool to think I’ll escape the fate of every other black girl in a horror movie. Maybe there’s no safety net here. I’m playing tag, but Poe could be setting the stage for a snuff film, and I’m just the dumb bunny whose neck will be snapped before the first act is over.

I run faster. I don't even know if Poe is following me. The tip of his knife whispers down my spine, but whenever I twist back, no one is there. Caught between horny and scared, I don't see the fallen branch until it's too late. I trip over it and skin my knees, landing hard on my shoulder.

My top is caked in mud, soaked through with puddle water, one side of my shorts ripped almost to the band on my hip. Something rustles in the leaves nearby, and I spring up before I freeze. Twenty feet ahead, a dark cabin sits in the middle of a clearing.

The Stabbin' Cabin!

I don't wait to see if the Poe who jumps out of the bushes is friend or foe. I sprint for the cabin, or at least, I try. My knees scream for me to slow down, but this time, I know Poe is closing in. I can see the shadow of his form rising up behind me, a foot-long knife raised over my head.

I hobble up the stairs and throw myself against the door. I grope and find the doorknob, but I'm slammed up against the wood before I can open it.

"Never caught a shooting star before. I wonder what my prize will be." Poe spins me around to face him, fangs bared.

On instinct, the animal in me rises up to meet the predator. I slam my forehead against the bridge of his nose, and the sick crunch of crumbling bone giving way makes me gag.

"What a gorgeous, murderous little beastie you are." Poe looks downright proud at my attack as he flicks his tongue out and tastes the bloody mess I've made of his face.

Poe's split second of distraction is all I need. I push the door open and duck inside. The echo of Poe's surprised laughter

slips the crack of the door as I slam it shut. I turn around to find a weapon or a hiding place, but —

I'm back at Creepy Court.

It's a muted version of Creepy Court, where all its warm colors have been leached away, leaving behind an eerie ghost town.

The cabin door rattles.

“Seren, Seren,” Poe sings. “The longer you fight, the harder I get. So please, darling, make me work for it. I can't wait to catch you and tear you apart.”

I take off down the mall corridor. I don't have a plan. I'm not sure how to get off this ride or if I even want to, but I know I'm not ready to be caught yet. A flash of blonde hair and fur scurries past, a bony shoulder knocking into me.

Rat lady?

I limp as quickly as I can, searching for a hiding place. The mall isn't as empty as it first seemed, but it's definitely stranger than I left it. Good Char still has a line twenty deep, but instead of the usual high school meatheads, it's populated by werewolves, vampires, and men with impossibly long arms and legs. At its head, behind the grill, a demon is turning hot dogs. He looks up at me with a face so monstrous, I'll be seeing it every time I close my eyes for years to come.

I duck my head to evade detection, but the monster falls silent and tracks my path as I hurry by. Horniness long gone, I speed into Frillard's. The box store appears to be truly abandoned: half the lights are blown out, and the remaining ones flicker on and off, the circular racks graveyards of droopy dress and wire hangers.

Starlight, star bright, your master is missing you tonight.

I wish I may, I wish I might, have the pleasure of punishing you tonight.

Poe's off-key tune whistles out, making my heart skip a beat.

Out of time, I dive under one of the clothing racks by the door and climb up on the center platform so he can't see my feet. I'll be able to see him enter from this hiding spot, and once he's deep enough into the store, I can make a break for it.

I hold my breath until my lungs ache, scared that any disturbance in the air will give me away. Poe's combat boots stomp past a few minutes later, and I force myself not to move for what feels like an eternity but is probably closer to fifteen minutes. The last sounds I hear are the slap of his soles down by the escalator.

That's good enough. Back to an almost childish state of glee, I burst out of the rack, choosing speed over stealth... and immediately find myself clotheslined by a trench-coated arm.

With a low "oof," I fall flat on my back, watching as a trio of gas masks float above me. Slowly, they come into focus as one. Poe tugs up the mask just high enough to expose a filthy smirk, flecks of dried blood still crusting his upper lip.

"Hiya, honey. Time to go home."

Battered, bruised, and wondering if I can get a concussion in an alternate reality, I don't protest as he swings me up over his shoulder.

"Time for the big show, Star."

I hiss when he lands a sharp smack to my ass and chases the sting by biting the fleshy meat of my cheek, where I can still feel the brand of his hand.

We don't go far. He probably takes only a hundred steps before he places me back on the ground like I'm precious and not someone he spent the last hour terrorizing. I blink up to a tangle of pink and blue gauze I'd recognize anywhere: we're in Red Light's display window. The Suspiria scene is gone, and in its place is a makeshift graveyard.

I flop my head to the side and see we've collected a silent audience of ghouls and beasties. The eyes gleam with anticipation. The scene is set, and the curtain is about to rise.

"Eyes on me, Star." Poe's deep command hijacks my nervous system, and I automatically look up into the blackened goggles that make up the top of his mask.

It makes my face ache, but I smile up at him. "Fraid I'm going to scratch your eyes out?"

"Nothing would give me more pleasure than if you did. Pain from you is a sweet kiss to a monster like me." He tugs the mask all the way off, and the rough motion sets his nose to bleeding again.

"See, this?" Droplets of blood drip from the tip of his nose into my parted mouth as he kisses his sweaty forehead to mine. "This is how I knew we would be a match made in hell. You get it."

"I get what?" I ask softly, the question a puff of air from my mouth into his.

He taps my head and then his. "In here, you understand love is violence. You revel in its destruction and the primal fear it inspires as much as I do."

He does a push-up and stares down at me. "You laugh, but those camp counselors are what your life will be like if you leave me for Vegas."

I stiffen beneath him; he's dragging in reality where it doesn't belong.

"You've spent forever running, running, running, and for what? The secrets you crave aren't going to come from the Codys of the world." He rises to his knees and whips off his belt. With a single, swift motion, he manages to loop the leather strap in a figure eight around my wrists before hooking them above my head.

I'm the sacrificial lamb, and he, my butcher.

"You need someone to push you so you can see yourself as I see you." Knife in hand again, Poe straddles my hips, trapping my thighs between his. In two, quick swipes, he slices open my tattered shorts and tosses them away.

"You need the focus of a killer." He trails the knife up and up and up, a thin red line blossoming from the split of my pussy through the valley of my breasts. The soft pad of his tongue follows, licking up his handiwork. The shallow cut stings, but my nipples go hard at the bite of pain combined with the most tender of care.

Crouching back down, he spreads my legs wide and makes a pillow on my thigh. Two ghouls are pressed against the window, torn nails clawing at the partition, trying to break through the glass. From this angle, the audience of monsters can see all of me, but only Poe can touch.

"You run. I chase." Silky hair tickles my pussy as Poe presses a kiss against the artery that's hiding just below.

"You bleed. I feed." His fangs sink into my thigh. Sealing his lips around the wound, Poe sucks until blood flows, pooling with my arousal.

Poe drinks deep of the cocktail he made, making sure that with each lap, his tongue drags and swirls around my clit. I moan, desperate for release after being brought to the edge so many times just to be yanked back.

As if sensing my thoughts, Poe pulls back, licking his lips clean, and I cry out in frustration.

“The only chalice I want to drink from, from now until eternity.” His chin glistens in the soft light of the window.

I whimper, and feel sorry for myself and my poor, needy body as he pulls me up, arranging me like his personal mannequin until I’m pressed face first against the glass, smearing our combined arousal all over the window. Poe presses in behind me, covering me from head to toe. He leans in and bites two talons off his fingers as his other calloused hand covers my mouth.

He works his newly declawed fingers between my legs, plunging them roughly into my pussy, fingerfucking me hard and rough, the sound of how wet I am a testament to the constant strokes against my g-spot.

The fingers disappear, and his cock slides in, splitting my lips apart, teasing my poor, battered clit until I’m clawing at the window, hips bucking backwards with no shame, tears and sweat and saliva painting a picture of my desperation to just be fucking filled, much to the amusement of the shifters and demons watching.

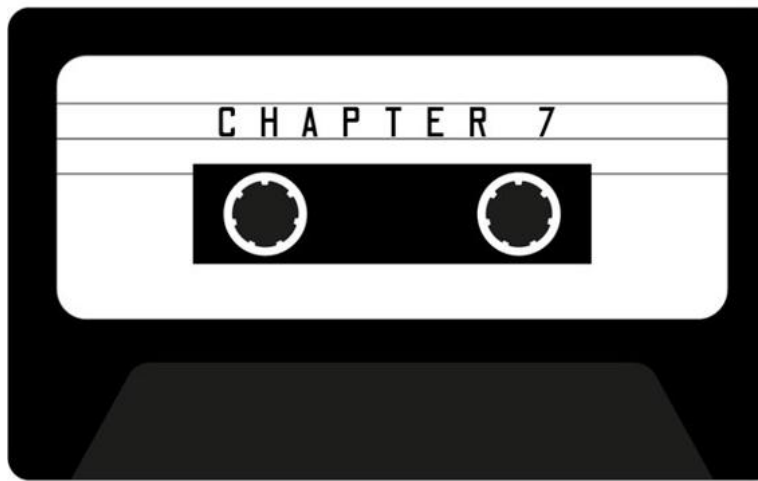
Then, in one, vicious stroke, Poe slams up and in. My pussy, done with his shit, clamps down around the thick cock in a stranglehold, afraid the asshole is going to try to stop before we’re done with him.

“Naughty star. You’re not the master here.”

Breaking my hold on him, Poe's cock swells larger, and it feels like it splits in two. He's officially everywhere all at once, and I short circuit.

Cunt full, head empty.

Legs shaking and supported only by Poe's weight pinning me to the glass like a butterfly, my eyes roll back in my head, and I'm gone.



“WAKEY-WAKEY, SLEEPYHEAD.” EYES CLOSED, I WRINKLE MY nose as droplets of water hit my face. I slip down and sputter when bubbles and water go up my nose. I sit up, and water sloshes over the lip of the tub. “This is what I get for leaving you unattended for ten minutes.”

I blink up at Poe. He wipes a fluffy hand towel down the front of the cashmere sweater I bought him for Christmas. “Oh no! I’m so sorry, baby. Here, let me.” Slick with bubbles, I slip and slide as I try to gain some traction and stand-up.

“Nope. You know the drill. In here, you move when-”

“You move me.” I sit back and hug my knees to my chest, propping my chin on top with a grin. “It’s a hard life, having you as a master.”

Strong arms slip under my armpits and help me stand. I glow under Poe’s indulgent gaze, watching him watch me as he thoroughly dries every inch of exposed skin before lifting me out of the tub and settling me on the vanity counter.

“Did I set the heat high enough?”

“You know you did. Otherwise, I would be wrapped up in all the bathrobes,” I tease.

“Can’t have that happen. I love this view.” I gasp as he tweaks a pearled nipple. The surprise pinch fades from memory as he lotions up his hands and palms my breasts, kneading them until I lock my legs around him.

“How’d I get so lucky to get a guy like you?”

“A guy like me?”

“Not every man is secure enough in himself to let me decorate our bathroom to look like a pink mermaid’s grotto.”

“You love pink,” he says, as if that explains everything.

“I do love pink.” I smile and rub my nose against his.

“And I love your pink. In fact, I want a taste of it right now.” Then there’s the firm pressure of his mouth against mine, his tongue slipping between my lips, and I get lost in his kiss.



“YOU KEEP FALLING ASLEEP ON ME, SWEETHEART, I’M GOING to start to develop a complex.”

“Wha-?” I jerk up and frown at the Persian carpet beneath me.

“Where am I?”

“Uh, your studio, you weirdo.” Shirtless, Poe leans against the door jam. The strong planes of his muscles are glowing a soft gold under the lamplight as he steps into the room. “Are you ready for me?”

“Ready for you?” I echo. Bookcases of black VHS tapes line the wall beside Poe on one side, and a projector dominates the opposite corner.

“I know they said to expect you to be tired and forgetful, but I didn’t think it would start this early.” He holds his hand out to mine. I automatically take it, and he hauls me up.

“Here, I’ll help you get set up, and then you can put me where you want me.” He moves over to the projector and starts fiddling with it, leaving me dazed and confused. This room feels like me. It has my wall of Polaroids of all our friends and the secrets they shared with me scrawled on the back, but I don’t feel quite right in this space.

I wander over to the wall of tapes and run my finger down their sides, reading their names.

“Bea bangs a president and other old people sex stories.”

“Rat Lady is real, and I served her coffee.”

The tapes go on like this until I see a pair of names that make me stop. This next batch of tapes stand out from the rest.

Poe and Star Slasher Scene.

Poe and Star Confessional Booth Scene.

Poe and Star Doctor’s Office Scene.

Each title strikes a chord, but I don’t know why.

Poe comes up behind me. “Oh, is it going to be that type of night?” I find myself wrapped up in a hug from behind. “I thought I was here for art purposes, Mrs. Star, not one of your smutty films.”

“Oh, is your hard-on your way of protesting?”

“You know it.” Poe presses a kiss to the top of my head.
“Come on, I got the tape rolling.”

The Persian carpet is now awash in undulating blue light. Poe stretches out across the rug, his golden body now submerged under translucent waves. “Last time, you had me this way; want me here again?”

“Uh, yeah.” On autopilot, I grab a marker from the table. The sense of having done this before is strong. I straddle Poe, settling on top of his semi-hard bulge, rocking back and forth for a bit, enjoying his groans of pleasurable frustration.

“Enough! I’ll walk!”

“Okay, okay.” I uncap the pen.

“Wait. What about the tape? Here.” Poe reaches to the side and hits play on two portable stereos. From one set of speakers, Rilke’s poem *I Go To The Sea* starts to play. From the other, Galaxie 500’s *Tugboat* drifts out.

The feeling of being on autopilot comes back, and I settle back on top of Poe, covering him in Rilke lines and Tugboat lyrics.

Then, I stand up and grab my camera.

Drowsy, content, and drowned in blue, Poe is the most beautiful creature I’ve ever seen.

“I like you in navy.” I smile softly at him and snap his picture.

“I like *you* in navy.” He rolls up and pulls me down beneath the imaginary sea. Smoothing my hair away from my face, he looks at me with intense concentration.

“What is it?”

“I could spend a millennium filling up tapes of you, and it wouldn’t be enough.” Merlot eyes bore into me.

A headache starts to build behind my eyes, and I wiggle out from under him. “What do you mean?” The feeling of wrongness comes back tenfold. The TV besides us crackles to life, snowy black and gray pixels dancing across the screen.

Poe shakes his head. “Don’t worry about it. I’m not feeling myself tonight.” He blinks, and chestnut eyes stare back at me, merlot gone. Was it ever there to begin with?

“Right, I get that feeling.”

“Come on, time for bed. Let’s get you comfortable. You’re sleeping for two now.”

Wait, what? I look down at my stomach, which I could swear was flat just moments ago. Now, it swells out, filling the bottom of my dress with a small bump.

“No.”

“What’s that dear?”

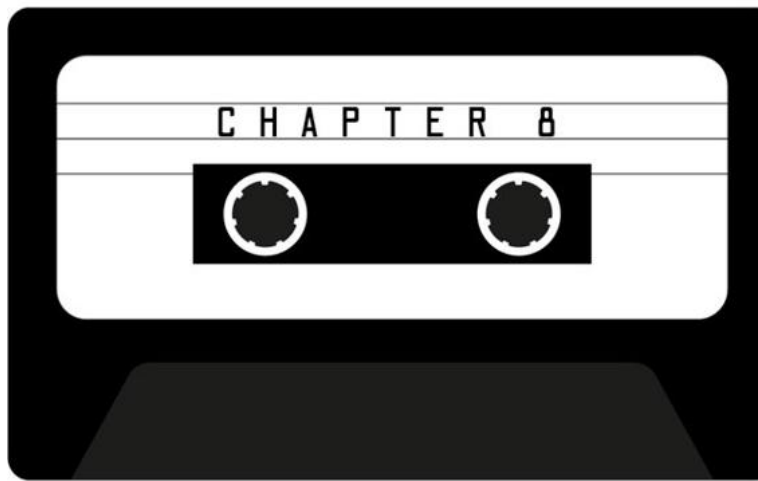
“No, this is wrong. This isn’t right. I’m not pregnant. We aren’t... We aren’t this.” I pace around the room, the static from the TV rising to a dull roar.

I whirl around, bits and pieces of the night coming back to me. “This is another of your fantasies, but I don’t want to play anymore. Let me out, let me out, let me out.” I slam my palms against his chest over and over again. “Take off that face and let me go.” My lungs tighten, and I can’t suck in enough air.

“Seren, breathe!” Navy talons out placatingly, Monstrous Poe’s two sets of eyes are resigned. “We can leave here, but you need to know something before I let you go.”

I shake my head. I don’t want to hear it. I won’t believe it, whatever he says.

His hands grip me tightly as he says, “This is your deepest desire, not mine.”



MAGIC *DOES* MAKE THINGS LESS AWKWARD.

Like when you're confronted with the knowledge that your deepest, sexiest desire is a bougie apartment on the Upper East Side where you're an art professor at NYU and make smutty films with your super-hot husband on the weekends. Oh, and you're having a baby with him.

Sister Constance is laughing her ass off somewhere.

Right. Magic.

Magic means there are no awkward morning afters. Just poof, you wake up in front of Hock It to Me with a silver marker in one hand and ten grand in unmarked bills in a plastic A&P grocery bag.

Wham, bam, thank you, monster boss?

Unable to process what last night was or what it meant, I decide not to try. Instead, I stride into Drake's and slap his marker on the counter.

“Pony up, lizard breath.”

“The little peacock outed me, huh?” Drake lets out a wheezing chuckle. Seemingly unbothered by the revelation of his secret, the dragon unlocks the case behind him and piles my stuff on the counter.

“Guess you know who gave you this now?” With no small amount of reluctance, Drake removes the delicate bracelet and surrenders it back to my care. I stare down at it, trying not to choke on the pang of longing in my heart. Staring at one merlot opal leaves me longing for the merlot eyes of another.

“I have my theories,” I respond.

“I bet you do.”

Ignoring the dragon’s scrutiny, I start to scoop my life off the counter and into my backpack.

“Oh, hey. Don’t forget this.” Drake drops a black VHS case onto the counter.

“That’s not mine,” I say slowly.

“No, it’s the lady’s who brought the rest of the lot in. She said she needed the money more than she needed the tape. Said she already knew what was on it, and it told her what she needed to do.” Drake shrugs. “It’s part of the lot. You gave me the marker, so it’s yours now.”

Something is wrong here. Why did Janie have a VIP video from Red Light? What was on it that sparked her desire to leave? A rush of anger at my friend boils over. All that shit about Mrs. Butter-Tits was a lie.

She didn’t blow up my life for me; she blew it up as part of a cash grab to go follow whatever Poe put on this tape.

“Oh, I know that look. If I could close the store down, I would love to watch you tear him a new one, Sweet Cheeks. I’ll have to get Ronnie to give me the play-by-play at the next gin rummy game.” He chortles to himself as I storm out of the shop, fingers pointing a V between my eyes and the security camera.

Watch out, boss. I’m coming for you.

I storm straight through the front room and into the back, straight up to Poe. “You caused all of this!”

“This is progressing nicely!” Ronnie looks delighted. “I’ll leave you to it.

“Hello, Seren. I was not expecting you back here.” Poe drums out an agitated beat against the concrete surface of his desk.

“Oh, I bet you weren’t.” I circle around the desk and crowd up right next to him, ignoring that even sitting down, Incubus Poe dwarfs me.

Docs, do your thing.

“If this is going to work, you need to start sharing and stop manipulating.”

I snag my camera from behind me and snap Poe’s picture. Without even looking at it, I know I’m going to carry it with me everywhere. I doubt I’ll ever catch this mix of weariness giving away to startled hope on his impeccable face ever again.

“My missing memories of the night we met, this cuff, Janie’s tape, her taking off, and I’m sure a million other little machinations, they all lead back to you. I can’t stick around and play with someone long term if they can’t be honest with me.”

“Say it again, but slower.” The rumbled command sends a fun shiver down my back.

“Which part? That I’m going to stick around and keep the lights on in this place, or that I want to play with you some more?”

“Why would you do that? You just said that I’ve been manipulating you this entire time to keep you with me.” He scowls down at me like I’ve failed a remedial puzzle.

“Bad decisions make good stories.” I climb into his lap, kicking my boots against his rock-hard calves. “A wise neon pornshop sign once told me that. Besides, If I run-”

“I’ll chase.” He growls into the side of my neck, biting the tendon there for emphasis.

“So, I suss out all your secrets from here. I’m like the sea, Bossman. I’ll wear you down eventually.”

“I’m sure you will, Star.”

The Beginning

POE

WHEN I HEARD HER TELL THE OPENING BAND HER NAME AS SHE asked them overly familiar questions and snapped their photo, I had to laugh.

Seren.

Meaning star.

Of course, with a name like that, she would be the one to guide me through the inky abyss separating her world from mine.

Only a star with an aura that bright, that insatiable, could sing a siren song to my own hunger and draw me to this loud, garish plane.

“She’s a tasty little powerhouse, isn’t she?” Draconis watches my star spin and twirl on her chunky-heeled boots around the bonfire in time with the driving beat of the band.

“Avert your eyes, Dragon. She is not for your horde.”

“Oh, it’s like that is it?”

Yes, it is like that, but not for the reason my ancient friend thinks. He sees my star and sees an anchor to this plane, a

crown jewel for his horde.

She is so much more than that.

I apparate near her and snap the neck of a Nightmare creeping too close to her bright light. I toss their limp body into the fire. I will play every role for her. Her protector, her nightmare, her jailer, her assassin, her thief. I'll take her screams, swallow her joy. I want every filthy fucked up inch of her beautiful mind under my care.

No one else will ever have her.

Seren.

My Star.

About the Author

Sabrina loves writing characters who find strength in softness, prefers monsters to men, and has never said no to more world-building. When she's not yelling at her laptop, Sabrina can be found wandering around New England, pushing book recommendations onto people who didn't ask for them.

She loves connecting with readers! Stay in touch with her in any of these [places](#).

Also by Sabrina Day

The Hidden Omegas

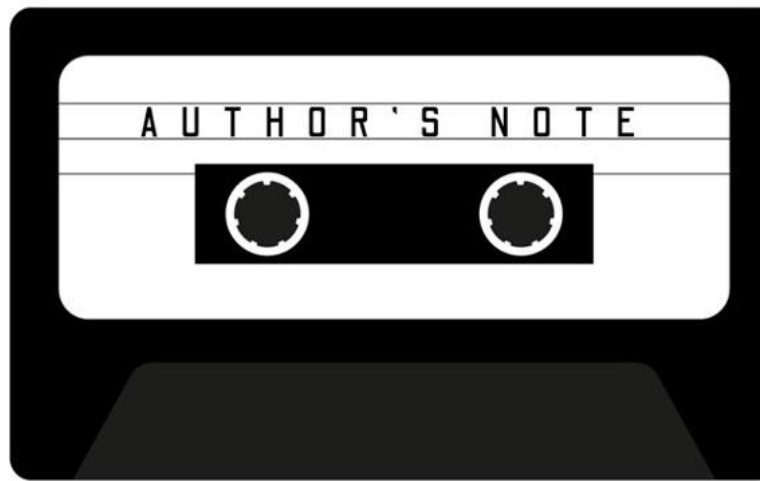
[A Hallow Bargain: A Hidden Omegas standalone prequel](#)

[Fleeing Fate: Hidden Omegas Book 1](#)

[Fate Found: Hidden Omegas Book 2](#)

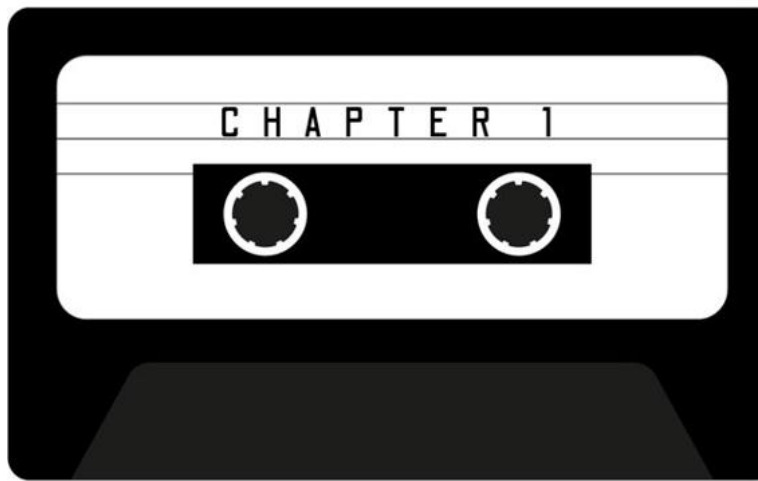
THE MONSTER OF DARKSPELL COMICS

SJ SANDERS



Welcome to Dark Spell Comics where worlds come alive. Or at least Pashar does his best. As a night-terror demon on sabbatical, he's enjoying his vacation in the human world tending to his little corner of Creepy Court Mall, stuffing his face with hotdogs from The Good Char and listening to the newest rock release while he sees to enjoying his work.

Everyone finds the nightmare they are secretly searching for... even if they are a human who breaks into hops afterhours. But this human is a special treat who intrigues him like no other, and one he especially wants to savor. Perhaps even for the rest of time.



PASHAR

I LEAN AGAINST THE COUNTER AS I WATCH THE DEMON industriously working on the order ahead of mine. The humans are all smiles and waiting eagerly, practically slobbering all over themselves, as they make appreciative sounds at the smell of the meat cooking. My lips quirk with amusement as their order is turned over to them. They immediately dig in, looking for all the world as if they are having the best meal of their life. I shake my head as I watch them go and glance over at the lumbering male behind me.

No Cassanova in his true form, he's an ugly bastard as a human as far as I'm concerned.

“You do realize that's sick, don't you?”

He smirks as he wipes down the counter with a swipe of his rag before starting my order. “It's not like they know where it's coming from. And why waste good meat?”

I snicker and he gives me an impatient look when I don't move away from his counter. He may get a kick out of feeding humans bits and pieces of those being tortured in the pit, but he sure does get a pike up his ass when it comes to serving a fellow demon.

"What will it be?" he grumbles, slapping his rag on the counter to glare at me.

My smile stretches wide, and I know he can see behind the illusion to my oily dark purple scales, the hint of my corethi slithering over me, and the monstrously large sharp teeth grinning at him. Nightmare demons are just built special that way. Even other demons prefer not to look too close at what goes bump in the darkest parts of various demonic realms.

"Three to go. Extra crispy and extra mustard. Hold the red crap," I instruct, delighting in watching the other demon curdle resentfully beneath the yoke of his punishment.

Unlike Dzik, I'm not on Earth for punishment. I'm on vacation—a lengthy one in reward for my exceptional services. Or to remove competition, but when it comes right down to it, I don't really care. I'm able to come and go as I please through the portal connecting my shop to my dwelling in the nightmare realm of the infernal abodes, and running the comic book store gives me an outlet for my creativity while allowing me to enjoy the chaos that is humanity.

As far as vacations go, I'm having a great time. I also have to congratulate myself on my timely vacation. The eighties has it all. Beyond the nicotine soaking into everything and the drugs that seemed soaked into the skin of many adult humans that pass through, there is a blatantly energizing glamor to everything that sparkles like hellfire. And there is rock and roll.

It is a hell of a lot more entertaining than my last vacation in 1348. What was supposed to be a leisurely vacation with an idea to torment some of the rank clergy and local populace in Florence, Italy while enjoying fine meals and a good Tuscan wine ended up being dead in the water—quite literally. The Black Death probably was a good time for some demons, but everyone was a little too dead or dying to be much fun. I did spend most of it drunk on said wine so I suppose there was a kind of fun in that.

I consider the casks I still had from all of those I smuggled back to my den and smirk. The landholders had not lasted too long after they let their servants die and rot in the fields but first, I was quite happy to liberate them of their stock while they ineffectually cursed me in a nightmare-fueled state, their decaying bodies covered in lesions. Normally I don't send nightmares to those suffering or dying but I made a special exception for them, leaving just enough lucidity for them to watch as I stripped them of their wealth.

I scratch my jaw thoughtfully. Come to think of it, I have some nice jewels as a take-home gift for myself from that vacation as well. The wine, however, was the gift that keeps giving. I found so much of it stored at the winery due to ports closing down that I had to construct an entire basement level beneath the lower levels of my home just to fit them all. At my current rate of drinking, I suspect it will take a few more centuries before I get through them all. Unless I find someone to share my life and wine with.

I snort in amusement as my gaze follows Dzik as he puts my order together. There is little chance of mating. It is rare for my kind to mate at all since we are terribly territorial. The only thing a nightmare demon enjoys sharing is...well... nightmares.

Dzik squints at me as he slaps my order on the counter in front of me. My grin simply widens as I toss the required paper bills on the counter beside my to-go bag and pick up my order. His upper lip curls in a sneer as he snatched the money up and puts it in the till before shutting the drawer a little too forcefully. I hear it clang loudly as I walk away. Snickering to myself I remove a corndog and take a healthy bite, my eyes landing on a couple of pimply faced boys loitering around the food court.

A maniacal cackle escapes me before I think better of it and two pairs of eyes snap to me warily.

“Relax boys,” I soothe as I take another huge bite of my corndog. “How would you like to make a couple bucks?”

As it turns out, even the wariest youngling will react greedily when coin—or in this case, cash—is offered. I relay my instructions and grin with wicked glee as they scamper toward The Good Char, their eyes alight with mischief.

Let’s see how that pain in the ass demon likes that. He would have to hope for a cold day in hell to provide them their icy treats with hellfire fueling his grill. Another cackle leaves me as I head toward my shop. Because I’m something of a hobbyist even when on vacation, owning my own little comic store appeals to the youngling in me. That each comic book drags its unsuspecting own into the nightmares woven into it while they sleep at night is part of the charm of my own little slice of eternity. That... and chewy, who is far less “charming.”

For all of my shop’s considerable charm, it’s unfortunately hard to keep servants... ah... staff. I can tell immediately I am about to lose another employee the moment I step inside. It probably has to do with the fact that he’s not breaking speed at all as he barrels toward me, his face white as a sheet. I bite

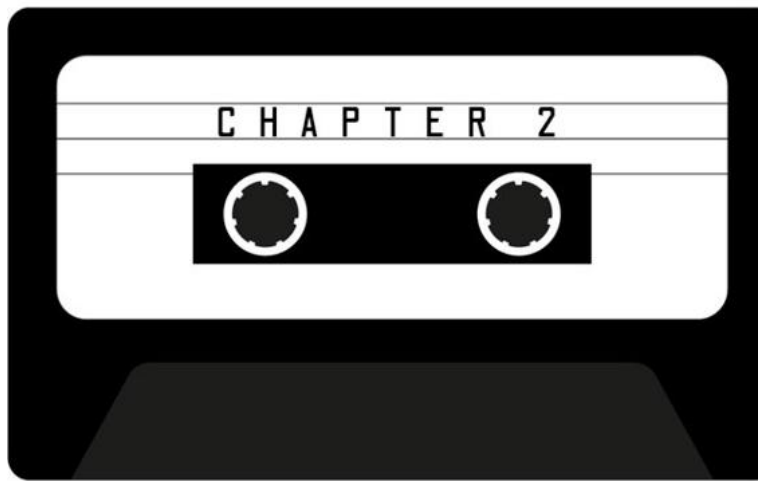
back a sigh as he shoots out the door and slowly turn to look over at the menace occupying a shelf in a roped off corner of the store. I narrow my eyes at the innocent looking fern.

“Chewy,” I growl, stalking toward it.

Its enormous fronds slowly curl inward at my approach, her numerous pod-like heads and stinging vines tucked out of sight, but I’m having none of that. Chewy is the one inconvenience of this whole vacation. A sentient, carnivorous plant from the nightmare realm, she can be a real bitch to deal with at times. It’s bad enough that she will try to eat a customer who gets too close if someone isn’t keeping an eye on her—something that putting the ropes in have mostly solved the problem of—but the fact that she gets her kicks out of frightening my employees is what makes her company unpleasant at times. She thinks this mournful routine will work on me? Ha!

Pointing a heavily glamoured claw at her, I snarl deeply. “No more of this. No more trying to attack or eat customers or employees if you don’t want to end up mulched and thrown into the flaming pit.”

This time I mean business.



FANNY

“FANNY YANG?” THE BARISTA CALLS ME NAME, HER NOSE scrunching slightly.

I force a polite smile to my lips, trying not to wince at the way she butchered my name as I push through the crowd to retrieve my coffee, dropping a couple of quarters into the tip jar. It’s the last of my cash but the lure of coffee is too hard to resist. The liquid nearly scalds my tongue in a satisfying way as I take a sip and I hum with pleasure as I scope out the mall.

Creepy Court. Weirdest name for a mall that I’ve ever heard of. It doesn’t look any kind of creepy to me. Bright, fluorescent colors of the lit-up signs distract from the yellowish paint used on the walls so that the nicotine stains from their numerous smoking customers isn’t so noticeable. Frankly, it looks much like any other mall I’ve been to.

The food court itself is a riot of eye-bleeding colors slapped disharmoniously together, and smells that make my stomach grumble in complaint even as I try to silence it with another, larger, sip of coffee. The coffee will have to do for now, at least until the mall closes and I can break into some of the kitchens to find something to satisfy my belly. A girl has to do what a girl has to do. It's better than the alternative. I have nothing against the girls peddling their wares on the curbs, but I'd much rather just steal what I need rather than resort to that method of feeding myself. There is a lot my parents believe about me since I decided to eschew family traditions and start living my own life, some of them ended up being true, but I'll be damned if I make that one a reality.

I try to make the coffee last as I wander around but, all too soon, I'm down to the last little bit in the paper cup. I down the rest and give the cup an unhappy sigh before tossing it in the trash can. Popping a piece of Bubble Yum into my mouth, the overwhelming grape flavor accompanies the shock of sugar flooding my system. Pulling my scrunchy out, I sweep my hair back into a tight, high ponytail at the top of my head and secure it once more with the shiny pink scrunchy. The feathery ends of my old perm tease my neck as my head tips, and I peer at the sign with a maniacally grinning coyote. Frankie's Funhouse. The smell of cheap pizza, cigs, and booze, and the scream of what I assume is children's laughter amid all the strange clamor coming from within, emanates from the place like a thick haze that sends a little shiver up my spine.

Okay. Perhaps it wasn't quite like other malls. I dig the dark atmosphere. Very rock and roll. As busy as it appears to be, it looks like a good spot to hole up for the day. It's unlikely that anyone will notice me loitering there with all of that madness

going on inside. Nor is anyone likely to notice when I slip into the restroom to wait it out while the mall closes. That's my regular method, and it seldom fails me.

Taking a deep breath of the riot of smells, I step inside as if I belong there. Just another paying customer. My eyes drag over the animatronic band moving stiffly through a routine, the music pleasantly creepy in tone despite its somewhat jovial lyrics. A game lets out a death scream that makes me jump and I clench a hand to my chest and laugh. Wow, this place is great!

Noting a family vacating their spot, I slide in and lick my lips as I examine the untouched slices remaining on the pan. They are stone cold and there isn't much left over. Even the soda remaining in the pitcher looks flat as hell but I'm not going to scorn my good fortune. Grabbing up a slice, I take a healthy bite, my eyes following the movements of the grinning coyote on the stage in front of me. There is something about him that makes me think he is looking right back at me and leering, but I mentally push it away with another quiet chuckle as I focus on my food. As expected, no one even looks my way much less approaches me. I find a few coins and play some of the games that have a surprising monstrous theme. It's enough to keep me entertained anyway until I see my cue to tuck into my hiding place. Families are packing it in and the older children who were dropped off are slowly detaching from the place and melting back into the mall.

It won't be much longer now.

The bathroom smells disgusting like someone puked in here recently, it's entirely bogus but I ignore it as I sit on a toilet and prop by feet on the closed stall-door in front of me. Sliding my backpack off, I put it in my lap and unzip the top to

pull my headphones out. It only takes me a minute to rifle through my coveted mixtapes before I select my favorite and slide it into my Walkman's tape-deck. I smile and lean my head back on the wall behind me as the world is muffled out by my music. I spent tireless hours making each tape, perched next to my boombox just waiting for the right songs to come on the radio so that I could record them. My music had resulted in the first major blow out—the first of many—between me and my parents. Demon music, they called it, their eyes rounding worriedly as they turned it off at every opportunity as if that would somehow miraculously make my love for it vanish.

My nose wrinkles disdainfully at the memory. Demon music. Ha! Joke's on my parents because if demons like rock and roll, as far as I'm concerned, they can't be that bad.

My foot bounces a little in time with the music, my head bobbing. I pause and frown, moving one of the headphones off my ear when I think I hear a strange sound. I shrug when it doesn't repeat and plop it back into place. Whatever, man.

I stay in that putrid stall for an hour or two, waiting until long after the last of the lights have gone out before I make my move. Zipping my backpack mostly closed, leaving just enough room for my headphone cords to have some give to it, I shoulder my backpack and bound out of the bathroom with a relieved sharp inhale of fresh-ish air.

As fresh as a pizza-arcade joint in the mall can be, anyway.

Humming along to the music, I make my way from the restrooms in the back through the labyrinth of games. I am briefly debating whether or not I want to dip into the kitchen here to look for more filling sustenance or hunt something out a little quicker and easier someplace else when I feel a strange

tickle at the back of my neck. Stopping in my tracks, my eyes sweep around the arcade warily. It feels like I'm being watched. Creepy I can handle. Creepy I love. Being watched in a darkened arcade, abandoned for the night, goes straight from creepy to hell no.

"Yeah... no, I'm out," I whisper, my gaze making for the entrance. Surprisingly the grate is still wide open to the dark interior of the mall and I feel a prickle of unease.

The soles of my funky ankle boots scuff just a little too loudly and I race for the entrance and my heart slams a staccato rhythm in my chest. A terrible, unnatural sound that I can't quite identify rises up behind me as if something is rising out of the gloom to hunt me. I desperately want to scream but I swallow it back as I slide gracelessly out of the entrance door. Just as quickly as it started, the sound cuts off, leaving the entire mall silent except for the sound of my pulse thrumming loudly in my ears and the faint music from my headphones banging out the rhythm of one of my favorite songs from where they now hang loose around my neck.

Biting back a nervous laugh, I give Frankie's Funhouse one last fleeting look before striking back into the mall again. My stomach rumbles loudly, reminding me that I haven't eaten since the meager slices of cold pizza this afternoon. Food it is, and then I will explore a bit before finding a suitable place to bed down. That's one thing about malls. If you are sharp enough to evade security, it is a hell of a safer spot to sleep than out there on the street.

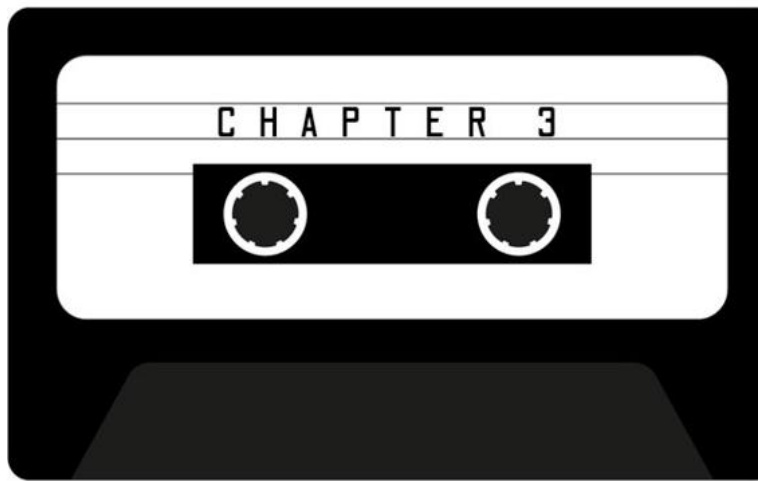
I slink at a more unhurried pace down the dark hall, picking up my pace momentarily when I come nearer to The Mall Swords. The antique store which only gave me a pleasant buzz of something vaguely horror-esque in the light of days feels

even more threatening in the gloom as if something is rattling dangerously inside. Not one to commit dumb horror movie cliches, I run past it and don't stop until I turn out from the hall in the main part of the mall again. The aura of the place is a bit more settled here even if the carousel looms like something from an abandoned carnival, casting long, monstrous shadows. It overshadows the food court just beyond it. I give a carousel horse with oddly sharp looking teeth a wide berth as I make my way back into the midst of the food court.

Taking my place at the center, I survey my options. The Good Char is the closest to my right. I peer at it speculatively, the smell of hotdogs and grease clinging to the air. It looks promising. Pulling a small hatchet from my backpack that doubles as a deterrent for those with less than innocent intentions for me, I smash the lock with the back end of blade and lift the security grate just high enough to squeeze through before lowering it again. The scent of food is deliciously thicker inside but I can't seem to figure out how to work the grill, which has a menacing aura to it anyway. Stepping close to it feels like walking to the edge of an abyss and it has an unnatural heat as if the fires are lit and burning though it seems to be off. Haunted stove is out. I consider the deep fryer for all of a minute before I realize that it's fruitless without the batter to fry a dog. Batter I obviously have no clue how to make. Cue the sad violin. I give it a disappointed look but raid the bakery across the way instead, giving its lock the same treatment and coming up with a few forgotten stale donuts for my trouble. Shoving one in my mouth, I head out into the mall, both nervous and curious to see what it has in store for me.

Either way, I locked in here until sun-up. I'll just have to find a relatively safe place to sleep.

Heading down another hall, I pause in front of a comic book store. Although the outward facing shelves are lined with horror comics, there is an orderly sort of quiet to it that seems almost inviting. It could be the fact that an entire corner is left empty for an enormous fern that's obviously been babied to grow to such proportions in the mall where space is always a premium. Smiling, I "let myself in." This looks like the perfect place to bunk down for the night. A thousand apologies for the lock but at least I anticipate sleeping well tonight.



PASHAR

I PRIDE MYSELF IN KNOWING EVERYTHING THAT GOES ON IN MY shop even when I'm resting within my den. It highly benefits me that nightmare demons are armed with a variety of skills when it comes to spell-work and manipulating energies. Not only is that what allows me to create my comic books, but it's what gives me a very effective alarm system with the network of energies I leave in place every night when I return home. The tremble of energy announcing the presence of an intruder brings a scowl to my face as I heave myself off my very comfortable reclining chair and storm toward the portal.

I'm half naked, I don't have my glamour in place, and I don't give a flying fuck. It is a welcome opportunity to scare the piss out of whatever idiot decided to invade my territory. Besides, it's the middle of the night. Who would believe them?

I smile nastily to myself, my corethi trembling at the bottom of folded wings, and step out into my stockroom. With an impatient growl, I enter my shop, my eyes falling on the sleeping form curled up suicidally close to Chewy's barrier. My eyes snap up to the plant. Several of its pod like heads are visible on their long stalks, their sharp clearly visible as their mouths gape open as a long, uncoiled vine inches closer to the sleeping human huddled under a thin blanket. I'm a bit shocked that it's not one of the heavily barbed vines utilized to flay and weaken Chewy's victims but I still don't hesitate to snarl threateningly, stopping her in her tracks. I want a terrified human, not a dead one. Unsanctioned deaths from nightmare demons is more paperwork than I want to deal with on my vacation.

Head's tipping toward me, the vine rapidly retreats back into her pod with a snap. I squint at her suspiciously for a moment as her mouths move slightly as if whimpering in protest. I should have destroyed her the moment she hitched a ride with me to this world. The infernal lords damn that soft spot in my black heart.

Grumbling, I give the human a brisk nudge with my foot. Not at all pleased that they inconvenienced me and then had the nerve to fall asleep before I can get up here and terrify them good and proper.

I purr with satisfaction as the human let's out a shrill squeak in response, their eyes flying open as they roll to face me, their blanket falling away. My snarl slips slightly in surprise as I meet the honey brown gaze of a petite female staring up in complete shock at me. Her golden complexion pales as she stares at me in abject horror. It's only then that I consider the sight I must be, snarl fixed in place, corethi looming threatening around from where they've emerged, my

exceptionally long tail twitching in the air around me. I'm not at all surprised when she manages to stop choking on her scream to let it out in an ear-piercing shriek. I'm also acutely aware that it will draw attention from the night security guard, and I can't have that.

Her slender fingers scrabble against the floor as she tries to scurry away from me, but she isn't fast enough to evade my tail. I snag her effortlessly before she is able to get more than a foot away and haul her up from the floor with ease as my tail winds more firmly around her body, holding her aloft in the air in front of it. My mouth waters at the scent of her skin. It strikes a considerable hunger within me but not for tearing flesh from her dainty bones. Her mouth is still wide open, but her scream seems to have lodged within her again now that I have a hold on her and I'm starting to worry that she's stopped breathing. I poke her with one finger in the belly and a terrible sound erupts from her that is a strangled shriek and giggle all at once. Wincing a little and fighting to hold back a chuckle of my own at the terrible sound despite my best effort to remain unmoved, I shrug. I'll just carry her out and throw her on her little rear end personally and be done. There are strict rules regarding holding unsanctioned humans, and more paperwork than there is for killing them. Which is sad because she seems like a tasty little thing.

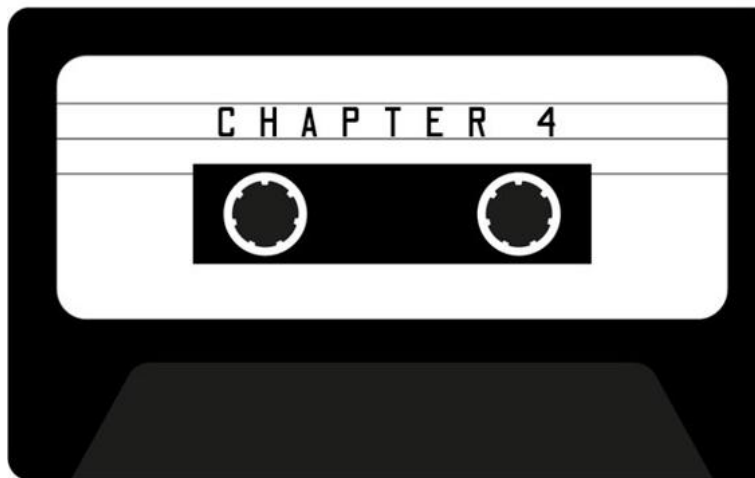
With a regretful grunt, I hoist her a little higher with my tail as I bend down to retrieve her bag and upon picking it up, it tips, dumping several of my precious comic books out in the process. I stare at the mess in dumbfounded silence. She was going to steal from me? Steal my comics?

Comic books I've spent many hours and days crafting horrendous nightmares with my woven spells.

I bristle, feeling numerous sharp spines pushing up from my skin along my back and arms as fury coils deep in the pit of my belly to mingle with the blaze of lust swirling there. I ignore the strangled scream she issues in response and my eyes narrow on her. Now, punishing a thief and getting compensated for it—that is minor paperwork. I grin at her and she shrinks within the clutch of my tail. Poor little thief. Chuckling wickedly, I turn back to my portal carting my prize. Having my last employee serving me was nice enough—what was his name Chuck? Larry? No, Tyler!—but this little morsel won't escape me during neither hours of the day nor night. There will be no clock-in and out times by which she can make her timely escape.

With one last weak cry, her eyes roll back, and she goes limp. Drawing her toward me, I give her a sniff. Ah, still alive. She just fainted. Good.

She is all mine.



FANNY

WHY DOES MY HEAD HURT? I MOAN SOFTLY, MY HAND GOING up to my temple. It feels like I hit my head on something. There is a piercing ache and a throbbing behind my eyes.

“Good, you’re awake,” a deep voice growls in a way that is frighteningly animalistic.

Startled, my eyes pop open to meet the yellow glow of a predatory gaze staring directly back at me. My pulse jumps and I suck in a breath, overwhelmed by the monster looming over me. And that I’m sprawled on the floor. My mouth downturns, puzzled as my eyes somehow manage to drop from the terrifying face above to take a covert look at my surroundings. Why am I on the floor?

I start to sit up just so I can inch away from the demonic monster looming over me, dread coiling within me that perhaps in this too my parents were right that I would end up

caught in something demonic. Well... someone demonic, anyway. My head swims for a moment and a hiss of pain escapes me as I quickly shoot up and clench the side of my head again. What the hell?

The demon grunts, his eyes narrowing on me before shifting away to a point beyond me. "Come on, get up," he grumbles. "Washroom is the door on the right over there. Then we need to get going."

"Going?" I echo, caught by surprise.

Apparently, it's the wrong response because his gaze snaps back to me and he glowers like he's entertaining the idea of eating me. A clammy sweat breaks out over my brow. When I was a kid, we had a neighbor with a pit bull. The dog was as mean as its owner and I remember staring fearfully at the dog's heavy, square, crushing jaws. The day it got loose from its chain still gives me nightmares. Looking up at this demon with his heavy, wide jaw roped heavily with muscles in proportion to his wide, powerful neck reminds me of that dog and yet infinitely more dangerous. When he speaks his large, sharp teeth are something from a horror story, barely cover by his lips, his tongue sinuous, long and thick lashing along them. Now that I think of it, with his oily dark purple scales and incredible long tail, he almost looks like he belongs on set for *Aliens* if only his head was shaped more elongated and barer rather than boasting long black hair and several large horns along with a multitude of bony protrusions studding his face.

Not to mention he has wings, I note. And whatever the barbed peacock things whipping around him. Their lethal points nestled among their feathery ends catch the light in such a way as they move that its hard to miss. Yeah, somehow, I think this is far worse.

“Yes,” he snaps impatiently. “I need to show you the ropes before the mall opens at nine. It isn’t going to wait on a lazy thief.”

Wait... what?

I rub at what feels like a knot on my head. I don’t know what I hit it on, but it must be making me delusional. Did I somehow get offered employment without realizing it?

“Are you saying that I have a job?” I ask, just to clarify.

He chuffs a deep laugh, his terrible teeth flashing in a horrifying grin. “That would infer you are getting paid, wouldn’t it? No, little thief, you don’t have a job, you have duties... endless duties in all waking hours, assigned as I see fit. Now move!” he barks.

I reflexively bolt to my feet and hurry to the washroom, groaning inwardly. Ok, so I’m being punished for breaking into the shops and stealing... that much I get. It sucks but if it means that he doesn’t intend to eat me, I’m not going to complain too hard and make him change his mind. I just need to report to work every day until he considers my debt repaid.

I ponder this as I step into an obsidian washroom lit by what looks like several small, glowing mirrors. I look at the large basin tub with longing. It’s not in any style that I recognize having an appearance more like a large, elongated bowl, but I would give anything to be thoroughly cleaned. Any impatient growl at the other side of the door makes me jump and I turn toward the sink and press on the tap above the mounted bowl. Freshwater flows for a measured count before gradually slowing and turning off.

Pressing it again, I take one of the small, folded cloths stacked neatly in a bit and quickly wash my hands and face before

giving myself a brief sponge bath. I feel a little better with the freshening up and considerably more optimistic. This whole situation makes a strange sort of sense. My grandparents were full of stories regarding transactions with the world of spirits.

Assuming that I'm remembering correctly, I recall from stories that I grew up with that the relationship with the spirit world is often transactional between debts and balances. By that logic, I just need to pay off my debt.

This puts me in a much better frame of mind as I walk out of the washroom. The demon is still terrifying, but I feel like I have a better grasp on what's expected now.

"I'm ready," I tell him, and I feel a prickle of warning when he smirks in response.

"Not quite," he says succinctly. "You need your uniform."

"Okay," I agree, expecting a shirt or something to be thrust at me.

I jump when he suddenly leans forward but he moves too quickly for me to properly react. I jerk back but before I know what's happened, a band clicks around my neck and I'm released so suddenly that I stumble backward a few steps, my hand slapping up to my throat where a flexible metal band curls around my throat.

"What...What's this?" I squeak as I try unsuccessfully to get my fingernail up between the metal and my skin.

Whatever it is, there is something unnatural to it as it seems to twist in a way that evades my grip and hugs close to my skin without choking me.

"My stamp of ownership that magically binds you to me," he replies with a deep rumbling purr of satisfaction. "When I said

that you have duties for all waking hours, I was very literal. You are now mine.”

This...is a lot worse than simply working off my debt in the mall. I have a sinking feeling that I will be returning here at the end of the day. My face falls, and he chortles gleefully.

“Come along, little pet,” he hisses. “There’s much to be done.”

His fingers snap and I feel an overwhelming compulsion flow through me to follow after him as his tail coils around him and a shimmer of inky darkness appears around him and slowly reforms around him. If I didn’t know any better, with his faded jeans, long ponytail, and band shirt, I would have mistaken him for any other human fan of rock and roll. I open my mouth to question him about it but the mirror in front of us takes on a slick appearance of shifting black oil. It looks way too menacing but there is no avoiding it as I follow after him right through the mirror and into the comic book shop that I fell asleep in. Comic books litter the floor still from where they fell from my bag but the demon walks by them, motioning for me to follow him as we head to the enormous fern taking up the corner of the room. Pick up a spray bottle from the storage cupboard beneath a nearby display, he stops and turns to me as he motions toward the plant with the bottle.

“This plant that you idiotically fell asleep next to is Chewy.” Another grin briefly splits his face before sobering once more as it sets into a scowl. “If you value your quality of life at all, you will stay away from her. You will not die, since you are bound to me, but you will be surprised what suffering that you will survive through,” he casually remarks.

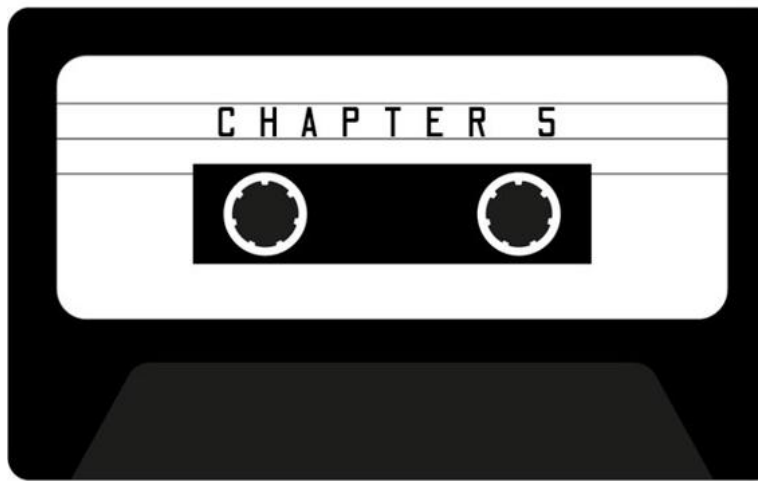
I give him a look of disbelief because seriously—this is a freaking fern. His eyes narrow at my expression, and he chuckles a cruel cackle. Lifting the bottle, he sprays the fern

liberally and I feel something cold slide through my veins that the fronds tremble before suddenly numerous pod-like, teeth-filled head poke up from among it and thick vines uncoil as if enjoying the mist. It's very Little Pet Shop of Horrors and I can't help but to stare in a mixture of fascination and horror. The movie trailer is strange as hell but I kind of wish that it was already out so that I have some small idea of what to expect. I have a feeling this is no mere carnivorous plant. There is a mind of some sort behind its movements as its mouths open to catch more direct spritzes.

"She requires misting several times a day. Keep an eye on her at all times that you or anyone else in the store is near her and remain a safe distance behind the marked off area. She is a lethal predator and can move faster than you will expect. I'll feed her for now, so you don't have to worry about that yet, just keep her hydrated throughout the day," he instructs blandly as he puts the spray away. Tipping his head toward the comics scattered and the floor, he resumes glowering. "Once you've cleaned up your mess come to the register. And be quick," he snaps as he turns away to leave me to my work.

I give Chewy a nervous look and have a feeling that she is looking curiously back at me, her vines curling like little question marks around her as if she is curious. I swallow and give her a tight smile as I shuffle back a little further. Bending I pick up the first comic book, and then another, my eyes trailing around the shop to note that the shelves have nothing but more horror comics filling them.

Perhaps that would have been pertinent to notice *before* I fell asleep in the shop.



PASHAR

HAVING A HUMAN PET IS ACTUALLY QUITE NICE, I DECIDE. Sadly, I can't keep calling her pet or human without rousing suspicions among those running the mall. I've caught the administrator of the mall, that Rizal woman, glancing curiously our way throughout the day as she makes her rounds preparing for something called Trick or Treat Street.

I squint at the flyer she gave me to pin on the board behind my counter while my pet straightens up after the last slew of customers. I do not understand. Instructions to don a costume and I am supposed to give unhealthy quantities of sugar to human offspring?

"Human, come here and take a look at this," I snap, drawing my pet's attention to me.

Her dark brows lower as she puts the last comic book on the shelf and heads toward me. Somewhere around hour three she

lost most of her fear of me, much to my dismay, and has been showing an increasing amount of irreverence and attitude that I plan on curtailng.

“Since there appears to be no end in sight of you ordering me around, you could just use my name,” she grumbles. “Like I told you four hours ago when ‘pet’ got old.”

I frown, promptly losing my train of thought. She did?

“Remind me.”

She makes an exaggerated roll of her eyes in her disgusted exasperation that is as annoying as it is ridiculously amusing. “Fanny,” she huffs and leans forward to peer at the flyer behind me, her ass tipping in the air.

I stare at its delectable curve, my tongue snaking over my lips as I imagine sinking my teeth right into it. And then blink.

“Fanny?” What a peculiar name.

She shoots me a sharp look, the long tail of gathered curls grazing me with the turn of her head. Her lithe, little body suspended over the counter so near me that it would take little to no effort to pull her toward me—or push her over onto her ass, however the impulse at the moment drives me.

“Yes,” she bites out. “As in a fanny, and if you think you have any lame butt jokes, I’ve heard them all. It’s short for Francine, but I can’t stand that name either,” she grumbles, her attention returning to the flyer.

The annoyance on her face shifts to one of curiosity and I eye her, trying to not to enjoy the natural perfume of her body mixed with whatever annoyingly sweet substance she seems to be constantly chewing.

“Oh.” I hadn’t been aware but now I’m intrigued with the way her face has turned red. I can feel the smile pulling my lips and my tail twitching with maniacal amusement despite being restrained around my waist.

Her slender finger shoots up in warning and she drops to her feet. “Don’t even think of it. If you can’t be nice then I will get you back.”

Bah! I would like to see that. I regard her silently, weighing the matter and then snort. “There is nothing you can do to ridicule Pashar.”

Her brow furrows. “What the hell is a pashar?”

“Not a what,” I bark, incensed. Hasn’t she ever heard of any good, respectable demon names? I’m the fourth in my line to be rewarded with such a distinguished name for my incredible skill at terrifying mortals and all other beings susceptible to nightmares. “It’s my name, diminutive female.”

“You’re name, huh?” She crosses her arms over her chest and regards me for a long moment before making a derisive sound of amusement. “Okay, I give. I’ve got nothing.”

“Give what?” I eye her suspiciously.

Her lips twitch. “Give up. As in, you win.”

I scoff as I give her my back and peer at the confounded paper once again. “Of course, I do. I’m a demon.” A scowl pulls at my face as the strange cheerful smile on the gourde in the picture mocks me. “But this,” I growl, waving a hand at the flyer, “I don’t understand.”

Fanny’s smile rivals that of an imp. “I thought you were a know-it-all demon. Don’t tell me that you don’t know what trick or treating is? Does Halloween ring a bell?”

I sniff disdainfully, my wings folding together against me beneath the illusion spell. “Some ridiculous human tradition, no doubt. I have some vague memory of humans celebrating a holy All Hallows Day.” I don’t recall that being much in the way of fun or having anything to do with the projected merriment suggested on the flyer.

Her eyes widen. “You really don’t know what Halloween is? Oh, you’re in for a treat!”

Somehow, I doubt that. My doubts are largely confirmed when Fanny gives me a quick run down on the festivities. As if moving on their own accord, my arms cross over my chest as I pin her with a glare. I’m privately amused by the way she throws her hands up in up in the air and huffs at me in response, but I wrestle it down so that my expression doesn’t crack.

“How can you, a demon who peddles horror comic books, not like Halloween?” she finally asks with an air of complete disbelief.

I give a taciturn grunt in response. Truthfully, the administrator’s idea doesn’t sound half bad. Especially if the large plastic skeletons that I can see the administrator struggling to haul down to hall just over Fanny’s shoulder is any indication of how the mall is going to be decorated. More skeletons, monsters, and horrors are always better. I can see the night being very lucrative if the swarm of small children doesn’t scare away my usual sort of clientele. What use do I have for extra children roaming around the mall? Unlike some of my brethren I hold myself to higher standards when it comes to my victims.

“First, they’re not horror comic books, they are woven nightmare enchantments. Second... I don’t have much

experience when it comes to children,” I admit on a grumble.

The idea of having to interact with a large number of them makes me feel on the brink of breaking out in hives, complete with festering colonies of stinging wasp-like parasites.

Fanny’s mouth down turns, her head tipping to the side. “I would think that a nightmare demon would be someone pretty familiar with children. Don’t they make you most of your business?”

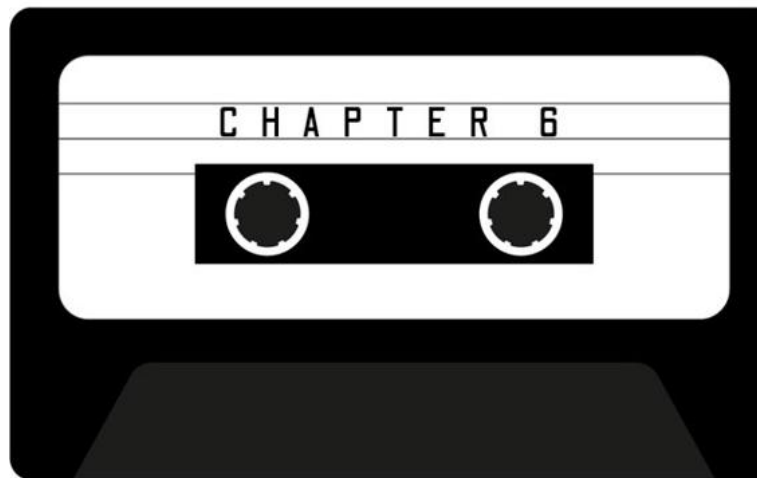
“For some,” I agree, my tone turning sour as I move away, determined to find something for my pet to do.

Unfortunately, she doesn’t give up so easily. She scampers after me, her dark eyes lit up with delighted curiosity. “You don’t scare children, do you? Holy cow! This is totally rad. A demon with a soft spot for children.”

“I didn’t say that either,” I sharply rebuke. I have no idea what rad is, but I’m quite certain that’s an insult. “Don’t go putting words in my mouth.”

“You realize we are going to have to wear costumes,” she sing-songs behind me, obviously taking far too much joy in my predicament. “We will have to do something really gnarly but not super scary. We can do a matchy thing. It will be the perfect way to introduce you to the Halloween spirit... and kids!” She lets out a gleeful giggle that is just on the verge of a demon worthy cackle.

I have the sneaking suspicion she knows how much the prospect of being surrounded by children terrifies me. It’s kind of cute that she honors with me a good scare. Cute but not going to happen.



FANNY

A WEEK LATER

HAVING A GRUMPY DEMON AROUND IS KIND OF ADORABLE once you get used to all the grumpy growling and fussing. I spend the night curled under a thick blanket on a pretty nice-looking couch—something that looks a little familiar from the Sears and Roebuck catalog actually, which makes me suspect his furnishing come smuggled straight from Earth—and upon waking, accompany him back to toil all day in the comic book store. If you can call what we do toiling. If Pashar’s human disguise is to resemble a rock and roll grifter, he certainly runs his store with similar laid-back vibes. He spends the majority of the day muttering to himself over his sketches while I care for Chewy, organize the comics, and watch for customers. Every now and then he has a new issue that practically sends

sparks shooting up my arms the moment I touch it, with orders of what shelf to put it in.

Apparently, there is some sort of system to the madness within the shop that I've yet to work out. To my eye, there isn't any organization to the shelves at all but all of my offers to reorganize them are met with steely refusal.

Most hours there is little for me to do other than watch the people milling through the mall and the gradual arrival of Halloween to the mall. A trick or treat street *inside* a mall. What a clever idea. I just need to find a way to convince Pashar that it can be fun. I know that his human appearance is just an illusion but there still must be some joy that a demon can find in the admittedly silly customs of the season. Maybe I need to suggest a few good costumes and get him into the spirit of things, but what?

I start rolling various ideas through my head. The obvious answer would be for him to go as himself but there are two problems with that. One, his real appearance can be terrifying for someone not prepared for it. Even spending day in and day out with him and never once being offered any kind of harm, I only recently have stopped recoiling in response when he releases his illusion of humanity. It's not that I find him distasteful to look at. Quite the opposite, actually. I always enjoyed some aspects of fear a little too much and that trickle of remaining fear has resulted in flipping a switch that I didn't even know I have—to which he thankfully hasn't caught on yet so that I'm spared from dying from embarrassment. Two, there is no way any sort of human-made costume can come close to looking like him.

I tap a finger on my bottom lip as the administrator walks by with her arms laden with two large boxes that appear to be

filled with little goody bags, a black witch's hat flopping on her head. Despite her burden, she tries to shift it anyway so that she can give me a cheerful wave. Smiling, I return the gesture. Miss Rizal is super nice. Looks like she needs a hand. The store is dead at the moment anyway.

"Hey, Pashar, are you going to flip if I go on break?" I shout over to the male brooding over his drawings at the counter.

His eyes lift and it strikes me how yellow they are even beneath his human illusion. A very bright golden brown that toes the line of being natural. His brow furrows slightly and he grunts, flicking his fingers at me.

"Take your lunch break," he growls, his gaze returning to his work.

"Sweet. Want anything?" I already know his order, it's the same thing he always gets. "I'll be heading to The Good Char."

Strange how learning what exactly that demon's special ingredients are hasn't dissuaded me from eating there. I don't know what that says about me. If it makes me a monster, I guess I just fit in better with the Creepy Court this way. In the days I've been working here I've slowly seen the normal world peel away as I become increasingly more aware of the monsters living peacefully among humanity here.

"Yeah. Don't forget to tip the brats," he says, a satisfied smile curling his lips.

I shake my head and pinch my lips together to contain my own smile. I'm so not encouraging him with this. "Still on that? I figured the feud was over when Dzik picked up the fleas from you. I'm still trying to figure out where you pulled those out from, by the way."

His smile widens showing teeth with a definite sharpness to them, his yellow eyes gleaming brightly enough that I can see a hint of their true color bleeding through. He looks evil as all get out but strangely, he's just my kind of evil. "Secrets of the trade," is all he says, and he makes another shooing motion at me. "As for Dzik, he would get bored if I didn't torment him. Now get out of here before I change my mind."

I can't quite keep a giggle from slipping out as I book it out of the shop. Whatever magical leash he has me on is relaxed so I don't feel the sharp tug that I normally would. That I automatically miss the proprietary tug of it is some heavy shit. Therefore, I choose not to think about it. Instead, I immediately pick up my steps to catch up with the administrator lugging her box, the charms on my cute, little chain belt looped through my jeans tinkling cheerfully as I walk.

"Hey, Miss Rizal, wait up!" I shout.

She wobbles a little with her burden, the double stacked boxes teetering precariously as she turns to me, but her smile is wide and friendly. Swooping in, I rescue the top box and beam at her.

"Let me help you with this."

"Oh! Thank you, Fanny. I think I misjudged my carry capacity," she jokes. "There's just so much to do! But I think the mall is really starting to come together."

My gaze skims over the decorated displays set up in the hall and the smaller decorations in the corner of the shop windows and smile. "It is looking super bodacious, Miss Rizal."

She brightens with pleasure. "Thank you, again, Fanny! Are you and Pashar getting ready?" She glances back toward Dark

Spell Comics meaningfully.

I grimace a little as I follow her gaze back to the shop. Pashar is visible through the window as is the fact that there has been zero decorating done.

“It’s a work in progress,” I admit slowly, my mind working frantically to explain as we make our way down to the Guest Service desk. “They don’t celebrate Halloween where Pashar is from so I’m trying to warm him up to the idea.”

Her mouth rounds briefly in surprise. “Oh, I didn’t realize. Well, if you need any help, flag me down. I really want this Trick or Treat Street to kick off with a bang.”

“I’ll be sure to let Pashar know how important it is,” I assure her.

My eyes catch on a large, black German Shepherd walking his owner down the hall and my smile returns. Awwww. JJ found himself a friend. I was a little concerned when I learned that there was a for-real werewolf masquerading as a pet at the Twisted Whisker—because, for real, no one around here can keep a secret worth damn if you are in the know—but the two of them look so damn happy that I can’t help but to be thrilled for them. The woman holding his leash certainly doesn’t seem to be the one in charge, but she looks ecstatic as hell as she cheerfully waves to me.

We finally reach the desk and the monster stationed behind it gives me a polite smile as she returns to work while Miss Rizal and I set our loads behind it with all the other boxes rapidly accumulating there. I have to hand it to her, she’s going in full tilt. A tingle of excitement sweeps over me. I can’t wait, even if it means dragging Pashar in, kicking and screaming the entire way. There has to be a way to convince

him that it will be fun, preferably with as minimal fuss as possible.

Giving a cheerful wave, I head toward the food court, my stomach growling. I spot Elliot handing one of his special orders out over the counter to a customer. His eyes meet mine when his customer leaves with a pleased gurgle and I give him a friendly wave in passing. His face creases with laughter as I wiggle a little to Cyndi Lauper's hit blasting through speakers overhead before continuing on my way. I'm still bopping with the lyrics when I reach The Good Char's counter and Kimmy giggles behind her hand at my antics while Dzik the Dick glares over at me from where he's perched over the grill. I know that's Dzik being his usual friendly self, so I give him a wave. If he was actually annoyed, he would be looming over the counter, attached to Kimmy like a tick.

"Hi Fanny," she chirps. "The usual?"

"Yes, thanks!" I reply, leaning one hip on the counter as she hurries to pour my lemonade while Dzik grumbles and grabs several wieners and coat them in his special batter.

"How's it going?" she inquires as she sets my cup and straw in front of me.

"The usual. I do what Pashar says while he growls and snarls at me like he's contemplating eating me. That, of course, is when he's not complaining about 'the Halloween nonsense.' The fun is never ending."

Kimmy giggles again and gives me a sympathetic look. "Still trying to convince him to get in the groove for Halloween? How's it going?"

I grimace. "Let's just say that you are fortunate that Miss Rizal's staff takes care of the food court. He's about as willing

to contribute toward festivities as Dzik would be.”

“Waste of time and money is what it is,” Dzik grumbles, looming behind Kimmy as he plops my order on the counter in front of me. My eyebrows raise when he sets a large hand on her shoulder and Kimmy blushes. What’s this? New developments? “Just begging for extra lunacy around this place.”

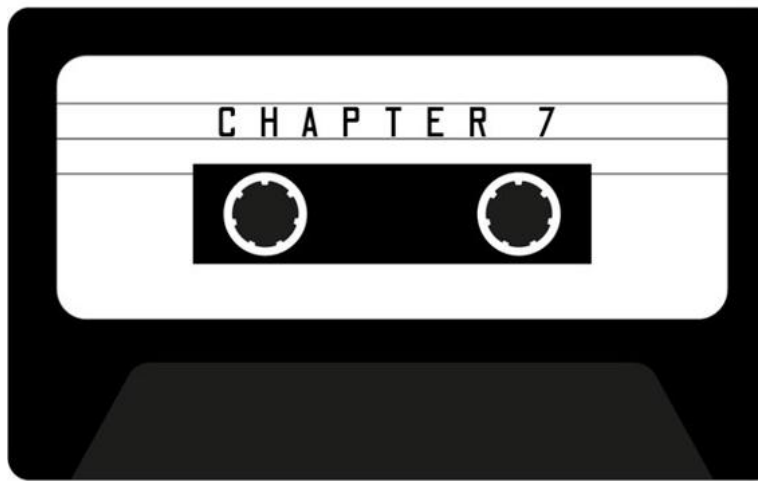
He shakes his head grimly as he stomps back toward his grill and drops unceremoniously into his chair tucked back there.

Kimmy makes a face and sighs as she grabs a soda from the cooler and cracks it open. “Point taken. Does that mean you’re throwing in the towel?”

I snort in amusement. “As if.” My gaze trails over to the clothing store kiddy corner to the food court where an employee is busily hanging up costumes on wracks at the front of the shop. My eyes land on a bright red, horned mask wearing the biggest evil grin and I brighten at the sight of it. “Actually, hold that thought. I have a great idea.”

Kimmy leans over the counter and giggles. “Good luck!”

I may need it. But does that deter me? No, it does not! Digging out cash from my pocket, I hand it to Kimmy, and with another wave goodbye, I hurry away from the food court with my order in hand. My lips curling with a wicked grin that would do Pashar proud, I make my way over to the shop, my idea blooming vividly within in my mind. This is totally going to be righteous!



PASHAR

I LOOK UP FROM MY WORK AS THE SMELL OF CORNDOGS FILL the shop, my long tongue snaking over my lips. My weaving pin, with which I stitch the nightmare to form the images into the paper, lifts from my current work and I set it down as I turn toward the door. Fanny gives me a sly smile and I notice that she has a second bag in her other hand. I give it a curious glance as she sets the takeout bag from The Good Char on the table beside me. I dismiss the bag she continues to hold as my attention rivets fully on the paper bag filled with mouth-watering food. Besides, it's not the first time she has decided to shop while on her break. The name of the clothing store is not one I've seen her with before since she usually visits, usually either Sizzling Discourse or Xolotl's Gifts whose signature brands are easy to spot, but I'm just glad she didn't make me wait too long this time for my meal.

Fishing out my corndogs, I shove the bag in her direction as I promptly open the to-go cup of mustard and set it beside my meal. I'm salivating as I dip a corndog into it and take a satisfying chomp. I purr happily and close my eyes contently as I chew. Dzik must have got a fresh batch rich with suffering. It is delicious. My eyes crack open so that I can take another bite and note that Fanny is watching me with a worryingly thoughtful look on her face as she nibbles on her own corndog. As much as I usually take considerable pleasure out of watching her eat the flesh of the damned—who knew it would be so erotic as well as incredibly satisfying?—I am put on alert by her expression.

And she's still clutching that bag. In fact, she is hugging it strangely close to her chest. Noticing the direction of my gaze, she promptly drops the bag to the floor and kicks it under the table. Like that's not suspicious. I pin her with a scowl, but she doesn't cough up an explanation. Instead, she takes a large bite of her corndog as if she hadn't just acted peculiar.

“What was that?” I growl, suspicious.

Her round, hooded eyes widen perceptively at me, and I'm distracted by the fine hair teasing the soft curve of her jawline as she glances down in the direction of the hidden bag in surprise. “Nothing. Just picked a few things up that I need.”

Giving me a particularly sweet smile, she dips her corn dog in her own little cup of mustard and takes another crunching bite followed by a delectable moan that makes my cock harden aggressively in my pants.

My eyes narrow at her, a soft growl starting in my throat. I promptly quash the sound and blank my expression when I notice the corner of her lips tilt. So, it's like that? Huffing, I turn back to my meal, refusing to be lured into whatever game

she's playing. Sometimes living with Fanny is like living with another demon—the difference is that the sort of battle I want to have with her has nothing to do with territorial skirmishes and all to do with wrestling in a mating hold while I rut her senseless.

With some effort I dislodge my brain from the route it's eagerly going down and thrust my corndog a little harder into the mustard cup than is warranted, rewarding myself with a lewd splatter of mustard everywhere, several drops of which land on Fanny's cheek. Although the color is wrong, the sight of it sprayed on her cheek and neck makes my cock jump with interest at the surge of lust that suddenly barrels through me. It doesn't get any better when she wipes a larger dab off with her fingertip and promptly sticks it in her mouth.

Hissing to myself, I hunker over my food and resume eating, refusing to look her way or make any more remarks or questions about the damn bag. She will see that Pashar is not a demon she can play with.

Three days later

I GRIT MY TEETH AND REMIND MYSELF THAT I'M HATING EVERY minute of this as I watch her put up the decorations that she somehow coaxed me into agreeing to. The damned bag still preys on my mind and Fanny is clever as a fox when it comes to using my distraction against me. It's as if she knew and was waiting for just that moment to attack as I stewed over the mystery bag that I still refuse to ask her again about. Despite that, I must grudgingly admit that she is a worthy component—one that I desire even more to wrestle and pin down to have writhing beneath me in a mating hold. My fantasies are turning

regularly to vanquishing her in the manner of courting done by nightmare demons when they find the female they desire to nest with.

I fist my cock brutally under the table as she bends low to pick up another decoration, her pert little ass swaying in time with the music pumping through the shop. This is torture, and I know torture even if that isn't entirely in my job description.

I bite back a groan as I strangle the feral part of my anatomy that is misbehaving but immediately release myself when her head turns in my direction to flash a brilliant smile at me. I usually get off on watching humans scream in terror and yet it is Fanny's smile that is currently making me want to release in my pants. I covet them to the point of being irrational jealous over any customer she smiles at. I want to stroke myself and watch my seed spray all over her while she pants and smiles ever so sweetly at the droplets coating her tits and face. My cock gives a heavy pulse and I immediately unwind my tail just enough to rapidly shove the tip down the front of my pants and curl snugly around my swollen shaft.

"What do you think?" she asks as she takes a few steps back from the window, her dark eyes shining with obvious happiness.

I'm tempted to tell her what I'm really thinking but I sink my teeth into my tongue, using the pain to refocus. The little vixen doesn't need any more help toying with me. Instead, I make an effort to tear my eyes from her and actually look at the display. A surprised grunt leaves me.

She selected several of my comics and set them out in a curious display. I also see why she insisted I drag the small table and old, velvet-upholstered chairs that I had stolen from a castle during a very brief jaunt in the 1600s. A business trip

but one that I sufficiently rewarded myself with after delivering the commissioned nightmare personally. It was a stroke of good fortune that the nobleman whose room I was kicked into had some very nice, very luxurious things. I was quite happy to make a few choice selections. Among them were those two chairs and the small ornate table sitting between them. I also recognize the gold candelabra perched in the table and several ornately carved boxes that lay open overflowing with all manner of items. The majority of them are cheap props that she acquired in the mall; the rest are very expensive ones that she took from among my belongings.

The cheek!

What they never possessed was the fake webbing that clung to them from cotton batting that I watched her patiently stretching for part of the morning. Nor the incense ash coating everything. That is going to be a nightmare to clean out of the upholstery and I wonder which fiend in the mall I have to blame for supplying her. Despite this, it looks... good. It looks exactly like a ghostly sitting room from a bygone era, complete with two plastic skeletons slouched in the chairs. Horror comic books lay strewn on the table and resting in hands or on laps. And there are more plastic spiders and bugs than I care to count.

Pulling my cock firmly against my body with my tail, I stand and wander over to get a closer look. It's actually quite impressive. And it ties both the concept of the holiday with the theme of the shop. It may even draw more customers to enjoy my nightmares. From the corner of my eye, I can see the excitement filling her. Now would be the perfect time to lie and tell her how much I hate it and just pop that joy so I can feast upon the sorrow and suffering.

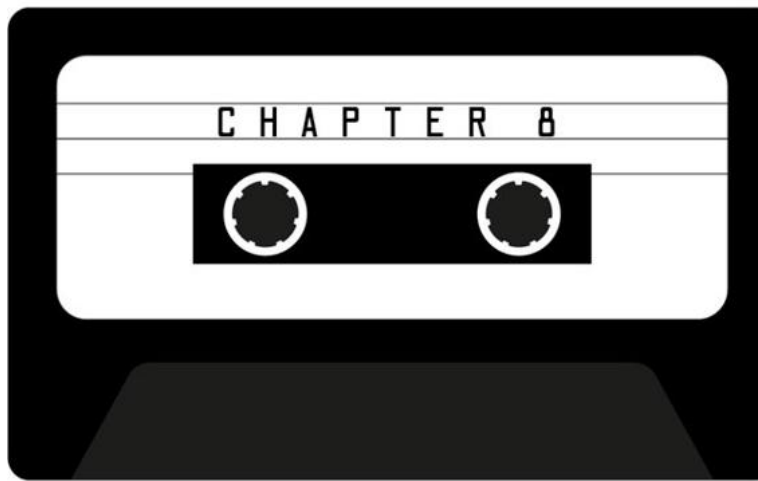
Strange how unappetizing the thought is when it comes to her. Instead of being aroused by the idea, my cock withers and my stomach lurches with distaste. Enjoy Fanny's joy—only hers. So, I grunt and nod as surly as possible.

“Looks good,” I admit.

The squeal that comes from her makes me want to slap my hands over my sensitive ears, but I don't have the opportunity because suddenly I'm being overcome by a little bundle of femininity hurdling against me. Throwing her arms around me, Fanny hugs me tight.

“I just knew you would love it!”

That's not what I said, nor what I inferred, but I like her body pressed against mine too much to correct her. My tail grips hard against my cock as the beast surges to life once more the moment I breathe in her unique scent of candy and spice. The rusty purr that rumbles from me is embarrassing and I'm just glad that there are no demons nearby to witness it or hear her soft, throaty laughter in response.



FANNY

I'M STARTING TO HATE THIS COUCH. IT WAS A DREAM TO SLEEP on for the first several nights but then that is easy when one is accustomed to sleeping in terrible conditions and always waking sore and tired in the morning. I had thought the couch was for a night or two, but it seems like the demon is planning on keeping me on it for the long term. It hadn't entirely bothered me until I caught a glimpse of Pashar's bedroom and saw exactly what sort of comfort he enjoys. If he could do all of that for himself, how hard would it be to set up something comfortable for me?

All it took was a single brief glimpse when he stepped out as I happened to be on my way to the bathroom and I've coveted it ever since. It's ridiculous that he can do all of that and not even bother to make up a reasonably comfortable guest room for me to sleep. One that doesn't make me shiver at times

while I wait for my body to warm the blankets. I know that he's a demon and this is my punishment but come on. I don't need much; it hardly seems fair to deny me an actual bed when his entire bedroom is the epitome of a den of luxury. Granted, it looks like a vampire decorated, but I like it. He could keep to his home's color scheme, austere spaces, and touches of overdone elegance, and it wouldn't bother me in the least once I moved my own brightly colored little homey touches out of the living room.

But as I have nothing but a couch, his bedroom just begs me to enter, and I have a poor ability at resisting what I want. I want to explore the entire expanse of the bed and find the coziest spot on it. There is a forbidden, naughty part of me that really wants to do it while he is stretched out bare on the bed which makes me both blush furiously and grow wet.

I'm not a virgin. That was the first of my mother's warnings of my shameful future that I practically ran headlong into. But as most men I've encountered while roving were complete pricks that I wouldn't let anywhere near my pussy, my experience hasn't exactly been copious or widely varied. In fact, until just recently, I've been pretty sure I could take or leave having a sex life of any kind. Pashar may be a complete dick and a monstrous demon of nightmares, but he's one that makes me squirm with desire the moment he drops his human disguise.

Funny. It should be the hot human look that makes me want to jump him. He certainly picked an attractive model to emulate. I discovered that quite by accident when I happened to glance at a magazine and was forced to take a second look in surprise. The model's hair was short and well-groomed and his face lacked the scruff that Pashar's human look had, but all it took was for me to squint a little and I saw it. And yet that still doesn't make me all hot and bothered. He's nice to look at, but

the real him has me curious and wanting to take a look and see what he hides in his pants.

I can't even begin to imagine what he looks like there but picturing his dark purple body and long wings stretched out over the black sheet, his long hair pooled behind him. And that tail. A soft pant leaves me as I imagine that long coil of his tail and the way it loops and twitches provocatively. Having all that between my legs and a bed with the thickest mattress I've ever seen to curl up on afterward is my most immediate and torturous fantasy.

Not that he looks at me that way. As much as I enjoy messing with his head regarding the Halloween stuff, I really wish I could actually capture his attention. I've been doing my best, but my best doesn't seem to be getting results. Even wiggling my ass in the air at every opportunity hasn't had the desired reaction. At this point, I'm pretty sure I could go tuck myself into his bed in my Hello Kitty pajamas and he wouldn't even notice.

I bite my lip and smile. He's never explicitly said that I couldn't sleep in his bed. He just told me to not dig through his things with my clumsy human hands. I have no intention of touching anything in the room but the bed... and maybe him if he doesn't object to a cuddle partner... so, what's the harm? Especially considering how surprisingly chilly his home is. Isn't this the world of demons? I imagined it would be hotter. He has to be cold as well if his bedroom is as cool as the rest of his home. I certainly can use a warm body to curl up to or at least share heat under the blankets with. While sleeping on the couch with the bedding I was given kept me at a tolerable temperature, the chance of being truly warm and comfortable sets me in motion.

I don't allow myself a moment to second-guess the questionable brilliance of my plan to worm my way into a more comfortable sleeping spot and hopefully, eventually, a certain demon's arms. Truthfully I wouldn't mind working my way into his twisted heart either. I've never met anyone that I felt such synchronicity with. It's like why are tied together by more than just the magic he has bound me with. I'm actually certain that we must be soul mates. I read about it in Cosmopolitan magazine and that is what I know I'm feeling. Our stars are aligned—or likely would be if he weren't a demon and in a completely different world than the one that humans experience. Even though I've never been outside of his home, I'm pretty certain that we are in another realm which is pretty fucking dope. I would give anything to be able to take a peek and see something of it. But first, I want a closer look at that bed and, if I'm lucky, the demon occupying it.

With a little quiet hum to myself, I slip off the couch and leave the living room, taking a hall to its very end where a large door bars entrance. The handle turns easily under my hand and the door opens with barely a whisper of sound. The room is completely black outside of the strange illumination from several mounted crystals that give off a faint glow of light. It's enough for me to see enough by so I don't hesitate to step into the room. It's lucky, too. I know from experience that they react only to magic, so I have no way to brighten them to make it safely around the room. If they had been too dim or darkened, I would have been out of luck.

Not that I can make out much detail, but I can see the dark imprint of the enormous bed and the bulk of the large demon stretched in the middle of it. Without hesitation, I tiptoe over, making as little noise as possible, and peer down at him. The rumbled fabric of the bedding is more of an impression than

anything else, but his wide, sculpted chest is hard to miss as it moves rhythmically with every breath he draws deeply into his lungs. I lean forward, noting as I do all of the empty space between his body and the edge of the bed.

I bite back a laugh. He's not going to even notice me on the bed. There is enough room to easily fit two people on either side of him. With how firm the mattress looks, and his own large bulk considerably outweighs my much smaller body, I doubt he will even feel a hint of me crawling onto the bed beside him. I just have to stay below wing level so I'm not sleeping on it. Not a problem. It will put me at an awkward crotch level but I'm not going to be paying any attention to the beast while I'm fast asleep.

Adjusting my position lower down the side of the bed, I put my knee on the edge of the mattress and pause when the wing closest to me twitches. My eyes snap from his wing to his face but when he doesn't so much as frown or make any other move but continues to breathe evenly, I slide stealthily onto the bed and drop down low on the open mattress to the left of his hip. I'm well below the bottom edge of his velvety wing and all the strange peacock feathering at its base, while still being far outside any accidental touching distance—not without a lot of starfishing going on. Curling up on my side, I wiggle into the blankets and carefully tuck them in around me. The tiniest sigh of contentment escapes me before I can smother it.

Oh, wow that's comfortable. With the weight of the bedding draped over me, I'm forced to bite back a louder sound of pleasure.

I can't, however, hold back the startled squeal that I shout when his large body suddenly goes still for a heartbeat before

his entire body moves. He is like a massive shadow engulfing me as he smoothly covers my body with his own. His hot breath stirs my hair and I swallow back my whimper. Not of fear but of desire. A flash of intense heat is rushing through me as the firm weight of his body faintly presses in against mine. It's not enough to crush me but to hold me in place beneath him. A growl vibrates between us but then he sniffs and the growl shifts, dropping down into a rattling purr. It doesn't last for more than a second before he seems to remember and it cuts off just as quickly as it started.

“What are you doing here?” he snaps, jerking me up the length of his body so that we are hip to hip rather than hip to mouth as I lay beneath him.

I give him a defiant look, put off by his attitude. It wasn't like I was trying to grope him or do anything pervy. “Don't get your tail in a twist. I'm just trying to sleep and enjoy some of this huge bed you're hogging to yourself,” I hiss back, undeterred and unwilling to back down when he has demonstrated once again—and very convincingly—that he will not hurt me, not even when taken by surprise. But it does look like playing tag with the demon will have to wait until he's a little more receptive to the idea. That's fine, for now I'll be happy just to sleep comfortably. “The couch is cold and hard. It's killing my back and I'm going to end up sick if I'm not warm enough. Besides, I'm not taking up much room. So just go back to sleep.”

“Impossible,” he huffs. “You have no sense of self-preservation if you are crawling into a demon's bed and expecting that nothing will happen except sleep.”

I go still and peer up at him, my heart galloping with excitement. “Are you going to devour me?” I whisper,

sincerely hoping he will.

Though I can't see his frown, I can feel it and notice the way his glowing eyes narrow. "Of course not," he scoffs.

The sound of it grates on my ears but I smile sweetly at him since I'm sure he can see my expression just fine.

"Wonderful. Then this shouldn't be a problem. Now scoot over and quit being a blanket hog or let me take a turn on the bed while we work out better sleeping conditions for me."

It isn't exactly what I wanted but at least I'll get the bed, and that's something. I grab a hold of the blanket wrapped around him and give it a tug. To my surprise, his hand snaps down onto it and latches on so tight that I'm unable to get more than an inch or two of fabric to budge. He rumbles in warning at me, his long tail snaking along my legs as it whips around us.

"Stop!"

His snarl falls on deaf ears because I pull harder until suddenly the blanket shifts and I'm aware of the thick bar of Pashar's arousal bearing down on me. The grunt and moan that breaks from him startles both of us and we jump, causing our bodies to crash together unexpectedly, his cock pressing against me. For a moment I forget to breathe, and he seems unable to move because I can't help but to be aware of the impressive size of his sex printing its outline against my belly. His tail swishes and curls and I'm aware of the deep shadows of his wings flexing above us.

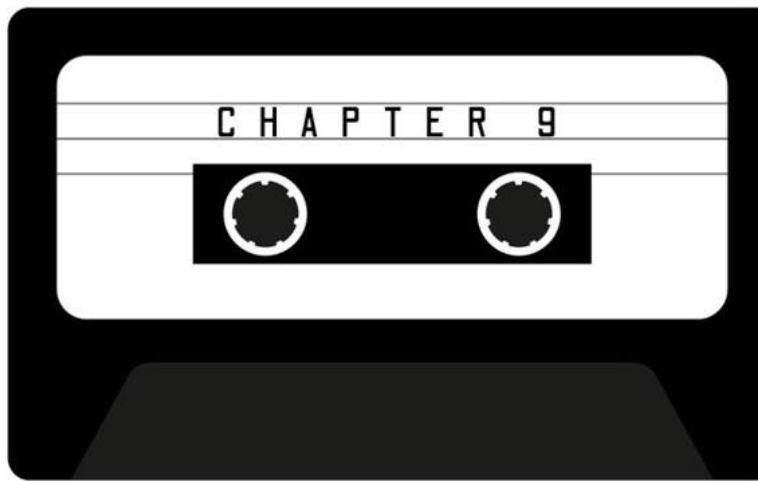
Then he's gone. Settling himself on the other side of bed, he gives his back to me, his wings twitching with annoyance.

Perhaps I pushed a little too hard but dammit I'm tired of not getting a really good night of sleep. I push up onto my side

and bite my lip as I watch the random movements of his wings. “Pashar, I...”

“Sleep,” he growls testily.

An unhappy frown pulls at my lips, but I fall back onto the mattress without another word. Thankfully, I am just as tired as I let on and although I’m disappointed that there was no mutually satisfying exploration that happened, I find that I am so comfortable that I slip quickly and easily into sleep as his tail lashes slowly around me.



PASHAR

I TAP A CLAW IMPATIENTLY ON THE COUNTERTOP AS I WATCH the human purse his lips and attempts to decide between the issues that he has brought to the counter. I want to crack his head open because I don't understand why this is happening here rather than back at the shelves where he could have returned them. He is just creating more work for Fanny, and that annoys me as much as the way he's obviously been eye-fucking her the entire time since he's entered the store. It makes me wish he had been drawn to some of the more violent nightmares on the far shelves. Unfortunately for me, the ones he chose were minimal grade nightmares that will give a rush of a chill but little else.

I scowl in disappointment at his selection as he finally slides two toward me.

“Just these, dude,” he says with a laid-back smile as his eyes slip once more toward my female.

My fingers itch with the desire to grab my weaver and quickly stab out his eyes later in the comic for looking at what’s mine—or better yet, feed him to Chewy—but I manage to restrain myself. Paperwork. I have to remember how much fucking paperwork it would be to murder a human on my vacation. The human standing in front of me is fortunate that demons are not only incredibly hierarchical in terms of power but have a fondness for complex systems of checks and balances to keep everything running as it should. Without that, not only would demons run willy-nilly everywhere as they pleased but this idiot would be dead before his body hit the floor.

“Six twenty-five,” I growl, and the moron doesn’t so much as register that I’ve spoken at all, his attention still firmly glued to Fanny’s ass while she bounces in time with the music and mists Chewy with the water bottle.

My venomous spines threaten to burst through my skin and my illusion-cloaked corethi shifting out from under my wings. I’m still debating on whether the paperwork is worth it as eyes linger on my female a little longer, but the male wisely remembers himself long enough to hand me the money.

“Oh, hey, I totally forgot why I came in here.” He chuckles to himself, brushing his hair back out of his eyes. “Do you have any Advanced Dungeons and Dragons manuals?”

“Dungeons and Dragons,” I repeat, mystified, but if the human wants to be eaten my dragons—

“You know what, I think they have those at Walbrook Books on the second floor,” Fanny interrupts.

I grind my teeth together as the male’s face lights up.

“Oh, do you play?”

She blinks, caught off-guard by his obvious enthusiasm. I eye the byplay between them, that paperwork looking more appealing by the moment, but then she gives him an apologetic grimace and it's all I can do to keep from crowing at the disappointment crashing over the male.

“No, sorry. I just wander a lot during my lunch breaks. The books caught my attention because one had a pretty gnarly dragon on the cover. It did look kind of cool though,” she rushes to add which makes him brighten a little once more to my considerable disappointment.

“Oh! You are welcome to join my group. We are a small adventuring party right now, but I heard that there was a newer manual out that I wanted to get that could add some more interesting components to our adventures. We are always looking for new players to join!”

Fanny slants me a questioning look and I know what she wants without even hearing it, and no, I say. No!

He also notes the direction of her gaze, his smile is far less enthusiastic this time. “You can both come. It will be great. Here, let me just write down where we are meeting and when. It's just right here in the mall. We rent out a party room on the second floor for a few hours once every other week to go on our quests.

Quests? This guy has to be kidding me. Unfortunately, Fanny's eyes gleam with interest as he begins going into detail while he writes of some of their latest adventures. Sitting back in my chair I snort silently to myself, hating the way that has clearly ensnared my female's attention while I fume. Chewy clearly doesn't like it either—or she is keying into my mood after all

these months sharing space with me in this shop—and several tendrils sneak toward the male with obvious intended avarice.

My lips curl in a wicked smile as I watch them slide over the floor, the struggle with my hatred for paperwork being overcome by my sheer loathing for the human flirting with *my* human. Fanny's eyes flick to me and her brows furrow slightly. I tear my eyes away from the approaching vines and grin at her, but it seems that I wasn't quick enough because she quickly looks over and her mouth drops open for a full five seconds before she suddenly pushing the customer toward the door, his back of comics books clutched to his chest.

“You know, what, we will think about it. It sounds like a real blast. You should definitely grab that manual because it does sound like it will add some pretty bitchin' stuff to your game. You should probably head up to Walbrooks if you want a chance to really look around before they close,” she says rapidly as she steers the human toward the door.

He doesn't even notice the plant's vine trailing after him, his infuriatingly infatuated smile fastened on Fanny the entire time as he listens to her chatter at him.

Besotted twit is going to get himself eaten. I cackle to myself as I lean forward, eager to see the moment when they strike. A quick glance behind her, Fanny picks up her pace and manages to stay ahead of them long enough until they come to a frustrated stop just short of the door. Her entire posture relaxes and she shoots a scolding look to both Chewy and me as she pats the human on the shoulder and waves after him as he trots like an obedient little mutt toward the escalator that will take him to the second floor.

I give Chewy a sympathetic look. “Foiled.”

“Very funny,” Fanny grumbles as she steps back into the store. Chewy’s vines slide along her legs.

I watch with interest as they seem to curl in tiny little affectionate coils against her skin. I’ve never heard of a malcante plant bonding with anything other than its mate. Unlike non-sentient plants within the nightmare realm, malcantes pair bond, despite having both female and male reproductive parts. In fact, they spend a significant portion of their early life cycle seeking out a desirable mate—which usually ends up being a pain in the ass when they do because then they start breeding and there is often an infestation that has to be dealt with if the offspring don’t disperse quickly enough. If I didn’t know better, I would be convinced that Chewy had chosen a mate. The tentative curls of her vines are not unlike the testing pats that the malcantes give each other to demonstrate interest and then affection.

Fanny doesn’t shrug them off, which makes me wonder how long this has been going on outside of my notice. Picking up the spray bottle once more, she returns to spraying Chewy’s massive fronds and my eyes narrow suspiciously as more vines and fronds reach for her as if wanting to enjoy even the briefest contact.

Like hell! First thing upon closing I’m going to do what I should have done when I first realized that the malcante plant had followed me here but had been too lazy to do—I’m going to boot Chewy out of my shop and someplace very, very far from my den. The thing has been a damned nuisance, but this is the last straw! I’m sure as hell not sharing my female with a plant either!

What if she has bonded to the human?

I palm my face, digging my claws in just enough to deliver a small amount of pain beneath my scales as I hiss in frustration. If Chewy has attached herself to Fanny, it will actually cause problems to separate them. I'm pretty sure I won't be devastated if Chewy died pining away, but if she has bonded that means she has likely already injected Fanny with her venomous barbs. One hand this will extend Fanny's life way beyond a normal human which is a plus since I'm in no hurry to let my human go, but without regular venom from Chewy specifically it will do the opposite and cause Fanny to waste away within a matter of weeks.

To the fiery pits with it!

"You know, it could be fun if we go," Fanny says conversationally as she opens a box tucked behind the counter and retrieves one of the mice she bought from Twisted Whisker.

"Go where?" I suspiciously ask as I watch her toss the rodent to the plant quivering with jubilation at the sight of its meal.

If she expects me to take her around the nightmare realm, she can think again. It is not a safe place for a human to be mucking around.

Rolling her eyes, she fetches another mouse from the box. "To the game, of course. It could be fun exploring imaginary worlds. I mean—that's kind of what you do here, right?"

I scowl at the comparison. "It's not the same. Although," I grin slowly and lean back in my chair once more, "it could be entertaining," I admit. "I could spin such a nightmare that it will take their 'immersion,' to a whole new level of—"

"Never mind," she interrupts with a laugh, tossing the second rodent to Chewy's snapping pods. "Forget that I asked. I think

their game is immersive enough for them.”

I grin lazily, my wings flexing playfully beneath my glamour though she can't see it. “I can always just kick them into the nightmare realm and watch them scream.”

Shaking her head, she picks up the spray bottle and spritzes me like a misbehaving cat before resuming Chewy's daily misting. My uproarious laughter fills the comic book store. I've never enjoyed a vacation so much. The seed planted within my mind from Chewy's bonding to my female grows rapidly and I'm suddenly very certain that I don't want this to end. And thanks to Chewy's bizarre mating instinct, now I don't have to. I never told her when I would release her. There were no promises made—and now, it would be unethical to do so since she will need Chewy to survive. Sooner or later, I will have her in the nightmare realm with me and then I can test the waters of allowing her to venture out with me, but until then I'm determined to enjoy the reprieve... and my female.

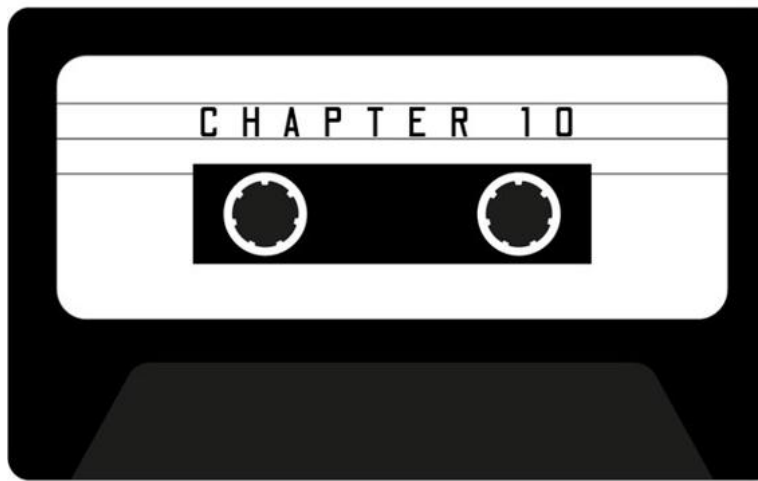
Nightmare demons don't like others in our territories or dens. We don't even actively look for a mate. But once our mate comes along, we are possessive fuckers who are so attached to our mates that it's no wonder that we fuck enough offspring into being to compensate for the majority who never mate at all. Of course, a human can't carry a demon offspring, no matter what their movies say—Fanny recounting the plot of *The Omen* to me being probably one of the most ludicrous things I've ever heard—but a human never stays human long when they are mated to a demon.

Sooner or later, they change, and I'm fascinated to see what changes eventually come. Because we are going to mate. Right now, it is merely delayed while I enjoy this little courting

game we now play ever since she snuggled into bed with me and pulled out my heart with her little hands.

But it won't last for much longer. My testicles are heavy and full and my cock in a constant state of arousal while the venom in my fangs leaks continuously. Soon we will rut, and the first true hit of essence will flood into her with my seed.

And it will be glorious.



FANNY

PASHAR'S CHEST MOVES BENEATH MY CHEEK, AND I YAWN widely as his wing unfurls from around me, letting in the dim light from the crystals. I don't bother moving just yet since his tail is still lashed tightly around my middle. It's kind of cute. He never admits that enjoys having me cuddled in this great big bed with him, but I can tell. Even that first night, I wasn't in bed with him for more than a few minutes before his tail wrapped around me. What started with his tail had rapidly progressed from there. Now, the moment I crawl into bed, his tail is sliding around my waist to tug me to him as his arms and wings pin me against him.

Some might find it frightening to be pinned completely against a demon, but I really enjoy it. His heat radiates through me all night and I've never felt safer than I do when his bulk is surrounding me in every conceivable way. It makes me feel

loved and appreciated just for being me. In the dark bedroom at night, there is nothing else but me and him curled up close, raw in the most basic of ways as we find comfort and pleasure. And Pashar holds me as if I'm the most important thing in the world to him that, even in sleep, he can bare to let go of.

It makes me wonder whether the tight leash he likes to have on me at the mall is just him getting a thrill from trying to punish me—which, if that's the case, the joke is on him—or because he likes having me tied to him. That it comforts him knowing that I can't be removed from his side.

So... yeah... it's cute.

Scooting up in his grip as much as I can, I press my lips on his large jaw, marveling at the softness beneath my lips despite its brutal appearance. A rumble escapes him and one yellow eye cracks open and slides over to peer down at me. His massive, clawed grips the back of my night shirt and I giggle when he hauls me effortlessly on his enormous chest. His width is so much greater than mine that my arms can't even close around his sides to touch the bed. His tail slides up my inner thigh and I squirm, enjoying the way his half-stiffened cock rears up and thumps my ass as a deep groan shakes him.

Pushing myself up onto my forearms braced against his torso, I smile at him and wiggle a little against his shaft so that the already wet head of his cock is rubbing against me. His eyes slit as he watches me and his big hand presses against the small of my back, holding me in place as his hips rock up against me. If not for his hand, I probably would have fallen off him with the way his body rolled beneath mine. My tongue slides over my lips with excitement.

“What are you doing, Fanny?” His deep growl vibrates through me, lighting me up like a pinball machine.

I gasp and press against his thick length, suddenly hating my cute pajamas. They don't do anything to disguise his massive erection, but it frustrates my need to feel the full intensity of his cock rubbing against my pussy. And they just get in my way. Of course, he is as naked as ever but it's not like I'm any closer to catching a peek at that monster. Somehow Pashar always gets to bed before me and the lighting cast low enough that I've never seen him though the lighting has never been such to allow me to take a good look at what he's got between his legs. Whatever it looks like, it has girth and contours for ages. I shiver as he immediately thrusts up against me, introducing me to several protrusions that run along his length that I can feel but can't see.

"I asked you a question," he grumbles, and I lift my head to give him a mischievous smile as a fresh wave of lust sends a pleasurable haze over my vision.

Those eyes. They are so bright that they penetrate me. Hell, I want him to penetrate me and not just threaten it with his unhinged stare full of arousal. I'm sure I look like a doped kitten the way I'm scraping my fingernails languidly against his chest but damn he does this to me way too easily. The flutter of excitement within my belly just gets bigger with every movement of his big body beneath mine shuttling the thick head of his cock against my entrance.

"I think it's pretty obvious," I point out with a lust-addled smirk.

A deep groan rumbles hollowly through him and his straining cock pushes harder. "Temptation. You are playing with fire. Were you never told to not play with demons, little girl?"

"I know what I want," I whisper as I stroke my tongue against the thick muscle of his chest.

His skin shivers beneath my mouth, his breath panting as he continues to lift his hips, thrusting against me, grinding against my pajamas—defiling Hello Kitty in ways that just delight me. Every stroke hits my clit, making my whimper as I cling to him.

His other hand grips my hips as he begins to rock faster and harder against me, bucking and straining between my legs as I'm brought down against him in time with his every thrust. A trembling spark lights within me and begins to burn brighter and brighter as he grunts beneath me. I wiggle in his hold, needing more but the hot brush of his tail against my back makes me grow still with anticipation. Even my breath stops as I feel it slide into my pajama bottoms. I expect him to use his tail to pull them off me, but he doesn't.

His sinuous, slick tail slides between my ass cheeks, dropping lower until it brushes my entrance and parts the lips swollen with arousal so that it can glide between them. It is a deliberately slow sensation that is confusing when his cock is battering at my clit. The tip of his tail brushes the bottom of it, curling and thrumming as his cock grinds against me. I make a choked sound in my throat at the conflicting sensations. I feel as if my breath, heart, and soul are all being stolen at the same time I cling to Pashar and gasp. That gasp turns into squeal when his tail suddenly slides just enough to reposition itself against the mouth of my pussy and press deep as his tail sinks into me.

His yellow eyes burn up at me he rocks me onto his tail and against his cock. "Come for me, little pet. Come, now," snarls as his tail presses up against the most sensitive part of my channel as his cock shuttles violently against me.

I explode into a thousand starry fragments, my pussy gripping and dragging on it with its pulsing squeeze. I can tell that Pashar likes it because he rumbles triumphantly, picking up the pace and stroking his long tongue along my neck between sucking nips of the skin there while I tremble against him like a butterfly pinned to a board. My orgasm threatens to shake my bones into dust and I'm crying out against him, my fingernails digging into his scales as I anchor myself through the storm of sensations crashing through me.

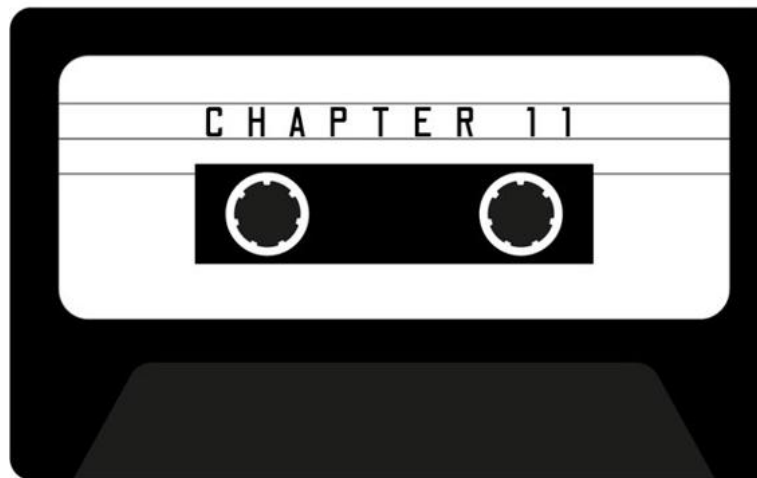
My mouth gaping, I strain against his hold, my breasts pressing against his chest, and I arch into him, pressing myself more firmly against his dual instruments of pleasure. I gasp and moan with the tiniest of whimpers as his tail begins to plunge in and out of me in time with the savage rocking of his hips. His growls and grunts are becoming deeper, his muscles bunching beneath me as we rock together. Being rammed by both his cock and his tail, it doesn't take me long to come apart again, my orgasm burning bright as it combusts and shoots through me. This time, however, Pashar's big body stiffens beneath mine and I can feel his swollen cock jerk sharply against my pussy, making me see stars as I feel the intense heat of his cum splatter against the soaked crotch of my pajamas, baptizing Hello, Kitty with sweet, creamy musky of his cum.

Poor Kitty. The wrong kitty got all that goodness.

I drop down slack against him and his grip lightens so that his hands stroke over my back and bottom, a deep, resinous purr rattling from his chest. His tail remains firmly lodged within my pussy for several minutes, allowing me quiver and clench repeatedly on it unless the last of my pleasure finally subsides and I shiver with a soft moan as he pulls it wetly from my body.

“Good girl,” he croon-growls into my hair, and I smile breathlessly against his chest.

I don't know if I'm any kind of a good anything, but I sure as hell got my treat. And I can't wait for my fill of many more come Halloween.



PASHAR

ALTHOUGH THIS IS MY FIRST HALLOWEEN IN THE MALL, I CAN already tell that it's going to be trouble as the day draws nearer. A small group of young vampires slink nearer to my shop with their eyes lit up with mischief. I assume that they think Fanny and I are easy pickings but the moment I let out a true growl they stop warily just outside the entrance of my shop and peer at me uncertainly.

Whatever thoughts of devilry that they have considered carrying out at my expense quickly leaves their minds as they quickly drop back and hurry with preternatural speed from my shop's entrance.

“You do realize that the whole point of the Trick or Treat Street is that we won't be scaring the kids, right?” Fanny wryly points out as she pours an obscene amount of sugary treats from a bag into an enormous bowl decorated with

various smiling ghouls and witches printed around the outside of it.

“I promised nothing.” I make sure to add an extra surly growl to my statement. “Besides a bunch of young, rabble-rousing vampires is the last thing anyone needs cruising through here. You are more the sort of sweet that they are looking to nibble on—not what’s in that bowl of yours.”

“You really say the sweetest things Pashar, but don’t worry I don’t have eyes for any other creature of the night but you.”

Her giggle fills the shop and I find my own lips tipping in a begrudging smile in response, my hard heart warming like that foul pumpkin pie she returned with the other day. Soft, warm, probably slimy—and utterly smitten with the little human female.

“Just keep it that way,” I grumble. “A vampire filled with human blood from their recent snack makes an even worse mess to clean up.”

Less paperwork, though, thank the demonic overlords.

She shakes her head at me, her eyes sparkling with amusement. “You do recall that we do have vampiric patrons of the mall—even a whole shop that caters to them.”

“An excellent idea,” I retort sarcastically. “It makes the food court lines a lot shorter when they can pick off their buffet from the humans wandering the mall before they can congest The Good Char. I hate lines,” I mutter.

Fanny rolls her eyes, a soft snicker escaping her as she heads over to tend to Chewy. “I’ll have you know that Damon and Max are not only way cool, but they also treat their employee Star well—as in, you know she actually gets paid.”

Leaning back in my chair, my irritation with the bloodsuckers vanishes as I smirk over at her. “With as much shopping as you do with my coin, I can safely say that you are being more than adequately compensated, thief. Do not worry. I have nothing against blood suckers. They provide a good service so long as they aren’t looking to nibble off what’s mine.”

She grins over her shoulder at me, but her face suddenly contorts with surprise and pain as she hisses and snaps the side of her hand up to her lips. “Ouch, shit!”

I stand abruptly, concern rippling through me—and apparently my illusion at the way her eyes suddenly widen at me and then dart to the door. Right. Drawing in a deep breath and expelling it, I wrestle my control back into place as I stomp over to her and tug her hand away from her mouth.

“What happened?” The growl is barely out of my mouth when I see the telltale red barb from Chewy’s vine sticking deep into the side of her palm. Or what’s left of it. It has already begun deteriorating and finishes the promises within a heartbeat, right before my eyes. There was no maybe about it. It was exactly as I thought. I rub my finger over the spot and glance up at her. “Does it hurt?”

A look of surprise crosses her face, but it is quickly replaced with a pleased smile as she tucks in closer to my side. “It stung a bit, but it’s not the first time. Sometimes she just gets a little over excited when I’m misting her.”

“Yeah... right. Chewy has not done that to anyone before,” I bluntly inform her. As content as she seems to be with me, she has always erroneously believed that her life would eventually go back to normal. The time for playing games is now done with reality laying all the cards on the table. “I’ve had dozens

of human and non-human employees and the most she's tried to do is eat them. She *likes* you," I emphasize slowly.

Fanny blinks. "Oh. Well, I like her, too. She is a pretty wicked little plant."

"No." A heavy sigh like the bellows of a demonic forge leave me. "With demons and entities for our world, it is not so casual. She is bonding with you. How many times have you been pricked by her?"

Fanny shrugs. "I don't know. Once a day since shortly after I started."

"Yeah, that would about do it," I mutter, both annoyed at how slick the malcante carried out its intentions, and absurdly pleased by it. "So, there's good news and bad news about that."

"Oh? Okay, hit me with the good news first," she replies with a grimace as she turns her hand in mind to inspect the red wound already fading from her hand.

I grin evilly. "Your servitude can now last for centuries."

She jerks in surprise and laughs. "Okay, how exactly is that good news?"

"Well, it is for me," I grumble in an attempt to sound annoyed. "There is plenty more work I can get out of you when I've got centuries to space it out. Besides, you've gotten under my scales and skin like a hell-fly maggot chewing its way to feast on my heart and entrails," I admit in a gruff voice.

A thoughtful look crosses her face, her brows furrowing slightly. "Is that gnarly demon way of saying that you love me?"

I grunt, exasperated. "It's what I said, isn't it?"

The smile that lights her face is like the dawn that steals all dreams. It steals my breath and my heart every time and that moment especially as she flings her arms around me, nearly tipping us over since I still remain somewhat crouched beside her. My wings snap and flare wide and I nearly lose all control over my illusion as her warmth and scent surrounds me in a wonderful cloud of bliss. If this is what dreams are, then I guess I can tolerate one—because there is no better dream than Fanny.

Tail slipping up around her waist, I curl my arms and wings around her as my corethi skates gently over her as they descend from my wings. My arms tighten when she attempts to draw back, my wings rustling in warning so that she laughs and playfully swats at them. I loosen my grip just enough to peer down at her as one of my corethi slides against her cheek, leaving a smidgeon of dust in its wake. A hint of my magic, already seeping into her bit by bit with every touch.

“This is absolutely wild, and I totally love, like, so much, but I have to tell you a secret—” she grins, “I don’t have a clue how I suddenly have centuries just because of Chewy stabbing me. Or what this even means for us.”

“Ah. Right. Details. Chewy has bonded with you. Normally it’s something malcante plants do when they mate—”

“Oh man, please don’t tell me a plant thinks I’m her mate!” Fanny moans and slumps, her forehead smacking hard against my chest.

I scowl down at my beloved flesh-eating parasite of my heart, somewhat worried by her pained grimace that she might have cracked her skull on the bony plating that runs beneath my skin there. Lifting her face, I rub a finger over her brow,

inspecting it carefully. Once I'm reassured that everything is intact as it should be, I sigh.

"Of course not. You don't have the right sort of equipment for her to even want to make the attempt. But she has made the unusual decision to bond with you for whatever reason. To be honest she probably sees you as her offspring that she's decided to keep within her nest," I mutter, giving the malcante a suspicious glower.

If that thing even tries to take a bite of me for touching my female, I will pop off her heads so that she will have to suffer a restrictive diet for months while they slowly grow back again. Thankfully, Chewy not only seems content but quite pleased with herself as her fronds ruffle and her vines slink around her and us in obvious delight. Fanny giggles at the display until I touch her chin and turn her head so that she's once again meeting my eyes.

"This bonding means that she has envenomated you. It connects your life-force to hers more quickly than I ever could," I concede. "I can't magically halt your aging the way her bonding venom does, as a demon I can only corrupt your humanity until after a great many years—decades most likely—you finally transform and shed it to be who you are meant to be."

She looks up at me, her big, wide-set eyes staring in the dark abyss of my soul. For whatever reason she finds me pleasing, I cannot complain, I can only hope that she will find the same pleasing in herself as well when the changes come.

"I won't be human anymore?"

"No," I rumble in agreement. "It is the price for being with me." I grit my teeth, hating the fact that she might try to refuse me. "Object all you want, but even if you don't mate with me

and don't change, you can't escape me. You need Chewy now that you've become envenomated. You need each other, and I have to keep her here under my supervision. You can rail and scream—”

“Pashar, shut up,” Fanny laughs, pressing her finger against my lips. “I love you too. And what I'm hearing here is that what Chewy did is ultimately a pretty awesome gift. I'm not going to be a hag when I finally change—which is kind of a relief. If I have an eternity to spend with anyone, I would much rather be hot when it happens.”

“And the change doesn't scare you?” I narrow my eyes on her, not quite believing my female.

She giggles and tucks her sweet little body against mine. “Please. I get to become some badass demonic creature. That is legit wicked as fuck. Being human is overrated. I want to explore all possibilities. So long as I can remain hot,” she adds, tilting her head to squint up at me. “I will stay hot, right?”

Chuckling, I kiss the tip of her adorable little nose. “You will look mostly as you do now, thanks to Chewy... just accentuated with whatever gifts the change gives you.”

“Wicked,” she breathes against my scales. “And how do we get this things started?”

I peer down at her, a strange ball of emotion squeezing my throat. “When we mate and I introduce my own venom into you, it will begin the process.”

Her eyes slit contently, a pleased smile spreading across her face. “And can I pick when we mate?”

“I...uh... sure,” I grumble, my own eyes narrowing on her as I lean in close. “What do you have in mind.”

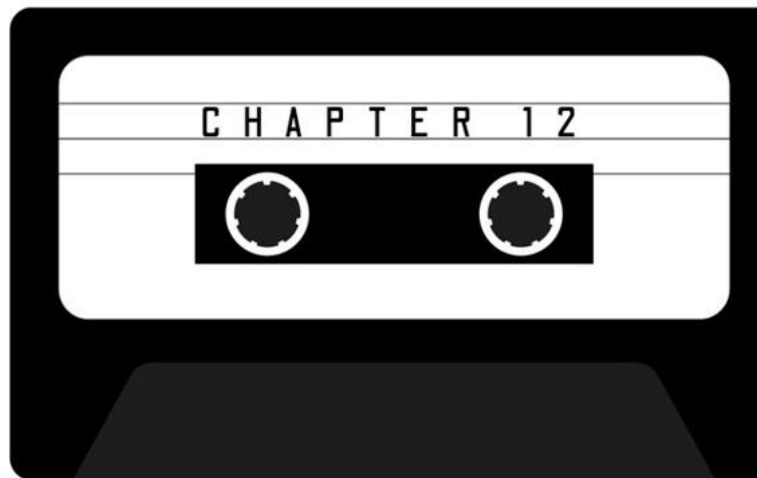
Her little pert tongue slips out from between her lips to flick my mouth and I nearly groan with the pleasure of it.

“Halloween night. The Witching hour. Let’s really get magical for our first night of forever,” she whispers.

Tomorrow night. I tremble with happiness as I hug her close to me. I was almost afraid that she would ask years from me just to playfully watch my squirm. It pleases me that my mate is as eager for me as I am for her. The game of torture, of master and servant are coming to an end. All of the games are done. All except one.

“Now tell me what’s in that infernal bag?” I growl.

Her laughter bursts out and I have a feeling there is one last game still that she is determined to wait to play out.



FANNY

“No. ABSOLUTELY NOT.” PASHAR GROWLS IN OFFENSE though he meekly sits before me as I adjust his costume.

“Come on, don’t be like that. You promised to cooperate. You wanted to know what was in the bag, after all,” I sing out in reminder as I adjust the cheesy, plastic red devil mask on his face. With his cartoon-like appearance and wide smile, it is just the thing that my demon needs.

“It is insulting to demons everywhere,” he complains. “It’s stupid.”

“It’s not stupid. You look great,” I rush to assure him. “Look at it this way, you can be a demon and not only not terrify every human in the mall but give the fake impression of being friendly and approachable to the children with minimal effort.”

“I will be mocked by demons everywhere,” he hisses, but I huff in amusement at that.

“Oh quit. It’s a family appropriate costume that you can hide behind. What more do you want? I’m dressed up, too,” I point out, gesturing with my gloved hand at the small red demon horns attached to the red headband on my head that somewhat match the paint coating my face.

“It’s not the same at all,” he grumbles. “You are just wearing color and soft horns. If you are going to torture me, why not provide me the same costume?”

“I suppose you didn’t catch the part about looking approachable,” I reply dryly. “I love you, Pashar, but your idea of looking friendly will frighten small children which is the opposite of what we are trying to do. Besides you left all the Halloween prep stuff up to me since you didn’t want to deal with it—and this is what you got. So just relax. Besides, who is going to see you to tell, anyway?”

“What in Satan’s twisted bowels...” a deep voice booms and I wince as I practically feel Pashar’s annoyance hit the roof with Dzik’s bark of laughter. “That is quite a costume, Pashar,” he chokes out as Kimmy tips her head back and gives the big male a pinched look.

“I think it’s cute,” she says, doing her best to be helpful.

“Oh, it is,” Dzik agrees, his smile growing eviler by the minute.

The exchange hits its mark and my demon glares, his glowing eyes spitting furiously at Dzik as they narrow dangerously behind the plastic smiling face.

“Shouldn’t you be perched over your hell pit?” Pashar shoots back from behind the mask.

Dzik just chortles, his loud laughter carrying far enough to draw several curious gazes in passing.

“Oh, we haven’t opened yet,” Kimmy chirps cheerfully, her eyes shining as she peers around the shop. “Dzik’s just taking me around because I wanted to see what everything looks like before we get busy. This looks great! Like the haunted mansion of some sorcerer whose demons are on the loose,” she adds.

I smile in response, delighted with the compliment. I have to admit, I did a good job. In addition to the display at the front, the inside of the shop is littered with fake spiders, plastic pumpkins and grinning wicked witches along the displays and hanging from the ceiling.

“I just do not know why I have to wear anything,” Pashar grumbles. “I can simply adjust my illusion if I must do this.”

“Where’s the fun in that?” I challenge as I pick up the floppy fabric demon tail and give his denim-clad lower body a thoughtful look.

Although it takes a very large size to accommodate his frame, I’m glad that he at least wears real clothing and merely adjusts its appearance for the sake of his illusion. Given how monstrously huge his true form is, I’m actually gratified by the fact that he can compress himself enough so that his size beneath his illusion is more along the lines of just a really big man. It all makes my job with this much easier. Plucking up a safety pin, I circle my finger in the air with a sweet smile until he begrudgingly gets up from his chair and turns to present his backside to me, his arms crossing over his chest. Dzik ignores his warning glare and laughs harder at my demon’s indignation. Even Kimmy can’t quite hold her giggle in as I

pin that tail right above where his actual tail is concealed within his pants.

It looks really tiny on him as it flops and dangles with his every movement, not even reaching his knees. He gives it a disgusted look, missing Kimmy's apologetic smile as she waves goodbye and practically hauls the snickering demon out with her to see more of the mall. The trickle of activity is slow, but soon customers are pouring through, many of them stopping to admire the decorations. Because it's hours yet until Trick or Treat Street is underway, for now I don't bother opening the bags of candy I have stashed behind the counters. I attend to my usual work, my fake tail swinging behind me as I walk. It must be as distracting visually as it is wearing it because more than once I catch Pashar watching it with obvious interest. It makes me wonder what it would be like to really have a tail. If I did, how would it feel to have him grab it and give it a tug?

Does he like his tail pulled? I bite my lip as I consider curling my fingers on the base of his long, thick tail and yanking on it. Maybe I will give it a try and see.

As if sensing my thoughts, Pashar looks up from the art he's carefully creating and enchanting. His true eyes glow brighter from behind his illusion, and I feel an answering heat rise within me. We've been fooling around quite a bit, working up to the main event, and man am I ready. I've been aching to feel the length of his cock pushing into me. The lack of penetration is the only thing that has helped Pashar keep his fangs—and subsequently, venom—to himself. As tempting as it is to just go for the gold and enjoy it, I really want it to be the best end to the spookiest day of the year. Finish off the holiday in an extra special way.

How many girls can say that they spent their Halloween mating a demon?

I give Chewy a giddy smile as I feed and water her. With a fond pat to one of her vines I continue on my usual route around the shop, straightening here and there, cashing customers out when there's nothing that requires my immediate attention so that Pashar can continue to work. We make a good team in every way. Granted, there are a few tense moments when a few flirtatious comments regarding my costume make my demon straighten in his chair, emanating pure violence, but I make it a point then to hurry them along and out of the shop before Pashar explodes. Despite that, I'm enjoying myself and don't even mind the fact that I have to touch up my makeup after lunch to repair the small smears around my mouth. Or that the thick goop itches unpleasantly. It's all worth it, especially when the first stream of Trick or Treaters arrives.

Although he grumbles, Pashar doesn't object when I move his stool from behind the counter to the corner just outside the entrance. Instead, he picks up the enormous bowl of candy and lowers himself onto the stool as I dole out the treats to the kids who, with a little encouragement from their parents and more than a little cajoling from me as well at times, hesitantly make their way to him with wide eyes.

From the first dutifully rumbled "Happy Halloween" from my demon and his deep chuckle at their sudden awe-filled gasps, my already conquered heart melts a little more. Especially when he goes the extra mile for the littlest among them, I acknowledge as I watch a little girl who can't be any older than four warily approach us, her hand tucked into her brother's hand as they follow behind a stream of older kids.

Dressed all in pink like a fairy, she gives Pashar an uncertain look and appears to be on the verge of tears as a little boy dressed as a skeleton walks her up to us. I wiggle my fingers at her and give her a cheerful smile, but her gaze is fastened entirely on Pashar looming on his chair like a vulture on a perch. Although having him sit on his stool brings him a little closer to the level of the kids trick or treating, he is admittedly still huge. So much so that I'm pretty sure she doesn't even see me.

"Come on, Sally," the boy murmurs. He sighs and throws back his head with a groan when she whimpers. "Don't cry. It's Halloween, remember? People are just in costumes. And look, he's got that big bowl of candy. You want some, right? Let me show you, it's simple." Striding forward, he holds his bag. "Trick or Treat."

Pashar rumbles in approval, keeping it lower than usual so that it doesn't spook the little one too much as I fetch a small handful of candy from the bowl and toss it into the kid's sack. He turns to the little girl with a triumphant look. "See. Just like that."

As if on cue, Pashar shakes the bowl in her direction so that the little foiled wrapped pieces rustle together. Her tiny teeth sink into her bottom lip, but she nods and moves closer. Blinking rapidly, she holds up her little bag.

"Twick o Tweat," she lisps in a very little voice, her eyes like saucers in her head.

"Happy Halloween, brave little pixie," my demon murmurs, his voice pitched low in a soft purring sound as her bottom lip wobbles.

She blinks again, her lashes spiky with her unshed tears as she regards him with surprise as he continues to purr. Gradually,

the corners of her lips tip and a tiny, watery giggle escapes her. “Just like kitty,” she observes.

Pashar nods solemnly. “All the best monsters are,” he assures her. “And all the best do a little magic... just for special pixie princesses.”

Wait, what? I give him a confused look, but he frees one of his hands from the side of the bowl and curls it low in the air between them, spinning shadows and a pearly gray mist gathering between his fingers and palm as tiny fairy lights spring up to zip around before dancing merrily around his hand. Her little mouth gapes open and she leans in closer. The lights make little bell-like sounds as they rise up to her, their soft glow illuminating her face and shimmering on her eyes.

I’m pretty sure I am gaping a little as well as I watch the interaction between them. Pashar is always so utilitarian about his skills. There is nothing visible to see outside of his art when he is working on a new comic, and his glamour settles around him instantaneously without a lot of fanfare. This is honestly the most show I’ve ever seen from him and the fact that he’s doing it for a frightened little girl her first time Trick or Treating is the cutest thing ever. His gaze shifts, his eyes eating mine and I swear I see a hint of amusement in those glowing depths that makes me want to screw my face up and stick my tongue at him to show him that I’m definitely not impressed. It would be a lie, but I would do it. Except that it would also draw attention to what he’s doing and it’s obvious that it is meant to be a small thing just for her as her brother digs through his bag.

I give myself a hard mental shake, grab a big handful of candy, and drop it into her bag. The fairy lights are immediately forgotten and wink out of existence as her head drops to

investigate her loot. A happy squeal leaves her, and she runs over to show her brother her score, or shop left behind as the children hurry off to their next stop. My demon stares after them for a moment until he realizes that he's still purring, and the sound cuts off like an engine.

"Not a word of this to anyone," he grumbles before levying a menacing growl towards a group of teens dressed who grin with delight in response.

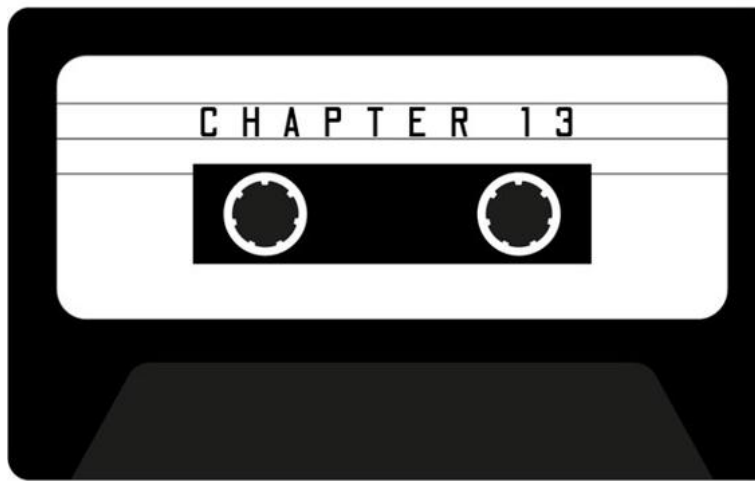
"Of course," I murmur. "A demon enjoying Halloween would be just terrible."

"I'm not enjoying it," he denies, but I smirk at the blatant lie in his voice. "Experts say that sugar gives nightmares, so I'm just fueling them and prepping them for their nightmare demons."

What a bunch of bull crap. I bite back a laugh because we both know he would do nothing of the sort if he truly believed that.

"Absolutely. It can't be for any other reason. If it was, what would the other demons say?"

The look he gives me as they rush away with their candy is one that promises the best kind of retribution. A punishment I definitely mean to collect.



PASHAR

I AM GLAD WHEN WE ARE FINALLY ABLE TO CLOSE UP. Although I refuse to admit it to my mate, the festivities were surprisingly enjoyable, especially seeing the children weaving their little fantasies all around them as they raced through the mall in their various costumes. As a nightmare demon I was able to see the trails of those subtle magics and I gently tease them into the right direction so that they sleep well and explore their little adventures in the dream world fearlessly. Something else I refuse to admit if my mate catches on, but I wager she already suspects some of my softness. She keeps it to herself, but I see it in her knowing smile as we go about our routine, closing up the shop.

I pull off my mask and set it on the counter, happy to be rid of it. It takes a little more work to unpin the tail, but that soon joins it. I consider tossing the ugly thing into the garbage bin

but I look down at the costume and shake my head. Humans masquerading as demons. It seems bizarre to me but then perhaps not so much as I recall more than one devilish mask during the Carnevale in Venice even in the midst of the plague. I had worn one myself, I recall, before I traveled south to Florence. I had stolen it from a vendor and worn it out of mockery as I laughed at the ridiculousness of masquerading in something so close to my true form as I frolicked among the humans. Boldly revealing the truth as I wandered among the company of many others similarly masked in the hope of going unnoticed by the rampaging evil, unaware of actual demons in their midst.

Although the time of year is wrong, staring down at the mask brings it to mind. That previous mask I had tossed into a fire, chortling with amusement but with little other thought for the mask itself. I had not thought of it for some time. Strange that the memory returns so sharply to me now when, in contrast to this Halloween, that carnival bore no true delight for me. This mask is a pale, ridiculous imitation of the artfully crafted masks I wore before and yet this time, I do not wish to throw it away. It is a novel feeling for me as I'm seldom one to keep mementos.

I believe that this one I shall keep.

Picking up my bag, I slide my work into it and follow with my supplies and tools before at last slipping the mask in with them all. Dropping the bag back onto the table, I don't bother to pick up the cloth tail that falls to the floor. Instead, I head over to the entrance and pull down the grating, my gaze straying to my mate, and her little fake tail swinging behind her, as she bends to clean up a mess. Lust hammers through me at the sight of her pert bottom rising into the air, even with that ridiculous tail attached to it, and a smirk curls my lips as I drag

the grating down the rest of the way to the floor and lock it into place. With a final shake to make sure that it's secure, I abandon the entrance and slip quietly between the shelves, my gaze fastening on my female as my desire flares and fans through me, the curling with greater intensity as my cock throbs within my pants.

I'm unable to restrain my growl as I slide into place behind her. She freezes for a heartbeat and then slowly straightens as tiny bumps break out of her flesh. It is exquisite how responsive she is. My nostrils flare, dragging in the scent of her nervousness and arousal mingling together. I haven't moved even an inch closer when the lights in the mall click off one by one, plunging us into darkness, broken only by the glow of the signs. I lean forward in the darkness and slip my long tongue from my mouth so that it trails along the sensitive skin of her shoulder and up her neck. I can taste and smell her readiness and it makes my cock tightens and rises in response, pushing through my genital slit, eager to finally claim my mate.

There is a dance of subtle energies in the air, their dance winding faster and more vibrantly with the season of the hunt. I ignore it as I always do since demons do not involve themselves in the hunts of the fairy and other beings that take what is theirs in the waning months. And yet, I feel aroused with my impending claim like any male who had secured a mate by the laws of the hunt. It thrills me, winding a fiery path of pleasure deeper than ever into the core of my being. I tremble, my hands shaking slightly as they come up to settle along Fanny's shoulders. I stroke her upper arms and drop my head lower to nuzzle her neck as I deeply breathe in her scent. I could easily push my bag aside and fuck her on this counter, her pale golden breasts lifting in offering to the darkness as I

bend her over it. It tempts me and I'm not usually one who ignores my temptations but not this time.

Fanny is right. We only mate once and this time should be perfect. So, I file that highly arousing image away to explore later and bend just enough to tuck my arms securely around my mate so that she is easily lifted off her feet the moment that I stand. Fanny clings to me in reaction, her small arms curling tightly around my neck as she gasps in surprise. A pleased purr rattles through me and I hug her close, my nose brushing the soft skin beneath her jaw where her scent is the richest.

"I guess it's time," she observes with a small, nervous laugh.

I don't respond with words, but my purr kicks up a notch as I adjust my grip on her just enough to scoop my bag up and loop it over my shoulder before curling my arm possessively around her again. Fanny's small body fits perfectly within my arms and against the giant bulk of my body. She is mine and I don't leave any doubt in her mind of my claim as my tongue slips out once more to bathe her neck in more of my saliva that has become pheromone rich ever since my body began priming for mating days ago. There is an extra something else in it as well and I know when she feels it because she gasps and wiggles provocatively against me as her scent blossoms with the ripest flavor of need. Her nipples scrape against my chest through her shirt.

"Oh!" That word slips from between her lips as her body shivers against mine.

That little gasped word is pure ecstasy for a demon like me. To feel it breathed upon the scales of my neck by my female, never has there been anything more erotic. I am aching as I navigate our way through the portal, the sensory burn of shifting worlds rocketing through me. Fanny twists and

moans, her desire heightened by the energy-burst. I feel it too. It catches fire to the heat rushing through my blood, stirring an inferno within me as the first hot burst of precum spurts from my cock and smears against the inside of my pants, making the fabric rub irritatingly.

I drop my bag on the floor and shift my hold on my female. I need to remove the rough pants and spare the sensitive head of my dick—for all our brutal strength and deadliness, our sexual organs are more sensitive than most other species. Like other nightmare demons, mine are internal but it takes little stimulation for them to extrude and cause considerably more discomfort with my mounting arousal. As much as I need some relief from the overstimulation, I don't want to release my mate for even a moment.

An impatient, clicking growl rises from my throat, the sound an entirely new variation from my usual. It takes me only a moment to reach back far into my memories and recall what it is. Mating growl. It is both used to inflame our mates and warn rivals away. If it did anything for the latter, I haven't a clue, but its effect on Fanny is instantaneous. She jerks in my arms with a soft cry, a gush of her arousal spilling free from her as she trembles from the small climax that shoots through her. It's delicious and fans my hunger for her to even greater heights. I can't wait any longer! Clutching her tightly to my chest, I race to our room, my heart pounding with excitement in time with my heavy footfalls hitting the floor.

The layout of my den allows me to reach the room quickly and lay my mate on the bed, her bottom tucked close to the edge of the mattress. She smiles up at me and pulls off her sweater, her small, delightful tits bouncing with the movement before laying back to watch me, her dark eyes shining with excitement. Her hips promptly lift as I reach for the waistband

of her pants, assisting me as I unbutton and peel them off her, taking her underwear down with them. Her sweet perfume immediately floods my nose as I bare her cunt, and another clicking growl vibrates through me in response as my cock leaps in its silent demand. I am eager to shred my human clothing from my body to climb over her and mount her, but I don't wish to scare her, or use my mate harshly and potentially harm her.

Forcing some patience into my movements, I step back and remove my clothes, allowing them to drop to the floor as I abandon the last vestiges of my human disguise and stretch to my full height, my breath billowing into me as my body expands to its true girth once more. Fanny's eyes follow me, the lust within their depths deepening as I drop my glamour. With another clicking growl, I prowl toward the bed and her thighs part at my approach in silent invitation. Stepping between them, I lower myself to a crouch and drop my hand to her slick sex, luminous with her arousal, and press against the heat gathering there. A groan of pleasure escapes me from the feel of it, and I rub my thumb back and forth over the little nub of flesh at the top of her slit as my tongue slips from my mouth and ventures along the delicate flesh there, lapping her sweetness up. With feverish snarls of pleasure, my tongue slips along over cunt, teasing her and lapping her sweetness from the source as I press my tongue deep within her, hunting for more.

Fanny moans, her hips trembling as I thrust my tongue in and out of her as my thumb resumes teasing her little pleasure spot at the top. I delight in the kick of her hips and the soft whining pants that burst from her lungs as I tease her and worship her. I can't get enough of her flavor. I could probably feast on her for hours if the ache of my cock weren't so demanding.

She is so incredibly soft here that I can't help but marvel at it all as I explore her folds and retract my claws to dip a long, thick finger into her heat. Fanny makes a choking sound in response, her head tipping back with the intensity of the sensation rushing through her and the plush, wet heat of her squeezes against my finger. My eyes close as a shiver rushes through me and I fan my wings wide, stretching them fully from where they have been compressed and shriveled against my body all day. My corethi descend from where they are coiled at the base of my wings and lower around her like so many vines, the feathered ends trailing over her, their barbs scraping, delivering tiny, insignificant doses of my venom to my mate.

They stroke over her flushed skin, and I enjoy the way her flesh reacts to their delicate, venomous touch with every shiver and smattering of tiny bumps raising and prickling. More importantly, it is her scent that compels my hunger to greater heights. Her perfume of excitement and need fills my nose as distinctly as her cries of pleasure fill my ears. She is a sensory masterpiece: taste, sound, and touch satisfying my every need.

Almost every need. My cock is hard enough to bludgeon a hapless enemy to death but there is only one thing that will ease it and make the ache tormenting me go away. Such sweet pain. Sweet torment. Even as I desperately want relief, I relish the sensation as I bring my female quickly to another climax, her sweetness bursting into my mouth and over my tongue clenched within her cunt. I growl in satisfaction and only with great reluctance withdraw it from her body to lick her flavor coating my mouth. She watches me with glazed eyes, her pulse leaping in her throat.

She is so tiny and prey-like as I slowly climb over her. But there is no fear in her passion-filled gaze. Only a want that burns me down to my dark soul. A louder growl rumbles in my chest, hungry and possessive. Her pink lips part with a gasp and her pupils expand further in reaction. Has she been reacting that way all along? If so, it is a revelation and one that I will keep tucked close to savor and implement as I see fit.

I lower my hips to hers and a hiss of pleasure slips from beneath my teeth as my straining cock brushes her slick folds. Her pelvis leaps up in reaction, sliding in a tantalizing fashion along my length, making a thick stream of precum pump out from the tip of my prick. I want to skewer her on my dick so that she writhes, caught on its length filling her, as I plunge into her hot sheath. It is only with a surprising modicum of self-control that I didn't know I possessed that keeps me from doing exactly that.

Rocking my hips slowly, I mimic our earlier bouts of eager and adoring fornication, sliding the tip of my cock and the length of its shaft back and forth along her beckoning slit. Fanny instinctively rocks responsively into each graze, pressing the little swollen bud of her pleasure and unfurled sex opened up for me firmly against my cock in invitation. Her sheath is so tiny, my cock like a lead pipe settled against it, but we will fit, and the mating venom beginning to course through her will see to it that it does not hurt. A quiver runs through me as instinct roars higher between us with its hungry demands.

Take. Sate. Hunger. Devour. It is a wordless pulse of instinct rushing between us, demanding the completion of the mating act that we've danced around. I can feel it beneath my scales and Fanny arches more desperately against me in her silent demand telling me that she feels it just as keenly. A pleased

rumble echoes through me and I lean forward, snaking my tongue up her neck and jaw. It glances lightly against her lips before pressing deep even as I adjust my angle and press in the large head of my cock.

Her lips swallow the thick, tapered tip of my tongue even as her cunt opens and begins to swallow my cock. Her moan of pleasure vibrates through me, skating over my skin like the most pleasing of aphrodisiacs that the succubae possess. My tail curls around her thigh and my corethi cling to her as I pull out a little and press in a little deeper again. I taste the drops of venom filling my mouth from my fangs and know that she is drinking them in with every lurid suck on my tongue as she gasps around it with pleasure, her little body rising to meet my every thrust. Another growl of pleasure breaks from me as my hips jump forward, pressing the entire length of my cock home.

Fanny's squeal is muffled around my tongue but her channel attempts to strangle my cock as warm heat bursts around my length with every squeeze of her internal muscles. My cock jumps in response, eager to spill but I withdraw from the brink and pin her hips with mine so that she remains motionless beneath me and withdraw my tongue from her mouth as I work to regain control. It doesn't stop her from attempting to wriggle beneath me with frustrated whimpers. I stare down at her, watching the expressions crossing her face as she is caught within her need. So gloriously responsive.

Her little heels rise up and kick into my flanks like she's trying to urge on a hell stallion, her face screwing up in her frustration.

"Pashar, move!" she complains, and I chuckle darkly before withdrawing and giving her exactly what she needs.

Her squeal of pleasure is a delight to my ears as I plow into her, and I grunt as the head of my cock taps the deepest recess within her. I can taste the venom filling my mouth again, my gums aching with the need to strike and claim my mate, envenomating her so that she is eternally mine and mine alone. It rides me as I rock back and thrust deep again, my hips moving slowly at first and then picking up speed as our bodies come together violently with our mutual need. Fanny's little weak claws score my scales, bringing little shivers in their wake, her cries driving me on, her teeth sinking into my chest making my cock leap and my testicles shift with the rapid accumulation of my seed.

She does wicked things with those little pitiful human teeth and claws as they scrape ineffectually at me and yet stir my ardor to greater heights by ferocity with which she does it until I am slamming into her, rutting her as my hand clamps around her neck, dragging her firmly back down to the mattress and keeping her pinned beneath me as our bodies slap together with our primal need. Heat fills her gaze, and she smiles, her head tilting, exposing her neck to me. I try to distract myself with the bounce of her breasts as I rut her, slowly only to grind into her with her climaxes to milk her every orgasm to its greatest peak. The clench of her cunt around my cock is bliss, drawing my sap higher, threatening to shatter my control as I continue to ride her.

Her enthusiasm never flags as she meets me thrust for thrust. Her breath is coming in little pants now, a sheen of sweat coating her skin as I feel her body prepare to climb to its pinnacle once again. It coils within her, growing as it tightens with every stroke and I am helplessly caught in it, my cock swelling and jerking with my strokes now. My lips peel back from my sharp teeth as I pump deeply into her cunt as it

slowly begins to tighten around me as her muscles clench with her impending orgasm. I slam into her clenching heat, my eyes rolling back at the way her grip caresses my cock with every thrust. Her legs quiver around me and her channel spasms hard, milking my length so fiercely that my own climax barrels through me, exploding with such force that a roar tears from my throat seconds before my teeth snap onto her shoulder, savaging it as my venom flows undiluted directly into her veins.

Fanny's scream of release comes again as she rides her orgasm anew, her body drinking in my essence with a desperation that I understand all too well. I growl triumphantly as I give her my gift as she gives herself to me.

My sweet Fanny. My mate.

Life will never be peaceful again with this female at my side. I can hardly wait to see what our future brings.



FANNY

IT'S SAFE TO SAY THAT THE MALL HAS BECOME MY HOME AND a large part of my life. In a way it has become my home just as much as my mate's den. I spend my days wandering along its halls, visiting with the friends that I've made there. I've seen so many movies at the movie theater there that I've lost count and wasted a crap-ton of Paschar's money at the arcade. Not that he minds. Money doesn't really have a meaning for him in the same way it does for humans. Demons have their own currency so human money doesn't mean dick so long as he has enough to supply us with what we need while in the human world. It's his vacation and he really treats it as such, his nightmare comics and little shop being more of a hobby project than anything else. He is happy to let me dip into the cash and take what I want even if he growls and threatens to take it out of my ass later—which always turns out to be a lot of fun, I have to admit.

It also turns out that vacations last a really long time for demons since their time runs differently than human time. And since we are mated, he is on official extended leave anyway until it's safe for us to really go home and not be isolated within the confines of his den. So I try to remember this as well. I've caught most of the good movies that have hit the cinema and shopped my heart out as years have marched past. The eighties were hard to let go of but then as the late nineties came with everyone dialing in, the world expanded further, growing and changing while I mostly stayed the same.

I mean, personal internal growth aside, and the random change of my hair styles on whim, I can't say that I look any different thanks to Chewy. Well, and not counting *the changes*. They are slow to come but I started noticing them after the first three years we were together. Small things at first, like setting fire to an entire shelf of comic books one day, and then bigger things such as when I woke up with a tail that had sprouted overnight while I slept—which does turn out to be every bit as erotic as I had imagined. Unlike Pashar's sinuous tail, mine is fluffy—like that of a fox. I blame my mate entirely for calling me his little fox so much. I swear that my body just decided to just work with what he was shoveling, but I can't complain. I love my tail, even if it's a pain in the ass to keep hidden. But more than that, I love Pashar's grumbly, surly, growly ass day by day, and he never fails to show me exactly how much I mean to him even if it is in the little things, like going with me to see my favorite movie at the theater for the third or fourth time, or bribing the cook at one of the nicer restaurants in the mall to stay open a little later for our dinner.

Surprising me on my thirty-fifth birthday with a laptop was everything! I know he hates the new booms in technology. There is no dragging him into the digital age as of yet. I can't

even persuade him to put up an online storefront for selling his comics. He says it cheapens his work, but all I can see is new avenues opening up before me as I explore the world beyond what was ever possible before.

And the years keep rolling. Music changes, fashion changes. Politics. It is fascinating to watch even if I feel like I'm an observer, seeing everything from a distance. And we do leave our mall sometimes to make little trips elsewhere, but we never stay away long. We go to the beach from time to time, and we visited Disneyland, but never further out than California. I don't like to be gone long, and really neither does Pashar since he feels nervous traveling with me in the open away from the security of the mall and all the monsters who work there. There he feels safe to let me out of his sight. I like going down from the shop, through the portal to our den and sleeping in our big bed every night.

I take a bite of cold pizza, the extra cheesy slice making me hum with pleasure as I finally shut the lid on my laptop and give him a sidelong look as I slide my hand over its sleek top. This is the fifth laptop that he's bought me since the first one. Although he claims to still have no use for them, he understands how much I appreciate having access to the world at my fingertips and so sees to it that I have up to date equipment. He didn't even make any of his usual comments about nosy humans when I joined the world of social media. I think he gets the fact that I need to feel like I'm still a part of the human world in some small way even as I grow further and further apart from the last vestiges of my humanity.

I wonder if we can get internet service in the demonic world.

I make a mental note to ask him about that. Although I've loved our vacation, I know that with my transition nearing its

completion that Pashar will soon look to return home. I'm excited for the new adventure stretched out in front of me but also nervous. I worry sometimes that if I lose those human parts of myself that Pashar fell in love with that he would feel differently about me.

Licking the greasy cheese and sauce from my lips, I eye my mate speculatively, my tail twitching against the back of the stool where I'm sitting behind the shop counter, the rest of the surrounding mall dark beyond our little shop. His eyes track my tail and I give it a teasing little flick, a giggle bursting from me when a lustful smile curls his lips, his glowing yellow eyes rising to meet mine.

My tail curls against my belly and I hug it to me, enjoying the teasing bristle of the soft fur. My long, pointed ears twitch, twisting with the subtle sounds of the denizens of the mall. Essentially, becoming a huyao, a fox demon, certainly hasn't been any hardship. Or perhaps I always was a fox demon and just found a way to wear a human form for a while to be born to my parents. I certainly never fit in right among my family, and there are all kinds of legends of foxes becoming humans, several of which my grandmother used to tell. I can't help but think that my parents would be horrified to see me now. They are very old and although I don't visit them since it was kinder than the truth of my decision, I got in touch with them some years ago and have kept tabs on them. Knowing that they would be unhappy with what I've become makes my chest squeeze the way that it had during my youth when I tried desperately to meet family expectations before rebelling against them.

I don't think they would recognize me now nor see any trace of the human that I was. They would be disappointed. I can live knowing that; that's nothing new. As long as Pashar loves

this me as well, then I am more than pleased to have my nifty abilities. That doubt is insidious though and I find it slipping out my mouth between bites of pizza before I can stop it.

“I think my transition is almost complete,” I confide quietly.

His eyes narrow slightly on me as if staring deep into some part of me that I can never see in a mirror, and nods. “A few more months at most,” he agrees and takes another big bite from his slice.

Okay. No words of excitement or adoration there. No need to panic, though.

“I mean, this new me is pretty neat right? I can’t imagine how it can get any better,” I observe with a giggle, as I blow a tiny flame from my fingertips.

Pashar’s lips curl faintly with amusement, but I’m a bit disappointed that he only grunts as he continues to eat. I mean, that’s just how Pashar is. It’s not like he has been demonstratively excited about my transformation, but it never bothered me before since I never felt like he was displeased with it. Our sex life certainly hasn’t suffered. He is as enthusiastic as ever—and in fact gets more inventive and willing to push my boundaries as time passes. But now that my change is almost complete, the doubt has flared to life, and I don’t understand why he can’t see that I need a little more than that.

I wrinkle my nose at him with a huff and he looks up at me in confusion, his mouth stuffed full of the ridiculously large slice he’s feeding into it.

Leaning forward, I meet his gaze and fold my arms on the counter. “Babe, I love you but seriously... you need to be just a teensy bit more reassuring than that.”

His brow dips into a scowl and he quickly chews his mouthful of pizza before speaking. “Reassuring of what?”

“Of what?” I gape at him. What exactly does he think we are talking about? “Of this!” I gesture to myself in one sweeping motion. “I need to know that you love this transformed me as much as you love the human me. That you aren’t going to get tired of me the way that I am now and drop kick me.”

He snickers quietly but there isn’t a hint of cruelty in his gaze when he looks over at me. His eyes glow with the fierce love that is so uniquely Pashar. “My love, is that what’s worrying you?”

“Well, yes. This is a new adventure for me, but I need to know that you are into it as much as I am.”

He chuckles loudly and reaches over, snatching me off my seat to haul me into his lap. “My little fox, it doesn’t matter to me if you were a slime ghoull of the foulest swamps of the demonic world. The female I love never changes even if your form does.” He presses a kiss to my mouth, his long tongue delving past my lips and deep into my mouth, past my sharp teeth, and lingers there, his tongue twining around mine as if savoring me. When he at last lets me come up for air, his grin is wolfish as he stares down at me and curls his fingers around my tail. “That said, there are many delightful advantages to this new form. Claws and fangs to tear and bite into me as I fuck you is something I will never tire of. Or this,” he adds, giving my tail a short tug, sending desire licking through me.

I shiver, a ragged pant escaping me, and he chuckles, lifting me up higher into his arms as he stands. With one sweep of his arm, he flings aside the pizza box so that he can drape me over the bare counter and tugs off my jeans. My arousal spikes and I can feel the wet silky material of my panties clinging to my

pussy and clit in a way that makes me moan and twitch when his hot breath fans them. He grins wickedly up at me before pressing his mouth over my panty-covered sex to nip gently with his dangerous teeth, swiftly sending me teetering close to the edge as I whimper aloud.

He responds with a growl of pleasure that sends heat tumbling deeper through me in a way that had never affected me before until our need to mate hit us. But now I reach for it greedily, basking in it that vocalized affirmation of his desire and his claws tear off my panties. But it's his large body rising to settle over mine and the way his arms close around me and hold me so tenderly and reverently to him as he whispers soft words of adoration as he kisses and licks my flesh that proves me how much he loves me exactly as I am—the now me, however it changes and remains the same.

He is mine. He is with me to explore this new adventure with me, and I just can't wait to get to the demon world and see what happens next.



For more tales of demons and their human mates, check out
the Demonic Realms series!

About the Author

S.J. Sanders is a mom of two toddlers and one adult living in Central Florida. She has a BA in History, but spends most of her free time painting, sculpting, doing odd bits of historical research, and writing. While she has more research-oriented writing under another pen name, her passion is sci-fi and paranormal romance of which she is an avid reader. After years of tinkering with the idea, and making up her own stories in her head, S.J began to seriously pursue writing as an author of Sci-fi Romance utilizing her interests in how cultures diversify and what they would look like on an extraterrestrial platform with humans interacting with them and finding love.

CREEPY PASTA

EVANGELINE PRIEST



Chesa Rizal is a harried mall admin who finds comfort in a cheesy bowl of pasta at the end of a stressed-filled workday. Things get stranger when she gets lost in the back hallways of the mall and attracts the attention of a shadowy creature.

Rufus Halliday, once known as mindbreaker hellspawn, Vhelloss, is now the proud owner of a kitschy Italian restaurant. Hopelessly infatuated with the charming overworked admin who graces his restaurant each night, Rufus knows better than to involve himself with humans.

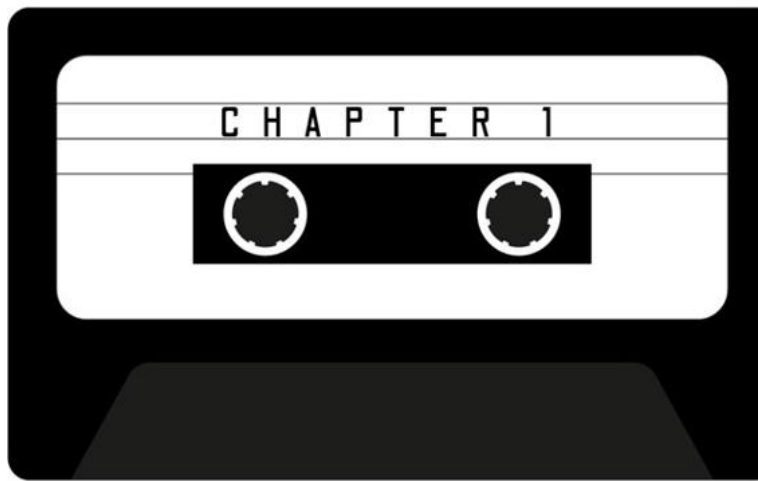
However, when Chesa doesn't pick up her standing dinner order, he follows her trail through limbo to find her.



Content Warning:

Even though this is a cringetastically sweet story, there will be animated mannequins; voyeurism; shadowy tentacled monsters; nightmarish hellscapes; pasta-eating; garlic knots; age gap between an elder god and a human woman in her twenties; and graphic sex between consenting sentient adults.

Featured tropes include: instalove; stalk-her-to-protect-her; size difference; tentacles; mind-linking.



CHESA

SNOWY STATIC ON THE TV SCREEN MADE CHESA RIZAL'S heart sink.

Not again.

Chesa fast-forwarded the VHS tape but knew it would be pointless. Yet another day's work and hours of film were destroyed. She swallowed her frustrated groan as she skimmed through the footage she had.

Interspersed among the sweeping panoramic shots of mall grounds were long stretches of warped video.

All the cute interviews that she had with most of the store owners of Creepy Court Mall were virtually unusable. Same with most of the candid shots she thought she had captured. At least there were some salvageable moments, like the adorable dogs in the Twisted Whisker and a few clown antics from

Frankie's Funhouse. It could be enough to create a B roll. She made a note for the marketing team.

So much for having a local television spot for promo done by tomorrow. She moved the deadline to Friday. If this kept up, she would never finish this project for her boss.

Speaking of whom, Jaime Barbosa's office door opened, then closed with a jangling of keys. Like clockwork, he rolled out of his office at 5:00PM precisely. The perks of being the mall's general manager.

Chesa was usually alone in the management office on a Sunday, but the management team decided to rotate working one Sunday a month for the last quarter of the year. Not that they lightened her workload any...in fact, they usually added a little more to her plate whenever they saw her. But, at least when they were here, she felt like she could get all the other mall stuff done without having to man the office.

With the videotape messed up, and the pile of props she still needed to take to storage, Chesa would need to wait until after the mall closed to finish up so she would be here for the last hour of the business day in case a customer or tenant needed anything.

At least the mall closed at 6:00PM on Sundays.

Jaime's curly hair preceded him as he poked his head into her office. He wore a bright red and pink Hawaiian shirt with light-colored khakis. A tuft of chest hair peeked up from where he left his top button undone. "Hey, hey Ches, what's the word? How's the project coming along? Do we have anything to send over to marketing this week?"

A smile strained her facial muscles. "Sure. Just a few more interviews and I'll be able to send this raw footage over to

Judy and the marketing team to edit this week.”

Jaime shot her with a few finger guns. “That’s my girl! Don’t stay too late!”

“I won’t,” she said to his retreating footsteps. She only half-believed herself.

It was already October, and the big new Halloween event that she was spearheading was circled in red on her desk calendar. A trick-or-treat street, something that hadn’t been done before, at least to her knowledge.

And right after that, she needed to somehow turn the mall from a spooky haunted house on October 31 to a winter wonderland with a countdown to Santa Claus coming to town before opening on November 1 ... the visual merchandising team was going to love her for that.

So much to do, too little time. Yet, she was determined to make this year their most trafficked year yet. And maybe that would mean a promotion to a position where she could have at least one day off a week.

Chesa pushed aside all the impending color-coded deadlines that blared like sirens at her. “I can do this,” she said to her calendar.

Her spiking adrenaline fueled her second wind as she slashed and rearranged her priority list until she narrowed her tasks to three items:

1. Fix video
2. Take props to prop room
3. Pick up dinner at Creepy Pasta by 6:30PM.

Okay. Not bad. All she needed to do was re-record some interviews and film some more candid videos and hope the

footage didn't get destroyed ... again.

Who was she kidding? Even assuming her videotape came out perfectly, she couldn't get that done in less than an hour.

The thought of the densely packed shrimp fettuccine Alfredo and fully loaded garlic knots that would be waiting for her made the frustration welling up inside of her even worse. A part of her wanted to willfully forget about the ruined tape and leave that for Monday morning's problem. But she knew herself. She wouldn't be able to sleep knowing there was a pile of work she left undone.

Her brainstorming was interrupted by a few phone calls and customer service questions. She directed one customer toward the restrooms and handed another one a map. As she refilled the mall maps in the displays, her gaze landed on the store directory.

Red Light Videos.

Maybe they could do something about her tape this week.

Chesa called the video store and chatted with Seren, a new store clerk there. A glimmer of hope fluttered inside her when Seren turned out to be an aspiring film student who would love to help Chesa figure out her videotape issues. In fact, not only would she try to fix the tape, but she even offered to help record more footage and interviews this week.

Chesa twirled in her seat as she hung up her phone. Finally, a light at the end of a long, long tunnel! She checked her watch. Not quite 5:30PM. Plenty of time to drop off the video and store the props before the mall closed.

She chewed on her lip thoughtfully. She shouldn't leave the office unmanned, and yet the thought of actually leaving on

time to enjoy a delicious dinner tugged at her. It was close enough to closing, that no one should need her.

Decision made, Chesa called mall security to let him know she would be leaving the office, but had her walkie on her in case she was needed.

“Copy that,” he replied.

Buoyed by a possible solution to her problems, Chesa bounced out of the office.



CHESA DROPPED OFF HER VIDEO TAPE WITH RELIEF, AND Seren, her new hero, assured her they'd be able to get something together by this week. Along the way there, Chesa had handed out a few more flyers to stores on her route, unloading the rest of her pile to mall security when she passed him. The man took it with barely more than a grunt of acknowledgement.

She was ahead of even her own timetable.

One more stop, then dinner, then home.

Chesa returned to her parked dolly, which was laden with old mall props. She had parked it just outside of the door marked for Employees Only.

The endless maze of concrete hallways always gave her a touch of anxiety. Normally, she would make one of the mall security guards walk with her, so she wouldn't be alone. But, she figured since the mall was still open, she wouldn't have

any issues. Besides, the guards were supposed to make their rounds in about half an hour.

Chesa followed the series of turns until she reached a T in the hallways. Turning right led to the fire exit while turning left led deeper into the mall storage locations. She turned left.

The lights flickered a bit as she dragged her load past a few more exits toward Storage Room B. She unlocked the unit, used a cinder block as a doorstop, and dragged her dolly inside. The storage room was nothing more than an unleased store space, so there was no electricity hooked up. She balanced the flashlight on the floor like a torch. It lit up the entrance adequately enough for her to tuck the dolly away. The merchandising team could spot it immediately next time they needed it.

Chesa plucked up the flashlight, checked that her keys were dangling from her arm, and that her walkie was clipped to her jacket pocket. Only when she compulsively checked again that she had all those things, did she confidently push the cinder block away and allow the storage room door to close.

With an enormous sigh of relief, and visions of creamy, cheesy pasta in her head, she backtracked her way toward the mall.

The lights flickered some more, casting a dim yellow haze into the area. She made a mental note to call Mall Maintenance to replace the bulbs with something brighter and far less flickery.

She quickened her stride as she approached the door back into the mall. Normally she would be too distracted to let her childhood fears of the dark bother her. But today...

Chesa scurried the last few steps of the hall and pushed the door open with a sigh of relief.

As she stepped through, Chesa noticed the smell. Fetid and dank, it was nothing like the citrusy-sunshine fragrances that were pumped through the HVAC system. She reached for her walkie to call Mall Maintenance. As she did, she realized something was very, very wrong.

The mall was no longer a hub of frenetic energy, with last-minute shoppers darting into shops. She wasn't even sure she was in a mall.

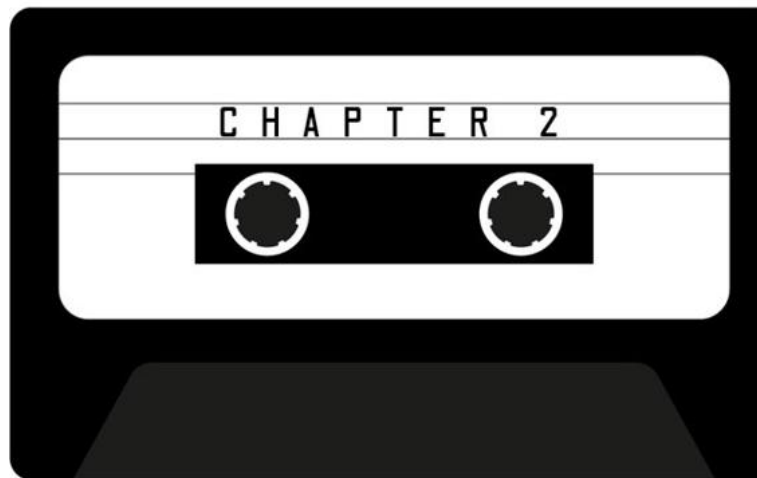
A maze of empty office space stretched before her. Instead of the bright lights and Top 40s hits over the speaker, everything was hazy and eerily quiet.

“Maintenance, do you copy?” Her radio was on, but the usual squelch was gone, along with the usual chirps that would accompany the call. “Security? Anybody?”

As she played with the dials on her radio, she became conscious of a discordant tapping. It was soft at first, but it grew louder. Closer.

She peered into the increasingly darkening stretch of space that should have been the mall. Instead of the clear line of sight to the nearby anchor store, a dark plume of shadows billowed in from that end of the hall like a black tidal wave.

Chesa scrambled back into the hallway and let the door slam behind her. She twisted her key into the crash bar, locking it out. Moments later, something big crashed into the door.



RUFUS

RUFUS HALLIDAY NOTICED THE UNTOUCHED TO-GO BAG UNDER the heat lamps. The promise-time of 6:30PM faded on the carbon copy receipt of Chesa Rizal's order. He had waited until the last moment to fill her garlic knots, knowing she couldn't resist tasting one before she left for home.

The owner and head chef of Creepy Pasta had been looking forward to seeing Chesa's face light up with rapture upon seeing her dinner. He lived for the unabashed pleasure that would take over her face as she popped a garlic knot into her mouth. Of sucking the buttery garlic from her fingers one by one.

Yet, it was approaching 7:00PM and there was still no sign of the charming little human who swooned so beautifully for his food.

Rufus swept his gaze over the dining room. Every table was taken and the waiting area and bar were standing room only with a forty-five minute waitlist. A stretch of his shadows confirmed everyone was happy. His staff—from his managers to his busboys—were balancing the workload like a well-oiled machine, just as he liked it.

The forgotten takeout bag was an anomaly to what should have been a smooth evening.

Rufus tapped his hostess on the shoulder. “Heather, did Ms. Rizal call? Did we make her a different order?”

Heather shook her head, her halo of curls immovable. “No, sir, I haven’t seen her. I even called over to the office to remind her about her order—no answer. Maybe she changed her mind?”

Of all the humans that inhabited this realm, Chesa Rizal did not change her mind. Her unwavering, single-minded focus in all things was what fascinated him about her in the first place. Though he gave up his mantle as a mindbreaker Hellspawn for this lifetime, he still appreciated a well-ordered mind and Chesa’s was a beautiful tapestry of intricate design that he could revel in for hours if she would let him.

How she so passionately immersed herself in work—or a bowl of pasta—was also infinitely refreshing.

And as she treated herself to shrimp fettuccine Alfredo with an extra side of garlic knots every Sunday, her absence was troubling.

He slipped his hand into his jacket pocket, toying with the slip of silk there. It was a hair tie, one of many in Chesa’s collection. This one was a simple black style that the females

of his staff called a scrunchy. He had meant to return it to her but never got around to it.

Heather had been rambling as he was obsessing over Chesa. “Maybe her closing routine is taking longer than usual. She had that big dolly she was pulling around. It’s not like the other mall managers help her,” Heather added on conspiratorially.

It was no secret that Chesa was the only mall admin worth a damn. “Perhaps you’re right,” he murmured. Chesa tended to overwork. But she always called to confirm that she still planned to pick up her order. Whenever she had called, stating she would be later than planned, he would give away what had already been prepared for her to his staff, and make a fresh one in its place.

Worry wormed its way into his gut. Dammit. He wasn’t supposed to care about anyone in this realm. Especially a human. They were too fragile. Too helpless.

Too mortal.

Rufus gestured to the order. “Go ahead and donate that food to any of the staff that wants it. If or when Ms. Rizal comes for her order, we will remake it fresh.”

Heather beamed. “Got it, Boss.”

Rufus glanced at the dining room once more, twirling the hair tie in his pocket around his finger. Slowly, cautiously, so as not to draw the attention of any outer lord that might be near, he unfurled his power from his human disguise. A shadowy tentacle extended from under his jacket sleeve to twine around the silk scrunchy in his hand—his connection to Chesa. As he focused on her, disjointed images of tangled limbs, confusing hallways, and menacing shadows flooded his mind’s eye.

Icy dread raked down his back. Chesa was in danger. “I’ll just step out for a moment, Heather. You have the floor?”

“Of course, Boss. This is nothing. Take your time.”

Without a backward glance, Rufus slipped out of the back of the restaurant and into the shadows of the mall.



FADED YELLOW LIGHT AND STALE AIR GREETED RUFUS AS HE stepped into the liminal space that existed in rolling pockets throughout the mall. Under the shallow layers of reality that mortals see was the shadow realms. The time that was and could be.

It was like taking a polaroid, and having the images appear minutes later. In that moment of blankness, where the photo had yet to appear and the potential for everything and nothing existed at once...that was this space.

Not quite the past, not quite the present.

The Elder races did not experience it, as their presence was so large. But spawn and other halflings were just small enough to entire these in-between spaces.

There was no real name for this realm, this hidden echo of what was left behind after the living world moved on. If so, it had been lost to time, too insignificant for the Elders to note.

Rufus liked to call this space the Aftermath. He thought the name fitting as the mortal realm seemed always to be at the tipping point of chaos.

And beyond that, the endless sprawl of the outer reaches from which he and his kindred have spawned.

It had always made him nervous to know that Chesa often walked the back hallways by herself. Her clever mind would be a tasty delicacy for any of the Elder spawn that might venture this way.

At least here, he had the power to protect her.

With an exhale, he unwrapped the human guise of Rufus Halliday.

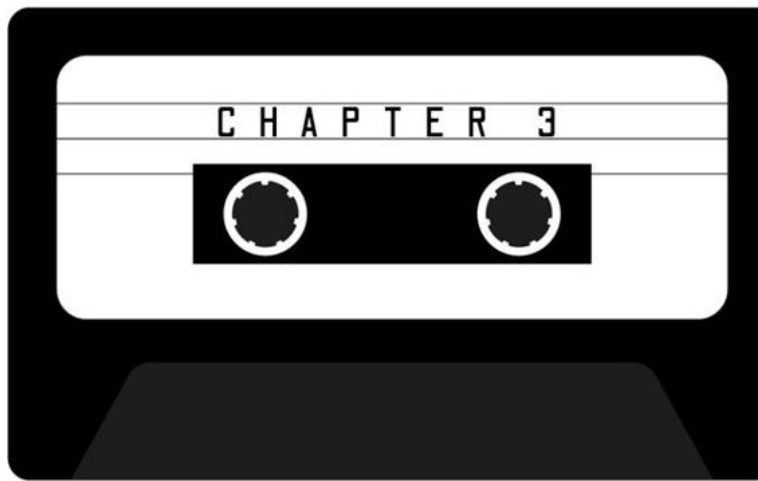
He stretched from the confines of his human form, allowing his power to seep into him once more. Lengthening tendrils of shadows unfurled from his back as he grew to his full height. Like the density of a black hole, energy and matter flowed into him, feeding him the knowledge of the universe in a single glorious inhalation.

Gone was the mild-mannered businessman with the nondescript features and olive skin tone who wore custom-tailored Italian suits.

Here, he was Vhellos the Mindbreaker. The Hellspawn who wrestled this territory from many an eldritch creature before they knew to stay away.

Rufus reached for the tangled web of shadows that he used to mark his boundary from the outer reaches. As if they were antennae attuned to Chesa's mental frequency, he found her.

Unfortunately, she was not alone.



CHESA

CHESA DIDN'T KNOW HOW LONG SHE RAN. ALL THE HALLWAYS looked the same. Even when she tried to sus out a pattern by only taking left turns, she never doubled back the way she came.

Her initial panic simmered to a dull throb of anxiety. She could deal with that. She had weathered many a holiday season fueled by stress hormones alone.

Though there were no visible threats, she still couldn't shake the feeling that she was being watched. It was the reason she continued to run even now, albeit at a steady jog rather than the breakneck sprint from earlier.

The thought of that roiling crush of black shadows tumbling toward her like a tidal wave was enough to seize her mind in icy fear.

It was like something could reach into her nightmares and make her re-live them.

Chesa took another turn at random, hoping that she sees something other than an expanse of stale rooms filled with old cubicles or an endless stretch of cinderblock hallways. She ended up in another batch of offices.

She stopped to catch her breath. Her calves burned and sweat rolled down her back. She wore only her undershirt and trousers—her matching jacket had slipped from where she had tied it around her waist and was most likely in some forgotten stretch of hallway, along with her walkie, which was just as well since it was like lugging a brick with her.

At least she still had her key ring and flashlight. The thought of being in the dark made her shiver, and for the tenth time, she checked the flashlight for a fraction of a second to make sure it still worked.

This must be hell. She must have somehow died, and this was her new eternity.

No! She refused to die in an office. If—*when!*—she escaped from this nightmare she somehow found herself in, she would take a vacation.

She would eat whatever she wanted, sleep in until noon, and watch so many movies. The last one she had seen was back in January, when that movie, *Legend*, came out. She went to a late-night showing, indulging in a post-holiday treat because she had a glorious two days off in a row.

Boy, she had savored every moment.

Even though Chesa was supposed to be rooting for Jack, the hero, she secretly wished the Lily character had been with Lord Darkness. He was so big! And that voice—Chesa had

melted every time he spoke. Lord Darkness still featured in a few fantasies of hers in those few times she was too restless to go to sleep.

A rustle of movement shifted her attention away from the cozy thought of dancing with a dark lord in the direction she had come from. Chiding herself for stopping for too long, she continued jogging once more.

She only got a few feet away when she tripped over a telephone cord that appeared as if from nowhere. Instead of falling, more cords wrapped around her until she was buoyed upward in a net of coiled cables.

The familiar chittering noise grew louder. Chesa desperately tried to pull herself free from the elastic bands of this trap, but the more she struggled, the more it coiled around her until she tired herself out.

She needed to reserve her strength.

Movement above her caught her attention. The paneled ceiling overhead was pulled open by unseen hands. Slowly, she was being pulled up into the ductwork as the black tide of shadows tumbled into view. It was still a ways off, but she didn't want to be anywhere near it.

Whatever fate waited above her, it was favorable for the black tide. She didn't want to be engulfed by whatever was in the shadows.

As the dull roar of tumbling waves filled the room, Chesa was rushed up into the ducts above her.



CHESA WOKE TO PAIN THROBBING FROM HER TEMPLE. SHE must have hit her head when she was being pulled up from that office she had been in.

She had a hard time focusing her eyes in the dark.

The stale scent of old cloth was replaced by the dankness of stagnant air. The smell was familiar. It reminded Chesa of the storage rooms in the mall, the ones that had been converted from old store fronts.

She carefully reached for her flashlight. It slipped from her grip, tumbling to the floor. At least it was heavy duty enough not to break. It clicked on, and a dull cone of light illuminated toward a random corner with stacked boxes and industrial shelves.

The net that held her had been tacked to a hook on the wall as if she were a prop. Chesa worked through the tangles that bound her in order to get free. The cords were elastic enough that she could create a hole large enough for her to shimmy out of.

As her vision adjusted to the scant light, she noticed movement around her.

Along the far wall, mannequins swayed on their feet or were stacked on top of the other. Many were still pinioned to their stands. All of them moved against each other, a writhing mass of friction.

In the middle of the space, a couple of them were piled separately here and there, each with their legs scissored between each other. Their hips clacked together in a steady rhythm; their rigid arms encircled each other in a crazed embrace.

Chesa was enthralled by it all, and couldn't help but openly gape at the sight before her. The rise and fall of their torsos, the quickening pace of pistoning hips, the loud smacking that mimicked the sweet release of gasping pleasure—all of it made her own breath hitch as she realized her own rushing pulse. Of how liquid heat gathered between her legs, and how her muscles clenched around the emptiness there.

She wanted to touch herself, to relieve herself of the pressure that now throbbed in her most secret place. She wanted to know this manic energy that surged even inside these inanimate objects.

Embarrassed by her reaction, Chesa filed away the shock of what she was seeing to a dark corner of her mind. Later, she would analyze it, and in a furtive moment, indulge in some darker fantasies, but for now, she redoubled her efforts to getting free while her captors were distracted.

She squeezed through an opening in the net, dropping onto silent feet. Getting her bearings, she resolutely ignored the orgy happening around her.

Chesa desperately wanted to pick up the flashlight but didn't want to gain any attention. She peered into the darkness, calculating where the door would be in a room like this. Decision made, she tiptoed across the concrete floor on silent feet. Once she found the door, there would be light from the hallway.

Something wrapped around her ankle, and only a hard plastic hand held to her mouth kept her from crying out. She could make out the mannequin on the ground, its grip on her unyielding. The other mannequin, the one that silenced her—stood behind her, its arm around her torso squeezing the air out of her.

Chesa tried desperately to get out of their hold when they took her to the ground. Two more joined the first pair, and soon, she found herself wedged between four mannequins.

She searched the smooth contours of these figures for any weakness, any place she could poke, prod, kick, or gouge. Nothing. Worse, they seemed to out think her, anticipating her moves and restraining her before she could do anything about it.

What were they doing? What did they want from her?

She wished she could ask them, but it wouldn't matter. It wasn't like they could say anything.

During the struggle, Chesa realized she was fully in the circle of light left by the flashlight. It was within reach. She just needed to free her arm.

As she thought about it, the pressure around her middle lessened just enough for her to free her arm. She reached just enough to push it and it skittered away a little.

The mannequin's hold tightened around her once more. A presence descended into this space. It was nothing that Chesa could see, but it was something she could feel, like the pressure from a coming storm front.

Fear coiled inside her, freezing her in place. She allowed the frenetic energy of the mannequin orgy to happen around her. She squeezed herself ever smaller within the midst of the

tangled limbs, hoping to remain hidden from whatever lurked in the dark.

Whatever it was growled. The pitch of it was so low, she felt its vibrations more than heard it.

She couldn't track it, but one thing was clear: it stayed wholly in the shadows.

Without another thought, she reached for the flashlight and arced its light into the darkness.

There, illuminated before her, was a horror so great that she couldn't make sense of it. Her brain couldn't process the variegated limbs and eyes; couldn't perceive a color that was darker than black.

It did not like the light. Tentacles slashed out, raking through the downed mannequin forms. In the chaos, something clipped the flashlight and sent it spinning away from her. In the strobing light, she saw the exit door.

Chesa didn't dare pause. In the confusion, she ran away, dragging a clinging mannequin with her.

She burst through the door and back into the yellow and stale world of the back hallways.

She was in the light, and that was all that mattered. Anything with light. That was what she craved. She ran through the hallways once more.

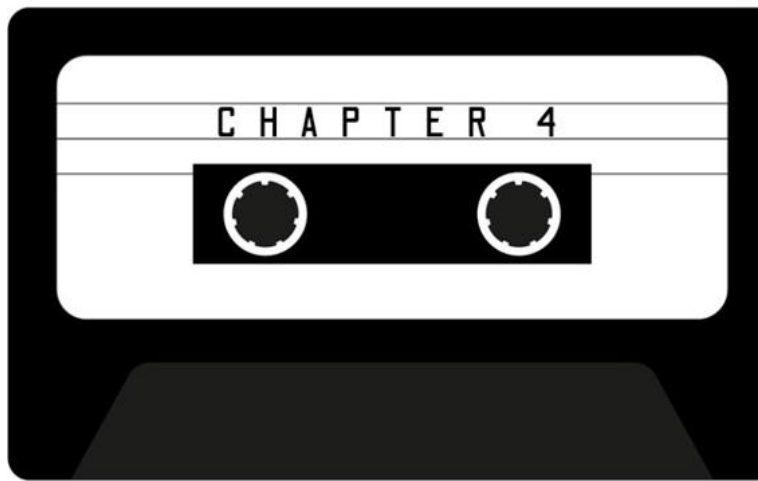
Whispers were catching up to her and she could see the black tide rushing toward her.

This time when she turned down another length of hallway, she saw a familiar emergency exit door. She sprinted toward it and burst through the crash door in time for a shadowy silhouette to stand before her.

Skidding to a halt, she registered someone shouting, “Get down!” and complied.

Tentacles of smoke and mist rippled over her in a rush to knock out the thing that was pursuing her.

She fought for consciousness, but the overwhelming suggestion to *sleep now* pierced the mist of panic in her mind. Her vision narrowed to pinpoints of light as she succumbed to the feel of being wrapped in a downy blanket.



RUFUS

RUFUS Poured his energies toward the night horror pursuing Chesa. Pulsating dark matter rippled toward it, binding it before it could escape his grasp.

He spared a glance at Chesa, who curled into a ball at his feet, her hands protecting the back of her neck. He plucked her from the floor with one of his tentacles, nestling her against his side.

Sleep. It was the softest command he could press upon her until he could assure himself of her safety.

Damn Aza. The foolish pain lord thought he could encroach upon Rufus's territory with no repercussion.

Even now, the black tide that had rolled through the backrooms and dared seep into his territory in limbo evaporated into gauzy mist. Rufus stretched the mantle of his

power, easily deflecting the sniveling Elder spawn, pinning it with its own tentacles. “Did you not notice the web marking my territory, Aza?”

“I noticed, Vhellos. I did not care.” Aza attempted to drag Rufus into the abyss of his mind, inviting him into chaotic agony.

Greater gods than he attempted to take this realm—and lost. Rufus indulged in a smile. “You will care. I will make sure of it.”

“Why? Because you were once the Mindbreaker?” It sneered at him. “You are nothing. Look at how weak you are. How you protect these insignificant humans. I will crush you right after I suck the soul from that mortal you favor.”

Aza would soon learn what it meant to be broken. “Whatever makes you happy, Aza.” In a blink, Rufus captured Aza’s gaze, forcing the pain lord to purge itself of the misery that it thrived upon. Black clods of crystallized despair spewed from its central orifices. Aza shrunk down even further until it was nothing more than a black cloud.

Rufus clawed a runic script in the air, and the being that once was Aza, the Elder spawn pain lord, was separated and bound within a shower of tokens. The golden currency rained down, with a cartoon character on one side and the words “*Where everyone is always smiling*” emblazoned on the other.

Rufus flicked the coin in the air and watched it spin before catching it again.

“See, Aza? You’ll always be smiling now.” Stretching forth the shadows from his back, Rufus gathered the piles of tokens together and directed them toward the Frankie’s Funhouse in the mall. Trapped and bound in a place where a unique type of

happiness lived, Aza would be weak and lethargic without its usual sustenance for eons to come.

It would take that long to distill enough of it from all these random coins.

Rufus lifted Chesa in his arms. She was so small cradled against his body, especially in his true form. For one infinitesimal moment, he considered where to take her.

He could return her to her office and make it so she fell asleep and what she had endured was a terrible nightmare? Rufus dismissed that idea immediately. What if there were other minor lords that have attuned to her mental frequencies as he did?

Chesa was lucky enough to survive the backrooms.

But there really was no better place for her to be than with him. There, he would be assured of her safety.

In one step, Rufus went from the backrooms to the liminal space he called home.



RUFUS PACED THE CONFINES OF HIS ABODE IN LIMBO AS CHESA slept. Though the human world was now his adopted home, he needed the respite of this in-between space whenever he encountered others of his kind. The mere wisp of their presence would taint the mortal world.

Perhaps she would like some tea?

Rufus busied himself with making a platter of snacks to go with both tea and coffee.

She woke as he approached her, asleep on his couch. She immediately startled, sitting up and staring at him with those large, expressive eyes.

He could lose himself in them. Even now, her clever mind moved from panic to calm as she assessed her surroundings.

“Do not worry, Ms. Rizal. You are perfectly safe here. Do you know who I am?”

Her brow furrowed as she looked up at me. “Of course I do. Rufus Halliday, owner-operator of Creepy Pasta. I only go there almost every day to eat. Where am I?”

Rufus couldn't help but smile. This human was such a delightful surprise. Did nothing faze her? “I found you unconscious. I thought it best to take you back to my place, as it was nearby.”

“Unconscious?” She closed her eyes, trying to remember what had happened to her.

She sported bruises around her neck and jawline. Dark circles marred her otherwise perfectly glowing skin. Her lips trembled, though she valiantly pressed them into a firm line to keep from crying.

Chesa was uncomfortable.

Rufus gripped the little scrunchy in his pocket. He should have taken her some place familiar. He had already smoothed over her memories, so her appearance with him was well out of the ordinary.

He hadn't wanted to, but it was for the best. After all, nice mortal humans, especially exceptional ones such as Chesa,

didn't need to know about the horrors this universe offered.

With a light touch of one of his tentacles, he wiped away her confusion so she could rest if needed.

“Would you like anything to eat, Ms. Rizal? I know you like fettucine Alfredo? I could whip you up an order right away?”

Chesa looked at him expectantly. “You cook, too? And here I thought you were just the restaurant owner?”

Rufus shrugged. “I am always open to learning new things. Besides, it is always in my best interest to be nominally helpful in the kitchens in case I need to step in and cover.”

A hint of a smile appeared on Chesa's lips. “I know a little bit about covering for co-workers.” She chewed on her bottom lip contemplatively. Rufus found it utterly distracting. “I am happy to eat, but why are you pretending that you haven't just pulled me out of some nightmarish hellscape?”

Stunned, Rufus didn't know what to say. Instead, he probed her mind just a little and saw her recent memories bubbling up to the surface. Chesa running through the backrooms and endless hallways. Realizing that mannequins reanimate when they are left alone. Of her flight from Aza's black tide and its desire to feed from her fears.

Chesa was immune to his mind tricks. “You remember that?”

She looked at him as if he was the one to have lost his mind. “Yeah,” she drawled out. “I tend to remember those moments when I have to run for my life. Do you do this so often that the events blur together? By the way, who or what is Vhellos?”

Rufus gave up trying to lie to her. “That would be me. My old name.”

“Your old name,” she said dully. “I’m assuming it’s not from a random country that you emigrated from.”

“No.”

“And where did you come from?”

Rufus gazed at her once more. How much did she remember? Did she see him in his true form? No, that couldn’t be. She would run in fear rather than be bright eyed with curiosity.

Chesa threw up her hands. “Look, I don’t know what kind of Superman-Clark Kent thing you think you’re doing, but you cannot possibly think that I don’t know that you were the one that saved me from the large meatball blobby thing with all those eyes and teeth.”

He blinked. “Blobby thing?”

“Yes! That dark blob that floated around like a meatball with a million eyes and teeth. There was a big black tidal wave filled with monsters at its back? And then you held it back with your magic jazz hands?”

Rufus looked down at his hands. “Jazz hands?”

Chesa bounced where she sat. “Yeah, because you were like big and tall and had all the tentacles rippling around you? Dude, I know it happened. You can’t lie to me, so don’t even try.”

Rufus didn’t think he was trying. “I’m not trying anything. I’m just...surprised. Most humans would babble incoherently right now if they remembered the horrors you’ve seen.”

“I’m not like most humans—” she countered.

“Clearly.”

“—but honestly, ‘babbling incoherently’ is a bit much. Shocked, perhaps, but it’s not *that* brain melt-y.”

Not that brain melt-y? “I will have you know, Ms. Rizal. I was known as the Mindbreaker in my previous life.”

Chesa put her hands up in mock surrender. “Okay, okay, I’m getting it now. You had thought I’d forgotten about it all, and hoped I’d believe I had an awful nightmare, is that it?”

Rufus no longer knew who was trying to comfort whom. His delightful little human had more resilience and nerve than he had given her credit for—and he had already given her the utmost credit. “It seems there is no reason to speak. As you seem to know all, Ms. Rizal.”

“Chesa, please. And, no, I don’t know all, but I know what I lived through.” She tossed the blanket away from her and stood. “You said something about dinner? I’m starving!”

He shook his head with a chuckle. “Your dinner awaits.”



THEY PASSED THE TIME IN IDLE CONVERSATION. THERE WAS only one minor mishap when Chesa accidentally opened the door to limbo rather than the powder room. She noted the few asteroids floating in space, before closing the door and opening the correct one.

What a revelation she was. In her presence, Rufus felt at ease. He could listen to her for hours. She spoke fast and was excited over the littlest things.

And the best part was that she remembered him. Not just what he needed her to remember, but all the random little insignificant things as well. He said as much to her. “Few people remember me, as I am doomed as not to be remembered.”

Chesa ripped apart a garlic knot with a manic glee. “How in the world do you manage a restaurant if people keep forgetting you?”

“It isn’t a sudden thing. It’s more like a gradual fade. And when I need people to remember me, I do.”

After a moment of thoughtful chewing and comfortable silence, Chesa asked, “So what now? Are you going to kill me?”

He choked on his limoncello. “After I went through all that trouble to find you and cook for you?”

Chesa laughed with her entire body. “Man, you should see your face.” She wiped the tears from her eyes as Rufus contemplated finding a mirror. “How long have I been gone? I feel like I’ve been asleep for hours based on how rested I feel. I don’t remember the last time I slept for over four hours.”

Pride swelled in Rufus’s heart. “You’ve only been here a few hours. But if you ask me, I feel you need a full day’s worth of rest. You work too much. We all think it.”

Chesa froze mid-forkful of pasta. “All? Who’s all?”

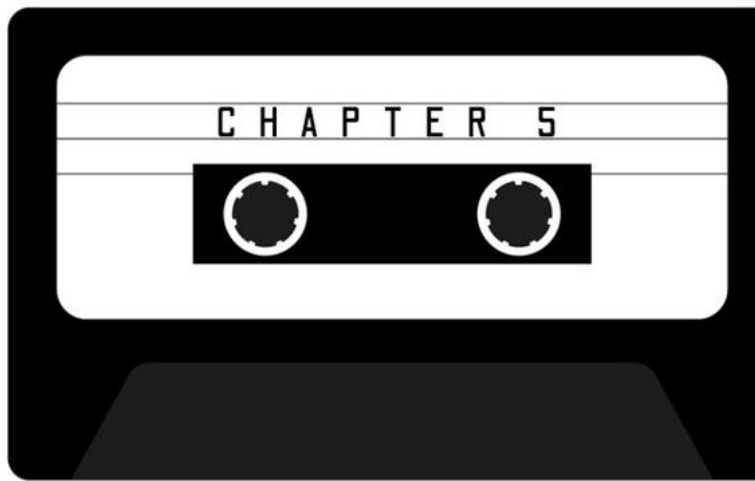
Rufus ticked off the answers on his fingers one by one. “My waitstaff for one. I’m pretty sure everyone who works in the food court. Anyone who’s met you...”

She hushed him. “Regardless, I still need to get back. The updates need to be done, and the marketing team needs to

know changes ASAP. They're waiting for my reports—" As she spoke, her hands gestured faster and faster.

Rufus captured one of her elegant hands and nested it between both of his. "I don't think you quite get me. This place—limbo—is out of space and time. Just as the backrooms were a liminal space outside time where you were lost in for hours. You can spend hours here—days, even—and only a minute would have passed." He looked at her meaningfully. "If you truly wish to go back to your home, I will arrange it. But if you wish to stay here, eat, rest, you may do so. You will inconvenience no one else, least of all me. Which will it be?"

Chesa didn't hesitate. "I want more Alfredo and garlic knots, please."



CHESA

ONE NIGHT STRETCHED INTO THREE. AFTER THE CARB loading, Chesa slept for most of the next day. And the next. She only woke for food and showers.

Rufus had supplied all she needed, including her own suite of rooms, clothes, and skincare products. All of which were of better quality than her current collection.

“I told you. You needed sleep.”

Chesa sipped her coffee. Even his coffee was better than hers. “I’m going to be so spoiled after this.”

“You are welcome here any time you need to rest. Seriously.”

She laughed half-heartedly. Man, she wouldn’t want to leave. “I don’t think I’m strong enough to withstand that kind of temptation.”

“You don’t have to be strong.”

Chesa felt the mood shift, and she didn't want to follow where it would lead. Instead, she asked the second biggest question in her head. "You know what's funny? Filipino food is nothing like this cheesy pasta, and yet your food always tastes like home." She shoveled a brick of lasagna onto her plate, pulling a pinch of cheese and placing it into her mouth.

Rufus ducked his shoulders. "That might be my fault. Whenever I cook, especially for you, I wanted you to feel the comfort of home."

She fell for him then. Sure, he was ridiculously handsome with his cheekbones and dark features and a deep voice that spoke to her so gently. And, yeah, he was also this enormous dark lord that embodied her most secret fantasies.

But when he said stuff like that? Screw rules and what was the proper way to do things?

Rufus had to have felt the same. Infinite lifetimes played out in his eyes. His tentacle wrapped around her chair leg and pulled her closer to him. He dragged her onto his lap. She had all the time in the world to stop him, to pull away. She didn't do any of that.

Chesa tilted her head back as he descended, pressing his lips against hers. She dug her fingers into his lion's mane of hair.

It was a chaste kiss. At first.

Tentative. Exploratory.

But one sweep of her tongue against the firm line of his lips flipped the switch on his control. He had her on the table. Long, elegant fingers skimming her body. The scraps of her clothes disappeared.

She gasped as he placed sucking kisses down her neck and chest. Rolled one nipple between his fingertips. Tasted the

other one. Murmured appreciative words against her skin.

His fingertips softly glided up her body, finally resting at the crease of her hip before he gently cupped her femininity. The warmth of his hand on her wet heat caused her to shiver with pleasure as he murmured sweet, unintelligible words against her skin.

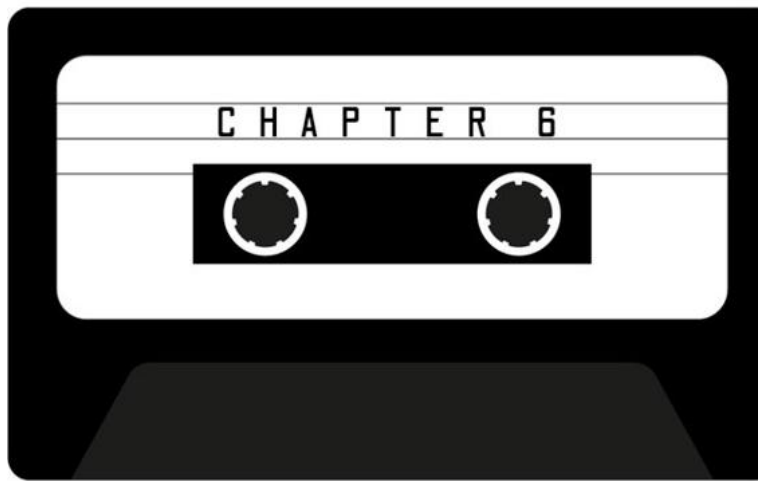
He teased her senses, exploring every inch of her most intimate parts with his fingers, his tongue. She became completely absorbed in the sensations that coursed through her, allowing herself to forget everything but the pleasure he was giving her.

She came in a glorious surrender, her back arching as she screamed. Rufus did not let up, filling her with his fingers, pushing her to go again. Chesa could not deny the onslaught of sensation that trembled over her.

In the aftermath, she admitted out loud that she needed to go back, and he said, "I know. I will take you when you go. Just tell me when."

She bit her lip. "We don't have to leave right now."

A slow smile spread across his face. "What do you want to do instead, little Chesa?"



RUFUS

HE THOUGHT CHESA WAS BEAUTIFUL WHEN SHE SWOONED over his food; she was even more so when she wrapped that delectable mouth around his cock. He buried his fingers in her hair, careful not to hurt her, but she didn't need to do this.

“Chesa, I—” His words died on a groan as she swallowed his length, taking nearly all of him in. She wrapped both of her hands around his base while she bobbed her head up and down.

Where had she learned this? She didn't have a partner of note in the year he has known her.

He brushed the surface of her mind carefully. He wouldn't pry, but superficial thoughts were fair play. It would be like hearing someone speak to themselves aloud.

He didn't have to push at all. The tapestry of her mindscape rippled before him, desire and curiosity as vibrant threads woven throughout.

Chesa Rizal was a virgin. And she wanted this. Wanted *him*.

He should have known. After all, she was an eager over achiever in all things. With her ordered mind and meticulous focus, her virgin mouth was his undoing.

He should take things slow, but he was too far gone. He gasped when she took him in deeper, touching the back of her throat.

Her tongue moved in circles over the head and she moaned when he pushed in deeper, her hands gripping him tighter in encouragement.

Rufus felt his climax close as she swirled her tongue around him, coaxing ripples of pleasure in him. He reached down and wrapped one hand around her neck, fingers brushing lightly against her skin.

He watched her, mesmerized, as she wrapped her lips around him and sucked lightly.

He bit his lip and tried to hold back, wanting to make sure that Chesa felt every bit of the pleasure he was feeling. But despite his best efforts, his body surged forward, pushing him over the edge.

Rufus groaned as his orgasm rocked through him and she kept up her nimble ministrations until the last of his spent pleasure left his body.

Chesa pulled away and smiled up at him. He caressed her cheek, feeling so much admiration for her willingness to please him. She blushed as he pulled her up to tuck against his body.

He liked the feel of her there, in the hollow of his neck. He curled his fingers over her cheek, tilting her face up so he could press a tender kiss onto her forehead. The tip of her nose. Her pillow soft lips.

He wanted more.

Rufus pushed her back until she was laid out before him. She moaned when he settled his weight on her, wrapping her legs around his waist for more friction.

He would give her all she desired and more.

He pulled back, trailing slick kisses along her neck and collarbone. His hands explored her curves, her breasts, her inner thighs, and the heat between them. He trailed his fingers lightly around her clit, teasing it with gentle circles.

Her breath came in quick pants and her eyes fluttered shut as the pleasure rose. She locked her legs around him and he pressed against her, finding that special spot.

Rufus used the shadow tentacles from his body to invade her, sending out an army of tendrils to explore her body. He wanted to be inside her, just like she had been living inside of him for months. He wrapped the tentacles around her legs and arms, binding her gently and caressing her skin. They skimmed over her body, exploring every inch of her, every crevice.

The pleasure inside him surged higher and higher, and he felt his control slipping. He gritted his teeth and pushed forward, sinking in deeper and deeper and sending her over the edge with him.

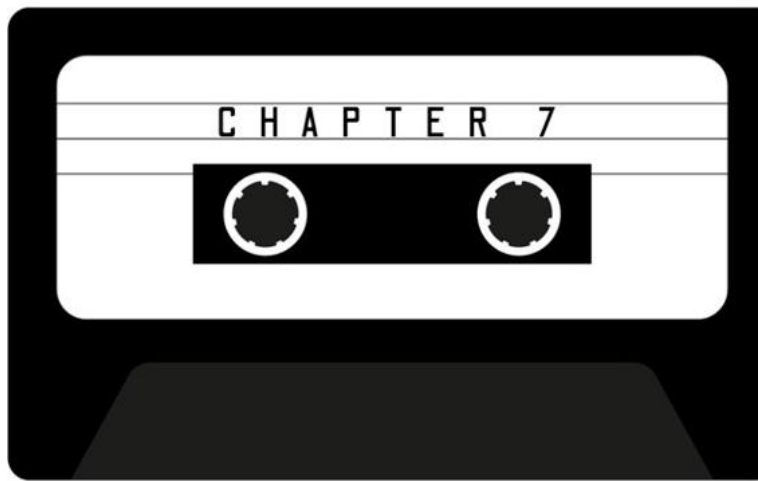
Finally, he pulled out, panting heavily. He held Chesa close, cocooning her in his embrace and cradling her head against his chest.

The room was heavy with satisfied silence, both of them overwhelmed by the exquisite pleasure they had experienced. He held her like that for a few moments longer before pressing a sweet kiss onto her forehead.

“We need to do that again.” Her voice was thick as she finally succumbed to sleep.

He smiled, tucking her in and settling himself beside her.

Yes. Soon. He would make sure of it.



CHESA

IT WAS WILD TO WAKE UP AND WALK INTO THE OFFICE EARLY on Monday morning after spending a full week with Rufus. Recuperation and rest were exactly what she needed to get that pep in her step.

Well, that and orgasms. So. Many. Orgasms.

Chesa finished her work and promptly clocked out at 5:00PM, ignoring the not-so-vague hints that Jaime dropped for her to pick up some extra work—otherwise known as his slack. She didn't even acknowledge his words, only waving a quick goodbye before she dashed out of the office.

Rufus had invited her to a proper date, and she didn't want to be late.

He was there to greet her in the foyer. She was barely in his arms when he pulled her in for a kiss. “Ready for dinner?”

“Where are we going?” she asked.

He smiled that devastating smile that sent her heart into convulsions. “We are already here, my love.”

Chesa wanted to ask what he meant when her gaze rested on the structure behind him. The Eiffel Tower soared into the sky.

She was in Paris. She couldn't believe it. One moment, they were at the mall. The next, they were in Paris.

He had taken her to Paris!

Rufus lifted her hand and brushed his lips over her knuckles. “This is only the beginning.”

They had dinner and dessert, after which he whisked her away for a private dance on the Eiffel Tower. Then, riotous lovemaking back at his place.

The next day, Chesa picked up the tape from Seren at the video store. She paid her \$200 from the mall's petty cash, and Seren was super excited about it.

Rufus confessed he had been the reason Chesa's videos kept messing up. He made it up to her by taking her out for a pizza picnic in Rome, and then licking her to multiple backbreaking orgasms as she cried out to the stars.

He sank himself inside of her in that slow way that made her eyes flutter shut.

“Tsk, tsk, my sweet Chesa. Look at me. I need all of you.”

She met his gaze and lost herself in the galaxy of stars she saw there. She let him dive deep inside her mind as he took her body...her very soul.

Rufus ground his hips against hers, eliciting a deep groan from her. “After this, where to next?”

He was determined to take her to all the places she longed to go. But right now, she was exactly where she wanted to be. Chesa reveled in the way he looked at her. How he pressed himself even closer against her. “Anywhere with you.”



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For more monster romances, check out *[A Cherry on Top](https://books2read.com/monstrousappetites1)* at <https://books2read.com/monstrousappetites1>. Set in the underworld of Obsidian City, it is a slice of life novella that is part of the *Monstrous Appetites* series.

[Taming the Viscount Viper](#) features the same naga family mentioned in *Monstrous Appetites*. It is available as part of The Monsters Ball on Amazon.

For more stories in the Obsidian Rift universe, *Claiming Her Orc* is available for pre-order. Links are available at <https://evangelinpriest.com/links>.

About the Author

Evangeline Priest writes love at first bite paranormal romance featuring growly alpha heroes and women strong enough to tame them. She writes “monsters in space” science fiction romance as Eva Priest. Try out The Legion universe, starting with *Hunted*:

<https://evangelinepriest.com/book/hunted-the-legion-savage-lands-sector-1/>

She is usually within reach of coffee, chocolate, or a bowl of noodles.

Join her VIP community on Patreon where she shares NSFW art, excerpts, cover reveals, and featured stories each month.

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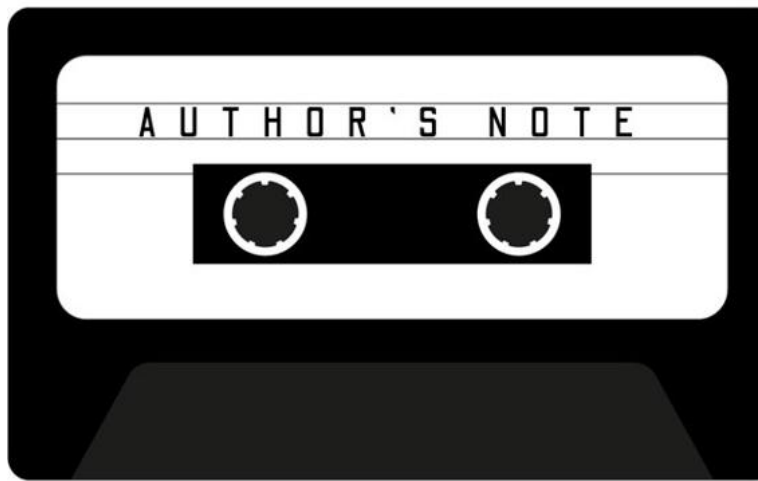
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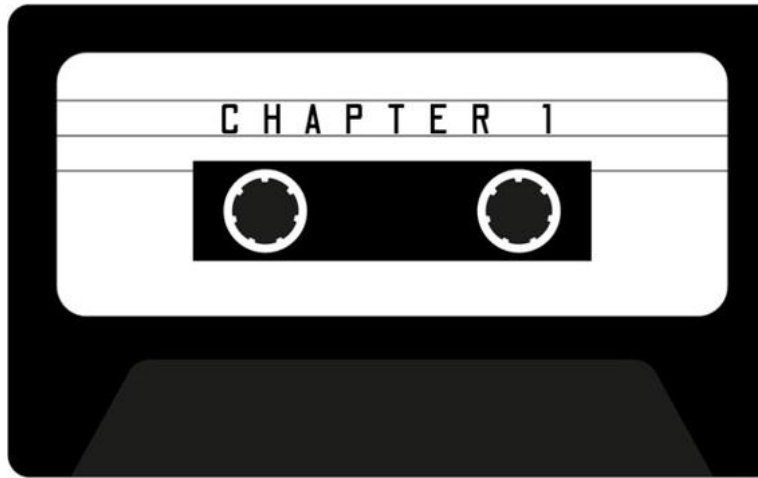
DREADFUL THINGS

MAEVE BLACK



Content Warning:

This book is intended for those above the age of eighteen.
There are scenes with depictions that are of sexual nature.
Some included are rainbow kiss/red wings, condomless sex,
honorifics, lessons in kissing and sex, monster shaped peen,
and a lot of whimpering.



DON'T YOU (FORGET ABOUT ME) – SIMPLE MINDS

ZERO

“WE NEED TO HIRE FOR SEASONAL WORK,” LAZAR, MY ONLY other employee, brings up. He’s a ghoulish like me. His skin a deep plum with similar stitching to my own. We’ve been friends for a near decade, and unlike me, he has a life outside of this little novelty shop.

“Do we really, though?” My face cringes as I think of having to hide who I am to a human. It’s not easy owning this shop already. Whenever we’re busy, I have to put on my skin suit and act as a human does.

Sometimes, I wish to just strip away the façade and be me.

He scrunches his face, nodding. Like me, he’s been super isolated and forced to hide. This mall has always felt like

home. At night, we're us, and the other shop owners who also have to hide in plain sight become themselves too.

"Okay, but I've had no bites on the ads I put out in the newspaper. It feels pointless."

"Might feel like it, but how the hell will we be able to run this store come Halloween night? You know we have to go to the Ghoul Dive."

Every year on Halloween, there's an event that all ghouls—and haunted creatures alike—have to attend. We may be free in the human realm, but we're still controlled by the people who gave us that freedom.

We're required to make payment in the flesh.

"I'll find someone. Maybe put a sign outside the shop?"

"That's smart. There are so many college kids who need flexible working hours, and we don't do school anymore, so there's no issue there."

Both of us graduated early. Laz with his Bachelor of Science and me, with my Bachelor of Arts. He wanted to be more knowledgeable about investments and my focus stayed on accounting and administration duties.

He's right, and I've been avoiding this for so long that we're days away from Halloween—and shutting down the shop isn't allowed. There's the trick or treat event the mall holds every year. It's part of having a shop in this place.

Heading to the printer, he grabs a piece of paper and a Sharpie. Like he does for our bandmates, he writes 'WE ARE HIRING' in all caps.

It's legible while also looking very grungy with his lettering. "Perfect," I state, grabbing the roll of tape.

“You should’ve done it a week ago, Zero!” he calls after me as I walk toward the front of the shop.

If you are a first-timer entering this store, I’m sure it’d feel like a fever dream. There’s a bit of everything here. Neon signs, strobe lights for the raver kids. There are practical jokes and oddities for the class clowns. Merch from whatever pop culture event you’re feeling. Bongs and weed paraphernalia cover the east wall. And the most lucrative area where people blush when entering is the sex shop section. We have everything you could want. Dance poles, edible underwear, lingerie, and toys galore.

I pass the neon section before hitting the entrance. With renewed hope for a filled position, I tape the sign to the window. It stands out against our darkened shop.

From the outside, you would think this was a random grunge store. Our sign is up top in neon purple. *Dreadful Gifts*. It’s fitting for the random stuff piled inside.

As soon as I seal the tape down, pressing against the glass to make sure it sticks fully, someone taps my shoulder.

The shock of someone touching me, let alone me not hearing them, has me jumping. A giggle escapes the person and when I turn, my eyes connect with a familiar face.

Posey Ramos.

No recognition hits her eyes as she scans over me. “You’re hiring?” I blink slowly, wanting to point out the fact that we went to high school and university together.

She was the popular girl after all, and I was simply a nerdy ghoulish who had to hide myself. It wasn’t until uni that I became any type of attractive. By then, the girl I wanted wouldn’t get with me, and now I’m in this weird twilight zone where the

world looks at me as a loser, but I've got so much more to offer.

“Yeah, we're looking for a part-time seasonal worker.”

Her face lights up, her eyebrows rising as she sucks in a breath. Yet the action doesn't meet her eyes. Her nose is cute, all button-like and wide. It's soft without sharp edges and has a little stud on the left side. My eyes catch on her lips, big, soft, the bottom a bit plumper than the top.

She's wearing simple makeup, unlike me with the heavy eyeliner and eyeshadow. It keeps people from asking question about my sunken eyes and the blue-gray hue that I can't quite get rid of even with my skin suit. Posey doesn't have those dark circles. Her brown skin is smooth and unblemished from scars unlike mine.

“That's perfect!” Her voice is cheery, but behind her gaze seems to sit lies, so vacant and drained. There's a pinched way her eyebrows fight against the faux excitement. Her lips have a bit of a wrinkle to them, almost like she's trying to smile away some type of pain. It's not my business, though. So, instead of asking her anything personal, I point my thumb to the entrance of my shop.

“I can do a walk-in interview right now, if you're up for it?”

Her eyes look down at her outfit and she flinches a bit. There's a grimace she carefully hides as soon as it appears. “I'm not dressed—”

“You look absolutely fine,” I plainly mutter, wanting to know who told her dressing casual wasn't acceptable. She's rocking a beige sweater that shows off her soft shoulder, paired with a skirt that's plaid and pleated. Something I could see anyone wearing on a regular day. The fact that she's struggling with

her self-image is absolutely wild to me. She's pretty, always has been.

She bites her bottom lip, closing her eyes as if shame is her only friend. "Okay. Yeah, let's do that."

I don't say anything as I walk away, hoping she'll follow me. Was Miss Perfect who I imagined hiring? No. Is Lazar as desperate as me to get someone to work when we need time off? Absolutely. Her footsteps are near silent as we make our way to the back of the store. No, not the naughty part on the west end of the back, hidden behind black curtains. Instead, the east side, where there's a hidden door in the wall. A false one that leads to the office in back.

Pressing onto it, the click sounds out and I'm met with Lazar who isn't wearing his skin suit. His deep plum skin meets my eyes and I can't seem to catch my breath. "We have an interview!" I holler out, hoping this doesn't end badly. We're not allowed to be known to the human world. If she sees him, she'll have to be killed. Luckily, she isn't super close to me, only a few feet away.

Red eyes connect with mine, embarrassed and teetering the edge of his ghoul side. Somewhere between rampage and bloodlust. He takes deep breaths and I hope he can chill out. It's not every day that our lives are under watch, and it's something he'll have to get used to with our new employee.

We definitely need to clean out the fridge. The hearts we store in there isn't exactly in line with human laws.

"Is there something wrong?" Posey asks, her voice small and concerned somewhere behind me.

"He's getting dressed," I answer with a fake chuckle. "Didn't want to embarrass him like that."

She lets out a little sigh and I don't turn to see what her facial expression is like. Lazar comes back out as the human version of himself, with curly black hair, brown skin, and leafy green eyes. He has a slit in his eyebrow and piercings in his nose and lip. He's always had such a nice skin suit, and sometimes, I wish mine was just as handsome.

"I'm good!" he calls out, even being as close as he is, he says it for Posey's benefit.

Sidestepping and waving her forward, she comes in, face to face with Laz. His eyes roam her body freely, and while passing, I slap his chest with a little tut. "Absolutely fucking not."

He quietly laughs and shrugs like I shouldn't care. And *I don't*.

I lazily guide Posey to the chairs in the back, and Lazar sits next to her as I prepare to start the interview. By grabbing the clipboard, a piece of paper, and a pen, I seem somewhat professional. Unfortunately, I haven't hired anyone before. Laz is my bandmate and we started this shop together. Adding someone is new for us and I'll need to figure out how to legally do it.

"What's your name, sweetheart?" Laz asks, and again, I swat his chest. He chuckles and rubs at it. "Jesus, Z. Calm down. I bruise easily."

"She's to be an employee," I grumble. "Not your *plaything*."

Posey smirks, and it's the first time I've seen the bratty poser from high school. There's the girl I met back then. Her eyes glow with mischief, like she's loving the attention. It takes every ounce of patience to not roll my eyes. These two will be the life of me. Get it? Because I'm dead.

“Posey Ramos,” she answers, though I already know and Laz probably remembers her too. Lazar lets out a whistle, knowing exactly who she is.

Leaning toward me, he whispers—but damn, it’s far too loud. “Poser?”

I sharply nod, and Posey’s eyes narrow into slits. “Did you just call me a poser?”

Inhaling a not-so-patient breath, I go to answer but Laz beats me to it.

“You’re Miss Popular. Poser Puff. Cheerleader,” he cheekily mocks, no derision in his tone. “The coolest girl in school and hot as hell, might I add.” The way he flirts has me wanting to smack him again. With my luck, she’ll reach out to our nonexistent HR department. *She hasn’t even started yet.*

“I’m Lazar,” he coos, blowing her a kiss. “Laz for the cute ones.” She scoffs, folding her arms across her chest. Lazar smirks at the move, leaning back and spreading his legs wide.

“Charmed. Maybe I should go elsewhere?” she brattily challenges, one manicured eyebrow raised upward. I run fingers through my shaggy hair, wishing they’d stop whatever the fuck they’re doing and be professional.

“Okay, Laz, you’ve gotta go, man.” My attempts to shoo him are frail at best. He’s terrible with taking hints. You could smack him in the face with one and he’d thank you but go on his way.

He chuckles and straightens in his chair. “If Little Miss can’t handle me, how can she work by my side?”

Almost as if she takes that as a challenge, she sits straighter and fixes her face. “You know what, I need this job. You both

—” She directs, pointing to us both. “—obviously *need* me. So, let’s go over some things.”

I’m not even sure why my pants tighten with her tone. Almost like I can’t resist the fact that she’s commanding the room and guiding us like we’re her pets. My cheeks warm and I really like the way she speaks to us. “Go on,” I urge, wanting nothing more than to see what she’d ask me to do if we were to be on a different kind of level. Not an employee and employer one, but just Zero and Poser.

“Lay it on me,” she encourages me to explain.

“I’ll lay *it* on you,” Laz mutters under his breath, earning a swift kick in his shin from Posey. He makes a little sound out of pain and her grin widens before she winks.

Avoiding their little battle, I soldier on, hoping to get this over with before my ghoul side decides to make an unscheduled appearance.

“We need someone who can run the register and restock. Someone who can answer questions when we’re away and eventually can close the store down by themselves if needed,” I quickly run through the things. “It’s not as hard as it sounds. We will train you for everything.”

She tilts her head and her lips tilt once more, and it looks beyond charming on her. Laz, of course, takes that moment to butt in. “We need you to be flexible. There are things outside of this place that we both are required to do and sometimes that takes us away at odd times.”

I’m shocked he didn’t make a ‘flexible’ joke in response to his own words with how this entire interview has been going.

“That works for me. I have school early mornings and am free every night,” she responds, and with a whisper she adds to no

one, *and it's not like I have a social life anyway*. A little smile breaks free across my face at that and I can't help but bite my cheek to hold it in.

"You're hired."

"Just like that?" She clucks her tongue, almost in disbelief.

"Just like that, Poser."

"Really?" she scoffs, her grimace on full display. Almost ignoring her own annoyance, she continues, "I thought it would be a bigger battle."

"We're pretty desperate, actually."

"Does that mean it sucks to work here?" she jokes, but there's a note of concern in her tone.

"This is Dreadful Gifts. The keyword is in the name," I honestly respond. While I love the Creepy Court Mall, I really fucking hate the people my store drags in.

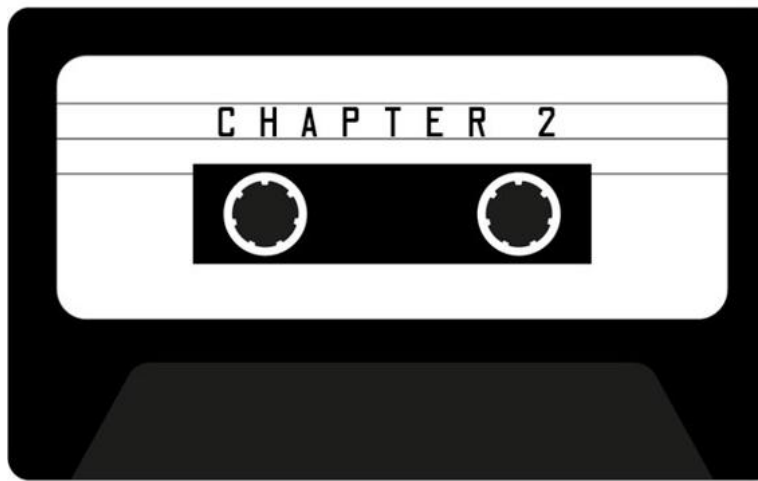
"Gotcha."

"I'll see you Monday," I hurry out, needing her to leave so I can smack Laz once more.

"Monday, right. I'll see you then..."

"Zero," I add, biting the inside of my cheek. Next to me, Laz lets out a little snicker.

"Right, Zero."



WE BUILT THIS CITY – STARSHIP

POE

WONDROUSLY, I WALK OUT OF DREADFUL GIFTS WITH NO more excitement than the amount I entered with. Yet, somehow, I still feel a whole lot lighter than before. It's not easy knowing that my ex already ruined my life. To add, I have no seasonal job with his mom, helping her with all the sorority things she was paying me for.

My skin crawls as I think of him, and the last time I saw his stupid face. His mouth on *hers*, his hands plastered against *her* body, and the sounds they made as they swapped spit and who knows what else. I shake the feeling away, knowing I need to do anything but think of Chuck and how much he hurt me.

The Creepy Court Mall was the spot we all went to in hopes of getting some type of dopamine. There was a little bit of everything here. An arcade, the best food in town, and even

the coolest record store that I can't look at without thinking of how I had my first kiss with Chuck there.

That asshole has tainted just about everything I've ever loved.

Him and *her*.

I close my eyes, wanting to gouge them out and bleach the memories away. I'm twenty-one, there's absolutely no reason for me to cling onto a guy I met in my first year at uni. He's not even that cute. *Don't lie to yourself, Poe.*

Letting out the biggest sigh of my life, I walk toward the food court, knowing full well I won't be able to eat a single thing until this gnawing depression leaves me.

Knowing I have to see the two people who hurt me most for another two years of classes and cheer bring tears to my eyes. Not to add insult to already overwhelming injury, there's a Halloween party at Mourning U, and as one of the cheerleaders and members of Dead Theta Kappa, I'm at a loss. *I have to go.* Being there without a date to shove in their face sounds like the worst kind of hell.

Everyone will be staring at the girl who lost the guy.

Before I can make it too far, the two people I loathe most in the world are there. They freaking stand feet away. They're not touching. Little victories, I guess. But they're still here, where the three of us used to hang out. Here to be a fucking drag on me and rub their whatevership in my face, I'm sure.

Not taking a second to think, they head my way. Chuck's smug mug makes me want to slap it off him, give him a new look to brag about to all his loser friends.

Then there's *Lola*.

My friend, or rather *ex*-best friend. She lost that title when she decided to sleep with my boyfriend.

“Oh, my golly gosh, it’s Poe!” She places a palm against the place where her heart is supposed to exist, but if you dig a little deeper, you’ll know nothing is there.

I want to scream at her, claw her eyes out, beat her ass, and then laugh as she cries. If I could destroy her, ruin her life like she’s done mine, I would. But unlike her, I couldn’t sleep at night if I did.

Instead of responding, I immediately turn away, rushing toward the place I came.

“Poe!” she hollers dramatically, her voice too loud and obnoxious, causing far too much attention. It always bothered me, but my patience evaporated when she betrayed me. “Don’t be like that, I have something to tell you!”

I pause, not wanting to, but acknowledging that she’ll chase me regardless and make more gawkers watch is enough of a motivator. Stopping and turning toward them, I plaster on my fake-as-fuck smile. “Oh, hi there. Didn’t notice you.”

Chuck rolls his eyes but doesn’t call me out on my blatant lie. “What are you doing here? Did you find a different seasonal job?” Of course she takes a jab where it hurts, making sure I feel the loss even more than I did before. I let out a heavy exhale, the spirit of *I’m-going-to-fucking-kill-you* leaving my body with the simple movement.

“Yes, but I’m here...” I pause, not knowing what the hell to say. Then Chuck bites his lip like he’s hiding a laugh, and that action pushes me over the edge to lie. “I’m here to meet with my boyfriend.”

Both of their faces fall and I can't even stop the sneer of triumph painting my features. "Yeah, we're meeting and I really should get going."

"Prove it," Lola says immediately, her freckled cheeks more prominent as her face reddens. Her hair even appears brighter than normal. The contrast of it and the redness of her skin making this lie worth possibly getting caught. Even if they call me out, and I lose with this, at least I made them both sweat.

That is worth all the embarrassment.

But then, a thought comes through. *Laz*. He flirted with me back there, hell, he probably would fuck me if I simply said 'please.' An idea conjures in my head and I know exactly what I'm going to do.

Spinning toward Dreadful Gifts, *again*, I go through the entrance and the little bell above the entrance chimes. No one greets us and I hate that I might have to go hunt Laz down. It'll make it a lot less natural that way.

Standing ten feet away is my hero. Bad boy Zero. He might not be who I was hoping for, but something about his chilling demeanor is enough to propel me to him. Unhurried, I saunter over to him and he notices me immediately. The way his eyes eat me from head to toe in a slow measure confuses me. Not even fifteen minutes ago he seemed aloof, unbothered, and almost annoyed by my existence.

Now, standing there in all his metal, shaggy, and delicious glory, he's watching me eat the distance between us.

He doesn't halt me or stop my close proximity. His jaw seems to clench, though, and it has me almost faltering. Almost.

"I know this is weird as hell, and you don't really know me," I rush out, my fingers tingling as I hold on to the leather of his

jacket. “But if I lose my job here, it’s worth it.” My words are a pant, and my chest is beating far too quickly. “There’s this really asshole guy—whom I used to date—who is watching.” I emphasize this all, needing him to hear my plea and hopefully not shove me away.

He’s so subtle about looking over my shoulder, still not saying anything as my grip tightens on the soft material. “I’ll do just about anything to not deal with the embarrassment of him seeing me lose again.”

A gruff little sound leaves the guy I’m practically assaulting with my body pressed against his. My new boss, no less. “You see, we were dating, and the tool cheated.” My words slip out with a bitter tinge, but I can’t seem to stop the anger and sadness filling me. “With that chick next to him.”

I don’t have it in me to point behind me to the girl who literally slept with my boyfriend while claiming to be my friend.

“I wouldn’t accost a stranger, let alone my manager if it wasn’t important to me,” I continue, swallowing back my nerves. “Just go with it. *Please.*”

His eyes glance down at me. He has at least half a foot on my height, if not more, and the way the gold flecks in his eyes almost glimmer into a sparkling red has my breath skipping a few times. I blink rapidly and the red disappears. Almost like I imagined it.

Without guidance, he closes the distance between us, and our lips collide. My entire body warms up with need coursing through me. Holy shit. I don’t even think Chuck ever kissed me like this. There’s no way his lips ever consumed me with this much vigor.

A need full of warmth zips through me, burning low in my stomach. From my toes to the tip of my nose, everything feels overwhelming. He doesn't push his tongue into my mouth, but damn, the way I wish he would.

My toes curl as his hand slides up my chest. One cupping my throat like he's stamping ownership and the other trailing through my hair before sinking into my messy curls.

I let out the tiniest moan, and while my mouth spreads, he tentatively licks my top lip with perfect precision. Not once did I ever think a guy could take my breath away with their mouth, especially after Chuck's lack of passion, but this mere stranger is proving me wrong.

There's a tingle residing between my legs that I haven't felt in years, and for some reason, I want it to stay. Even if this guy is my new boss—*if he doesn't fire me*—something in him calls to me.

When he parts from me, I swallow the dryness, suddenly feeling absolutely parched and overheated. I thought this was a bad idea, thinking he'd use too much tongue, too much saliva, or hell, even bite me. But it felt unreal, fated, almost like he waited for my cues and didn't overstep at all.

My lipstick is smeared over his lips. Cupid red and messy. Something Chuck hated because it wasn't chill enough for me.

Well, suck on that, Chuck.

Zero bites his bottom lip and then smiles. It's so subtle and cool. Too cool, like he's far too aware of our surroundings. We're at the Creepy Court Mall. It's not exactly the cool place to go, but especially this novelty store.

It's the one store in this place that makes me laugh to no avail, though.

Thank you, I mouth, trying not smile like a dopey idiot, but fail anyway. With a smug expression, I turn to Chuck and Lola. My *ex* and *ex-best friend*. Their mouths are slightly agape. Chuck doesn't even drape his arm over her like he used to do to me. *Trouble in paradise?*

His sour expression is enough to have pride ripping through me. They both slide through the aisle, heading directly toward me.

"Guess she wasn't lying," Lola huffs, smacking her gum in the most obnoxious way. What are we, fifteen? We left high school years ago. Apparently, time hasn't stopped her immaturity from flourishing.

"Lying about what?" Zero asks, his face stoic. Yet, underneath that is a bitter edge. Something I recognize fairly well. *Disgust*.

"Poe over here says you're her new beau." Lola's sneer meets me like she still thinks I'm lying—I am, but she doesn't need to know that. Her nose tilts high like it's magnetized to the ceiling or something.

Zero's arm encircles my waist, his fingers digging into me possessively. He leans forward, far too good at this, and lays a lingering kiss on my cheek. My face heats, feeling too much for some random dude I've only just met. His disarming smirk sets my skin ablaze and then he bites into my cheek.

"Little Posey is always so coy when it comes to our relationship," he coolly answers. A shiver races down my skin as his fingers dig into me once more. *Not Poser. Posey*. I kind of like the sound of it with his gruff voice.

Lola pops her gum rudely, all while Chuck narrows his gaze at the hand on my waist. As his glower seems to encourage Zero,

he makes sure to tug me closer.

I can't resist the smile engulfing my face, because he's so good at this and while I'm not opposed to being claimed, it's strange how comfortable this feels.

"He's a loser, Poe," Chuck grumbles, folding his arms across his chest. Only months ago, those toned arms would've had me melting. Chuck is the golden boy, the jock who hit every damn record on the university team. He's your standard football player. Brown shaggy hair with eyelashes that are a tad too perfect, and that crooked golden retriever smile that doesn't match his actions.

"That's wild," Zero says with a derisive chuckle. "I've been winning with Poe here since we met."

Chuck flinches, and while Zero isn't acting like we've already messed around, that's exactly how my ex sees it.

Good.

Suck on that.

"Not sure what you see in her," Chuck scoffs, trying to jab at me. His face sours even more somehow. But I can't help but lean into Zero, loving the way he holds me like I'm his.

"She sees *me* in her, Cafferty," Zero snaps back with an amused huff. It takes me all of ten seconds to realize he knows Chuck's last name.

I don't spare Lola another look, but she's probably still chewing that gum with her mouth open at every movement. We were inseparable, until we weren't. I've gone over every moment we spent together when Chuck was present, wondering where the hell they decided to betray me without a second thought.

I'm unsure what Chuck wanted from her that I wouldn't give him. I gave him blowjobs on the regular, let him inside me, and never made him reciprocate. *Which is a bust. I deserve orgasms too.* It's not like either of us were virgins when we met either, he slept with half the popular girls in high school, and we didn't meet or start dating until uni. We've always been really physical, but he always had the better end of the bargain.

Plus, Lola is average, just like me. We're both cheer squad members. We wear our makeup, outfits, and almost everything else the same. The stereotype of popular girl was written in our image.

We're basically the same people, her hair is just blonde, whereas mine is black. She and I were close—or so I thought—yet she took no time to fuck my boyfriend in the back of the campus parking lot after that Friday game.

They weren't even discreet. I walked up after finishing scheduling practices with Mercedes, and they were out in the open, naked, acting surprised that I stumbled upon them.

“You're such a tool!” Chuck growls, turning around. He doesn't grab Lola, and I half expect her to chase him. Instead, she eyes Zero and then me. Before saying another word, she walks off, a sway in her hips. Does she think that'll attract him to her? I try not to let that sour my newly triumphant mood. He wouldn't touch her.

Why would I care if he did?

“Wow.” Zero lets out a low whistle. His hands don't drop yet, and I cherish the way being held feels like safety. It's only been a few months but my heart still feels battered. I'm constantly wondering, why and what did I do wrong?

There are no answers in the silence, just questions without meaning.

“If we’re fake dating,” he muses aloud. “Then we need to make this mutually beneficial.”

I gasp, not knowing how his voice got so low and suggestive when it was so soft before. “What do you mean? That was a —”

“One-time thing... me helping the princess of Mourning U? Not a chance, Poser. I think we should make an arrangement.”

“But I—”

He turns me, my chest brushing against his, causing my breath to stutter out pathetically. You’d think he’s soft, but his chest is a wall of muscle, and I’m weak.

“You. Owe. Me.”

I let out a sigh, but nod once in defeat. “You’re right,” I groan, not wanting him to ask for something extreme, but if I have to show up two people who hurt me, I’ll do just about anything.

His palm, warm and insistent, tips my jaw toward him. “There’s this Halloween event this weekend. And while I know you’re only doing this to spurn an ex, I need you so you can make the chick I want jealous.”

“That’s it?” I asked, shocked. “Just a date?”

His cheeks redden with embarrassment and I want to bottle the expression with me. “Okay, there might be something else.”

I raise an eyebrow, knowing it couldn’t be that simple. “Go on.”

He lets out a huff and bites his lip. Not noticing before, his teeth seem longer, sharp. Almost inhuman. I blink a few times

and they appear normal. Must've been hallucinating it.

"There's a girl there, Roxy. I want to impress her. She said she wouldn't give me a chance because I'm..." He stops and speaks through a cough, quickly saying the last part. So fast that I can't understand it.

"What was that?" I grip his jaw, now tilting him toward me.

"Fuck," he shyly grumbles. Somehow, those rosy cheeks take on a crimson shade. "I'm a virgin." He coughs again to cover the grimace he sports. He tries to turn away but I hold his jaw, wanting to mess up this pretty specimen.

"Oh, Zero. I'm going to make you such a happy guy."

It won't be a feat to teach him all the things that Chuck never did for me. He shakes his head, a bashfulness creeping over his expression. "Please don't pity me, Poser. I've always been a *loser*, as your asshole ex eloquently stated. Roxy is the first chick I've wanted to try to date since high school. She's a bit *freaky*."

"Freaky?"

He leans in, his mouth brushing my ear. "She likes to tie guys up among *other things*." I giggle, thinking of how appealing that sounds.

"*Oh*," I emphasize. "I see."

He moves backward and runs a hand through his messy hair. "Forget about it, Poe. You owe me nothing." The way his head almost falls makes me give in. I'm not exactly freaky, but I can definitely teach him a thing or two.

"We need to set some ground rules," I announce, reaching for his jaw once more. I can't seem to stop grabbing it. Guess I'll have to get used to it, since we're going all in.

“Rules are good,” he mutters, still avoiding eye contact.

I place my hands on his chest, the girly pink nails I have contrasting against the black and grungy fabric of his shirt. The sight has my heart picking up pace.

“One, we have to agree that this is just pretend. *No feelings involved.*” He nods again, this time not avoiding my gaze. “Two, I think if I’m going to be *teaching* you things, we’re going to have to meet up outside of work hours.”

He grimaces, but nods. I can’t tell if that’s from the idea of being in a public fake relationship with me or having to spend more time with me outside of our designated schedules.

“Three, whenever I need you to play the doting boyfriend, you’ve got to keep up the ruse, okay?” I need to hurt them, make them hate their lives like they made me hate my own.

“Likewise, Roxy will get so jealous.” He waggles his eyebrows at that, as if it’s the best plan he’s ever had. “Then, maybe she won’t care about my inexperience.”

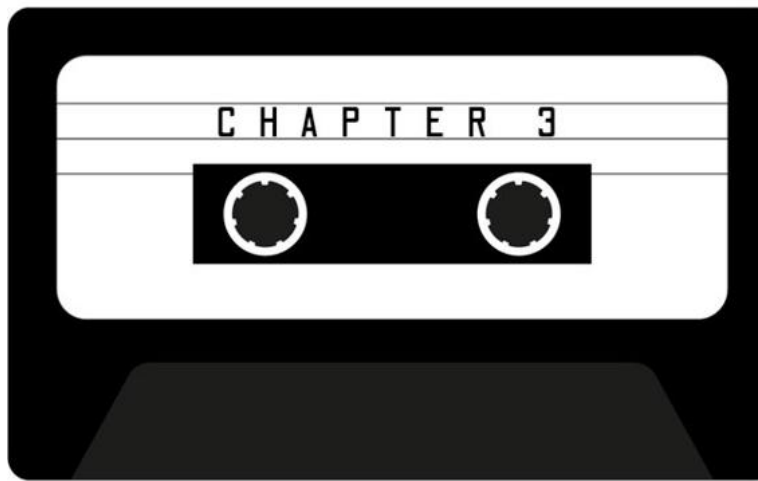
“That’s the spirit,” I praise. “Four, no telling anyone it’s fake. Lips sealed.” I swipe my fingers across my lips, mimicking a zipper before throwing the imaginary key away.

“Like I’d tell anyone we’re fake dating, that’s fucking embarrassing,” he shamefully grumbles, that red shade coming back full force.

“Five, I think we need to get our story straight just in case someone asks how we started dating.”

His eyes blink slowly like that’s worse than chugging a glass of milk. *It’s not*, he’s just being dramatic.

This is definitely going to be an experience.



SUMMER OF '69 – BRYAN ADAMS

ZERO

I'VE NEVER REALLY BEEN NERVOUS.

Not when I came to the human realm, not when I watched the first friend I ever had get murdered by the lead ghoul, and not even when I nearly exposed myself in front of an entire crowd of people during a live show.

But now, as I wait for her to come into this shop and pretend to be my girlfriend while being my employee, has my nerves fried.

When I came up with the concept of fake dating, half of it was just because I want to see that tool, Chuck, lose. In school he bullied me, always pushing me into lockers, telling the girls I pissed myself at practice, and when I laid him out in football,

he convinced our coach—because of his rich parents—to sack me.

My love for football nearly ended, all on the fact that Chuck Cafferty fucked me over.

And to feel his girl, the one he always bragged about, in my arms? Nothing sweeter than revenge.

Until I tasted her, at least. The way she moaned and heated my body with her excitement isn't lost on me, and somehow it was even sweeter than pulling a fast one on my nemesis.

She melted into me perfectly, like the warm beat of a heart against my sharp teeth, I devoured every breath she allowed. My cock hasn't quite deflated yet. All it wants is her, and now that she's *teaching* me, it's all I've thought about. Using my fist far too many times over the weekend at the prospect of touching her again. I might be a virgin, and unable to truly grasp what it means to please a woman, but I'm a quick study, and I'm all in.

"It's the princess's first day," Laz jokes from beside me. I'm leaning against the desk in the back, thinking of how he's going to react to the news of us. We're not allowed to inform anyone of our deal. Not that it's much of a deal, I practically blackmailed the girl. It was too easy, her compliance almost too quick.

"Yep," I mutter, not wanting the reminder. What if these days apart made her realize I'm nothing special? How the hell am I supposed to recover from the way her mouth felt against mine? The way her little noises sounded will haunt me until my dying breath.

"Don't sound so put off, she's hot as fuck."

I growl at him. Literally growl. The noise isn't soft or human. It doesn't take a genius for me to know my eyes are red and all the way in zombie mode. We don't call it that, it's degrading, but that's the easiest descriptor. Laz puts his hands up in surrender but there are too many questions behind his mischievous eyes.

He's in his ghoul suit like me. We look like two monsters, and we are. If only we could stay like this permanently. Life wouldn't be such a drag.

"Do you like her or something?"

"Or something," I bite. Closing my eyes, I force out my skin suit, hating the immediate itch that comes with it. Heading toward the bathroom at the back, I grab my eyeliner, eyeshadow, and concealer, becoming the regular dude I've pretended to be for too many years. One day monsters won't be subjected to hiding, and when that day comes, I'll celebrate by being me other than on Halloween.

Until then, I'll be wearing my fake body like it's my only one.

"Poser girl!" Laz's voice filters outside the door, and I just know he's flirting with my girl. *My girl?* Yeah, I guess she kind of is. Yet, there shouldn't be any type of annoyance on my part when Laz flirts with her. My body without my brain heads toward them, needing to make sure he doesn't touch what my brain has already claimed as his.

"Posey," she corrects, huffing at him. "Poe, if you're not a brat." She sticks out her tongue while resting her hands on her hips with the cutest glower aimed at Laz. She's wearing boyfriend jeans that show her ankles, a little dangling anklet right above her Mary Janes. Her top shows her midriff, a little black number that has my eyes skating over her. There's a gold chain across her stomach, glittering under the dim lights.

Damn, she looks really good. Her eyes catch me staring and there's a humored glint there.

"Zero," she calls out softly. I'm not far, but I couldn't look away from her even if I tried.

"I'm training her in the back today," I rasp, unable to hide the excitement fueling me. Today is probably our first lesson, and the thought both terrifies me and excites me.

"But what about the register—" Laz starts and I shake my head.

"She'll need to learn how to clock in and do the bank drop."

"I guess," he grumbles. "I could teach her."

"You'll be fine up front." I laugh at the way he seems so put out. "Alone." Usually, he loves for me to do the stuff in the back... But then it hits me. He wants to flirt with her. *Over my dead body*. Maybe she wants me to be jealous in front of others, but until I can even tell if we'll work well with this fake arrangement shit, I can't go showing Laz that I'm hers.

I rotate my neck toward the back at Posey. Her eyes alight with amusement. It's the first time I've seen it match her expression. The other day, it was almost like she had nothing to live for. Suddenly, I'm the reason and that's far too much power to give any man.

"I'll be back in an hour," I lie, knowing he'll suck it up. Posey's eyes widen at my words, but she doesn't run away. There's almost this air of mischief. It's something she used to have in high school. And whether or not she knows I used to stalk her religiously isn't something I'll ever admit.

Not sparing another look at my disappointed best friend, I open the back door and we both shuffle in. As soon as it

closes, she's smiling. "What?" I ask, amusement making my lips tilt.

"I just think it's adorable that you want alone time with me," she openly teases me. I can't help the way my eyes roam her perfect form. The thickness of her hips and thighs, the way there's a glinting jewelry piece in her belly button that I missed before. She's perfect, and the fact that she's not aware of it makes her even more attractive to me.

I need to stop this thinking. It's not healthy. This isn't real.

"We have a deal," I play it off, knowing that I just want to touch her again. See if her skin heats, if her arousal will hit my nostrils, and if that sweet heady scent of blackberries will rise again. She bites her lip as if to stop herself from giggling, and my eyes once again get stuck on how perfectly plush they are. The way I want to bite into them and hear what sounds she'll make.

I'm not a saint, I've watched porn. It's not easy to find, usually, except we get it, along with the rate-R magazines here at the shop.

"What should I teach first?" She hums thoughtfully, tapping her chin. My eyes track every tap, and I'm learning quite swiftly that I'm going to have to detach. This is simply a trade-off. She scratches my back and I scratch hers. Nothing more. "Oh! I know!" Her excitement lights her features and she grabs my arm. The moment our skin meets, my body heats beyond belief, and my cock becomes steel. It hasn't done this since I realized what boobs were in high school. Now it's like I don't know how to control my body's reactions.

She pulls me back toward the back of the area. There's a secret entrance to the back rooms hidden and available. And while it's something I'll have to show her for when she closes—if

she ever does—I don't want her accidentally falling against the false door and hurting herself.

She stops right before the bathroom, spotting the table. It's the one we put security tags on, and fold the shirts for the displays. "This should work."

I don't say anything, wanting her to have full control over this situation. Nerves are my newest buddies as I wait for guidance. I want to grab her face and take her mouth again. There's something so addicting to the way she pressed into me, and I've thought of nothing but it since last week.

"Lesson one," she starts, sitting on the table. It helps even out the height difference between us. "Foreplay."

"Foreplay?" The question is redundant. Porn doesn't teach foreplay. It teaches fucking. Hedonistic orgasms and cream pies.

"You're going to kiss me breathless, hero."

"Hero?"

"You know, since you saved me from embarrassment."

"Whatever you say, Poser."

She huffs and continues her spiel. "Foreplay is where you kiss your partner. You find where they like them, licks too, and maybe even some bites," she explains. A shiver rakes down my frame as I imagine kissing and biting her, leaving bruises and marks across her skin so they know she's mine.

Even if it's fake.

"Where do you like to be kissed?"

She rolls her eyes slowly, snickering. "That's for you to *learn*," she emphasizes. "You're to learn, yes?" When I nod,

she waggles her finger at me, directing me closer. Her legs are closed, her posture straight and waiting.

I grip her knees, loving how my hands engulf them as if they're nonexistent. Using little strength, pulling them apart and spreading them wide, I feel her relinquish control. Her eyes dance with mischief, her teeth digging into her bottom lip. My palms trail up her thighs and her body shudders in response. She's not as unaffected as she pretends to be.

"What are your boundaries?" I question, wanting to make this as safe as I can.

Shock meets me as our gazes connect, but there's an appreciation there, almost like I'm the first person to ever ask. "Above the clothes, Romeo. Don't need a public indecency charge."

I close my eyes, trying to will my erection to abate, but when she says above the clothes as if under them is a close option, it makes me feel unhinged. Without opening them, I blindly reach forward and somehow grab her jaw.

"Eyes on me, hero," she hoarsely commands.

I slowly open them, meeting her determined expression and trying hard to concentrate on anything other than sex.

"You'll tell me if you don't like anything?"

She emphatically nods and I grip her tighter. Her eyes flutter, feeling something toward the action. Leaning inward, I take her mouth with mine. Unable to keep them in, I savor her. She tastes like bad decisions and dopamine, a high I'll gladly chase. Tentatively, I trace her lips with my tongue, repeating what I did last time. Rather than chickening out, I slip it inside her parted lips and *taste her*.

That blackberries flavor that haunts me meets me once more. It invades my senses like no other flavor will suffice after this. She traces my tongue, a teasing, and I know by the way she presses into me that she knows what she's doing. My entire chest beats like a huge drum, almost like my heart is trying to escape my body and nestle within the cage inside hers.

I moan, and while that would worry other guys, it urges me to keep up. With my free hand, I trail it up her thigh, squeezing her hips along the way. She whines and scoots forward as my thumb digs into her generous hips. Raising my hand higher, I tease her ribs, feeling the softness that covers them before hitting the underside of her breast.

Her moan vibrates against my tongue, and I lick her, brushing against the roof of her mouth and committing it to memory. I'm not sure how to separate fake and reality at this point. My body wants her, and my cock sure as hell can't tell if it's happy or mad at the reality that it'll be lonely.

Pulling my other hand from her jaw, I run it through her hair and grip the base of her head and hair, tugging purposefully. She literally whimpers and I groan in response, my entire body heating at the prospect that she's enjoying this.

I release her mouth and lean into her throat. Brushing my nose against her erratic heartbeat, my knees nearly buckle at her scent. She's divine, a fucking treasure.

My tongue peeks out, tracing the vein on the side of her neck. I want to sink my teeth in, taste how much she wants to fuck me through her blood. A ghoulish can tell many things about their partner through their blood. Words lie, but blood sure as hell never has. I bite down and she humps at my waist.

If her little desperate noises didn't tell me how she feels, the face that she's seeking purchase from my cock tells me how

much she wants more.

I lick, suck, and drag my teeth over her throat, making sure to leave every ounce of my desire on her. “You’re too good,” she praises. Her words are husky, like she’s already close to orgasm, and that thought has me trailing down.

“Mhmm,” I hum. My tongue flicks against her clavicle, then my teeth drag, making sure the goosebumps on her skin travel to her perky tits.

Underneath the thin fabric, they harden. Not bringing my teeth to them has me near combustion. They’re not overly big, but rather a handful or less. She’s utterly perfect, and I hate that I want to devour her. There’s a beast inside me who seeks escape, but I can’t ever let it out. She’s human. It’s unwarranted. We shouldn’t even be kissing.

“Zero,” she breathily moans, and I swear my cock weeps at the sound of my name on her tongue. “Fuck, I want you.”

Shit.

“Touch me,” she urges, grabbing my palm digging into her hip, and she pushes it toward the front of her jeans. Fuck. She should wear only skirts. Give me easy access all the time. Let me drop to my knees and worship her cunt. Learn exactly what she likes and only ever do that. I press against her pussy, heat meeting my hand. She rocks against me, using me for her own personal toy.

“Just like that,” she praises me, and I swear I’d fall to my knees if she asked. “You’re such a good boy, Zero. I knew you’d be good at this.”

Her words undo me, and I grip her throat with my other hand bringing her mouth to mine once more. I bite her lip, digging in, while rotating my fingers against the gap between her legs.

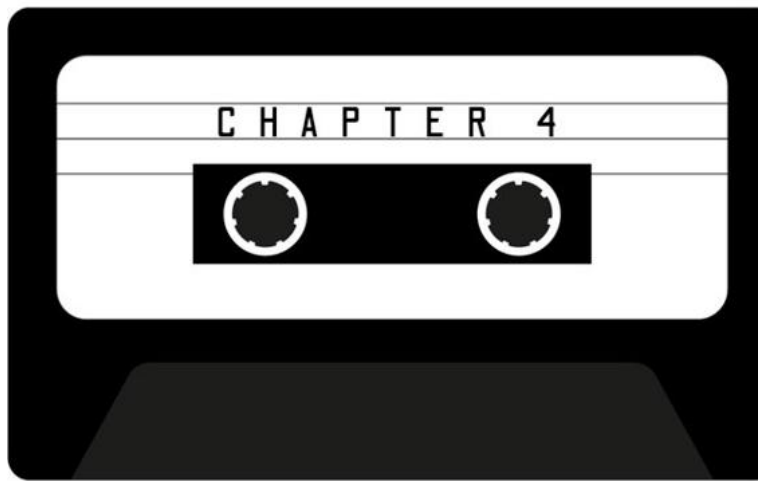
“I’m so close, Zero. Please don’t stop,” she begs, and she’s so pretty when she begs me for things.

Before she can get to that finish line, the back door is busting open, and the person who I love but want to currently kill walks through with wide eyes. “Holy fuck!” Laz chuckles at the scene before him. I’m sure he can see my cock tenting my jeans, and the way my hand hasn’t left her throat or pussy.

With the red lipstick she wears that’s probably all over my lips. And there’s no fucking way to hide the swell of her lips. They’re simply plush and fuckable. I want her even more now. The way her arousal coats the air in a decadent sweetness has a rage filling me. Laz’s eyes widen and I just know my eyes are red as fuck.

I’m on the edge, teetering, and for her, I’d collapse into the monster I hide, taking her for myself. Hurrying to let her go, I rush to the bathroom and slam the door.

I’m so screwed.



MATERIAL GIRL – MADONNA

POE

I'M NOT SURE IF HE RAN FROM ME OUT OF EMBARRASSMENT OR anger, but the way he stormed out has festered inside me since yesterday. Laz ended up training me on the register, and when Zero didn't resurface for the duration of my shift, Laz sent me home.

When I asked him what that entire scene was about, he shrugged and nudged me out the door.

I'm supposed to work again tonight. Tomorrow is his Halloween party and mine is the day after. There's a required trick or treat event at the mall too that Laz mentioned when I left. I'm required as an employee to show up. Which is such a weird concept.

I walk into Creepy Court, having a couple hours to kill before my shift. It sucks to depend on the bus for shuttling, because no matter how you time your event, you're either super early, late, or severely late. There's never an on-time option. The entire mall is decked out in Halloween garb, and it's welcoming. It gives such a spooky vibe along with a happy spirit I haven't felt since high school.

When I went to Mourning U over many out-of-state universities, I missed out on friendships with the girls I grew up with. Now, I have very little friends who aren't sorority girls or cheerleaders who seem to have chosen popularity over morality. I head over to Sizzling Discourse, the mall's residential gothic store. For some reason, I want to go all out with my outfit. Be a vampire from *Once Bitten* or something. I think Zero would love to show me off, make Roxy jealous with someone who actually looks like competition instead of the preppy girl.

"Poe, is that you, girl?" a voice hollers as I make it to the costume shop. Turning toward the person calling out, I notice Charlotte Harrows. She's one of the girls I became close to but lost touch with when she moved away. At first, we sent letters, but when school caught up with us both, they stopped, and it just wasn't the same.

"Charles!" I nearly squeal, rushing toward her and engulfing her in a big hug. She's so tall, much taller than me, and her eyes are the darkest shade of brown, only light when the sun hits them perfectly. She has the prettiest smile, even with the scar on her lip that she used to be embarrassed about.

"I've missed you so much." My heart swells at her words. Besides Lola, Charles was my closest friend. We were inseparable once upon a time.

“Me too,” I respond, my hands still on her shoulders. “What are you doing here?”

She peers around the mall and then the store I’m in front of. “At Creepy Court or Sizzling Discourse?” We both chuckle at the thought. Charles—much like me—doesn’t wear black often. She sticks to the brighter, trendier colors.

“I’m in town for Halloween, going to the Dastardly Bastards party in two days. It’s some wild meetup with goth people. So, I’m actually coming to Sizzling Discourse for that reason alone.”

The irony of this isn’t lost on me. “I’m going to a party too, I’m not sure where it is, but I’m coming here to dress for it.”

“I bet it’s the same one I’m going to,” she huffs out with a laugh. “I’m excited to be someone else for the night.” I nod and think the same. It’s nice to not be Posey Ramos. Maybe I’ll just be Poser. The thought is far too comforting. I’m not supposed to like the name the guys call me, even if it’s all just for fun.

“Maybe then you can help me?” The desperation isn’t lost on Charles, and her smile widens with mirth.

“It’ll be like old times,” she muses, putting her arm through mine and dragging me into the shop. It’s dark, almost macabre in coloring. In the front stands a chick in top to bottom black. The humor dancing in her expression isn’t lost on me. Her mouth wraps around a sucker and she pulls it free, eyeing us both. It’s like she’s silently saying, *Southstrom is over there*.

“Welcome to Sizzling Discourse,” she announces. “Anything in particular you’re searching for?”

“Halloween costumes,” Charles says at the same time I say, “I want to impress my boyfriend.”

Charles eyes me, turning toward me like I've just dropped a bomb. And I guess I have. She's probably still thinking I'm with Chuck and he would do about anything than date a goth girl. With a raised eyebrow she silently sends me *we're talking about this* with her expression.

"This isn't a costume shop," she points out to Charles. "But I'm a believer that if you come to the dark side, we may not have cookies, but we have addicting clothing."

I laugh, unable to stop myself. There's something both peaceful and appealing to her chill appearance. For once, there's no real judgement. She is who she is and is proud of that.

The clerk guides us toward the back. Across the walls are tees, much similar to the ones in Dreadful Gifts, yet these are mostly bands and not pop culture kinds. I smile at that. These are bands I'm fond of, like Van Halen, R.E.M., and Metallica. My smile broadens when we reach a section of actual costumes.

"Just in case you decide not to rock us goths as costumes, there are some cute ones. They're a little revealing, though."

There's a gray onesie that's more like a leotard with a fluffy bunny tail on the back. It comes with a set of ears and even some makeup. Another one is a Wonder Woman suit, and while it's tempting, I really want to show Roxy up at this party. She probably won't even be rocking her normal stuff, though.

Tapping the clerk's shoulder, I swallow down my fear. "Will you fit me for an outfit you'd put me in if I were your personal doll?" Her eyes light up, a bit of wonder there, like I'm asking her the exact thing she wants. Closing my eyes, I release all of my nerves, wanting to let this happen. It'll not only make

Roxy jealous over me, but it'll also offer Zero a look into who I could be.

She loops her arm where Charles once was and mostly skips toward the boot section. Her eyes scan and then pause. "What's your shoe size—" She pauses as if she wanted to end the sentence with my name.

"I'm an eight, and it's Poe," I answer, wanting her to know me for some reason.

"Poe," she repeats with amusement. "Even your name is goth. I'm Star."

She trails her pointer finger across the labels before finding the one she wants. Slipping it from the ones above, she hurries with the movement. It's almost too quick, like she's having a battle with getting it out. "I'm going to grab everything. Before you freak out and say no, I want to compile the outfit. Then you can try it on."

"I'm chill," I respond, clenching my teeth. Am I nervous? Yeah. This is out of the box for me.

"Shirt size?"

"Large, I think."

"Bottoms?"

"Extra-large to be safe," I answer. "Sometimes my ass is a bit too much for short ones."

She chuckles with mirth, eyeing my frame. Her eyes twinkle, and she licks her lips. "Might as well appreciate all magical gifts," she teases, but there's an appreciation in her eyes.

Rushing off, she grabs things off hangers, her eyes practically gleaming with joy, and I wish everyone had that kind of happiness. While she helps me, she also chats with Charles,

guiding her to certain areas. But for some reason, Star chose me to dress and take extra care with, and I'm immensely grateful.

When her arm is full, she grips my hand and ushers me to the back. There are two stalls, and she leads me to the left, handing me a set of hangers. "This is outfit one, let me know the fit. If it's too big or small, don't hesitate to tell me." I'm still holding the boot box. She nods at that. "These will match either."

My heart hammers as I enter the booth. The excitement strumming through me seems to bring out the need inside. While Zero avoided me yesterday, part of me knows it can't be from the kiss. Not only was he fantastic with his mouth, teeth, and tongue, but he let me guide him when I wanted to get off. He asked if I liked what he was doing and kept the motions that had me moaning.

My throat is still covered with the bruises from his kisses, and I can't say I don't love it, because I do.

Setting the box and clothes down, I undress. Today, I didn't overdress with jeans. Instead, I put on a skirt and a long-sleeve turtleneck to hide the marks Zero left. Charles didn't notice, so it must've been a win. After I'm only down to my bra and panties, I grab the skirt. It's black and violet, the stripes on the plaid both white and purple, and pleated too. It gives gothic schoolgirl. I cinch it up my waist, and it sits perfectly on my hips. I clip it and then zip the side, loving the way it looks. Twirling and glancing at my reflection, I feel hot.

The mirror only agrees with me. Even if I'm only wearing a skirt and bra. Reaching up for the other hanger, I undo the top. It's a black one with a skull on the front. The skull has X's on the eyes and scribbles on the mouth. It's a crop top that shows

my belly ring and band. I put it on, and it's *very* risqué, where my bra sticks out the bottom and my boobs would if I don't wear one.

Another hanger holds a harness of sorts. My body heats at it. For some reason, it reminds me of Zero mentioning Roxy's proclivities for kink. Would he like these? Would he use it to hold me down while he ruts into me? A shiver overtakes me at the idea, and when I loop the harness over my shoulders and across my breasts, I note the ring clasp up front. It's like a star with a little push clip. It's centered on my chest, resting between my boobs. It's adorable. But on the same hanger is another and when I note that it attaches to my thigh, it makes sense why the skirt is a bit shorter than I'm used to. It exposes my thighs, letting the harness give a little tease.

Wow, I mouth, turning in the mirror. I'm still me, yet somehow, I look even better. If I had a black lipstick and some eyeliner, I'd even say I'm hot as hell.

"You okay in there, Poe?"

"Amazing," I answer, looking at my outfit. "I look *good*."

She laughs, the sounds melodic in a raspy way. "Let me see then!" Opening the door, I meet her slowly widening eyes. "Smoke show." Her two simple words are filled with awe. "You need to put on the thigh-highs and the boots. It'll make you even hotter."

I almost forgot about the boots.

Grabbing the thigh-highs, I gently tug them up. The lacy material and the bows that sit above my knees has me absolutely obsessed. I take the boots and lace them from bottom to top, and I already know I'm not going to be able to

keep Zero's hands off me. And for a moment, I forget we're fake dating and he shouldn't want that.

"Wicked," I let out with a sigh.

This isn't real.

He's not mine.

I blink and then twirl as Star rotates her finger. From behind her, a similarly dressed Charles whistles. Her eyes light up and her smile is massive.

"Holy hell, Poe! You're looking deadly!" I laugh at that, knowing she means it. She fans her face. "I've never been into girls until this moment, and now, I'm wondering if I should be looking for a missus at this party instead of a mister."

Amusement laces her tone, but the way her eyes crawl across me like she's making sure not to miss a single piece of me has me shivering. It's always good to be appreciated by women. They always make it feel like beauty and not something to own. "Thank you both," I mutter, not feeling shy, but feeling too many other things that I refuse to address.

"I want it all," I add on. "Even the second outfit."

Star raises a brow. "Are you sure? It's a lot more risqué than this one." It's a warning and promise wrapped in so little words.

"I'll take your word for it. I have two parties, might as well start my wardrobe somewhere."

Plus, I have enough savings. I can splurge. Before I check out, I make sure to get falsies, lip stick, eyeliner, and Star told me glitter and a belt were necessary. I don't disagree and take her advice.



BY THE TIME I MAKE IT INTO WORK A FEW HOURS LATER, I have my clothes stashed at home and my intentions solidified. I'm going to confront Zero. Regardless of if he's ashamed. We made a deal and with two back-to-back parties, we can't risk a weird standstill between us. I head to the office, forgetting to knock on the door. Laz wasn't up front and neither was Zero. And I need to clock in.

When I open the door, I'm absolutely shocked at what I see.

I'm not even sure *what* I'm seeing.

In front of me, near the fridge, but closer to the storage area, both Laz and Zero stand. Their hands are red, their eyes too. There's something gooey dripping from their mouths and hands, and their skin? Covered in scars and staples. They look like the science experiment result of Frankenstein.

Laz has this purple color, it's a bit deeper than regular violet. His curly hair is still on display. While I can't say for certain, it must be a costume.

But what's on their hands?

My eyes connect with Zero's. His skin is pale, gray with a green tone somehow. His scars are a bit deeper, like whatever gashes were given were angry, more aggressive. Neither of them say anything, but I can't look away. Is it blood? Is it paint? Has to be paint. Corn syrup, maybe?

"Fuck," Zero says as Laz mutters, "Motherfucker."

“I’m just going to...” I don’t even finish before turning and heading out the door I blitzed through. There’s an explanation, of course. It’s Halloween in three days. They’re probably testing their costumes, like me and Charles were earlier. That’s it. There’s nothing more. But the red stuff, it looked too real. Too dark, too fresh, too coagulated.

And the eyes.

Red.

So much red.

I should be freaking out, right? How am I not wiggling out? What is happening to me? My stomach doesn’t even revolt. It’s almost like my mind has already accepted the fact that they either have really cool zombie costumes and want to match or they’re both zombies and are eating... no way. They weren’t eating brains, right?

What if they were? I try to imagine it and gag a little. *Take a chill pill.* They need to eat too. I can’t just judge them.

My feet keep taking me through the mall, and I don’t even realize I’ve made it out of the store. Where am I? Scanning around me, I note Frankie’s Funhouse, a place I’ve always naturally avoided. On the other side of the mall, there’s Twisted Whisker, a pet shop everyone loves to stop at. My eyes must tell a story because Kelsey, one of the mall guards, saunters toward me.

I let out a deep breath and curate a story in my mind. Her feet are determined as she makes her way over. Politely, I wave, wanting to erase the facial expressions I must be wearing. Kelsey is cute, someone who has always had a comforting homey feeling. No matter what age I’ve been in the last few years, she’s been here. Always watching out for everyone.

“Are you alright, Posey?” Her eyebrows rise, the concern there very apparent. She holds her belt, a light on one side and a fanny pack on the other.

“Sure am,” I answer, my voice a bit exaggerated. “Just getting some air. I’m really nervous for midterms.” The lies spill out far too easy, but I guess that’s what happens when you care about someone.

While I’ve known Laz and Zero for less than a week, I’m already attached. Seeing their real faces—if that’s the case—doesn’t change my feelings. Laz teases and flirts with me in a way that makes life feel lighter. And Zero... I haven’t known him long, yet a part of me feels like we could be forever kind of friends. *Or more, if he’ll have me.* He seems like a good person who cares deeply for others.

They both protected me too.

Zero with my mental ex, and Laz with my heart when Zero ran from me. That’s not something you conjure up. It’s a built-in attribute to have. As I’m about to give her a reason to turn around, the two guys I practically ran away from come along. They’re both looking like they do every day and I have to double take.

They must think horrific things with me talking to Kelsey, but relaxing my expression, I hope it lets them know I’m not a threat. Or maybe I’m the warped one? *Clinically.* Are they zombies or did I have a fever dream?

Zero’s face is somehow paler. Without his eyeshadow, eyeliner, and what I’m guessing is concealer, he appears quite literally... *dead.* His eyes are sunken and drained, and the fear there makes me want to soothe it away. Laz seems ready to barf. Terrified. His eyes are wide, his expression dancing from side to side, almost like he’s waiting for someone to attack.

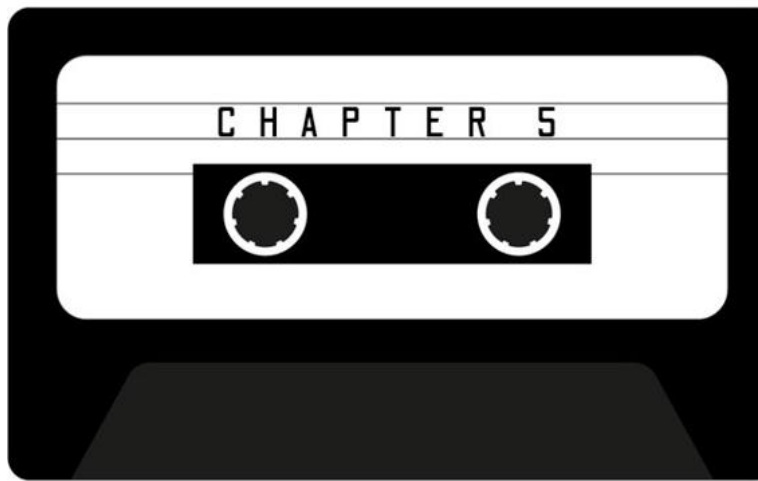
“I was just telling Kelsey that midterms are overwhelming,” I answer their silent questions before they have a chance to ask. “She saw me looking a bit flustered, and she’s so sweet to care.” I add a bit of sugar to my tone, making sure she hears my appreciation, regardless of its faux intent. She cups my shoulder and Zero’s eyes narrow on the movement before softening.

“Oh shoot! I forgot to clock in,” I mutter, almost like I’m usually a space cadet. “I’ve got to head back to work, Kelsey.” Her expression softens and she offers a big smile.

“Good luck with midterms, Posey. You’re going to be brill, I’m sure.”

I nod gratefully and walk back toward my place of work, feeling the heat of the two worried guys behind me. Hopefully there’s no rule where monsters are meant to kill humans, because that’ll really wreck my plans of having Zero eat me out later.

Eat me out, I nearly giggle at myself. I should be a comedian.



I WANT TO KNOW WHAT LOVE IS – FOREIGNER

ZERO

I’VE NEVER FELT FEAR LIKE THIS BEFORE. MY ENTIRE BODY buzzes with it. It’s as if everything around us is louder, more incessant, a constant thrum instead of a silent hum. She walked away before we could really fix ourselves. Every day, we eat around the same time, and unfortunately for us both, Posey was early for her shift. We should’ve locked the doors, ate earlier, or been more discreet.

Her eyes seemed wiggled out and intrigued at the same time, but the shock hadn’t worn off quickly enough. I let out a hiss as I scrubbed the blood from my hands. Laz and I always split our hearts, we don’t need a full one unless we know we won’t be able to consume for a few days.

“Think she told that mall guard anything?” Laz whispers, the dread in his voice so apparent and matching my own.

“No,” I answer honestly. She isn’t a good liar. Her entire face tells everyone everything. And whatever she told Kelsey was a lie to protect us. “I think she kept our secret.”

His breaths come out in shudders, and I know exactly what he’s feeling. Adrenaline, rage, distress, and bloodlust. She could’ve revealed what she thought she saw but she didn’t. She either wants to blackmail us, or she doesn’t think she witnessed what she did. Because under no realistic circumstances would she care enough about two guys she just met to lie for them.

“You know the rules,” he softly whispers. His tone is filled to the brim with grief.

“Fuck the rules,” I violently hiss, thinking of anyone touching Posey. I’ll kill every single one who dares to put a single finger on her. She’s my girl. Fake or not, I brought her in. I’m not letting Talos kill her like he killed my first friend.

Laz pauses and Posey keeps walking, not noticing us stalling. “The rules protect us all,” he glaringly reminds me, placing his hands in his jean pockets. It’s such a boyish move, reminding me of where we came from and how we were stripped of humanity once upon a time.

I point at the girl disappearing into our store—a girl I already care far too much for—and glare at him. “Her? You think Poser is a threat? She just covered for our asses, Laz.”

He swallows and his eyes glisten like he’s unsure of what the hell to do. I’m not entirely sure I blame him. We’ve never been in this position. We’re always safe. She’s blindsided us with her addition into our daily routine.

“We protect her like she did us,” I demand, putting my foot down. No one would risk their skin for monsters. Yet, she did.

She's worth saving. "She could've screamed, told everyone, and set the whole fucking Creepy Court up for an insane amount of drama." I run a hand through my hair, anger bleeding through me. "She didn't, Laz. She chose to hear us out."

He nods once and closes his eyes. While he might not be ready to admit it, she's already gotten under his skin suit, nestling into him like the staples that keep us together. "You're right, Z. Let's get this over with."

Leading us back to our shop, we head to the back, knowing she's there. Laz opens the door and I follow behind. It surprises me to see her sitting on the table I took her mouth only a day ago. She has her hands gripping the edges of the table but otherwise appears fairly calm. Her eyes meet ours but they don't seem scared.

What kind of twilight zone is this?

"You're zombies," she moronically states, bursting the safety bubble that never really existed. It's Laz who laughs first. I can't follow, because she definitely understands what she walked in on.

"Ghouls," Laz corrects, sobering up. "Princess, don't mind my shock, but why aren't you running and screaming?" His words find him, yet mine still evade me.

She bites her bottom lip and then looks over us both. "I like you. *Both* of you." My mouth takes that moment to work as a growl slips free, too fucking possessive for a fake girlfriend. Amusement twinkles in her eyes before she hops off the table. "Not like that." Those words are directed at me. "At least not in the case of Laz." Those last words settle something inside me, letting me breathe a bit easier.

“What now?” Laz asks, again taking the lead. They both seek my answers now, my guidance, something other than the heavy breathing and nerves.

“We are ghouls,” I cough out. Saying the words aloud, and to a human, no less, is quite daunting.

“So, you were eating... brains?” she asks, and there’s a bit of a grimace in her tone, but I appreciate her trying to cover it up.

“Hearts, actually,” Laz pops in, his voice a lot lighter than it was five minutes ago when we both thought the world was ending.

Her shoulders drop as she exhales, as if eating heart isn’t as gnarly as brains. I nod, agreeing with Laz.

“You were eating?”

“Yeah, and I almost barfed it up after you left,” Laz responds with a chuckle. “I’ve never been more afraid.”

She nods, almost like the cogs in her brain are finally working, taking in each bit of information with kind.

“Why didn’t you rat us out?”

Her expression softens and then her eyes meet mine. “I care about you.”

Shit. The words I thought furthest from possible slip from her mouth as if it’s that simple.

“You don’t know us,” I barely rumble, wanting to protect whatever parasitic love she’s wormed into me. Love has never scared me, but the human kind? That’s terrifying. It leaves opportunities for the worst kind of endings.

“I may not have known you for long, but I can tell you are good guys.”

“I’m the best guy,” Laz agrees. “So good, and willing to please.”

“Fuck off,” I growl at him as he throws his hands up.

“I think you two should talk,” he teases, gesturing between us and walking toward the door. “Just try to keep it in your pants.”

“No promises,” Posey teases, her voice confident and taunting. Laz groans with that, closing his eyes.

“Wish you liked me more. I’d make sure to lick your—”

“Out,” I bite, nearly snapping my jaws at him. My eyes burn and I know they’re red, hell, if my skin suit is even fully intact, it would be wishful thinking.

His smirk is full of menace as it tilts, his eyes glimmering with the kind of mischief he’s always had. “Toodeloo .” With a wiggle of his fingers, he leaves us alone. I’m not even ready to turn toward her, my monster is too fucking close to grabbing her and hauling her off somewhere away from prying eyes.

“Z, look at me,” she softly commands, her hand gripping my jaw. I fight only for a second before rotating toward her.

She looks so goddamn fine today. Her hair is in softer curls, her skirt shorter than the one during the interview. Everything about her appeals to me, it always has. Doing this stupid fake dating thing was a bad idea. Roxy could come in here and tell me she wanted me and I wouldn’t notice her, all that exists is my Posey girl.

My entire brain is stuck on a preppy little poser who hasn’t stopped making my heart beat since it noticed her.

When our gazes clash, her eyes trace my face, featherlike, gentle, and forgiving. “You’re beautiful.” My skin shutters

through, phasing away from my skin suit. When her chin drags across my bottom lip, my ghoulish self snaps into place, almost like it needed coaxing.

She's not short by any means, but being a head shorter than me has her on her tiptoes to run her fingers through my hair.

"Second lesson," she rasps. She doesn't ask any more questions, doesn't prod for the gory details, just drops to her knees while her eyes never leave mine.

"I'm supposed to be learning," I pathetically grunt out. "Not you."

She rolls her eyes gently. "I'm still *teaching*, Z. Even a guy should know what good head feels like."

"Fuck," I hiss, not knowing how I lucked out with a dirty girl on her knees. Not just any girl, *the* girl, the one I dreamed about in school and wished for.

Her hands clasp my belt, unclipping it before unbuttoning and loosening the zipper of my pants. Her eyes widen as she meets my flesh.

It's scarred, more so than Laz. When we're created, we're literally put together from the pieces of those before us.

Whoever does our stapling determines how we come out. For some reason, everyone seemed to have gotten the better end of the deal. As I grew, my scars widened and ripped. The more muscle I piled on, the deeper my gashes became.

When her dainty hand slips beneath my briefs, a pitiful gasp escapes me. Never has another person touched my cock. Only me.

Her heated flesh makes mine feel on fire. She's so warm, encasing my length like it's a prized possession.

I have piercings—they're for looks—but the parlor I got them from said they'd please a partner if they had the luck to be with me.

Posey's eyes meet mine after she gawks at me. "Insane."

"Can't tell if that's good or bad," I rasp, not quite nervous. My cock isn't like human ones, I know because my skin suit one is entirely different. Above my length is a textured smaller piece. It pleasures the clit.

Something I've never been able to try. Her eyes narrow on it before she tentatively leans forward and licks it.

"Definitely good," she hums. "Your cock is amazing."

Amazing. Much better than insane.

Her finger traces the flesh and I let out the most meager whimper. I sound like a fucking baby, wanting her to touch me more.

Even though this attachment is for clitoral pleasure, it's sensitive, almost like the head of my dick.

"And these..." she sounds out, her words paused as she traces each piercing with her finger. "I can't wait to feel them inside me."

"Shit, Pose, you can't say that." My voice is super gruff, like sandpaper, even to my own ears. "We have to leave this room and I don't have a condom."

"Next time," she teases with a wink. Before I can say another word, she takes me into her mouth. Her hot, wet tongue slides across me and I have to grip the table so I don't fall over. A whine leaves my mouth, pants that are nearly cries, and little grunts as she works herself over me.

She places her other hand at my base, unable to take me in her mouth entirely. Rotating her fist, she sucks me down, and I swear nothing has tested my control more than her.

“Ah, fuck, goddamn,” I groan, wanting to come so badly. “Your mouth is wicked, Pose. So fucking wicked.”

She moans and the vibration sends shock waves skittering down to my balls. For only a moment she pops off, her swollen lips redder, lipstick streaked. The color looks phenomenal on my cock, but even better smeared across her face.

“No coming, I want you to hold back your orgasm,” she instructs. I nod, unable to voice anything when her hand still makes passes over my length. “You’re going to be a good boy and stave off your hunger, and then I’ll swallow you down, okay?”

“O-okay.” The word is basically a plea for her to keep going. She smiles, her mouth tilting and showing teeth. Leaning forward again, she takes me farther in her mouth. This time, she sucks harder and I swear I see death in my future. It’s like she’s trying to suck my soul from my cock.

I groan so loudly that I know Laz is hearing this. I can’t hold back, my vocalizing seems to turn her on because she continues to work faster, almost desperate.

When I get close to the edge, I try pushing her off. She eyes me and there’s so much silent begging.

“Please, Pose. Stop,” I gasp. “Your mouth is too good.”

Her teeth drag across me, not halting, but adding that extra pain, and I’m near explosion. Right before I can orgasm, she pops off to stave it.

Kissing my cock, she traces my piercings with her tongue, giving me a break. Thank fuck, because if she took one more slurp, I would've died.

Her mouth kisses the base against my pelvis and then she sucks around my prod, having me close once more.

She doesn't stay there long, her tongue traveling across the veins that lead upward. "You taste like cake."

"Cake?" I chuckle, not knowing where that came from. I'm not a sweets kind of guy. I like a more refined palate. Something darker, deeper, less sweet with more heady tones. Like blackberries and wine. Blood is like wine for me.

"Your cock tastes like whipped cream and cake, and every time it weeps, I get even more. It's addicting."

"You can't say shit like that," I repeat my earlier words. "I'm a virgin, Posey. You're the first to touch me. I'm basically on the edge every moment I'm around you."

She lets out the happiest little trill, like it's the best thing anyone has ever told her. She's perfect to me, and I hate that this isn't real.

"Once I'm done with you, those words and that shyness will disappear. You'll be the perfect lover."

My nipples turn into hard points as shivers rack my frame. She's too good at this, and I'm jealous that this isn't a permanent deal.

"You good now, hero, or do you need a breather?"

"I'm fine, knowing I'll be coming far too quickly."

"Be a good boy and hold my hair this time. When it feels good, and I know it will, thrust into my mouth." My eyes widen at her words.

“Won’t that... hurt?”

“Who said I didn’t like pain?”

“Fucking dammit, Pose. You’re going to be the death of me.”

“Aren’t ghouls already dead?”

I shake my head. “No, but that’s a story for another time.”

“Don’t forget to pull my hair,” she jerks me out of the humor and back into the fray. “And when I gag, since you’re massive and it’s bound to happen, don’t stop unless I tap your thighs.”

I nod, listening to her.

“And, hero,” she emphasizes, licking the tip of my erection. “When you want to come this time, make sure you say my name. Don’t stop and think about whether I want to swallow. *I do.*” Her expression darkens with lust. “If you’re the good boy I know you can be and give me the cum I’m begging for, then maybe I’ll let you touch my pussy.”

“Your mouth is filthy, Pose,” I rasp, the words basically scraping my vocal cords. I’m growling at her as she nibbles my tip. “I’m about to make it fucking indecent.”

She takes me into her mouth and I waste no time to run my fingers through her hair. Grabbing the base of her skull, I revel in this moment, losing myself in the power she’s given me. She moans around me when I tug, and that encourages me to fuck her face.

Her mouth widens and a little gag fills the air. The sound is music to my ears, making my balls ache. She loudly slurps, making the most maddening noises.

Spit leaks all over me and she uses it to twist her hand at my base. I don’t stop thrusting into her mouth, and the way we whine in sync has me nearing the edge of bliss.

The moment I feel myself start to tumble, I thrust harder, pistoning my hips and hitting her throat. Her hand drops and I let loose on her mouth. Her gagging only further makes me roar.

Looking down to make sure she's still enjoying this, I note her tear-streaked face. They're glimmering with so much joy.

"You really know how to suck cock, Pose." The words are breathy snarls, inhuman, and so close to the edge.

"I'm." *Thrust.* "Going to." *Thrust.* "Eat." *Thrust.* "Your." *Thrust.* "Cunt." *Thrust.* "So good." *Thrust.* At the last one, I yell. "Pose, fuck, Pose. Take it all."

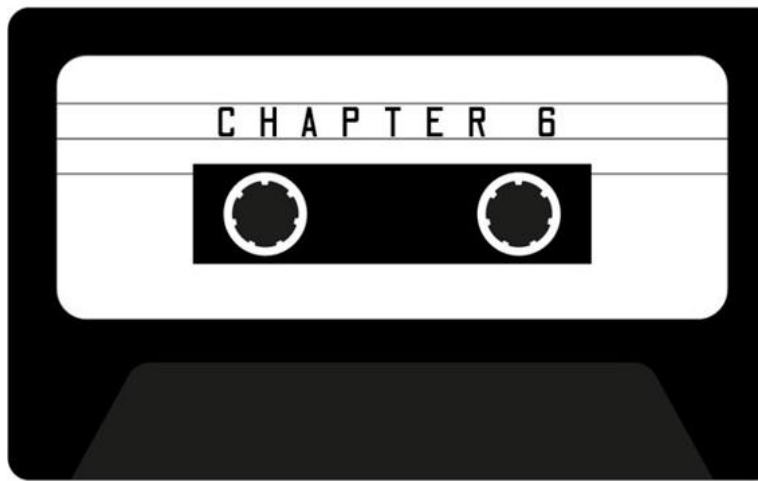
She sucks me down and her throat works as my movements become barely-there and shallow. When she pops off my cock, her makeup streaks her cheeks, her lipstick absolutely smudged, and her swollen and kissable lips invite me to devour them. I couldn't fucking resist if I tried.

My balls haven't even started to soften from the tightness before I'm hauling her to her feet. She gets no warning before my mouth is on hers and I'm swiping my tongue inside her.

She said I taste like frosting, and as my tongue swipes across hers, she's not wrong. I moan as the taste of myself meets her blackberry tartness. We're the perfect combination, and I can't help but rumble at the ferocity fueling my body.

Only going for what feels natural, I lift her, her legs close around my hips, and I hold her head, as if using it for leverage will sink me deeper into her.

I want her as my skin suit, so we're never apart. Everything she is will be mine. I'm not sure what I have to do to make it happen, but until she's screaming my name, begging me to fuck her, I won't be complete.



EVERY BREATH YOU TAKE – THE POLICE

POE

HE TASTES LIKE EVERYTHING MY SWEET TOOTH LOVES. SUGAR, cream, and fucking cupcakes. The way he leaked this sweet flavor only further urged me on.

There's something so addicting about watching a man fall at your mercy, and Z was crumpling from my mouth.

I can't even imagine what it'll be like when he finally enters me. Will he love it? Zero's so vocal and it's the most maddening thing. His noises push me further, like little siren calls to me.

He moans as his tongue fights for purchase in my mouth. The way he licks inside is like he's needing to taste himself and then add me to the flavor too.

It's the most erotic thing, but my panties are already soaked, what's more arousal going to do?

He sets me on the tabletop that has starred in several good moments between us, and without guidance, he falls to his knees.

"I've never done this," he admits as if his virgin status doesn't explain the gist of what he's done. His eyes meet mine and the redness beneath his gray skin only endears me to him even more.

"Lick it like it's the only meal you'll ever have," I say. "Eat it like if you don't, someone else will have to pick up your slack."

A dangerous glint shines in his expression, like the thought of anyone touching me has him murderous. I'm not sure if he notices the way he's possessed me. The way he owns me entirely and how we've surpassed platonic teachings in a few short moments.

To think I could possibly fool around with him and not catch feelings was careless on my part.

Zero flips up my skirt, and his eyes nearly bug out. "Pose. Fuck. I—" He pauses, closing his eyes, and I almost wonder if something is wrong.

Did I wear cute lace underwear? Yes. Did I add the little strap I bought earlier to my thigh to see how it made me feel? Oops.

His eyes open and they're red. Red like when he was devouring a heart. Crimson like he's in a rage of some sort.

"Spread your fucking thighs."

His words brook no argument. He doesn't wait for the movement, he pries them open aggressively, his fingers

digging into me like he's never going to let me go.

A huff escapes him, and it's so worked up that I know he's not angry or annoyed. His eyes are crimson from lust.

His finger traces the thickness of my thigh, the way it presses against the faux leather strap, and he bites his bottom lip. It's so hard, I note the blood peeking from his lips.

It really shouldn't be so hot.

"Lick me," I urge, raising an eyebrow when his hungry gaze meets my own. "Go on."

The taunt seems to do the trick because he slips his fingers over the leather, gripping it and tightening the strap against my thigh. Then with his other hand, he tugs at my lace and the sound that comes from the rip has me gasping.

"Zero!" I complain. "Bad." The chastising has him smiling and letting out a chuckle.

"They were in my way."

He leans forward, his nose pressed against the seam of me. Inhaling deeply, which has me squirming, a hedonistic hiss leaves him.

"Pose, I swear to fucking god, I can't hold back anymore."

"I didn't ask you to," I brattily argue, leaning backward. Using his index and middle fingers, he parts me, diving between. His tongue laves from my hole to my clit, and I practically shudder at the tendrils of bliss.

I've been worked up since he kissed me last week, I got off more than once to the way he made little noises while he gripped my hip and devoured my mouth.

And now, he's on his knees, eating me out like I'm the main course. It's obscene the way he licks, flicking my clit perfectly, and the sounds coming out of me are uncouth and lawless.

"Please, please, please," I whimper as he circles my clit and sucks. He finally releases the leather strap and then licks around his fingers before sliding them inside me.

"Shit, Pose. You're soaked," he says with awe in his tone. His eyes are dark, red—and he looks like a monster.

My monster.

"If you only enter a little," I guide as he drives into me, making me pant. "Curve up, and press on the spongy—" I whine as he hits it. "Yeah, right there." I let out a hiss as he licks me at the same time. "That's it. You were made for this."

The praise has him groaning and I knew he'd like it, to be told he's a good boy and that he's doing a good job.

"Your cunt is delicious," he rasps before sucking my clit between his lips. "I'm going to require you to always wear skirts and to let me eat my fill every night before your shift." He enunciates each word with a flick of his tongue. "I want to suck your little clit until it's all swollen again, and kiss it, make it throb with need."

"Oh, Z, please, right there," I whimper as he circles back and forth over the swollen nub. He takes pussy eating seriously, watching my facial expressions after each new movement, repeating his actions when I'm louder, and changing direction when my moans soften.

His fingers rhythmically tap inside, my slick leaking from around his fingers. I want him inside me. I've never wanted sex, let alone oral like I do right now.

Z doesn't need me as a teacher. Because he's the best student and I've done nothing.

"I can't wait to fuck you, Pose. To sink inside that pretty cunt and watch as my cock disappears in you. And your face," he hisses, nibbling on my clit. "Watching it as each flash of pleasure and need creases your forehead. I'm so hard thinking about it."

"I want that so badly," I admit, not holding back. "I want to feel your cock throb as you thrust inside, unable to hold back. Watch as your eyes stay red and you can't help but roar because I squeeze you so good."

"Fuck, you're everything, Pose. You're mine," he rumbles, latching onto my clit once more. I want to correct him, tell him he's doing this for Roxy and I'm doing it... Why am I doing this? Because it feels good. Because it's everything. Because I can imagine a life with this monster on his knees, and here he is, sounding perfect...

"Mine," he grunts, thrusting his fingers into me. I reach forward, putting my own fingers in his hair, and the noises he makes as I hump his face, using him as a means for pleasure, is enough to make anyone come.

"You're such a good boy, hero. Licking my clit so good," I moan, knowing I'm on the cusp of the best orgasm of my life. "Oh, yes! Right there, baby. Pleaseeee." I hiss and buck into him. "Oh fuck, Zero, I'm coming. I'm—" I nearly scream as my orgasm barrels through me and I use his face as my own personal grinder. Feeling his teeth and tongue all over me.

When he pulls back, his mouth is swollen. Blood is all over his lips and cheeks, and I'm wondering if he bit me.

A laugh escapes me, but his red eyes seem mad, like there's no
Zero here, only ghoulish boy.

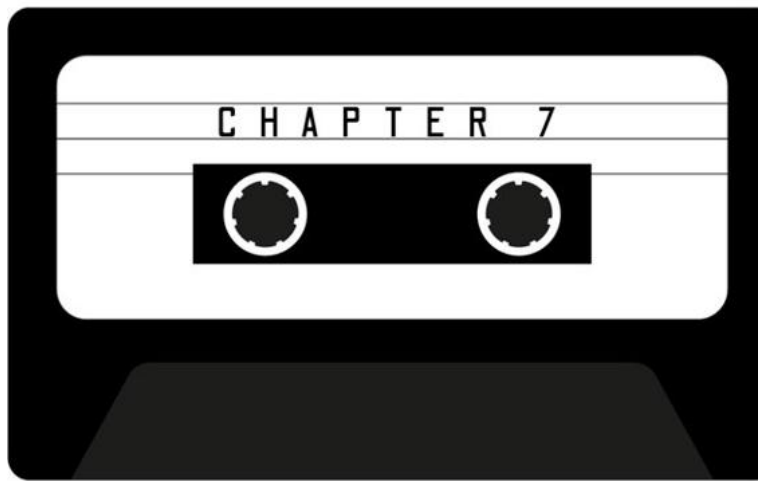
“Pose.”

My name is said as a warning, and I've never been good with
red flags or stop signs.

“What?”

“I think you started your period.”

I frown, thinking of all the blood on his face. “Shit.”



I WANNA BE YOUR LOVER – PRINCE

POE

MY FACE IS STILL WARM AND IT'S BEEN A DAY SINCE I STARTED my period, ran off to the convenience store and got new undies before going home. The fact that he ate me out even as blood dripped down his face is a new kind of experience for me. Most guys won't have period sex, let alone do oral while their partner is profusely bleeding.

That's the difference, I guess, Zero isn't merely a guy. He's a ghoul who doesn't hold back.

I'm not even sure how I'm going to the party tonight when all I can see is his blood-covered face as I'm blissed out.

Does he think it's gross? I avoided him all night during my shift, but I can say with honesty that I definitely know how to

run the register and put tags on new shipments. While I'm not sure how to do a ton else, the basics are down.

My landline rings as I stare at the bag I still haven't unpacked from the other day. Picking up the phone, I hold it near my ear.

"Girl, we should meet for the party," Charles's singsong voice fills my ear.

"Can't," I respond, playing with the cord to the phone. "I'm going with my boyfriend." *Fake. Fake boyfriend.* One I've already attached myself to like a disease.

"We never spoke about that!" she nearly shouts and I have to pull the receiver from my ear.

"Chill! My ears will burst." We collectively laugh at that.

"So, you and Chuck are still—"

I cut her off with a derisive noise. "Grody, Charles. No, he cheated on me with Lola."

"No way?"

"Yes way," I complain, but the pain isn't there anymore. Only a week with Zero—fake or not—and I'm already doing so much better. "I'm with a new guy."

"Don't make me beg, Poe. I'm on the edge, I need a name!"

"His name is Zero..."

"Zero Rayne?"

"Yeah, how do you know him?"

"What do you mean, he literally stalked you in school."

I think back to anyone following me and think of no one. High school was mild. No weirdos, not too many people bothering me, and cheer was my main focus. Hell, even as I'm in uni to

get my degree in business management, I've never paid attention to the little things.

"I don't understand," I let out, now sitting on my bed, the phone and dock practically hanging on what little length the cord offers.

"When we were in high school, Zero was there. He was a nerd, not ugly, but no one you'd have noticed. He used to follow you around."

"No way," I say, thinking of how immersed in school I was. "I'd have recognized him."

She laughs in my ear as if it's the funniest thing she's ever heard. "You were sucked into getting top of the class, you didn't notice half the guys trying to get with you."

"Well, can't say that's a bad thing." I don't know what else to say, I've never put romance above knowledge.

"I remember noticing him at the games. He'd go, and he'd show up just to watch you. It was almost creepy."

"Or adorable," I grumble, wanting to defend the guy I'm falling hard for.

"I guess, but when Chuck noticed him paying attention to you, he bullied him hardcore. Pushing him into lockers, stealing his clothes, and getting him kicked from the football team."

"What the hell?" My voice is shrill, over the top, and I can't hold the anger in. "He's such a tool, and to think I could've had Zero sooner."

Emotions well in my eyes as I think of the ghoul who's stolen my heart. Something about him called to me immediately, and to know he's had a thing for me makes me even sweeter on him.

I'm going to tell him.

Tonight.

At the party.

"I've got to get ready, Charles. I'll be there with Zero. Stop by!"

Before she can ask any more questions, I hang up and hop into the shower. I'm going to win Zero fair and square, Roxy can fuck off.

BY THE TIME I FINISH GETTING READY, THERE'S A KNOCK AT my dorm. Since I started at Mourning U, I've lived in their housing, and it's not news, but I'm pretty sure I didn't tell my little stalker any of that info.

Opening my door, I'm met with not one, but two ghouls.

And they're in their real skin now.

My mouth drops open as a slow and satisfied smirk makes Z look fuckable. Not that he wasn't prior, but that nervousness that was there a week ago has all but disappeared from him.

He's wearing a studded leather jacket. Much similar to the one I met him in, but this one is filled with band patches and quotes. It's spiked on the shoulders and around the collar.

He's wearing more eyeshadow and eyeliner, looking like any member from Metallica. He's so fine.

"Damn," I let out, and he taps my chin to close it.

"You'll catch flies like that, Pose. You look—"

"Like a wet fucking dream," Laz cuts in, receiving a growl and glare from my fake boyfriend. "Didn't know goth was your style, babe."

“Not your babe,” Z barks, turning toward him.

His hands go upward in surrender and he cackles like he’s doing it on purpose. “I’m going to meet you in the car.”

He backs away and Z doesn’t hesitate to take my mouth. His mouth is something I’ll never get used to. Dominating and cruel, he takes my breath away.

“What I was going to say,” he says eagerly. “Was that you look unreal.”

Part of me saddens at it, knowing this is what the girl he wants looks like. “Thank you.”

My words don’t sound bitter, but when he tilts his head, his eyes imploring, trying to see if he fucked up, I know he noticed my shift.

“You’d look good in a paper bag, Pose. You’re absolutely breathtaking.” A sigh of relief escapes my lips and I smile. “That’s my girl. That pretty smile and eyes with confidence. That’s all you.”

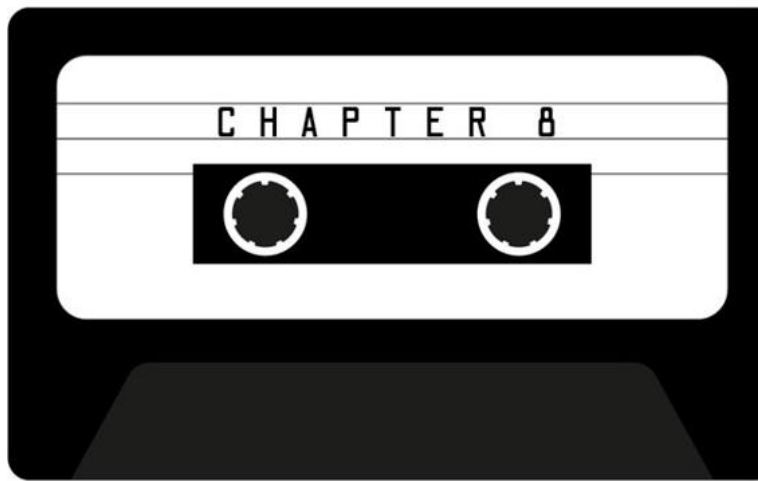
“You’re too good with that mouth,” I tease, trying to wipe my lipstick from his lips. He nips at my fingers, his amusement clear as day.

“I know, I made you come with it.”

I let out a shocked laugh, almost surprised he said it. “That you did, ghoul boy.”

“Let’s get to the party, Poser girl. I want to show you off.”

Then reality sinks in and it takes all the muscles in my face to not show how bothersome that single sentence is. This isn’t real. And I almost forgot. Again.



LET'S STAY TOGETHER – AL GREEN

ZERO

SOMETHING'S OFF. HER FACE HASN'T BEEN BRIGHT SINCE I picked her up, but as she sips a beer at the party, she seems even less happy.

What did I do?

“She okay?” Laz asks as we stand nearby. She's with a tall girl, one wearing a similar outfit. Laz eyes them, but his eyes aren't on Posey. They're glued to her friend. There's a darkness to him that reminds me of my own.

It's a possessiveness we can't abate. It's the monster staking a claim before our brain has time to argue.

“I'm unsure, she seemed off.”

“What did you do?”

I blink slowly at him, shocked he thinks I'm the problem. But if he's right, I need to fix it. I go over the conversation we had, how her face fell when she thought I only wanted her to look goth. Don't get me wrong, the black and leather does something for me. The pleated skirts and those damn boots... But Pose as herself, the preppy girl from high school that I'd do anything for, I want that girl just as much.

No matter what she wears, I want her.

She's already mine.

My mind lands onto what I said before she was silent the entire drive. "I told her I wanted to show her off."

Laz's forehead wrinkles, as if it doesn't make sense. What girl doesn't want to be—*shit*.

"Why would she care?"

I'm about to break rule number four. "We're not really dating," I hiss out, running a hand through my hair. "We are fake dating."

"Fake dating?" His expression darkens and there's something there, like an angry brother about to beat my ass. "What the fuck? Are you leading her on?" He grips my jacket, his eyes going full zombie.

"No, it's mutual," I hiss, looking over at Pose. She sees us and starts to come over, probably not wanting us to fight. "Don't say shit." He lets my jacket go, but doesn't stop the look of absolute anger from painting his features.

"You boys okay?"

"Yeah," Laz bites out, glaring at me. "You, princess?" His forehead softens, losing all creases as he gauges her reactions.

Her gaze narrows and the wheels are definitely turning. Before she can give us the third degree, her friend walks up, taking everyone's attention but mine.

"This is Charles," Pose immediately introduces without a nudge.

"You're fine as hell, Charles," Laz teases, but there's no actual jest involved. His eyes are devouring her, and I already know she's going to distract him for the night.

She haughtily smirks and offers an eyebrow raise. "Well, of course I am. Have you seen me?" Pose and Laz chuckle at the same time.

Putting her arm out to Laz, she gestures her head to the snack area. "Sounds like you need to get me a snack, zombie boy."

Pose's mouth widens but recovers quickly as Laz takes the girl's arm and leads her away. Not even a breath later, she's turning to me. "What did I interrupt, Zero?"

Back on a full-name basis, it seems.

"He thinks I'm leading you on."

Her eyes narrow as she places her hands on her hips. "What would give him that impression?" I clench my teeth, knowing she could drop me like a hat if I admit it.

But I've always fucking hated liars.

"I might've told him we were fake dating." Clenching my jaw to hold back from confessing my undying love, I physically hold myself back.

Sadness creep across her features. "Why would you do that? That's a rule." She seems almost defeated, like me telling him made what we're doing both more real and more fake.

I reach for her and she flinches. “I told him because I wanted to know what I said to make you sad.”

Her eyes well with tears, and the fact that I even have her this close to crying rips me to shreds. “Baby,” I let out, not knowing where the pet name came from but knowing it feels right. I don’t stop myself from cupping her face now.

Sadness falls from her eyes, streaking her cheeks with black. Her chin wobbles and I hate that I’m the cause.

“I like you,” I admit, not holding back. “A fucking lot.”

A small smile tries to break free, but the true fear in her expression doesn’t leave. “This isn’t real,” she reasons, almost like she’s trying to remind herself.

I cup the back of her head, bringing my face to her throat. I let out a shaky breath, whispering so no one else can hear. “Does this feel fake, baby?” My tone is deep, filled to the brim with emotion. Pressing a kiss to her throat, I bite her shortly after. “What you do to me is more than sexual, Pose. You fucking unravel me.”

“But—”

“No fucking buts,” I hiss, licking up her throat to her ear. “You’re mine. It may have not started this way and it might not feel quite there, but this is real.”

She lets out the saddest sound, like a wounded animal. “Don’t hurt me, Z.”

Drawing back, I kiss her forehead, staying there as my lips warm her skin. “I won’t.”

As we pull apart, I notice someone standing nearby. “Roxy.” It’s Pose who says it, not me, but she’s right.

The girl making eyes at me, the one that's devouring me with her expression alone while holding a drink, is the girl I told Pose this was all for.

And maybe it was for a moment.

But not anymore.

Pose waves me away, her face scrunching. "I think it worked, Z. Go talk to her."

"What are you talking about?"

"That's what you want, right? *Her*."

I reach for Pose, bringing her mouth to mine. Not thinking twice, I consume her, swallow her whimpers and tasting her tears. This girl is my beginning and end. Roxy doesn't fucking matter.

Holding her body to me, I make sure to stamp my ownership in the middle of this random party. When we depart, Roxy is gone, and my girl is looking at me with hope.

"Want to get out of here?" I ask, knowing I came here for fun, but want nothing more than to be alone with her.

"I think we should mingle. I don't want to abandon Charles."

I eye my best friend and she hers, seeing how Laz looks like a beggar on his knees. "I think they're good, Pose."

When her gaze lands on them, she chuckles. "I think you're right."

Not sparing them another glance, I whisk my girl away and take her back to the place where this all started. Creepy Court Mall isn't open, but being one of the store owners gives me special privileges.

Entering from the back, I sneak us through all the back rooms, knowing they'll be mostly empty.

Hopefully.

Recalling where Galaxy Games is, I sneak through the door. My keys get us in through the back entrance, but no stores lock their back rooms. Not generally.

I twist the knob and practically hoot with realization that it's unlocked.

Opening the door, I note the emptiness and that the lights and machines are still on. Unsure if they ever turn off, I hope no one is here.

"I haven't been here since high school," she mentions, going directly for the Ms. Pac-Man machine. My girl has taste.

"Me neither," I mutter, not wanting to mention the last time I was here was watching her make out with Joel Castillo in twelfth grade.

"Charles mentioned something to me on the phone earlier." She walks toward the air hockey table, the same one from high school, where she never caught me watching her kiss Joel, wishing I was in his place.

Her eyes light up with something akin to amusement as she leans her perfect ass against. I can't resist tugging on my lip, wanting to bite her everywhere, erase any man who touched her before me.

They don't exist, and I'll make new memories with her until she understands that too.

"What's that?"

This evil little smile curves at her lips as she eyes me. "Just that I had a stalker in high school."

Sweat lines my forehead, but I stay rooted to my spot, wondering if she's going to be mad. She doesn't seem like it, but women are a mystery and Pose is no different.

Her thighs widen for some reason and her hand trails up her thigh-highs, her skirt riding up with the movement.

It takes all of five seconds for me to note that the string of her tampon is dangling.

Unhidden.

Without underwear.

Fuck me.

"Yeah?" I choke out, swallowing down my eagerness. When I ate her out yesterday, I thought she started her period, and somehow her flavor only intensified. There wasn't the usual tinge of copper, just more blackberries. She tasted even better, like all this time the flavor of her that I got was from her blood all along.

I know what her heart would taste like, and that means I'll always be able to control my hunger and not tempt a beast with it.

"Did you watch me in here, hero?"

What I did in high school is the furthest thing from me being a hero a person could be. "I—" I swallow back my desire to focus on her question. "You kissed him."

She smirks and bites her thick bottom lip. "We did a lot more than that." It's bait. She's baiting me on purpose.

I was there.

Closing my eyes, I try to tamper the possessive monster in me. Try to hide the fact that I will slaughter that guy without a

second thought and eat his heart as she watches.

“Open your eyes, Z.”

Her words are husky, dripping with promise. While my eyes were shut and I was trying to gather control, she slipped her skirt off, laying it on the hockey table.

Her platform boots are flat and against the surface, her tampon no longer inside her. The way I want to be so quick is hard to fight.

“Pose.”

“Zero,” she counters. Resting on her elbows, she stares at me with only desire in her eyes. Her crop top is also pulled up and with the show she’s giving me, I didn’t even notice.

“You are my end.”

“You are my beginning,” she argues.

She’s always so difficult and it’s so endearing that I can’t be angry. I take the three steps to her and slide my palm up to her left breast. My scarred hands contrast beautifully against her perfectly smooth skin.

“What did he do to you?” I return to the conversation at hand, needing the details. When they started making out and I watched them, I turned away, burning with jealousy.

“You didn’t watch?”

I think back to that night and how angry I was, I couldn’t look or I’d go over there and tear him limb from limb. With a simple shake of my head, I stare down at her.

“Such a shame,” she mutters, her tone lackadaisical and free.
“Because you would’ve seen him fuck me on this same table.”

I close my eyes, begging for control. But I can feel the burn, I can taste the copper of my teeth grinding into my cheek as I bite so hard I'm ruining my skin.

When no words come to me, she doesn't stay still. While my eyes are closed, I can feel and hear her undoing my buckle belt and pants. When she frees me from my briefs, a roar of satisfaction wants to escape, but I'm scared. My monster is in the front seat, and her Z has taken a step back, letting the ghoul flourish.

"Now you know what *what's-his-name* did. What will you do, hero? Stand there with jealousy?"

My eyes flick open, my red meeting her sweet brown ones. "I'm going to fuck his memory out of you, baby. I'm going to take what's mine and paint this table with your blood."

Her eyes dilate as my words come out. We're basked in neon lights and the noises of machines hitting my ears.

"Tell me if you don't like it," I command, tugging at the leather around her tits. She's a wet fucking dream and she's all mine now.

"There's no way I won't like it, Z, I've been dreaming about your c—"

I interrupt her words by slamming inside her. Her eyes roll back, her back arching as I seat entirely inside her. There's no doubt her blood coats me, and that knowledge is too sweet to ignore.

"Zero," she whimpers, her eyes flickering as if she's convulsing around me. Tightness meets me and I know if I move, I'll come.

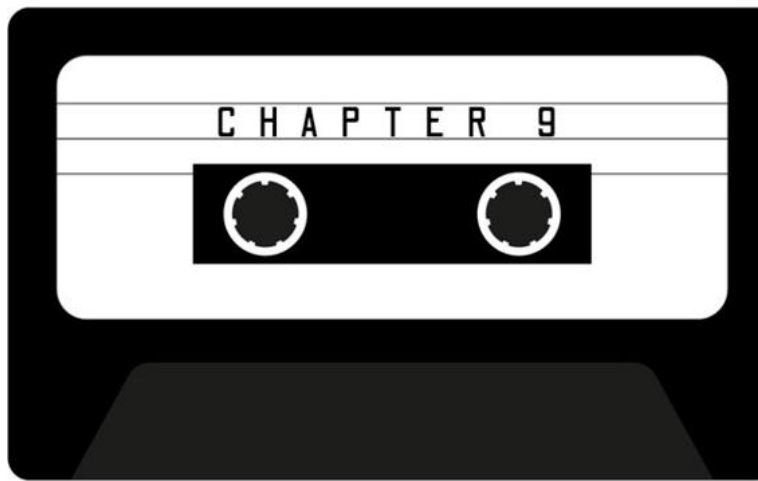
"You were saying?" I gasp, breathing hard as my chest rises and falls in rapid succession.

She squeezes my length, her teeth digging into her bottom lip.
“Fuck me, ghoul boy.”

Sliding one hand around her leg to hold her hip and make my marks known, I use the other to keep a grip on her harness. Then I rock back and hit home.

Sex had always been something I craved, and now that she’s given it to me, I’m not going to be able to breathe without fucking her in every position until I know every place she likes.

“Scream for me, baby. Let the whole fucking world know who’s fucking you.”



MY GIRL – THE TEMPTATIONS

POE

HE KNOWS HOW TO USE THAT MOUTH IN MORE WAYS THAN ONE.
My body is on fire with the need to come. I feel like if he
doesn't touch my clit, I'll combust from horniness.

I didn't know we'd end up here. After seeing Roxy, my fears
and worries came to the forefront, taking over hope.

But then he claimed me, stamping ownership, and let her
know she didn't matter.

He's mine.

Really mine.

*“Scream for me, baby. Let the whole fucking world know
who's fucking you.”*

Fuck me.

That's what I mean by he knows how to use his mouth.

"Eyes on me, Pose. Watch me fuck what's mine."

I whimper, heat pooling between my thighs. Already, wetness overwhelms me, and I'm sure part of it is to do with my blood.

"Please, Z." The words come out bereft, but he's so focused on his thrusting he doesn't notice my desperation. I tentatively reach down, burrowing between my legs. He grips my wrist so quickly I let out an angry noise that sounds almost like a growl.

My guy laughs, he fucking laughs and keeps thrusting into me. His eyes soften as he peers down at my pouting lip. That's when he takes into account where my hand traveled.

He releases me, snaking his hand between my spread thighs, and the moment he touches my clit, I clench and come.

My entire body shakes as the orgasm takes hold. Period sex has always been something I've wanted to try, but every guy I've been with has been squeamish.

Not Z.

Z fucks into me and doesn't stop moving across my clit. I cry out and shudder around him as it continues to zip through me.

I can't even hold back when the squirting starts. It's fast, in tandem with my heartbeat, the liquid secreting as he pumps with abandon. There's a hunger in his expression as he stares at his handiwork. Pulling out to me, he drops to his knees, opening his mouth to take what still leaks out.

As if it's a fountain for his use, he swallows everything and continues to rub at my twitching clit. His eyes are wide and aroused, and the way my blood smears all over him doesn't

make him falter tells me I'll never find another Zero. He's ravenous, a true monster. Eyes red and blown with lust.

My ghoul.

"I-I've only seen this in one porn," he rasps, licking at my hole, swirling his tongue with moans of satisfaction. His eyes meet mine and then he's latching onto my clit.

"Only my toys have made me squirt," I admit. Guys just don't do it for me.

His expression darkens once more, and he bites his lip. "The more you teach me, baby, the better learner I'll be. I've never aced my exams in school, but the University of Posey Ramos's cunt is my best subject."

"You're already my best student."

"Only," he barks, and I laugh at the seriousness of his tone.

"One and only, baby," I answer. "You have a job to finish." I gesture for him to come here, and he slips back inside me, his cock filling the empty space he left.

"I want you forever, Pose. No fake dating. Even if you give your lessons." His expression is both soft and ravenous. His eyes red with his desire but gentle with need, like he wants me to promise him the world.

"I think I can still teach you a thing or two."

"I used to stalk you," he admits, still unmoving inside me.

"You have always been so beautiful to me."

"Z," I cry, feeling emotions well inside me, threatening to spill from my eyes.

"Let me get this out, Pose. It's important."

"Okay," I nod in agreement.

His hand trails up my chest, up my throat, and grips my chin. “The moment I saw you, life made sense. Then you came back into my life for a job.” He shakes his head in disbelief. “It scared me because I thought I tampered down the way I obsessed over you. But I didn’t. You were still Poser. The girl who pretended with everyone.”

My chin wobbles and I hate how emotional I feel right now. He caresses it with his thumb, kissing my chin, then both my cheeks.

“You’re all I’ve ever wanted. Even when you weren’t yourself.” His mouth crashes to mine and I can taste myself on him. I should be grossed out, disgusted even, but all I can think about is that this guy is mine and he’s exactly what I’ve been wishing for.

“Whether you decide to go goth or stay my sweet little princess, you’re mine and I want you.”

“I want you too,” I choke out. “Ghoul and all, the heart eater and the amazing man inside. You’re everything I’ve been searching for.”

“What about Chuck?”

“I don’t know any Chucks,” I say. “There’s only this guy named Zero. A fine-as-hell rocker with a nice cock—”

He takes this moment to thrust into me again. “This thing?”

“Yes,” I moan as he rocks again and again. “So perfect.”

“Say my name,” he demands, his hand going to my throat. “I want to taste it.”

“Zero,” I moan and he leans forward, licking inside my mouth.

“Again.”

“Z—” He doesn’t let me finish before he’s thrusting his tongue inside me and fucking me wordless.

I moan into his mouth as he continues to punish my pussy with his possessive cock. His hips hit mine over and over, his body covering me. When he pulls away, his pleasure is at the forefront of his mind.

“Come for me, Z. Let me have it.”

He closes his eyes briefly before they connect with mine again. “Pose, fuck, Pose,” he rasps, rutting at a harsh speed. My back bows and I whine as his piercings hit that spot inside me.

“Zero!” I call out, falling apart once more. He shudders, filling me with his heat, and I love the feel of him.

“That’s right, Pose. Take all I have to give. That’s my girl.” He pulls out, using his fingers to hold his cum inside me.

“That was... wow.” My words evade me as I stare openly at him.

“I’ve got to burn this hockey table,” he rumbles. “No one can have what is mine anymore.” Happiness twinkles in his expression as he leans forward.

“Such a monster.”

“Ghoul,” he corrects with a nip at my lip. “Ghoul, baby.”

The End



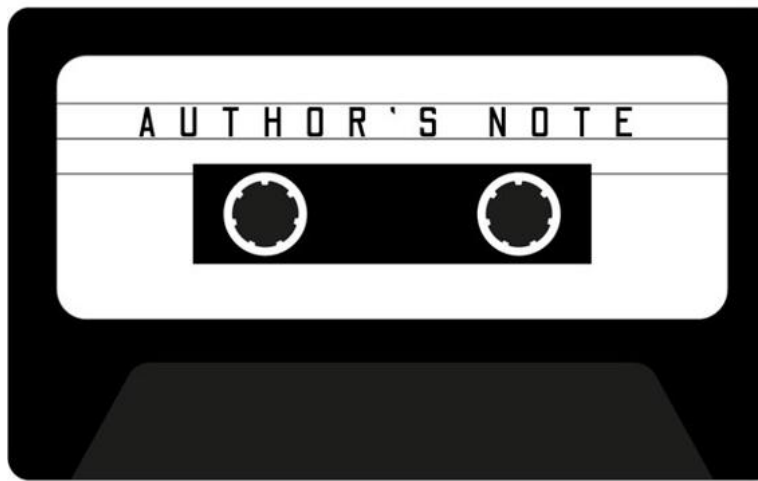
Thank you for reading Dreadful Gifts. If you want to read more romances where the main leads are obsessed with each other, please check out www.maeveblackbooks.com

About the Author

Maeve Black writes monster romance that they've always wanted to read. As someone who is queer, fat, and Latine, Maeve tries to be diverse and inclusive with all works, helping others see that the world isn't just a social construct. They love reading, playing fantasy video games, and drawing in their spare time. Maeve wants to be known for their spice and unique takes on the monsters they choose to write.

VAMPIRES TOTALLY SUCK

C. ROCHELLE



You might think I put in my application at Sizzling Discourse for the employee discount on fishnets, studded wristbands, and pitch-black lipstick.

And you would be right.

You might also think I took the job because the two guys who work here are hella hot.

But you'd be dead wrong.

Yeah, Damon *looks* the part—all dark and broody, with skin so pale and lips so red, you'd swear he was a teen vampire—but it's obviously an act to lure in customers.

Totally lame.

And then there's Max. He's friendly, always *smiling*, and dresses like a major fashion victim. Like, who wears straw fedoras and Hawaiian shirts in a goth store?

I know this is California but read the room, loser.

Whatever. I have bigger things to worry about than two wannabes. Somebody is stalking me, and I don't know what their damage is, but I'm not going down without a fight.

Whoever it is can bite me.



Content Warning:

Tropes

MMF with MM scenes, Snarky Valley Girl turned goth heroine, Hawaiian print wearing sunshine vampire who's filthy in bed, broody grumpy vampire with a tragic past, codependency, pretty girls (and boys) who love makeup, 80s slang, insta-lust, "I licked/bit her so she's mine," growly possessive dudes, reinventing yourself, an implied makeup montage, murder as a love language, swearsy dialogue, naughty dark humor.

Kinks

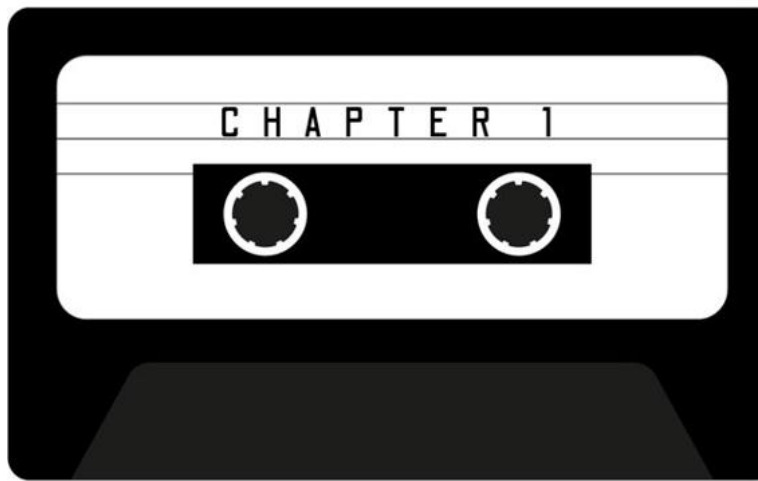
Biting and drinking/sharing blood (these are vampires, duh), being delightfully gagged with dirty panties, unusually pierced peens, Cuckolding with a genderbent hotwife (these consensual interactions with outside partners happen prior to the FMC arriving), sneaky masturbation, repeated defiling of the satin lining of various coffins, squirting, pussy worship, edging from a pleasure Dom, praise for our good girl, praise and degradation for our bratty boy, Dom/sub & Sir/pet bedroom dynamics with a happy switch in the middle, lite dress protocol, collaring, DVP, mention of cock biting*.

Possible Triggers (please check above lists as well)

Gaslighting narcissist ex-bestie, messy business partner fallout, mean girl style bullying and stalking, slut-shaming, breaking from a toxic/abusive friendship (all of the above from the ex-bestie), romantic jealousy and related angst (misguided, as this is a true polyamorous relationship in the end), self-worth issues, humiliation related to homophobic misogyny and masculine ideals (past, mentioned), past parental death (briefly mentioned, no details). vampires using their sexy compulsion powers for evil (but only on those who deserve it).



**The book Max is reading that includes cock biting is Blood and Secrets by Beatrix Hollow. Yes, it was published in 2022. We'll just say it was brought back to the 1980s in a DeLorean.*



STAR

THE LAST THING I NEEDED WAS TO STEP IN THE GRODY remains of a half-eaten pepperoni pizza Hot Pocket on the way to my interview.

Gag me with a spoon!

With a huff, I stomped through the revolving doors of the Creepy Court Mall and booked it to the nearest restroom. I was already late because I'd forgotten how long the drive was to *this* part of town, but no way in hell was I showing up smelling like extra cheese.

The job will be cheesy enough.

After scraping melted preservatives off my Doc Martens, I took a moment to check my outfit in the mirror above the sink.

The underbust corset I wore was giving my lace camisole-covered boobs a healthy lift, while my favorite vintage cameo

hung from my neck on a strand of beaded jet. Brand new fishnets were peeking through the layers of my mid-length petticoat, and I gave the crinoline a shake to fluff it up after my drive.

My gaze lifted to my teased black hair, artfully swept forward to cover one eye completely—but not because I wanted to hide. The star of the show was my maximalist makeup, with geometrically drawn eyebrows and enough pitch black eyeliner to blot out the moon. My shadow was thick, my cat eye extreme. I looked like Siouxsie Sioux had a love child with comic book Batman.

I look deadly.

This wasn't at all how I used to dress—or how I did my makeup a few short months ago. But now that I was starting over from nothing, I'd decided to play with a style that felt more authentic to who I really was.

Since I've never been able to experiment before now.

Leaning forward, I pressed my lips to the mirror with a sloppy smack. Then I admired the blood-red evidence left on the cracked glass before spinning on my heel and confidently stalking away from the scene of the crime.

Two minutes later, I breezed into Sizzling Discourse, fully intending to tell 'Max,' the manager I'd had car trouble. I hoped the little white lie would stop him from counting my lateness against me.

I'm just a helpless girl!

“Brittany?” A man's voice from the shadows almost had me knocking over a nearby rack of fashionable bondage jewelry.

“It's... *Star*, actually,” I automatically corrected as I hastily rehung a wine-colored leather collar inlaid with gemstones.

“Brittany doesn’t really fit who I am, so...”

My words trailed off as I turned to face the guy who’d materialized out of thin air. He was strikingly good-looking, with olive-toned skin, deep set brown eyes, and a distracting curve to his lips that made it look like he was about to laugh at a really dirty joke. But none of that mattered in the face of what he was *wearing*.

A Hawaiian shirt.

With a straw fedora.

“I think I might be in the wrong place...” I mumbled, although a quick glance around confirmed that yes, I was surrounded by the affordable goth clothing and accessories this store was known for.

Maybe he’s in the wrong place...

“You’re here about the sales position, right?” Hawaiian Tropic asked.

His lively gaze was drinking me in, but not in a lecherous way. It actually reminded me of how *I* salivated over a brand new eyeshadow palette.

“I am...” I cautiously replied, beyond confused by this turn of events. “Are *you* Max?” When he nodded enthusiastically, I handed him the mall employment application someone named Chesa Rizal had handed to me when I stopped by the main office last week during a drive around town. “Uh... Sorry I’m late, man. My Honda decided to spaz out on the way here and ___”

“You’re hired,” he interrupted, staring at me stupidly for another moment before sticking out his hand. “And yeah, I’m Max. Welcome to the Sizzling Discourse team... *Star.*”

Well, that was easy.

“Cool.” I shook his hand and casually flipped my hair, as if I *wasn't* fist pumping on the inside. “Soooo... when do you want me to start? My schedule is pretty open.”

Wide open, actually.

Max was still eyeing me like I was a magical, rainbow-haired Pegasus who'd landed right in front of him. “How 'bout now? If you have the time, I could show you around the store. You know... get you up close and personal with the merchandise.”

There was *definitely* a flirtiness to Max's statement, but when I snuck a glance at him, his smile was wide and genuine. I couldn't help smiling back, realizing my new manager was pretty much an eager puppy who just wanted to play.

How he ended up here is beyond me.

“Yeah, I could hang for a bit before I have to motor,” I replied, peering around the otherwise empty store. “I've actually only been in here a few times, so I could use the refresher. Since, you know, I don't remember Sizzling Discourse carrying midlife crisis Hawaiian gear.”

Let's see how you handle my brand of humor...

Max barked a laugh before tilting his fedora at a saucy angle. “You sound like Damon! He *despises* how I dress. Although the midlife part might be accurate...”

Before I could point out that dude looked like he was twenty-five tops—or ask who *Damon* was—a deep voice echoed among the racks.

“What the fuck is this?!”

I spun to find a more appropriately-dressed guy striding toward us with an angry snarl twisting his annoyingly pouty

lips. Confused, I looked over my shoulder, trying to figure out what was getting him so twisted.

“Damon, meet our new employee.” Max sighed so heavily, I had to assume he’d about run out of sighs when it came to *Damon*.

Hey, wait a minute...

Am I the ‘what’ he’s pissed off about?

“Hi... I’m Star.” I politely extended a hand for the angry man to shake.

I was attempting to play nice, while trying—and failing—to not get stuck on how his gorgeously flowing jet black hair perfectly framed his ivory skin, high cheekbones, and flashing amber eyes.

His attractiveness is just rude.

Damon grunted in disgust, pointedly ignoring my hand. Instead, he snatched my application from Max so he could glare at the crumpled piece of paper as if it mortally offended him in some way.

Probs because my name is on it...

“What makes you think *you* should work at Sizzling Discourse, *Brittany?*” Damon was back to sneering at me like I’d pissed in his Cheerios. “You’re nothing but a *Valley Girl* playing goth dress up.”

Max took a step closer to me—almost as if he was about to come to my defense—but I could handle myself.

Especially against a wannabe trying to call me one.

Matching Damon’s energy, I let my gaze drag down his body with maximum judgment. It was a struggle, since he looked

bitchin', but he was right about one thing. I was from the *Lone Pine* neighborhood, and being judgy was in my 'Valley Girl' blood.

"I think *I'm* a better option than either of you," I sniffed before briefly glancing at Max. "No offense."

"None taken," he replied before gesturing at Damon. "Proceed."

He wants me to put my coworker in his place?

Interesting...

My manager didn't have to tell me twice. I turned my attention back to the sourpuss in the room and let loose. "What is *with* this Old West duster jacket, *Damon*? And are those *knockoff* Docs? Is your employee discount not enough to tempt you into dressing like the *real deal*?"

Burn!

Even though Max had already told me I was hired, I wasn't interested in working alongside someone with an entire tree stuck up his butt. Damon needed to get with the program and learn that *no one* got to talk to me like that.

Not anymore.

Ye Olde West goth glanced down at himself before giving *my* ensemble an equally judgmental look. "The boots are Vivienne Westwood and the jacket is vintage." His gaze flickered to Max. "*Extremely* vintage."

"Neither of us wears much of our own merchandise," Max hastily cut in with an apologetic smile my way. "We see what's hot in the London scene and then seek out cheaply made alternatives—so the kids can afford it."

That's... kind of cool.

“Well, I’m happy to be the hot young thing, modeling the merch.” I shrugged, my gaze drifting to the display of collars again. “As long as we’re not going to have any *problems* with me working here.”

That last bit was aimed at Mr. Grumpypants, who apparently wasn’t done voicing his very grumpy opinion.

“Actually, you working here *will* be a problem,” he growled, crossing his arms and annoying me further with how his muscles bulged beneath his clothes. “And since we don’t need any help—”

“*I* need her,” Max barked in an unexpectedly aggressive tone. “I need... the help, Damon. With Halloween in a couple of weeks and then the holidays...”

Max glared, and something unspoken passed between the two men—immediately captured my attention. In fact, the tension was so thick, it practically *crackled* in the air.

Hot.

For the briefest moment, Damon looked regretful—although the emotion was definitely meant for *Max*, not me. But then he remembered what a giant douche he was and scowled at me before stomping away again.

This should be fun.

“Sorry if I caused drama with you and your...” I trailed off—casually gesturing while totally, shamelessly fishing for information.

Because I did not imagine that vibe just now.

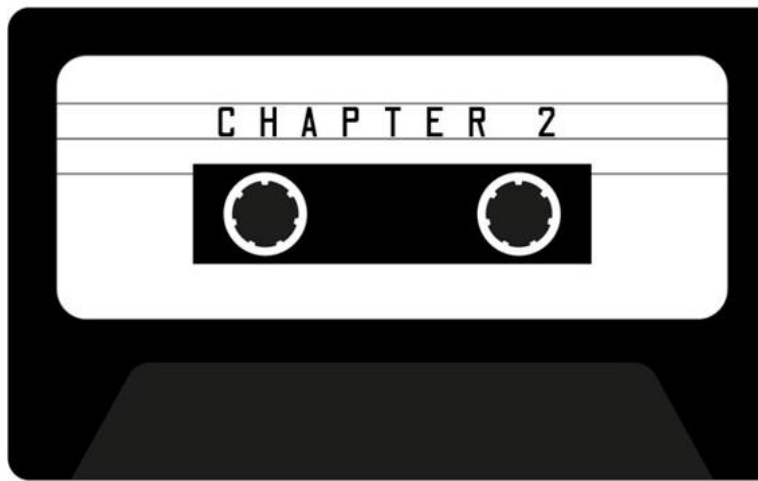
“My co-owner,” Max smoothly replied, flashing me a charming grin once again. “And don’t listen to him. We’ve needed a... third for a while now, but Damon’s set in his

ways.” His lips twitched as a devilish light filled his eyes. “He’s a pain in the ass, to be frank.”

Burn.

“Yeah... sharing a business is rough,” I muttered, not at all wanting to go *there* with my personal history. “But how ‘bout you show me all the *merchandise* I’ll be making look good for you guys.”

Max’s eyes darkened, but he quickly buried the heat beneath a cheeky smile. “With pleasure! And seriously, don’t let Damon scare you off, Star. I think you’re just the person we need.”



MAX

I HADN'T EXPECTED TO HIRE STAR ON THE SPOT, BUT THE instant she appeared—dressed like Victorian trash with eyes full of sadness—I *knew* she was the one.

She's perfect.

I also hadn't been actively searching for an employee. Damon and I could easily handle anyone who wandered into Sizzling Discourse, especially since most of the clientele just wanted to flirt with—or fuck—him. But Chesa had mentioned someone who fit the bill stopped by the main office, and I'd been intrigued enough to at least offer an interview.

We should give thanks to the goddess Selene for this twist of fate.

And send Chesa a fruit basket.

Fate was exactly what it felt like, no matter how much Damon wanted to fight against the inevitable. He may have been my partner—in business and eternal death—but he still behaved as if this were a temporary arrangement.

Sure, hiring Star without his knowledge wasn't my finest moment, but a petty part of me hoped *this* might be the catalyst we needed to finally get past his hangups.

My fangs lengthened uncontrollably at the thought of Damon finally giving me what I crave.

Or... Star...

Get a hold of yourself, Max!

With a slow exhale, I picked up my book—forcing myself to focus on something other than watching the clock. My pretty little human wasn't scheduled to arrive for her shift for another ten minutes. The last thing I needed was for Star to catch me panting at the store entrance like a starving dog.

Even if that's exactly how she makes me feel.

“How you can enjoy that smut is beyond me.”

Damon's familiar raspy tone made my cock twitch, but I kept my gaze stubbornly fixed on the page. After all, he'd barely spoken a complete sentence to me in the three weeks since Star started working for us.

Including when I fuck him into the satin lining each night.

With a sigh, I raised my gaze to his, physically unable to stay angry at the brat for long. I also saw his words for the white flag they were, since poking at me was *his* way of breaking the ice.

After icing me out...

“Oh, I dunno, *pet*,” I hummed, deciding to taunt. “Where do you think I got the idea to try a little cock biting?”

Damon hissed in a breath at the *unwanted* nickname, followed by a scowl as the gorgeous cock in question no doubt thickened at the memory.

You love taking your punishment.

I was fully expecting him to stomp away again, but then his gaze softened. “Max... I’m...”

Whatever Damon was about to say was forgotten as my new obsession breezed through the door.

“Heyyy, boys!” Star sang out, flashing a self-assured smirk that would have warmed my heart had it still been beating. “Spoiler alert—my look today was inspired by evil villains with nefarious plans. I wanted to see if I could scare away the customers...”

I set down my ‘smutty’ book to give the pretty villainess my undivided attention, smiling in adoration as she struck a sassy pose.

On her first day, Star had graciously allowed me to send her home with one of everything off the racks. She acted as if I were doing *her* a favor, not realizing how much it turned me on to dress her up like a sexy little doll.

How much I want to play with her.

Unsurprisingly, Star was the perfect person to model our goods, and today, she looked like a wet dream. Her black underbust corset was cinched tight, and I couldn’t help imagining slowly undoing the laces. Unwrapping her like a present.

She'd paired the top with one of our distressed miniskirts, and my mouth watered to see her long legs on display. The icing on the cake were the thigh highs printed with daggers dripping blood—the black nylon fading into red that seemed to pool at her feet, thanks to the shiny crimson Docs.

If only it were real blood.

Blood we were sharing...

FOCUS, MAX!

Blowing out a slow breath, I willed myself to chill the fuck out. Despite Star being a few years past 'legal' age in this time period—and that Damon and I both *appeared* close enough to not raise suspicion—the gap between us was more like centuries.

And that's the least of what makes this attraction challenging.

The truth was, Creepy Court was run by monsters and occasionally staffed by unsuspecting humans like Star. Even more rarely, one of these mortals would be allowed into our world, but that was usually only once a mate bond was formed.

If only she could be our third.

In the end, we all counted on the continued cluelessness of humans to stay in business. It was a necessary evil so we could remain safe and comfortable in the lives we'd built for ourselves.

Here in Southern California.

The idea of two *vampires*—including a Hawaiian print-loving one like myself—willingly existing in such a *sunny* location made me chuckle.

“Do you... not like it?”

Star's hesitant voice snapped me out of my daydreams and I realized—to my horror—that she thought I was *laughing* at her.

“What? Of course, I like it!” I quickly replied. “You look like a total Betty.”

I internally cringed at the ‘hip’ vernacular, but it did the trick. Any insecurity Star had been feeling disappeared beneath the overly confident mask she wore.

Through hours of small talk between customers, I'd managed to learn a bit about her past—including that she used to co-own a beauty business at Lone Pine Mall. While I loved how animated she became when talking about makeup, I'd quickly realized she wore it like armor—like an impenetrable fortress to keep out anyone or anything.

Too bad I only need an invitation to come inside.

“It's not like it would take much for you to be a villain, Brittany,” Damon muttered—although I saw the way he eyed the human in our midst.

Like she might taste as good as she looks.

To my relief, Star was as unbothered as always by Damon's remarks. I couldn't tell if she truly didn't care what he thought of her, or if she recognized a kindred spirit pushing others away with an emotional wall as thick as a mausoleum.

It annoyed me how perfect the two of them would be for each other if only Damon would stop being such a prickly prick. But I'd long given up on asking for more from my mate than he was willing to give.

“Your makeup is extra deadly today, Star,” I added, smiling wider when her beautiful blue eyes looked my way again. “It looks just like comic book linework.”

A work of art.

“Yes!” she exclaimed, as pure excitement overrode her practiced ‘cool.’ “That’s exactly what I was going for. I was flipping through some old *Love and Rockets* and thought I’d try to match Hopey’s punk vibe.”

Damon perked up imperceptibly at the mention of one of his favorite comics, but he quickly buried it beneath another scowl before Star could notice.

I see you, pet.

“Well, you nailed it.” I enthusiastically nodded, although I’d only glanced at the comic once or twice over Damon’s shoulder while he was reading.

Smutty romance novels are more my speed.

Star blushed prettily, but tried to hide it beneath her long fringe—forcing me to hurriedly avert my gaze. I was dangerously close to dragging her back to my coffin, wrapping that hair around my fist, and making her blush some more as I fed her my cock.

Easy, Max...

The last thing I wanted was to scare my little doll away before I could convince her to be mine.

Mine forever.

“What are *you* reading over there?”

Star was suddenly reaching over the counter for my book. I could have easily snatched it out of her reach... if I hadn’t been so distracted by her cleavage.

Or, if I gave a shit that she knew what I was into.

Which I don’t.

“*Blood and Secrets*, huh?” she teased as she flipped it open to a random page. “That sounds dark and mysterious... and *spicy*. You don’t strike me as the kind of guy to be into—*OHMYGAWD*, it *is* spicy! Why didn’t you freakin’ *stop* me, Max? Holy crap.” She continued to scan the page, despite her protests. “Dude has another dude’s... in his *mouth!*”

I wonder if it was the cock biting part...

“Is that a problem?” Damon growled, understandably defensive.

I could tell Star wasn’t judging. I’d just caught her off guard with my extremely graphic choice of reading material.

Poor baby.

“Of course not!” she squawked, turning deliciously redder by the second. “It’s *your* business. Both of yours. And it’s totally hot—I MEAN, FINE! It’s totally *fine*. Ugh. I’m making it worse, aren’t I? Now I feel like I’m creepin’ on your sex life...”

Please do.

“I don’t mind,” I teased in return, unable to resist. “Exhibitionists *like* being creeped on. Sometimes they even see it as an invitation to share.”

Ok, maybe I’m not completely teasing...

Both Star and Damon tensed. *She* looked enticingly intrigued while his gaze flitted between the two of us as if he’d *finally* noticed how smokin’ hot the human was.

The arousal she’s pumping into the air doesn’t hurt.

Along with the sound of her heart rate speeding up.

“What the fuck is this?!”

All three of us turned to face whoever was eerily echoing Damon's outburst from the day Star first arrived.

A stereotypical Valley Girl was standing beneath the roll-down security gate at the front of the store. She was all shimmering Lip Smackers and French-tipped manicure, topped with boring salon blonde locks. Even without her sneer, crossed arms, and bony hip jutting out, she was giving off enough attitude to make Damon seem like a harmless little kitten.

I do love it when he purrs for me...

"H-Heather?" Star's voice was uncharacteristically wavering, and I immediately disliked this newcomer for causing the change. "What are you doing—"

"On *this* side of the tracks?" Heather scoffed. "I needed cheap crap to decorate the kiosk for the *very busy* Halloween season. And I figured I could slum it here at Creepy Court without anyone who matters seeing me. Case in point." She gestured at Star—as if she wasn't one wrong move away from me ripping off her hand at the wrist. "I shouldn't even be surprised that *this* is where you've been lurking all this time. Painted up like a *whore*."

How dare she!

Then the bottle blonde strutted further into *my* store, closer to the two deadly predators lying in wait. It wasn't bravery that urged her on, but a singular focus, as her evil gaze was fixed on Star alone.

Who was *trembling*...

I'm going to KILL this bitch!

You can't kill the human, Max.

At least, not out in the open...

“Excuse me, but you need to leave.” I came out from behind the counter and placed myself in the harpy’s warpath, protecting what was *mine*. “Nobody talks to my employee that way—”

“Your *employee?!?*” Heather shrieked, peering around me to grin at Star like it was the best news she’d heard all day. “So playing goth for minimum wage was the best you could do after Bodacious Babes, Brit? I guess I really *was* the brains behind the business after all—”

“Are you deaf, Heather?” Star bravely cut in, even as her voice shook. “My boss said to make like a tree and get the fuck out of here.”

Good girl.

I crossed my arms and nodded in affirmation, delivering a non-sense stare tinged with a *touch* of compulsion.

Get. The. Fuck. Out.

As expected, my power worked like a charm. The bobblehead shook her permed head in confusion before backing toward the door.

“Whatever, Brit,” she drawled, clearly intent on getting the last word. “It’s good to see you’re getting exactly what you deserve after how *horribly* you treated me. Have a nice life, loser.”

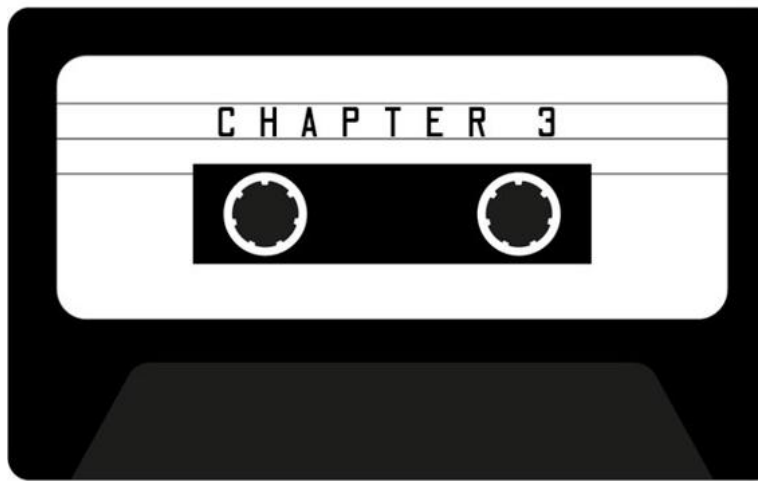
And with that, the human with a death wish stomped away.

Bye, for now, blood bag.

When I turned to check on Star, my breath caught at how *defeated* she looked. I wanted nothing more than to pull her into my arms, but knew that level of affection would be considered inappropriate at this point. So I clenched my fists at

my sides and played it cool—while also formulating the perfect plan to win over the girl of my dreams.

I'm going to murder Heather.



STAR

“WHO *WAS* THAT SCREECHING HARPY?”

I snorted at Max’s totally accurate description of Heather, even if I felt like fire ants were crawling over my skin from the encounter.

“Just an old friend.” I shrugged, keeping my gaze fixed on my nails as I picked at my already chipped black polish.

Maybe I should do Merlot next.

Or a red that looks like dripping blood...

Damon snorted. “She wasn’t speaking to you like a friend, Star.”

Apparently, the grumpy one was deciding to not only talk to me today but use my preferred name. I would have bristled at his blunt observation if he didn’t sound so... *sympathetic*.

Maybe he's coming down with something.

I sighed and lifted my gaze to look at the two men. The truth of what had happened between Heather and me felt like it was burning a hole in my gut most days, but I rarely talked about it with anyone. Not only because the unhinged muppet was known for threatening lawsuits against anyone who dared mention her many crimes, but because of a lingering sense of loyalty.

We were friends at one point.

At least... I thought we were.

As much as the idea of sharing my past set me on edge, venting to the guys couldn't make anything worse. It wasn't like they even knew Heather or her sycophants across town—or had any reason to gossip to anyone else at this lame mall about some rando Valley Girl.

“Heather and I were friends... kind of...” I began, internally wincing at how my voice hitched. “She transferred to my high school during our senior year, and we bonded over a mutual obsession with hair and makeup. I told her how it was my dream to have a beauty kiosk at Lone Pine Mall...” My cheeks were burning as I revealed way more about myself than I usually felt comfortable doing.

“You are *excellent* at makeup, Star,” Max cut in, nodding his head like one of those possessed-looking animatronic robots at Frankie's Funhouse. “If you ever want to practice on me, I'm your guy!”

Huh?

Just as I started assessing Max's excellent bone structure, Damon brought me back to the hot topic at hand. “Keep

going,” he gritted out, sounding like he was already getting his all-black panties twisted over my tale of woe.

If you insist, Broody Boy.

Slowly exhaling, I replied in a rush of word-vomit—as if I truly needed to purge the poison from my system. “Long story short, her dad agreed to co-sign on a kiosk after graduation, and Bodacious Babes Beauty Bar was born. I already had a pretty big following from school dances and prom, and word of mouth spread until we were booked for like, six months in advance.”

“All of that sounds awesome.” Max squinted as he stepped closer—and I couldn’t help noticing how aware I was of what little distance separated us. “But I’m assuming the severed foot is about to drop.”

I swear, it’s like he’s from a different era.

Or worked at Medieval Times...

I let Max’s idiotic idiom go, since the severed foot *was* about to drop. “Yeah, it wasn’t long until I caught wind of some weirdly specific rumors claiming most of our hair and makeup designs came from *her*. That I was just manipulating her into doing more work than me. I mean, yeah, maybe she *did* technically offer a few more options in her book, but her technique was...”

Not wanting to sound like a total jerk, I hesitated, but Damon filled in the blanks with his complete lack of filter. “Simple, shoddy, and immature. Lacking any nuance or skill to the point where, five minutes ago, I felt as if I were gazing upon a child’s finger painting next to a museum-worthy exhibition.”

Is he... flirting with me?!

I was so flustered by his unexpected input, I could only stutter in response. “Um, well... it *did* seem like customers were asking for me more than her, sooo... maybe? I dunno...”

“Most definitely,” Max vehemently confirmed, and I felt my cheeks go up in flames, much to my horror. “And let me guess. This *Heather* got jealous and somehow bullied you out of the business—more than happy to continue on her own with *your* customers while profiting off of *your* ideas. Does that sound about right?”

Whoa.

That was... shockingly accurate.

“Yeah,” I nodded, which made *both* guys advance—causing me to back into the Halloween-print scrunchie display. “And she decided since *her* dad had co-signed on the kiosk, that meant she could claim complete ownership of everything we’d created together after forcing me to leave.”

“How could you be so cruel, Brittany? After all that I’ve done for you.”

I can’t believe I trusted her...

My eyes grew hot as I remembered how Heather used to verbally and mentally abuse me in private, only to twist the story in public. The way she told it, *I* was the bully, and *she* was the victim, bravely freeing herself from a toxic situation.

How anyone was gullible enough to believe her theater kid act is beyond me.

I snapped back to reality to find the guys staring at me so intensely, I felt like a mouse being watched by two cats.

“So, yeah,” I concluded with a weird jazz hands gesture to awkwardly top it off. “That’s how I ended up looking for work

at Creepy Court.”

End scene.

“Would you like us to dispose of this vile creature for you?” Damon asked, and Max sharply glanced at him in surprise.

No one was more surprised than me. Especially because his growly tone—and unblinking stare—was making my pussy *throb* beneath my mini-skirt.

Down, girl! We do not throb for murder.

I laughed nervously. “It’s cool, seriously. You don’t need to deliver fiery vengeance on my behalf. I’m totally over it.” I attempted a sweet smile, even as some small evil part of me wanted to swallow down this psycho protectiveness like a foot-long from The Good Char.

Geez, who swallows a foot-long?

“You’re *not* over it, though.” Damon’s voice was low and menacing as he caged me in with his larger frame—enveloping me in the scent of leather and citrus, of all things. Leaning down until his mouth was so close to my neck that his breath tickled my now sweaty skin, he took a deep—almost obscene—inhale. “You smell like *anger*.”

This is warped.

But I’m so into it.

Damon’s fake vampire routine was definitely working for me at the moment, but I’d rather die than let him know that. “Okay, yeah,” I hesitantly agreed—and it felt *good* to admit. “Maybe I’m still a little mad, but I’m not gonna, like, freak out over it.”

At least, not outside of the privacy of my bedroom.

Damon suddenly backed off, and I realized Max was pulling him away with a pointed look.

Look at Hawaiian Tropic, defending my honor!

Something wordlessly passed between them, making me once again wonder how long this pair of mismatched socks had known each other.

“Try not to worry about it, Star,” Max murmured in such a soothing tone, my eyelids grew heavy. “We’ll just let... *karma* deal with it.”

“Yeah,” Damon chuckled, although I didn’t see what was so funny. “*Karma.*”

I felt drugged. My throat was suddenly desert dry and my head spun. “I-I... think I need a soda,” I mumbled before stumbling toward the breakroom. Grabbing a Jolt Cola from the fridge, I took a swig and slumped into an orange plastic chair, determined to figure out what the hell was going on with me.

It’s probably just an adrenaline drop from seeing Heather again.

Once the double-shot of caffeine was firmly flowing through my veins, I finally admitted the guys’ protectiveness and proximity—along with Damon’s teen wolf growl—might have also played a role in me swooning like a Victorian broad.

Get a grip, Star!

You cannot get involved with either one of these weirdos.

It wasn’t that I couldn’t see myself in bed with Old West Vampire and... whatever the hell Max was going for with the island resort wear. They were both hella hot, and I was no blushing virgin.

I could totally handle both of them in the bedroom.

Maybe even together...

DOWN GIRL!

The problem wasn't with Damon and Max at all. It was *me*. I couldn't trust anyone—not after what happened with Heather—and especially now that she'd tracked me down. I'd seen my ex-BFF in action countless times before. She was a dog with a bone when it came to what she classified as 'righteous' revenge. I already knew today's run-in wouldn't be the last I'd see of her evil face.

I sighed and chugged the rest of the Jolt. There was no way I'd be sleeping tonight, anyway, now that I was back in Heather's sights.

How did she even find me?

I didn't believe for one second that she'd just randomly showed up at Sizzling Discourse. Creepy Court was the reject mall with knockoffs, while Lone Pine was Queen Heather's kingdom. There were plenty of stores selling 'cheap crap' closer to home, so there was no reason for her to drive all the way to this part of town.

She already knew I was here...

My blood chilled as I realized she'd been tailing me—not only these past few weeks, but possibly since our falling out over Bodacious Babes.

It wouldn't be the first time Heather resorted to such tactics. She was notoriously paranoid, constantly convinced others were plotting against her and needed to be watched. Of course, I never confronted her about her behavior—since psycho bestie wasn't the type of friend you could give tough love to.

Not if you didn't want to be on the receiving end of her wrath.

I cursed under my breath at my stupidity. All this time, I'd assumed she'd moved on after everything that went down. Instead, she'd perfected her creepy craft, and now *I* was the one being stalked.

But why bother with me at all, when she's already won?

Just leave me alone!

That anger Damon had supposedly smelled bubbled up inside me and I growled in frustration, needing an outlet. Crushing the empty soda can in my hand, I chucked it at the nearby electrical panel, eager for the harsh sound of metal on metal to soothe my nerves. It clanged nicely, followed by a popping noise as a large crack appeared in the wall from the panel box down to the floor.

Oops...

I grimaced and leaped to my feet before scampering closer to inspect the damage. Weirdly, it didn't look like a fresh break. The crack was too straight and smooth and when I nudged the dislodged chunk with the toe of my boot, it swung inward.

Like a door.

Oh. My. Gawd.

Glancing nervously over my shoulder, I braced myself for either Damon or Max to appear and sexily scold me for wrecking the place.

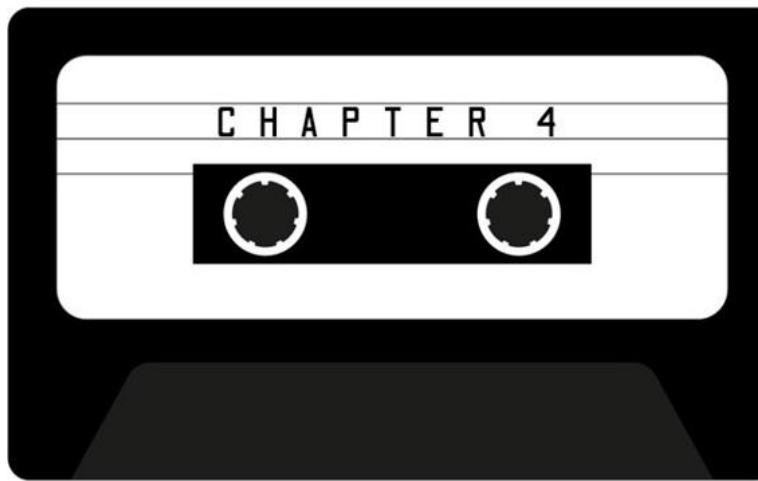
Or discovering their secret lair.

I hesitated, but only for a second since my curiosity *always* got the better of me—for better or worse. There were probably mob-hit bodies buried in the wall, but even that wasn't enough to scare me off. Whatever I was about to see would beat going

back out to the store after pouring my heart out over my ruined hopes and dreams.

Maybe I'll find an emergency exit, so I never have to face the guys again.

Deciding both men would leave me alone to sulk for a while, I grabbed a flashlight from the junk drawer, steeled my spine, and tip-toed into the darkness.



DAMON

WHEN BRITTANY—*STAR*—WANDERED OUT FROM THE breakroom twenty minutes later, the first thing she did was ask Max if she could go home early.

She barely met his gaze while she did it, and didn't look at *me* at all.

Is she still upset over her 'friend?'

Or because I acted like a total creep...

Of course, Max said yes, although I could tell it *pained* him to let her out of his sight. I'd had to listen to him obsess over the human's every move for what felt like centuries. If he now believed someone was *threatening* her, his protective instincts had already kicked into high gear.

Just like yours did, Damon?

Fuck.

I didn't know what had come over me earlier. Maybe it was because Star had looked so vulnerable after sharing her story, but before I knew it, I'd instinctively pounced. Except, instead of draining her dry like helpless prey, I'd wanted to feast on her in a different way.

Like how Max wants to.

Like how he already feasts on me...

Unbidden, I recalled how her pupils had dilated when she'd discovered what Max enjoyed reading—how she'd scented the air with her arousal at the thought of two men together.

Maybe at the thought of us specifically.

That her lame horniness could inspire my predatory instincts irritated me beyond anything I'd experienced since she'd invaded our store three weeks ago.

Things were so much easier before Star—Brittany—arrived!

With a frown, I stalked to where a customer was perusing the factory-produced band T-shirts we carried—which only annoyed me further. If it was up to *me*, we'd clear out any item you could find anywhere else in Creepy Court. Max might want to give the consumer sheep what they *wanted*, but I would have preferred to give the real punks what they *needed*.

Fashion to challenge the status quo.

We had the connections and the means to do it, but Max had shown no interest in evolving the Sizzling Discourse brand. If I was going to be honest, he hadn't shown much interest in *anything* in a long time.

Not until she showed up...

And it's all my fault.

“You don’t want that crap,” I growled at the purple-haired hardcore girl plucking at a generic Misfits tank. “Check out our deconstructed pieces over there instead.”

She glanced at the nearby rack before letting her gaze roam over me. “Righteous. Thanks for the tip. I might need some help in the dressing room, though...”

I looked her over in return. A few weeks ago, I would have immediately said yes—more than happy to fuck my self-loathing away while Max read his smut and pretended not to overhear.

While plotting to fuck me harder that night in revenge.

But now... all I could see were *Star’s* baby blues gazing up at me while I cornered her against the rack. All I could smell was her wet cunt combined with her millions of hair products, and I was suddenly not at all interested in a random hookup.

What the hell is the matter with me?!

“Are you feeling okay?” Max knowingly smirked after the Misfits girl left the store. “I was looking forward to punishing you for that later.”

I grunted noncommittally in reply. What I *wanted* to do was ask if he was sure our new employee was a human, and not some siren, luring us to our deaths.

Too bad we’re already dead.

“Still giving me the cold shoulder, hmm?” He allowed his fangs to extend before running his tongue over the sharp point.

Drawing blood.

My eyes snapped to the sight as my own fangs lengthened in response. “You fed without me?”

Max's eyebrows shot up in surprise—although I couldn't be sure if it was in response to me actually stringing four words together in his presence or to the question itself.

Acute panic flooded my empty veins. I was so old, I didn't need to feed often—and he rarely needed it at all—but I'd thought the hunt was one of the few things we still enjoyed doing together.

Have I finally pushed him away for good?!

"I did," he carefully replied, retracting his fangs once again. "During my break earlier, I gorged myself on a wino passed out in the alley. I..." He blew out a slow breath, looking as unsteady as I'd ever seen him. "I *need* to stay fed around Star, Damon... so I don't turn her before she's ready."

WHAT?!

"*You're planning on turning her?*" I hiss-whispered as my vision went red. "Were you going to discuss any of this with me before creating our third?"

I was livid. I was ready to go on a rampage through the mall, ripping out the throats of everyone I saw. The worst part was that I didn't know what I was more upset about—Max clearly looking to replace me or that he hadn't consulted me on his plan in the first place.

...or that I hadn't thought of it myself.

Max scoffed and crossed his arms. "Oh, you *want* a third now? I was under the impression you weren't even interested in being a pair."

Asshole.

I threw my hands up in exasperation. "Max, you know damn well what I'm interested in! I'm still *here*, aren't I?!"

“Barely,” he murmured, almost inaudibly—his gaze drifting toward the store entrance, as if willing his precious *Star* to return.

Fuck. This.

Practically blinded by rage and other shit I didn’t want to examine, I growled and stomped toward the breakroom. Once there, I wrenched open the secret door by the utility box and entered our nest—needing to get into my coffin before my psychotic ideations became reality. The instant the cool, damp air hit me, I somewhat relaxed, but then went on high alert as a familiar scent drifted by my nostrils.

Star.

She... didn't infiltrate the nest, did she?

Shaking my head, I banished the thought. There was no way the human had found her way back here or discovered what we were. I was just being paranoid because of all the infuriatingly confusing *emotions* running through my parched veins.

Feelings.

Gross.

My mouth *watered* at the thought of Max being full of fresh blood, but I refused to go back out there just to be near him again.

It's better for me to be alone.

I sighed as I reached my coffin, wondering—not for the first time—why Max had imprinted on me in the first place. He could have had his pick of anyone during the centuries he’d been around, yet he’d bound himself to someone who couldn’t give him what he needed.

But maybe Star can...

As if conjured by my thoughts, her *scent* hit me again—infuriatingly magnified as I climbed into my coffin and settled in.

Fuck, it smells like she rubbed herself all over the satin.

And why do I love that so much?

With a groan, I unbuttoned my jeans and shoved them down my thighs. My throbbing cock sprung free—my balls aching with the need to spill—and I squeezed my eyes shut in relief as I began to stroke. I'd never understood exactly *how* I was still able to get it up with no blood of my own, but I had no interest in jinxing myself by questioning it.

Because an eternity without orgasms would be hellish.

“Starting without me, pet?”

Just like every time Max called me that, my cock gave an enthusiastic kick. But just like every time, I was instantly flooded with shame over how my body reacted.

Why am I so broken?

“I didn't think you were *interested*.” I bitterly repeated his words from earlier, even as I rolled to my stomach and lifted myself onto my knees. Presenting myself.

Giving him what I can.

“Oh, you know damn well what I'm interested in,” Max parroted in return while roughly applying lube to my hole. “This tight ass wrapped around my cock while I remind you who you belong to.”

I can't belong to you.

I'm not what you want.

My spiraling thoughts were replaced by white noise as Max mercilessly pushed his way inside with zero prep and barely enough lube. I loved the pain, however—arching my back to take him deeper, gasping as his magic cross piercing pushed past my tight outer ring.

“That’s it,” he praised, although he meant it as punishment. “You *want* to be so good for me, don’t you, Damon? My perfect little pet, ready to be filled whenever I want.”

Please, fill me up.

“Give it a rest, Max,” I grumbled—rolling my hips to urge him on. “I’m no one’s *pet*.”

Please, punish me.

He faltered, but only for a moment before wrapping his hand around my throat—collaring me in the only way I had ever let him. “Is that right?” he leaned down to nip my earlobe. “Well, maybe I’ll get lucky with Star. I bet *she’d* kneel for me.”

A delicious vision of that exact scenario had me thrashing so violently in his hold, I knocked aside my tufted pillow.

Revealing the panties underneath.

That reeked of Star.

Selene, be merciful.

Max froze—buried deep inside me—before chuckling darkly. “Well, well. Looks like I won’t have to break the news to *our third* after all. I wonder if she’ll run... now that she knows what we are?”

I shuddered at the thought of chasing Star as she ran from us. Of catching her—holding her struggling body down as I sank my fangs into her neck...

While Max penetrated her in other ways.

“You want her as much as I do.” Max slowly pulled out, only to slam home again. “I can feel you tightening around me just thinking about it.”

I scoffed. “Why would I want a Valley Girl when I can fuck a different human every day of the week?”

Unfortunately, my cock was giving me away—leaking an obscene amount of precum all over the satin. With a huff, I tossed Star’s panties aside and lowered myself to my elbows.

Just fuck her out of my system already.

Continuing his maddeningly slow rhythm, Max hummed and snatched the discarded scrap of cloth before bringing it to his face for a deep inhale.

I practically dislocated my shoulder turning to gape at him. “Did you just—” My words ended with a choked sound as I watched Max position his fangs over his wrist and pierce the skin.

Fuck.

A hungry growl clawed its way past my lips as the scent of blood mixed with the heady feminine aroma already driving me mad.

I...

“Thirsty?” Max smirked, tilting his arm so the blood ran in rivulets to stain the already filthy panties clutched in his fist.

I need...

“Please,” I breathlessly murmured. “I need it. Please, Max...”

I need you.

Max's eyebrows shot up in surprise a second time, but I was already facing forward again, squeezing my eyes shut to hide from my humiliation.

"Well, since you *begged* so sweetly," he murmured, and I felt some deep, dark tear in my nonexistent soul stitch itself back together at his praise.

Why am I like this?

I didn't get the chance to fixate on that question. Max's bloody wrist was suddenly pressed against my mouth—smearing glorious blood over my lips—and I sunk my fangs into his skin with a groan.

I need all of it.

He grunted once as I took a hard pull before returning to his torment. "Do you think Star could get you to behave? What if she spread her long legs and offered up that sweet cunt for you to taste? Would you play nice for her?"

There was no hope of me replying. I was half-delirious from the sweet nectar rolling down my throat, the panties being pressed against my nose, and the pressure of Max's thick, pierced cock leisurely sliding over my prostate.

Some small, disobedient part of me wanted to throw him off, but my animal instincts were in control. If I hadn't needed to feed, I might have stood a chance, but I was a slave to my overstimulated senses.

A slave for him.

"Such a good pet when you want to be," Max growled, *finally* increasing his speed as he caged me in from above. "I can't wait to make Star ours—to share her with you."

I don't deserve it.

“She won’t want this,” I croaked, tearing my mouth away—gasping for air I didn’t even need. “She’ll choose *life* over an eternity with us.”

Especially with me.

Max chuckled, gripping my waist with both hands so he could slam into me—chasing his release. “She won’t if we kill for her.”

My cock throbbed at the thought. “Who would we kill? The girl who came in today? *Heather?*”

“Yesssss...” he rasped, his hips jerking as he neared the edge. “We’ll torture her—make her suffer the way Star suffered—then tear her to shreds while she’s still alive. Prove our undying devotion to our third through vengeance.”

I didn’t care about this Heather—didn’t care about most humans, or anyone besides Max. But the idea of killing for the first time in far too long had me reaching beneath myself to wrap a hand around my cock.

Every inch of me was already oversensitive, so when my fingers caught on the piercing at the bottom of my shaft, I groaned. My impending orgasm was relentless, and there was no stopping its advance. And if I was to be honest, the idea of presenting *Star* with the bloody remains of her enemy had my balls drawing up tight even faster than usual.

“That’s it, pet,” Max rasped, sounding even more wrecked than I was feeling. “Show me how badly you wish you were fucking *her* while I fill you up.”

“Fuck you, Max!” I spat, even as my vision started going hazy around the edges. “That will *never* hap—”

My words were lost as Max chose that moment to *stuff Star’s panties into my mouth.*

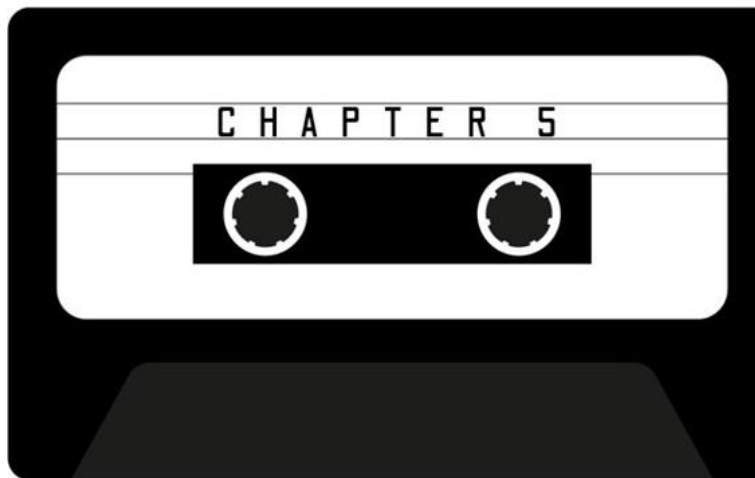
GOOD GODDESS!!!

Fresh blood mixed with the leftover taste of Star's arousal, and the pleasure racing through my sated veins became so intense it was borderline painful. I almost bucked Max clear off as I came with a muffled howl, soaking my hand and the satin beneath me as my vision whited out.

"Fuuuuck... I can't wait to have you both," Max growled—hammering into my still-spasming hole before quickly following me over the edge. *"My two perfect little pets. All fucking mine..."*

I collapsed beneath him, too spent to remind him I was no one's pet. At this moment, I wanted everything he was offering, and allowed myself one heart-wrenching moment to pretend Max's fantasy scenario could be possible.

Even if it's nothing but a dream.



STAR

AM I WORKING FOR ACTUAL VAMPIRES?!

Or just two wannabes who think they're vampires...?

For the millionth time since I'd locked myself in my bedroom at Aunt Carla's house back in Lone Pine, I questioned what exactly I'd seen behind the wall of the Sizzling Discourse breakroom.

It was definitely a secret lair, although, at first, I thought it was just a dude bro hangout. Between the matte black walls, lack of windows, and brand new Nintendo set up in front of a couple of oversized bean bag chairs, it seemed to have everything two guys could want.

Well, almost everything.

There were no beds—which made sense since I hadn't originally assumed Max and Damon *lived* there. But then my

gaze snagged on a pair of large objects in the far corner.

Coffins.

Two of them. Two coffins for two men who'd only minutes before vaguely suggested 'disposing of the vile creature' that was my ex-bestie, Heather.

Which still doesn't bother me as much as it probably should...

Apparently, discovering the guys I worked for slept in coffins—either because they *had* to or *wanted* to—also didn't set off any alarm bells. Instead of immediately running in the opposite direction, I'd calmly walked to the nearest one and slid open the lid.

The only previous experience I had with coffins was during my parents' funeral when I was six, and that was a hazy memory at best. I *did* remember Aunt Carla impatiently insisting I pay my respects, even though all I wanted to do was remain plastered to the back wall of the funeral parlor's receiving room—as far away from the dead bodies as possible.

Thank goodness the wake was closed casket.

So opening Damon's coffin was the first time I realized just how plush the satin interior of these things were. And I knew it was Damon's because, for some unholy reason, I kicked off my boots and climbed in. I was immediately assaulted by the scent of leather and coffee—unsurprising, considering what he wore and chugged like his life depended on it—tinged with that unexpected hint of sweet citrus.

Blood orange.

Whatever his cologne was, it was. Working. For. Me. I could barely spread my legs fast enough. Snaking a hand under my mini-skirt, I whined to discover it was too tight to allow me to comfortably rub one out while my panties were still on.

So off they went!

Tossing the offensive material aside, I immediately got to work. Maybe it was the fact I was trespassing, or maybe I was remembering the way Damon had loomed over me, breathing me in like I smelled as good as he did. Either way, it only took a few circles on my aching clit to have me arching my back, gasping his name so loudly, I wondered if they'd hear it up front.

Which wouldn't have been the worst thing.

Usually, I was a one-and-done kinda girl, but even while my body shuddered from aftershocks, I needed more. Peering over the side of Damon's coffin, I hauled myself up and over to the adjacent one—groaning the instant I hit the satin.

Despite the heated looks I caught Max giving me when he thought I wasn't looking, he'd kept a professional distance between us since I started—so I'd only caught occasional whiffs of his cologne. But now, I was so surrounded by his scent, it was a wonder I didn't evaporate on the spot.

Or immediately soak the satin.

I would have expected Mr. Sunshine in Floral Print to be the one smelling sweet and fruity, but no. Max's scent was whisky and cloves and hot, *nasty* sex. Before I knew what I was doing, I'd straddled his pillow and started riding—chasing another release while chanting his name like a desperate prayer.

That time, I came so hard, I almost hit my head as I half-collapsed against the edge of the coffin. It took a good few minutes for me to catch my breath again, but when I did, reality came flooding in like a bucket of ice water.

Horrified over what I'd done, I clamored out of the soiled coffin, hurriedly laced my boots, and hightailed it the fuck out

of there.

Without my panties.

It wasn't until I got home that I realized I'd forgotten to search for them in or around Damon's coffin. By then, I called it a loss. There was no way I could return to Sizzling Discourse, not only because of how I'd defiled the guys' living—*undead?*—space, but because Heather had tracked me down.

Maybe I should get a restraining order?

I sighed. No judge was going to take my claims of harassment seriously, especially with Heather's family being so well-connected. My best bet would be to move away completely—somewhere far enough that Heather wouldn't bother following me.

Like, the moon.

My aunt wouldn't miss me. She'd taken me in after my parents died, but only because there was no one else. My basic needs were always met, but that was it, and as soon as I turned 18 a few years ago, she'd switched from family member to landlord. The money I earned from Bodacious Babes easily covered my rent, but those savings had been slowly disappearing ever since I was forced out of the partnership.

Hence, why I needed the job at Sizzling Discourse.

I puffed out another sigh. All horniness aside, I *enjoyed* working for Max—and clearly, Damon had more of a soft spot for me than he let on. The feeling was mutual. What I liked most about both of them—besides their overwhelming hotness—was that they were unapologetically themselves. Whether that meant flaunting a love of Hawaiian print in a sea of black or acting like the high lord of emo, they followed their hearts.

And that's all I was trying to do with Bodacious Babes...

The snuffle that escaped me was unexpected, but once the first teardrop fell, there was no stopping the waterworks. I sank onto the bed and buried my face in my hands—ugly crying with a mix of pent-up rage, self-pity, and maybe a smidge of leftover post-orgasmic drop.

Until someone knocked.

On my window.

My gaze snapped to the sliver of darkness beyond the glass. I couldn't see much from where I was sitting, so I rose from the bed and cautiously approached.

Max was outside my window.

It took a full ten seconds for my confused brain to register that my bedroom was on the second floor.

Max is floating in mid-air...

“Star?” His muffled voice brought me out of my daze as he lightly tapped on the glass again. “Open the window, please.”

My survival instincts were screaming at me to remember all the horror movie lore that specifically stated *not to let them in*. But *something* was compelling me to ignore all that nonsense in favor of helpfully sliding open the window for my boss.

Since he's been nothing but nice to me.

“Hey there.” Max flashed me the easy smile I'd come to know well over the past weeks. “I just wanted to check on you and...” He squinted before his eyes widened. “Fuck, you're not wearing any makeup, are you?”

Oh, crap.

Color rushed to my face. If I'd been standing here naked, I wouldn't have felt more exposed than I did right now. “Um,

yeah, I-I washed it off when I got home because... well, it's not waterproof and, um..."

This is so embarrassing.

Understanding washed over his handsome face. "Oh, baby, have you been crying?"

Baby...

My entire body melted into a schmoopy pile of goo at his words—as all tension magically lifted from my shoulders.

This man can call me baby all he wants.

"Oh, you liked that, huh?" Max chuckled low. "You wanna be my *good girl*, Star? Let me in, baby."

But he's not just a man...

"No!" I hissed, shaking off whatever spell he'd cast over me with his sweet pillow talk and schmoopy pet names. "What's your plan after I let you in, Max? Are you gonna drink my blood, then *kill me* because of what I figured out?"

That you're a...

Vampire.

Max's brown eyes had grown even more hooded at the mention of *blood*, but his gaze suddenly snapped to mine in alarm. "Kill you?! What... no. Star, I *want* you to know what I am—what both Damon and I are—but you don't need to be afraid. I would never hurt you. Neither of us would."

Lucky for him, his claim matched how they'd both behaved when Heather showed up. Still, I narrowed my eyes—shrewdly appraising the *bloodsucker hovering outside my window*. "Then why are you here?"

His expression softened. “I told you. I wanted to make sure you were okay. You were obviously upset earlier, and then you left the store so abruptly...”

My face went up in flames as I remembered exactly *why* I’d run out of Sizzling Discourse like a bat out of hell.

What happens in the coffin, stays in the coffin.

“And you forgot these.”

Oh, no.

I could only watch in horror as Max reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out my balled-up panties.

I’m just going to go find my own coffin now...

“Damon wanted to keep them for himself,” he purred with a wicked glint in his eyes. “Especially since you left them under *his* pillow. Like a present.”

Just kill me now.

“And speaking of pillows...”

Just bury me six feet under.

“It wasn’t very polite of you to rub that sweet pussy all over mine without offering me a taste.”

I gasped as the pussy in question *throbbed*. And my knees almost buckled when Max then inhaled as if he could smell me from there.

He probably can.

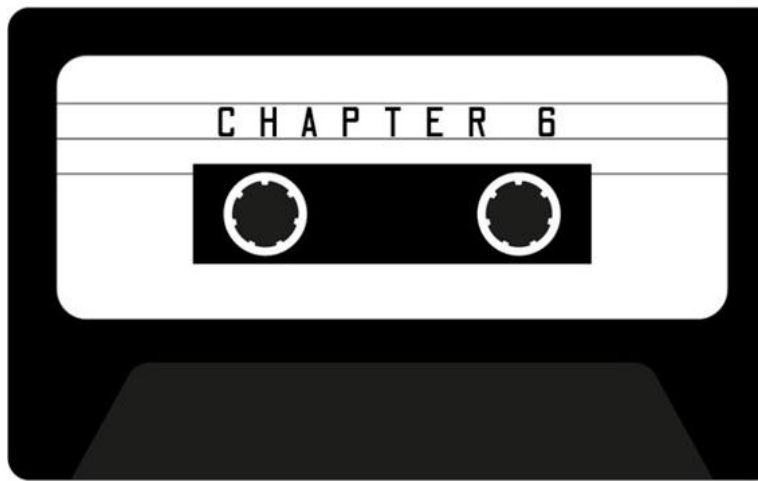
“A taste?” I managed to squeak.

“Yes, Star.” Max’s gaze briefly dropped to my mini-skirt. “I want to bury my face between your thighs so you can come on my tongue.” When I simply gaped at him, he grinned—

displaying fangs that only made me *throb* harder. “I promise I won’t bite until you ask me to.”

“Don’t you mean ‘unless?’” I whispered.

“No, baby,” he chuckled. “Until. Now let me in so I can take care of you.”



STAR

SHOULD I?

At this point, I'd already soaked this man's pillow. I'd left my panties behind in Damon's coffin—which he wanted to *keep*, apparently—and Max was now asking me to ride his tongue.

While promising that he won't kill me.

“Okay...” I barely breathed as I took a step backward—vibrating with lust and a healthy dose of fear. “You can come in.”

I'd expected him to swoop in like a demonic bat, but instead, Max very slowly floated in before calmly sitting on the windowsill.

“Hey there,” he repeated, again with an easy smile.

“Hi.” I swallowed hard, smoothing my hands down the front of my skirt, suddenly unsure what else to do with them.

And if I should ask for my panties back...

Upon closer inspection, my panties looked a little worse for wear. “Is that...” I squinted. “Blood?”

Max threw his head back and laughed, just like I’d seen him do multiple times since I started working for him. It relaxed me somewhat, as I realized his sunshine personality *wasn’t* an act.

He’s just been holding back his darker side.

“Yeah...” He chuckled, rubbing the back of his neck—although he looked more guilty than sorry. “We both got a little worked up over your unexpected gift and had to fuck it out of our systems before I flew over here.”

Why is that so hot?!

Other people’s sex lives were none of my business, but I couldn’t help envisioning the guys pressed together in one of their coffins. Naked and sweaty...

Thinking of me.

Before Max had opened his—apparently filthy—mouth, I would have assumed Damon was the one in charge, but now I had my doubts.

Either way, I wish they’d let me watch...

Or join in.

Now *I* was the one getting worked up, and I squeezed my thighs together—desperate for friction. Of course, my squirming did *not* go unnoticed by Max, and his gaze zeroed in on my mini-skirt once again.

“He can keep them!” I blurted out, almost dizzy with desire and not knowing what else to say. “Tell Damon to maybe not

be so grumpy now that I've given him a gift.”

Max huffed a quieter laugh as he stuffed my *blood-soaked* panties back in his shirt pocket. “I was hoping you'd say that.” He licked his lips—expression smoldering once more. “I'm also hoping you haven't put new ones on since you got home.”

My heart rate increased. “I haven't.”

“Good,” he hummed, smiling softly. “Now, why don't you lie back on the bed... like a *good girl*?”

Whoa.

I'd done some wild things between the sheets, usually with guys from the Creepy Court part of town, but I had *never* experienced anything like what Max's words did to me. My entire body felt deliciously loose—like a puppet on a string just waiting to be played with—and I didn't hate it one bit.

I'll do anything he says.

“Yes, Sir,” I murmured, obediently sitting on the edge of the bed before lying back.

Max placed a hand over his heart in an oddly *human* gesture. “Perfect,” he murmured—gazing dreamily at me like I'd done something way more impressive than simply following directions.

He's such a dweeb.

“Will you spread your legs for me, baby?” he cooed, rising from the windowsill and walking closer. “Show me what I want to see?”

I take that back—he's a zeek.

I couldn't stop the *whimper* that escaped me, making Max unnaturally freeze mid-step. But then I spread my legs—my

mini-skirt riding up my thighs—and bit my lip in anticipation of his reaction.

He didn't disappoint. His fangs lengthened, and his chest rose and fell with heaving breaths. Dude looked like he was either close to passing out or pouncing on me, for real this time.

Take a picture, it will last longer.

“Such a pretty little pussy,” he whispered, and for a moment I had to close my eyes against the visceral reaction I had to his words. “Can I taste you, baby?”

I might be the one to pass out first.

“Yes, please,” I rasped—propping myself up on my elbows so he could see how serious I was. How badly I wanted it. “And you don't have to keep asking. *Sir.*”

That last bit was added for two reasons. I didn't want my impatience to come off as rudeness, but also—more selfishly—it hadn't escaped my notice just how much he liked being called by that kinky title.

And how much I enjoy saying it...

Max shuddered and closed his eyes, and I watched, fascinated, as his fangs slowly disappeared again—as if it took major effort for him to hide his true nature.

I bet no one at Creepy Court has any idea there are vampires working there.

“I *do* have to keep asking,” he spoke evenly as he finally reached me and sank to his knees beside the bed. He placed his hands on my knees before tentatively sliding them up my thighs—his gaze locked on mine the entire time. “I prefer consent to be clear up front... and *then* we can play with it.”

“Play with it?” My voice sounded small to my ears, so I cleared my throat and tried again—steadier this time. “What do you mean?”

Max’s hands slid another few inches north, and I shivered as his thumbs caressed my sensitive skin. “We’re predators, Star.” He swallowed hard, but his gaze didn’t waver. “The hunt is half the fun.”

Oh.

“Oh,” I whispered, suddenly finding it hard to breathe.

It must be the corset.

“But I won’t do anything you’re not comfortable with,” he hurriedly added, misinterpreting my reaction. “You don’t have to worry about being chased out of nowhere. Damon is more than happy to play *that* game with me, at least.”

At least?

Max must have realized he’d slipped up. His lips pressed into a thin line and he quickly cleared his throat, as if getting ready to change the subject.

Oh, no you don’t.

“What other games do you like to play?” I asked before I could chicken out. When Max cocked his head, I blew out a breath and powered on. “Games you maybe haven’t played in a while...”

Games Damon doesn’t like.

A filthy smirk stretched across his face. “Oh, you sweet little thing...” His gaze finally dropped to my partially exposed pussy. “We’re already playing my favorite game.”

“And what’s that?” I automatically spread my legs wider as he gently nudged them apart.

Max hummed in approval before leaning down to skim his lips along my inner thigh. “The one where you’re a good girl who does everything I say.”

“Everything?” I panted, although I was definitely down to play.

Max froze and brought his attention to my face again. “Only what you want, baby. *You’re* the one in control here. When I check in and things are good, you say ‘green.’ If we’re going too fast, say ‘yellow.’ And if you want me to stop completely, say ‘red.’”

Like blood.

I gazed down at the man kneeling between my thighs—looking hot as hell with his fantastic bone structure and olive skin, and that stupid fucking Hawaiian shirt with my dirty panties stuffed in the pocket.

“Does Damon know you’re here?” I blurted out, uncaring that my question was like a record scratch on the sexy times.

Even though Old West goth had kind of behaved like a dick since I took the job, he didn’t deserve to be cheated on. He and Max were obviously together in some way, and the last thing I wanted was to be the other woman.

Max’s brow furrowed. “Of course Damon knows. He knows why I want you—and that I want you for both of us.”

Both of them?!

“*Both* of you?” I squeaked, scrambling to sit up to better look at him.

Max gently pushed me back down. His hand lingered on my chest, tracing a thumb over a peaked nipple through my thin camisole.

“Yes. Both.” He trailed his fingers down my ribs and over my hip—traveling all the way down my leg until he’d reached my ankle. “Damon and I are a package deal, and I want you to be *ours*. Would you be okay with being shared?”

I almost laughed out loud because *who* would say no to that?

Not horny bitches like me, that’s for sure.

Any thoughts of laughter died as Max carefully lifted my stockinged feet and set them on the edge of the bed. Exposing me completely.

And then he just *stared*.

I was oddly fine with his blatant inspection. If anything, it felt *right* to lie perfectly still while he inspected me—hoping what he saw pleased him.

It no longer mattered that I was about to give a *vampire* the green light to put his fangs near my pussy, because I wanted this. Badly.

I want to be good for him.

“It sure looks like you’re okay with the idea of being shared,” Max hummed as he lightly ran a finger through my folds. “You’re so wet for me, baby. Can I—”

But he still needs to get on with it.

“Yes!” I interrupted, my nerves buzzing and my skin burning under his touch. “Yes. Just... *taste* me already. Please...”

Max smirked, but instead of putting his handsome face where I needed it, he stood and curled over me—hovering his lips over

mine.

“What I was *going* to ask was, can I feast on your sweet pussy until my face is soaked? Because I want to smell like you when I go home and fuck Damon again.”

Okay, he’s definitely the one in charge—here and elsewhere.

“Green,” I whimpered. “All the green.”

He grinned and pressed his mouth to mine—tracing the seam of my lips with his tongue until I opened for him. I moaned as he invaded my mouth, moaning louder when two fingers slid into my pussy with an obscene sound.

After pumping deeply a few times, Max withdrew and slid his wet fingers between our mouths—encouraging me to help suck them clean.

“Good girl,” he breathed, and I melted beneath him—responding to his praise once again.

I need it.

As if finally understanding how close to frantic I was, Max raised himself off me and dropped to his knees again.

Please...

His breath cooled my wetness for only a moment before he plunged his tongue into my pussy—pressing his face so tightly against my center, I wondered how he could breathe.

Who needs to breathe when you can bathe yourself in it instead?

At the thought of Max returning to Damon smelling like me, I whimpered. With a chuckle, he backed off, but only far enough to latch onto my clit, gently holding the sensitive nub with his teeth while flicking with his tongue.

Flick. Flick. Flick.

The pace was excruciatingly slow and deliberate, and when I tried to raise my hips to speed things up, Max simply draped his arm over my belly and held me down. His other hand lazily caressed my inner thigh—fingers ghosting over my swollen pussy before sinking in.

And not moving.

“Max!” I whined, practically delirious. “I-I need... *please*...”

He responded by crooking his fingers, methodically tapping that magical spot to get me *writhing* in his hold.

Tap, tap, tap.

It took me a minute to realize he was mimicking the rhythm of my heartbeat, as the flicks and taps sped up right along with me.

“C’mon, baby,” he murmured against me, twisting his fingers and making me see stars. “Give me what I want.”

“Anything!” I gasped. “I’ll give you anything you want, just...”

Please!

“Anything, huh?” Max chuckled low and blew on my throbbing clit. “What if all I want is *you*?”

“You can have me,” I sobbed, my legs shaking as my release loomed closer. “Take whatever you want.”

Anything, anything, anything.

“Good. Girl.” Max lowered his face and sucked my clit back into his mouth before rapidly thrumming with his tongue.

I arched off the bed with a shriek, thankful Max was still holding me steady *and* that my aunt wasn’t home. My orgasm

was a living thing clawing its way out of me, and I had no way of closing the floodgates as I spontaneously soaked Max's face.

And that fucking Hawaiian shirt.

A sharp sting accompanied my aftershocks, and I blinked open my heavy eyelids to find Max grazing his fangs along my inner thigh.

He came up for air long enough to smile softly. "Can I bite you, baby?" His voice was low and soothing. "I won't drink too much. And I promise, I won't make you one of us until you're ready..."

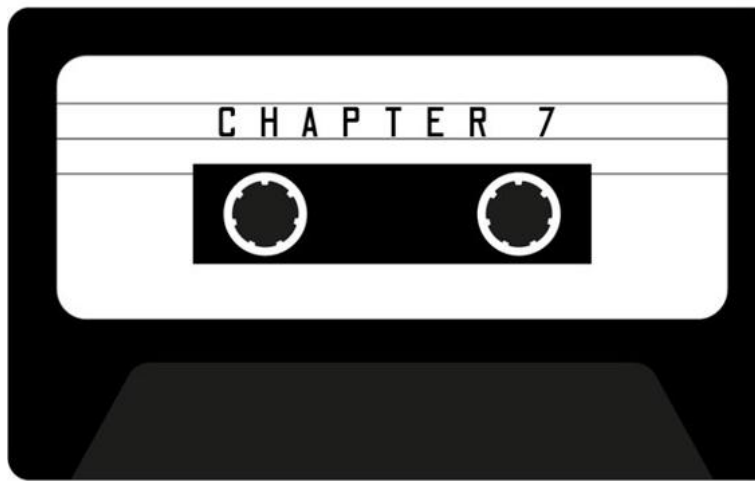
Until I'm ready.

Until...

"Yes, Sir. Green," I sleepily mumbled, my eyes growing heavier by the second. "Thank you..."

"No, thank *you*, my tasty little thing..." Max's face was hovering over mine—his satisfied smile going in and out of focus, thanks to my fading consciousness. Then, I felt him settle between my thighs again before the pinch of pain briefly returned, quickly morphing into a sucking pressure that was somehow both comforting and erotic.

When he spoke again, his voice was muffled, as if he were speaking underwater. "Thank you, for giving me everything I ever wanted."



MAX

WHEN I LEFT STAR LAST NIGHT—FRESHLY FINGER-FUCKED and sleeping peacefully—I’d assumed the only thing I needed to worry about was how to get her and Damon alone together.

So the last thing I expected was for my girl to appear for her shift today, looking as upset as when *Heather* showed up in my store.

“Max! My car, it’s... She... It’s totally trashed!”

“*What?!*” Damon replied before I could.

The vehemence in his tone would have surprised me if I hadn’t seen how wild her scent had made him when I returned last night.

Or how eagerly he drank her blood from my veins.

Parking for Creepy Court was in a covered garage, so Damon and I pulled down the security gate and followed Star back to

her car to check the damage.

“I didn’t notice until I got here,” she explained as she led us around to the passenger side. “But I guess now I know why a car full of dude bros were catcalling me at the stoplight.”

Taking a deep breath to stop myself from launching into the air and tracking down these ‘dude bros,’ I focused on the issue at hand.

The bright red ‘SLUT’ spray painted along the entire length of her white car.

It isn’t hard to guess who did this.

“A gift from your *old friend*?” Damon sneered, although I could tell the bite in his tone wasn’t directed at Star.

Luckily, she seemed to have his number at this point, as she simply shrugged in response.

And sniffled.

Heather will get what’s coming to her.

But we may as well try ‘human’ retribution first.

How boring.

“Do you believe this happened here or at your home?” I asked, forcing an outward calm I didn’t at all feel. Damon sharply glanced at me—attuned to my moods—but I shook my head imperceptibly.

While the two of us had started over in new locations multiple times, we’d struck gold by discovering this monster community hidden in plain sight. As much as I wanted to present Heather’s still-beating heart on a platter to our third, I didn’t want to do anything that would draw suspicion in Star’s direction.

Or ours.

“H-here, I think...” Star replied, sniffing again in a way that made my chest tight. “I doubt Heather would have risked following me to my aunt’s house, since it’s in a gated community.”

I snorted in amusement. High fences made no difference to me, not only because I could fly, but also moved too quickly to be caught on most security cameras.

Except the ones at Creepy Court.

“Let’s go to the mall office and see what they picked up on the security tape,” I gently suggested. When Star glanced at me in surprise, I pulled her close and took a deep inhale of her scent. “You’re mine now, baby. I take care of what’s mine.”

Damon hissed in a breath and looked away, making me frown. All he had to do was walk over here and comfort Star along with me, instead of continuing to deny himself what he wanted.

Still stubborn after all these years.

Twenty minutes later, we were in the security office, making the head guard, Kelsey, rewind the footage to catch the exact moment *Heather* vandalized Star’s car. She’d somehow managed to angle her face away from the cameras, but she had on the exact outfit she’d worn the day before.

Plus, I can practically smell the Aquanet from here.

Kelsey escorted Star back to the parking lot to meet with the police and file a report. Damon looked like he was seriously considering going with them, but I quietly reminded him it was best if we avoided the cops’ attention.

And I need to speak to him alone.

“She wants you, too, you know,” I bluntly stated as we walked through the bustling mall to reopen Sizzling Discourse.

That pre-Halloween chaos.

The biggest lines were outside the drugstore for oddly unsettling plastic masks, but most shops had Halloween displays of some kind toward the front. We were all expected to participate in the annual Trick or Treat Street event Chesa painstakingly organized every year—to hand out innocent candy to unsuspecting humans.

Keeping up appearances is important.

“Okay,” Damon replied.

I squinted at him, but, as usual, his expression was unreadable. Taking a deep breath, I prepare once again to discuss the dreaded *thing* we could never seem to talk about. “She could be our *third*, Damon.”

Please.

Damon sighed, and I braced myself for what I knew was coming. “I won’t stop you from claiming her, Max, I just... I just don’t think it’s for me...”

Insufferable, stubborn ass.

“Enough of this,” I hissed, grabbing his arm and pulling him away from the foot traffic of the main concourse. Stopping in front of the community bulletin board, I turned and glared at the man I’d *chosen* as my eternal companion, whether he liked it or not. “I’m tired of this silent suffering of yours, you fucking masochist.”

Damon’s gaze darkened at the reminder of just how much he enjoyed pain, but I was in no mood to be distracted from the topic at hand.

“You need to *tell me* what’s actually bothering you,” I pleaded—not for the first time—so desperate for this to work. To *fix* whatever was broken between us.

Just tell me how to fix things.

Damon didn’t reply, not because he was being his usual immovable self, but because something on the bulletin board behind me had caught his eye.

And turned him murderous.

Slowly turning, I found a crisp sheet of pink copy paper pinned to the board with ‘WANTED’ printed in bold letters at the top. What followed was a just-vague-enough account of a five-foot-seven, blue-eyed brunette who ‘possibly worked in a low budget goth store,’ and was suspected of vandalizing the vehicle of one Heather Andrea Caswell of Lone Pine Estates.

That little shit.

“What the fuck is this?” Damon growled, tearing the ridiculous notice from the board to better glare at it.

I shook my head, disgusted by the entire thing. “It’s harassment disguised as a public service announcement. I wouldn’t be surprised if Heather had some hack lawyer in her back pocket to advise her on how to word her lies to avoid a slander lawsuit.”

A lawyer who should be disbarred.

And dismembered.

“But...” Damon was gaping at the paper, rereading it as if he’d find some logic hidden in the fine print. “*She’s* the one who vandalized Star’s car! Is this supposed to distract the authorities from the truth? Or somehow justify her deplorable actions?”

I sighed and snatched the paper away from him, crumpling it into a tiny pink ball before tucking it into my pocket. “Damon, you know there’s no rational explanation for behavior like this. Narcissists are so skilled at lying they start to believe their own version of events.”

We were more than familiar with these types in our own coven. Something about being nearly invincible—above the laws most had to abide by—often produced a misguided sense of superiority that was truly frightening.

And bold... considering all that’s needed to take out a vampire is the harsh light of day.

“Head back to the store and wait for Star to return,” I instructed, resigned to play by human rules, for now. “I’ll go through the mall and pull down every notice Heather posted before Star sees them and gets upset. Our first priority is *our* girl.”

Damon looked momentarily undecided, but then pressed his lips together and resolutely nodded. Part of me was overjoyed he wasn’t arguing over me calling her ‘ours’ but mostly, I was focused on the task at hand.

And on not immediately disposing of the psycho Valley Girl.

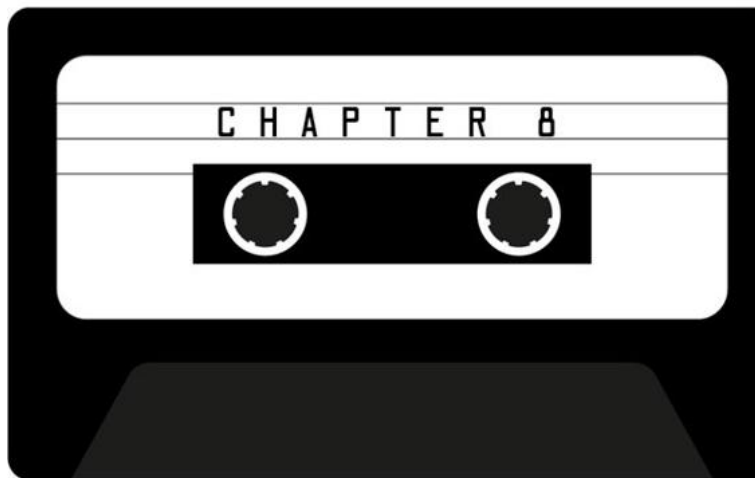
While Heather probably wasn’t the most intelligent foe we’d ever faced, she was clearly delusional enough to be dangerous. Most importantly, I didn’t want the stress of this situation to cloud Star’s judgment and cause her to act rashly.

Or run.

Even though I’d told our third I wouldn’t rush her into anything, I also had no intention of letting her go. Star’s enemies were our enemies, and I was prepared to do whatever it took to keep her safe. I’d allow the cops to deal with Heather

and her no doubt well-connected family for now, but if I wasn't satisfied with the outcome, I would be following up with the energy vampire myself.

And if that means getting my hands bloody, so be it.



DAMON

“OUR FIRST PRIORITY IS OUR GIRL.”

Our girl...

Ours.

Regardless of how resistant I’d been to the idea of accepting Star as our third, knowing she had a stalker on the loose was making me protective as fuck. And while I wanted to say it was because she already belonged to Max—and I would always defend what was his—it was more than that.

I want her to be mine as well.

But she can’t possibly want both of us...

Right?

“Well, they towed my car to be impounded for evidence...”
Star sighed as she shuffled into Sizzling Discourse a while

later, her shoulders slumped in defeat. “I guess I’ll just get a cab home after work—”

“You can stay here,” I blurted out. Both our eyes widened in surprise, but I apparently wasn’t done being random and weird. “You should just stay here from now on.”

Real smooth, Damon.

“Stay *here*?” she stuttered. “Like, sleep in your...” Star nervously glanced around, as if someone might hear us before whispering, “*Coffins.*”

A full-body shudder ran through me at the idea of pressing her curves into the satin.

Of being sandwiched between Star and Max...

I shook the thought from my head. Max had finally found someone to fulfill *all* his needs. He could swear up and down he only wanted Star as our third—wanted me to stick around—but I saw the writing on the wall.

“I mean...” Rubbing the back of my neck, I realized this was the first real conversation I’d had with the human since she started. “I’m sure Max would be more than happy to let you sleep with him. Sleep with him in his coffin, I mean...”

By Selene!

Have I never talked to a girl before?

Star dropped her gaze before peering up at me through her lashes—almost shyly. “I think I’d feel safer with both of you around.”

Eep.

“Oh,” I eloquently replied. “Okay... Well, let me lock the gate again and I’ll get you settled in. It’s a slow day of the week for

us, anyway...”

Right, Damon.

Because that’s totally why you’re trying to get her alone in the lair.

Star nodded and wrapped her arms around herself as I locked up. She was unusually quiet as she followed me to the breakroom, and I realized she was more affected by this Heather situation than she was letting on.

That psycho has done a number on her.

Knowing Max wouldn’t care at this point, I showed her how to use the hidden latch on the electrical panel to open our secret entrance before leading her inside our candlelit lair.

“I guess I don’t need to give you the tour...” I murmured, unable to hide my smirk at the memory of our discovery.

“Ugh!” Star groaned and dropped her face into her fishnet gloved hands. “I don’t know what my damage is. Who does that? Who breaks into someone’s home and...”

And leaves the best present under their pillow?

“It’s fine,” I gruffly replied, before clearing my throat. “And, uh, Max liked that you found your way in here, so—”

“What about *you*, though?” she interrupted, her blue-eyed gaze suddenly snapping to mine. “Max is easy to please. *You’re* the one who hasn’t been my biggest fan.”

Oof.

Double-oof, actually.

I sighed, deciding to clear the air between us at last. “I’m sorry, Star. You haven’t done anything wrong and I’ve been way harsh toward you since you started. Max is obviously

really into you. I've just been having a hard time dealing with —”

“With thinking I'm going to take him away from you?”

While Star's tone was nonjudgmental, her words hit me like a stake to the heart. Even when Max insisted I *tell* him exactly what was bothering me—so often, I'd lost count at this point—I'd never been able to explain myself properly.

Of no fault of her own, Star's arrival had exacerbated an already tenuous situation. But now here she was, not only showing me kindness, but perfectly summing up *why* I'd been acting like a complete dickwad for the last few weeks.

The last hundred years, to be honest.

“Yeah,” I replied, feeling an enormous weight lift from my shoulders the instant I acknowledged it.

I'll die if I lose him.

For real.

Star's gaze softened as she took a tentative step closer. “That's not gonna happen. Even if I wanted to steal him away—which I *don't*—Max would never agree to that. He told me you guys were a package deal, and while I was hella shocked at first, the idea of being shared is growing on me. That is...” She suddenly looked as unsure as I'd been feeling. “If *you're* okay with sharing *him*.”

The *relief* I felt to hear Max wasn't planning on replacing me was enough to have me answering honestly. “I'm okay with it, especially if it's with someone who can give him what he needs.”

Which I can't.

She took another step toward me—so close, I could feel her body heat warming my skin. “Are you talking about...”

My cold, dead heart felt lodged in my throat, even as *something* stirred to life inside me. Max had told me what happened between him and Star—in great detail—so I knew she’d submitted beautifully for him.

I wished I could have seen it.

I wish I could—

“How did you and Max meet?”

I slowly blinked before realizing Star was trying to redirect the conversation to what she mistakenly thought was a safer topic.

“Well...” I huffed as a smile threatened to break free. “Your first-day judgment on my clothes was correct. The Old West was my original time period, and that’s where—*when*—Max found me.”

Her eyes sparkled with interest. “That’s so cool! Were you, like, a gunslinger outlaw?”

I couldn’t stop the laugh at her finger guns, even as I braced for her reaction to the truth. “No. I worked in a brothel.”

Surprise!

She slowly nodded while gathering her thoughts. “I had no idea men did that. I mean... it’s not like they’re teaching facts like that in history class, but still...”

It was clear Star wanted to understand. And since Max had tasked me with keeping her company while he dealt with Heather’s latest psychological attack, I didn’t see the harm in sharing more about myself.

We’ll just pretend this isn’t a momentous event.

“It was fairly rare,” I confirmed, smiling to put her at ease. “Not gay sex—*that* was happening everywhere—but there was still enough of a demand for a... certain type of merchandise.”

Submissive and breedable.

Her brow furrowed in concern. “You weren’t *forced* into it, were you?”

I shook my head. “Not at all! It paid better than anything else I would have found.” When she nodded, I blew out a breath, gearing up to elaborate. “I... especially enjoyed wearing makeup and having the chance to explore being dominated.”

Star chewed her plump bottom lip, looking conflicted over the information I was giving her.

Of course she would.

It doesn’t make any sense with how I look and act now.

She suddenly hissed in a breath. “Ohmygawd, I’m the worst! With all the makeup I wear and how I’m always talking about it... That’s probably why Max offered for me to practice on *him* my first day—to protect *you*.”

I was taken aback by her response, for multiple reasons. If anything, I admired how free she was to express herself in that way while I still struggled with it. This was entirely a *me* problem, since it wasn’t like the current state of fashion discouraged it, including for men.

Tears stung my eyelids as I realized Max probably *was* trying to protect me that day—mistakenly thinking Star’s bold makeup was triggering me.

Because you’ve never been truly honest with him about why you don’t wear it anymore.

All at once, I knew I couldn't go on like this—keeping everything inside. It wasn't fair to Max, and it wasn't how I wanted to start things off with Star.

It's not fair to me, either.

“The first time I met Max was when he came through town one night, dressed as a wealthy merchant...” I took my time, deciding to give her a bit more backstory as I worked up to my big confession. “He stopped at the brothel I worked at, looking for a victim. Instead, he spotted me. He claimed it was love at first sight.” I huffed a laugh, feeling my cheeks heat at how ridiculous he was. “That idiot paid my madame more money than she'd ever seen to reserve me for the night, before whisking me away against my will. I'm sure Max thought he was being romantic—rescuing me from a less than ideal situation—but I honestly thought he was a psychopath planning to kill me for at least the first week.”

Star laughed, lightening the mood. “Why can I totally see that happening? Max definitely seems like the type to dramatically go after what he wants—consequences be damned.”

Well said.

I chuckled. “Yeah, that's him. Luckily, he convinced me he wasn't a serial killer... Well, at least not how I thought. He didn't tell me he was a vampire at first. All I knew for the first year we traveled the country together was that he was loaded and wanted to spend all his money on ‘the prettiest man he'd ever seen.’”

I paused, knowing things would be tricky to explain from here on out. “Don't get me wrong, I was living the dream and enjoyed every minute of it. I got to sleep in the fanciest hotels all day and hit up the gambling halls at night—distracting the men Max played cards against so he could clean house. And

there was nothing I loved more than looking pretty while... submitting to him.”

She placed her hand on my chest, directly over my dead heart—steadyng me. “What happened?”

Everything changed.

I sighed, knowing there was no way to avoid her disappointment after what I was about to say. “The negativity I received, for looking how I did, finally became too much. Max was excellent at keeping the drunks at bay, but before he turned me, he had to disappear periodically to... go hunt.”

When she didn’t recoil in horror, I continued, “After a night of heavy drinking, I looked just as good as the next painted lady to most of the men of that time. And they simply couldn’t comprehend I wasn’t for sale—looking the way I did. I just... I got tired of being constantly disrespected and propositioned, so I stopped wearing makeup. Then I stopped dressing how I wanted to. Unfortunately, it didn’t stop there. I also changed how I behaved behind closed doors... with Max...”

I didn’t know *how* to explain the rest. How I still submitted to Max, but not without a fight—as if determined to *prove* I was just as much a man as him, even though he’d never been the one to make me feel otherwise.

All I was doing was hurting both of us. Although Max enjoyed the struggle on a primal level, it wasn’t what he truly wanted, and it wasn’t what I wanted at all. I was still holding myself back—withholding a crucial piece of me from the man I supposedly loved.

I’m such a mess.

And he deserves better...

As if she could hear my spiraling thoughts, Star pulled me into a hug. “It sucks when other people ruin things for us. I didn’t wear makeup at all for the first month after everything went down with Heather and Bodacious Babes. But then, one day I just said *fuck it*. I reminded myself this was mine as much as hers, and she had no right to take it away from me. Sure, dealing with her again has been a major downer, but talking about it with you and Max helps—along with knowing you both have my back. I’m determined to not let her win.”

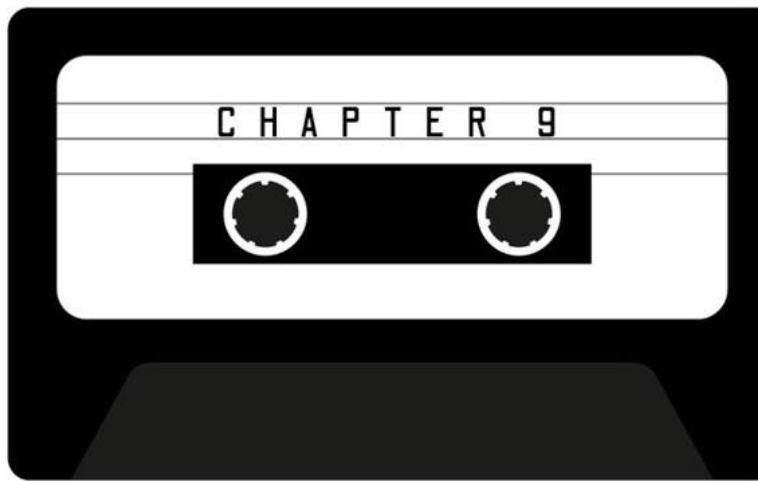
To my horror, I released a sound that almost could have been a sob, but Star simply continued to hold me tight. She threaded her fingers through my hair soothingly, and I allowed her now familiar scent to fill all the cracks that had formed over the years.

I don't want to let them win, either.

Feeling steadier than I had in a long time, I lifted my head and gazed down at her. “I can see why Max likes you.”

She smiled up at me in return. “And I can see why he *loves* you. C’mon!” Her grin turned mischievous. “I have a bunch of makeup in my purse that would make you look totally deadly... if you’re down?”

I huffed a laugh. “To be fair, I’m already deadly. But yeah, let’s see what you can do.”



STAR

I WAS THANKFUL I CARRIED ENOUGH MAKEUP IN MY PURSE FOR a makeover because Damon was made for it. His cheekbones could cut glass, his lips had a natural pout a model would kill for, while his ivory skin and amber eyes set off the lavender shadow perfectly.

This would have made the best movie montage.

Damon looked *hot*—even more than usual—but I couldn't tell what *he* thought. For a few tense minutes, he simply stared at his reflection in the vanity mirror as if he were looking at a stranger.

“Do you like it?” I whispered, not wanting to rush him, but needing to know if he was okay.

Because I have a container of Pond's ready to go if he wants it gone.

Just as I started getting nervous, his gaze flickered to mine in the mirror. “I do. It’s just... been a while since I saw myself like this.”

Sweet baby.

“Well, I think you look bitchin’.” I smiled encouragingly—wanting to offer reassurance without objectifying him. “Beautiful, really.”

He spun on the low stool to face me, his lost expression giving way to a lust he wore even better than the makeup.

“Can you kiss me, Star?”

My heart lodged in my throat. Not just because of what he was asking for, but *how*.

Could *I* kiss *him*.

Damon wanted *me* to take control. This was the same guy who’d snarled at me like a wild animal on my first day at Sizzling Discourse. The goth heartthrob who could probably land every man or woman who crossed his path. And the sad little baby vampire who’d been so damaged by his past, he’d stopped allowing himself to enjoy what he wanted.

What he *needed*.

Okay, I’ve totally got this.

“Of course,” I soothed, placing my hands on his shoulders and dipping my head until my lips brushed over his.

He didn’t strain upwards to meet me, or bury a hand in my hair to hold me in place. Damon remained pliant, allowing me to lick my way into his mouth slowly—to tease the sharp points of his fangs—and rewarded me with the softest little sighs in return.

He's like a drug.

Gripping his gorgeous face between my hands, I straddled his lap, suddenly starved for him. I upped the intensity of our kiss—tangling my tongue with his and nipping at his plump bottom lip. Anything to get him to make more helpless sounds as he submitted to me.

A drug I could get addicted to.

I could see why Max enjoyed being the dominant one. Yes, I felt powerful and sexy, but there was an added weight of responsibility that made every touch—every shared breath—feel euphoric. I wasn't only *taking*, I was *giving*, and the only thing that mattered was getting us both to the point where the pleasure loop was continuous.

“Star...” he gasped against my mouth—a desperate plea—finally daring to place a hand over one of mine.

“I've got you,” I murmured, breaking our kiss so I could draw back and better look at him. “Let me take care of you.”

Let us take care of you.

Damon's eyes slammed shut—as if the sight of what I was offering was too much—but I patiently waited for him to collect himself. When his criminally long eyelashes fluttered open again, his expression was a heartbreaking mixture of fear and hope.

Does he not think I'll give him everything he wants?

Or that he doesn't deserve it?

“I'm going to make my beautiful boy feel so good,” I whispered, gripping his face tighter when he started shutting down again. “But I need you to promise that you'll keep your eyes on me. Can you do that?”

He blew out a shaky breath but nodded, releasing me so I could slide down his body and get myself situated on the floor between his legs.

I paused with my hands on the button of his jeans. “Is this okay?”

“Yes,” he choked out, his eyes on me, just like I’d asked. “Green.”

I smiled at the knowledge Max had laid out the same safewords for him however long ago. It made me feel connected to both of them, even though Damon was the only one here at the moment.

Carefully unbuttoning and unzipping, I smirked when I found no underwear blocking my path.

Max does seem to like us going commando.

I licked my lips in anticipation as I reached into his jeans and wrestled him free, eager to get a good look at what I was up against.

Deadly.

Damon had one of the most beautiful cocks I’d ever seen, which made sense with how the rest of him looked. Thick and uncut, with the tastiest vein running up the shaft—like a roadmap for my tongue.

The head was plumped up and begging to be sucked, already emerged from his smooth foreskin and offering a perfect bead of precum on the slit.

All mine.

Unable to resist, I leaned forward to lick it off, moaning as the salty flavor combined with his signature scent of leather and citrus.

“Star...” he gasped again, somehow even more desperate than before.

The feeling is mutual.

When I pulled back to get my bearings, a glimmer of metal at the edge of his jeans caught my eye.

“It’s a... lorum piercing,” Damon breathlessly explained, bucking again as I experimentally ran my thumb over the barbell placed where his shaft met his scrotum. “If you... *by the goddess, Star...* If you keep playing with it, I’m going to last about two seconds.”

Let’s count.

“Is that a challenge?” I purred, hovering my mouth over his weeping crown. “Because I can’t wait to taste you. To taste what’s mine.”

“*Fuck,*” Damon hissed as I took him in far enough to run my tongue over the barbel, making his hips jerk upward again. “I want to belong to you, Star... I want you to... own me...”

I groaned as I swallowed him down—the primal sound echoing around the room. The thought of owning Damon—while Max owned both of us—made my pussy clench on nothing, desperate to be filled.

It was safe to say I was firmly on board with the idea of being shared by the guys, and not just for the mind blowing sex we would have.

All I could think about was the memory of Max sinking his fangs into my thigh—of how it would feel to have both of them bite me at the same time.

It was making me dizzy. It made me *want*.

I want to be theirs...

Damon's breath grew ragged as I increased my pace, taking him into my throat over and over while flicking my tongue over his piercing with every pass.

I peeked up to check on him, and to see if he was still following my directions. His eyes were still open, but instead of watching *me*, Damon's gaze was locked on his own reflection in the vanity mirror.

His pale cheeks were slightly flushed, his long dark hair catching against the sheen of sweat on his skin. But his makeup was immaculate, and I hoped he was as turned on by how he looked as I was.

You're perfect.

He groaned, low and gutturally—literally the hottest sound I'd ever heard. "Fuck, Star..." his gaze fell to mine again, wild with desire. "I'm gonna..."

Give it to me.

If he thought the warning was going to make me pull back, or stop altogether, he was dead wrong.

I want to take everything.

Damon shouted as his cock thickened and pulsed in my mouth, and I swallowed every drop I could before catching the last spurts on my tongue.

And I want to give, too.

Rising to stand, I carefully climbed back into Damon's lap and brought my mouth to his—sharing his taste like an offering to his trembling lips.

"Thank you," he whispered, his amber eyes meeting mine, and I understood he wasn't just thanking me for the kiss.

Or the blow job.

“Always,” I replied, smoothing his long hair out of his face. “I’ll take care of you, because you’re mine now—just like I’m yours. And we both belong to Max.”

“That’s what I love to hear.” Max’s smooth voice snapped my attention to where he was casually leaning against the far wall. “Did my two perfect pets kiss and make up...”

Max’s voice trailed off as Damon also turned his head to face him—his signature smirk morphing into shock as he spotted the other man’s makeover.

“Do you... not like it?” Damon hesitantly asked after a full minute of silence.

Oh, you silly man.

I wanted to kiss him senseless for assuming the worst, because the look on Max’s face as he stalked across the room was pure hunger.

And true love.

“Are you kidding?” Max choked out as he reached us and placed a shaking hand under Damon’s chin to hold him steady. “You look...”

“Just like how you remember?” I dared to ask.

Max nodded, although his gaze remained fixed on the other man. “Better.” Blowing out a shaky breath, he leaned down and gave Damon the sweetest kiss. “Fuck, I’ve missed you.”

Damon swallowed thickly. “Me too.”

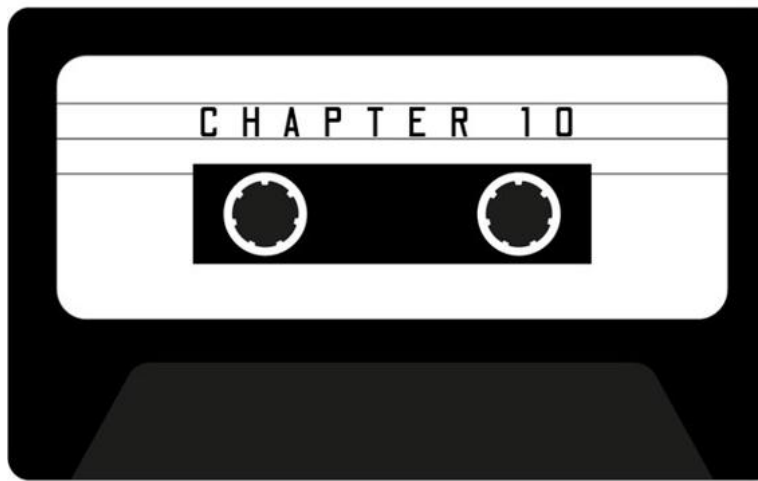
Not wanting to intrude on their moment, I tried to slide off Damon’s lap to give them space. With identical growls, they both grabbed me and held me in place.

I laughed. “Okay, got it. I’m now up in your business.”

Max grinned. “You got that right. On that note...” His smile turned devilish. “I have some business for us to attend to right now.”

Damon straightened. “What is it? Did you find evidence we can use against Heather?”

I sharply inhaled, but before I could cut in, Max replied, “Even better. Follow me to the parking garage roof. I’ll show you what the bat dragged in.”



STAR

HEATHER WAS ON THE CREEPY COURT ROOF.

It wasn't hard to figure out *how* she got there, since I knew Max could fly. Once we were outside, he demonstrated again by easily scooping me into his arms and shooting us straight into the air, with Damon close behind.

Although I doubt Heather got the bridal carry I did...

My ex-bestie looked a little worse for wear—probably because she'd put up a fight—but she was still healthy enough to glare daggers at me from where she was tied to a utility pole.

And run her mouth.

“Only *you* would manage to find a pair of mutants to shack up with, Brittany,” she snarled. “I swear, your coochie must be full of toxic goo or something to tempt freaks like these—”

“Actually, her *cunt*—language, please—is divine,” Max coolly interrupted. He then turned to face Damon with unmistakable heat in his expression. “I can’t wait for you to taste her, pet.”

“Me neither,” Damon softly replied before smiling down at me. “Maybe after we’re done here?”

His question snapped me out of my daze. “Totally. But, uh... what *are* we planning on doing here? I mean, we can’t actually... *kill her*, right?”

Right?

“Of course you can’t *kill* me,” Heather scoffed in her usual condescending tone. “That’s like, illegal and stuff.”

“So is *stalking*,” Damon snarled. “And posting false legal notices.”

Legal notices...?

Heather huffed and flicked her dirt-caked hair out of her face. “Nothing was false! Brittany totally trashed my car. She spray painted ‘SLUT’ in huge letters on the side before doing the same to her car, just so she could blame it on me. I even got a real lawyer to sign off on it and everything.”

“*WHAT?!*” I yelped, so astounded my jaw literally dropped open. “I didn’t... *You’re* the one who trashed *my* car, Heather. Mall security caught it on camera.”

She gave me a pitying look. “You sound like a crazy person, Britt. No one is going to believe you.”

Maybe I am crazy...

“The canisters of gasoline in your miraculously pristine car look a bit damning, Heather,” Max chuckled—not buying her bullshit for a second before turning to me. “I followed her to the gated community where your aunt lives before confronting

her. If I didn't know any better, it looked like she was planning to start a fire next."

"That wasn't me!" Heather shouted indignantly. "That was *Brittany*. She was going to burn down her aunt's house and then blame it on me." When we all just gaped at her, she switched gears—jutting her chin in Max's direction. "Or maybe *you* planted the evidence. Freak."

Wow...

My racing thoughts suddenly smoothed out, like water on a windless day, and I realized the sad truth I'd been denying.

She's never going to stop on her own.

I'd been focused on brushing myself off and moving on since our massive fallout as business partners and so-called friends. Meanwhile she'd been obsessively stirring the pot.

If it wasn't for the smug smile creeping over Heather's face, coupled with the evil glint in her poorly lined eye, I would've thought she was suffering from a psychotic break. But she was entirely aware of her actions.

Deep down, she *knew* she was lying, but as long as she could throw money at the right crooked lawyer, while convincing anyone dumb enough to listen to her version of the truth, she would continue this madness indefinitely.

So it's up to us to put an end to this.

Max stepped closer, tilting my chin so I was looking at him instead of Heather. "We won't do anything you aren't comfortable with, baby. Your enemy, your call."

I was torn—probably more than a morally upstanding human should be. But finding out my bosses were bloodthirsty

vampires intent on protecting me in whatever way necessary had changed things. Changed *me*.

If anything, I felt safer with them than I had with anyone since my parents died. I knew all I would have to do was snap my fingers and they would ‘dispose of this vile creature,’ no questions asked.

But can I be an accomplice to murder?

IF YOU DECIDE TO BE THE BIGGER PERSON AND LET HEATHER GO—WITH A MILDER PUNISHMENT THAN MOST BLOODTHIRSTY HOES MIGHT BELIEVE SHE DESERVES—CONTINUE READING.



IF YOU DECIDE THAT BITCHES GET STITCHES (OR STAKED), SKIP TO THE END TO KEEP IN TOUCH WITH THE AUTHOR FOR THE EVENTUAL RE-RELEASE OF THIS TALE, WITH AN ALTERNATE, GORIER, ENDING (BUT BE SURE TO STILL READ THE [EPILOGUE](#) FOR SOME WELL-DESERVED MMF SMUT).



MY SHOULDERS SANK, AND I DROPPED MY GAZE, UNSURE IF what I was about to say would make this pair of vampires reject me for good.

“I-I *know* she deserves the worst,” I murmured. “But I’m not a murderer. All I ever wanted was to share my love of makeup—to help others feel as gorgeous as I do when I’m wearing it. Sure, it sucked the way shit went down with Bodacious Babes, but I think I’m finally ready to get myself back out there. Maybe we could even set up a makeup counter at Sizzling Discourse! I mean... if that would be okay...”

“Of course it would be okay!” Damon snapped, narrowing his eyes at Max as if *daring* him to argue.

Max threw back his head and laughed. “Well, it looks like I’d better say yes. But seriously”—he smiled adoringly at both of us—“I was planning on asking you to do just that, Star. It would pair nicely with the edgier fashion I’ve been wanting to put Damon in charge of. If that would be okay with *you*, pet?”

He cocked an eyebrow at his longtime love. Damon swallowed thickly before replying, “I would love that. Thank you, Max.”

There was clearly more backstory there, but our sweet moment was interrupted by the harsh sound of Heather’s shrill voice. “Excuse me?! You are absolutely *not* allowed to do makeup again, Brittany. I’m the only reason you made a name for yourself in the first place and all you’ll be doing is

regurgitating designs *we* came up with together—which means *I* own them. It was bad enough that you spread a ton of rumors about me after you left Bodacious Babes. Business completely dried up, and it's ALL YOUR FAULT!"

Wow. Wow. Wow!

All at once, I understood *why* Heather was refusing to let this go. I already knew that when I left Bodacious Babes, my talent went with me, but I would never have wasted my time spreading rumors on top of that.

If business had dried up, it had nothing to do with *me* and everything to do with *her*. But this tale of woe was her narrative, and she was never going to tell it otherwise.

Because then she'd have to take responsibility for herself.

Blowing out an even breath, I looked at Max. "I may not want her dead, but I do want her to leave me—and *us*—alone for good. So... whatever you need to do to make that happen, you have my blessing."

He leaned down to kiss me, inadvertently pressing me against Damon—hinting at the spicy sandwiches to come. "Anything for you, baby. And please know, I would be willing to do much worse."

Morally gray boyfriends for the win.

With a growl, Max stalked toward Heather. To her credit, she didn't even flinch, but that was probably more because of her superiority complex than any actual bravery.

"And just what are *you* going to do?" she sneered. "My lawyer is gonna be on your loser asses like white on rice the instant you let me go—"

Heather's rant abruptly cut off as Max crouched in front of her with his back to me. He was murmuring something that I couldn't quite catch, but whatever it was made her beady eyes go wide and vacant.

Creepy...

And hot.

Damon snorted, and I realized *he* could hear what was going on. "What is he saying to her?" I hissed, nose as hell. "Tell me!"

My beautiful boy gazed down at me. "No." He smirked, being a total brat. "And if you want fancy features like super-hearing and"—he canted his chin toward the others—"what *Max* is doing right now, you'll let us turn you."

I stifled a smirk of my own. "Oh? Is this peer pressure? Are you trying to *compel* me to become a vampire, Damon?"

His amber eyes widened, and his gaze flickered to Max. "We would never use our compulsion powers on you, especially not for something as important as this. I-I hope you *choose* to be our third, Star, but it's totally your decision."

Before I could tell him I was kidding—that I'd already made up my mind about being their 'third'—the absolute *last* thing I expected to hear caught my attention.

"I'm sorry, Britt."

This time, my jaw almost dropped two stories, through the parking garage to the cracked asphalt below.

Am I dreaming?

All malice was gone from Heather's face, replaced by an openness I'd never seen on her before. For a moment, I

remembered how happy I was when we first met—when I thought I'd found a kindred spirit.

But it was all an act.

“Okay...” I replied, incredibly confused by what was happening.

Max must be really persuasive...

“I was just really jealous of your talent,” she continued earnestly. “I still am. But instead of cheering you on and being inspired, I let my bitterness take over. I became fixated on somehow stealing everything for myself and convincing everyone that what you had created was mine all along. It just... it seemed easier than putting in the work myself.”

I bet that's the most honest she has ever been in her entire life.

Wait a minute...

My gaze narrowed on Max, who gave me the most suspiciously sweet smile in return, but Heather wasn't finished. “I promise to make things right, Britt. I'll retract my accusations against you and confess to the cops that I vandalized your car. And I'll never come near Creepy Court, or you and your guys, ever again.”

I sighed, realizing Max had *compelled* Heather to say all of this to me—because there was no way she possessed the maturity to come clean on her own.

Good enough, though.

Closure was found in weird ways sometimes, and not always how we'd hoped, but if this was the best I could get, so be it.

And two hot as hell vampires seem like an acceptable consolation prize for what I've gone through.

“Well, I *don't* forgive you, Heather,” I replied, quickly elaborating when Max frowned. “But I appreciate hearing you say these things. More than *you* could ever understand.”

I nodded at Max so he'd know my words were meant for *him*. “Thank you. Now go ditch her by her car, but, uh... maybe make sure she doesn't follow through on the arson, okay?”

He laughed. “Oh, the cops already received an anonymous tip about a suspicious car parked outside your aunt's community. But I'll gladly put this trash out on the curb outside the police station to help move things along.”

He really does take care of everything.

Max's expression darkened as he took in the sight of Damon and me standing together. “By the time I get back, I want both of you in my coffin. Naked and ready for me.”

Yes, Sir.



STAR

ONE WEEK LATER

TIME FLIES...

Even when you know you have an endless supply of it ahead of you.

It had been a little over a week since the—slightly anticlimactic but still satisfying—showdown with Heather, and Trick or Treat Street at the Creepy Court Mall was winding to a close. I'd never wanted kids, but watching Max and Damon hand out candy to the ones who stopped by Sizzling Discourse—*while hilariously dressed as a pair of vampires*—had warmed my heart.

Still beating... for now.

The second shift of trick-or-treaters had been the costumed teenagers, and I was just putting the finishing touches on a

cute blonde dressed as a slutty Tinker Bell.

“Oh, my GAWD, Becky, *look* at this makeup!” she called over to her friend when I handed her the mirror. “I look *bodacious!*”

I would have expected myself to flinch at the memories triggered by that word, but instead, I smiled warmly. “You totally do. And I hope you have an awesome time at your rager tonight.”

To my shock, blondie set down the mirror and yanked me into a hug. “I will—thanks to *you!* Honestly, I was kinda nervous about going because my crush is gonna be there, but now I feel like the hottest bitch on the block.”

I rapidly blinked away tears, but ‘Becky’ saved me from having to reply by sauntering over to inspect my handiwork. “Damn.” She whistled low before nodding at me. “Girl, you should do this professionally.”

“Funny you should say that,” Max interrupted, smiling proudly as he handed business cards to both girls on my behalf. “Tonight was the debut of Star Baby Cosmetics. This seasoned professional is now available for appointments and walk-ins, right here at Sizzling Discourse... although, I have a feeling walk-ins will be hard to come by soon enough.”

He’s such a zeek.

But I’m way into it.

“Righteous.” Slutty Tinker Bell tucked the card into her tiny sequined purse. “I’ll call to make an appointment for winter formal asap, then I’ll spread the word to the rest of the cheer squad because, like Becky said—damn, girl.”

High praise indeed.

Damon waited until the teens left before pulling down the security gate and locking up. Since I was so focused on cleaning up my *new* makeup counter, I gasped when Max was suddenly pressed up against me from behind.

“Happy Halloween, baby,” he murmured, running his cheesy plastic fangs over my neck before spitting them out into his palm. “Gross. I don’t know who thought *these* passed for real fangs.”

I turned to face him, laughing as I used a tissue to retrieve the spit-covered accessory and toss it into the trash can. “Someone who hasn’t been lucky enough to experience the real thing, I guess.”

Max’s smile grew as his *real* fangs lengthened, his darkening gaze returning to my neck... and the new leather collar I was wearing.

His collar.

A few days ago, I was admiring the Sizzling Discourse collar display when Max walked by. Knowing he enjoyed dressing me up, I asked him to pick one out for me, but he reacted in such an uncharacteristically flustered way, I immediately let it drop.

Damon later pulled me aside to explain what collaring meant in the BDSM community, and how to some—like Max—it was the equivalent of a wedding ring. Then my precious emo boy confided how Max had asked to collar *him* at one point, but he’d been so deep in his issues he’d refused.

Which he deeply regretted now.

All this did was make me *more* determined to get that collar, and convince Damon *he* still deserved his, too. So yesterday—on Devil’s Night—the two of us cornered Max after closing

and dragged him over to the collar display before formally asking to be collared.

With the help of matching pouts.

Of course, I knew Max would say yes—since he loved to spoil us—but what I hadn't been prepared for was how emotional he got. An actual tear rolled down his handsome face when he fastened the wine-colored one around my neck, and when he attached Damon's black spiked one, Max practically collapsed into the other man's arms.

Okay, I may have shed a tear myself.

That Max and Damon had been together since the 1870s still occasionally blew my mind—and don't get me started on how old Max actually was. But they made it clear I wasn't a third wheel in their relationship.

They considered me their 'third,' which was apparently a big deal in the vampire community, but they refused to introduce me to their coven until I'd been safely turned.

Which brings us to my plan for tonight.

But first, I need to lure them into the lair...

"I should probably mention that I crept away earlier and hid my panties beneath one of your pillows," I airily spoke as I nonchalantly strolled toward the breakroom.

The words had barely left my mouth before I was being scooped up and thrown over someone's shoulder—Max's, judging by the scent of whiskey, cloves, and the promise of nasty sex. I shrieked with joy, gripping the cape of his ridiculous vampire costume to hang on, even though I knew he'd never drop me.

Neither of them would.

In record time—*thanks, vampire speed*—we were inside the lair, which had become *my* home now as well. I'd told my aunt I'd found a place closer to work, and she'd wished me well, probably glad to finally wipe her hands of me. There was no bad blood between us, but she'd never felt like blood at all.

Not like my guys do.

“Oof!” I laughed brightly as I found myself being tossed onto the plush satin lining Max's oversized coffin.

I scrambled to prop myself up on my elbows—wanting a better view as my vampires started tearing off their costumes and clothes. Curses were muttered and fabric ripped, with Max's new Hawaiian shirt being the only item handled with care.

Designed by Damon, and featuring funeral lilies on a jet black background.

Like a goth Magnum, P.I.

“Feeling shy, baby?” Max teased—his gaze practically burning a hole in the clothing I was still wearing. “Why don't you show Damon what he's about to feast on.”

Damon groaned as I unzipped my leather miniskirt before slowly peeling it away and spreading my legs. That left me in nothing but a garter belt, holding up deceptively innocent white stockings, and my underbust corset over a lacy white top.

Which is about to get sacrificed to the gods.

Preening under their rapt attention, I ripped open the lace, allowing my already sensitive breasts to tumble out—unobstructed and ready to be played with.

“Fuck...” Damon rasped, wrapping a hand around his perfect cock and giving himself a rough stroke. He looked ready to eat me alive, but he didn’t immediately make a move—obediently waiting for permission, like he’d been trained to do.

Such a good pet.

“Go ahead,” Max commanded, his eyes fixed on my pussy like he was memorizing it. “Get her wet for me.”

Ramping up that vampire speed again, Damon pounced, and I barely had time to yelp before my legs were thrown over his shoulders and his tongue was buried in my throbbing core.

“Damon!” I gasped when he moved onto my clit—sucking the bundle of nerves into his mouth as he plunged three thick fingers inside me.

My moans quickly drowned out the obscene sounds of me fucking myself on his hand, and I almost came on the spot when Max climbed into the coffin behind him.

“On your knees, pet,” Max yanked Damon into position—rougher than how he handled me every night. “Let’s see which one of you comes first.”

Damon lifted his head with a gasp, his gorgeous eyes rolling backward as Max forced his way into his ass. I now had firsthand experience with how fantastic that magic cross piercing felt sliding over my inner walls, but I also knew how much Max liked to tease. He preferred us both to be delirious—incoherently begging to come and sobbing with need—by the time we all found our release.

A pleasure Dom, through and through.

I whimpered as he began hammering into Damon, holding the other man captive by the collar—stopping him from licking

me again until he allowed it. While I was usually content to let Max lead—and watch the show—today, I had plans.

Life-altering plans.

“Please, Sir...” I choked out, reaching for them.

Misunderstanding what I was asking for, Max released Damon, who immediately dove back in, expertly bringing me to the edge with a single lick.

“No!” I yelped. “I-I want to come on your cocks. Both of you... in my pussy at the same time...”

That was only the first half of my request, but both men immediately sprang into action. I was used to their speed by now, but I couldn’t stop another laugh from escaping as Max managed to slide free of Damon, wipe himself clean, pour copious lube, and have me straddling his lap before I’d even registered he’d moved.

I guess the answer is yes.

“Is this what you want, baby?” he crooned, notching his pierced crown against my opening before sliding me down his shaft. “You need both your mates filling you up?”

I whined at the delicious drag *and* the sentiment of his words. It may have sounded like Max was only talking dirty, but I’d learned vampires mated for life. To be referred to as a *mate* was a very big deal to them.

And I am here to be mated.

Pulling me down to the satin with him, Max arranged me comfortably against his chest before opening me up to receive Damon. I was no blushing virgin—and had already fucked both of them so many times over the past week or so, I’d lost count—but we’d never attempted *this* feat before.

I've totally got this.

Tears stung my eyelids as Damon eased his way in alongside Max, but it wasn't from pain. It was because of how carefully these two deadly hunters were handling me—whispering words of encouragement as I took them both—along with the knowledge of what I was about to ask for.

Forever by their sides.

Damon buried himself as far as he could before pulling back, setting the pace while Max held me steady from below. Pretty soon we were all panting and groaning—three sweaty bodies joined as one—and I could feel my orgasm already licking its way down my spine.

“Wait!” I gasped, and even though it wasn't our safeword, the action immediately paused.

Carefully pushing myself up, I fumbled with the clasp of my collar. Realizing what I was attempting to do, Damon lifted my hair out of the way, while Max simply watched with uncertainty in his eyes as I dropped the collar to the satin.

Wait for it.

“Sir... pet...” I glanced over my shoulder so Damon knew he was included in this request. “I want you to turn me. Tonight. Please...”

Max's teeth snapped to full length, making me jump. This, in turn, made their cocks rub together inside me—causing us all to groan all over again.

Focus, Star!

“I know you don't want me to feel rushed into anything,” I hurriedly continued—seeing the concern in Max's brown eyes.

“But I *know* I want this. The idea of *not* spending an eternity with both of you feels like...”

Like a stake to the heart.

Max still looked unsure, but Damon started moving again—subtly tilting his hips while kissing his way up my shoulder. “She wants it, Max.” His breath tickled my neck. “Please turn her for us.”

No.

“I said *both* of you,” I sternly replied, making Damon stop his movements again. “If it’s possible... I’d like for you both to turn me. Together.”

Max reached up to trail his fingertips down the exposed skin of my breasts, absently rolling my nipples between his fingers as he considered. Damon laid his forehead against my shoulder blade before giving another thrust.

A not so subtle nudge for Max to make a decision.

Once a brat, always a brat.

Max huffed a laugh. “You both would be the death of me... if I wasn’t already dead.” He sobered before cupping my face between his hands. “Are you absolutely sure about this, Star? Damon and I will wait for you, however long it takes. You don’t need to promise us any—”

“Yes, I’m sure,” I interrupted, before realizing how rude I sounded. “Sir,” I added, coquettishly nibbling on my lip.

His expression softened, and I melted under the adoration. “Like I could ever say no to you, baby. Especially not when both our cocks are inside you.”

He’s onto me.

Apparently, the time for talking was over, as Max pulled me back down to his chest and gently gathered my hair on top of my head. Damon picked up the rhythm again for all of us, and I gasped at the first drag of Max's fangs against my neck.

"Make me yours," I murmured, moaning when two sharp points pierced my skin. "And yours..." I added as more pleasure-pain blossomed on the opposite side of my neck.

Forever.

Both men fed on me while Damon continued to thrust, and it wasn't long before I was crying out, clenching around their cocks as I came—impossibly full, while being drained of everything I had to give.

Take everything.

And give me everything in return.

My vision grew hazy and my heart rate slowed, but I wasn't afraid. Death was close, but it would never catch me—not while my mates could shield me from it.

From some distant place of consciousness, I registered a wrist being pressed against my lips—providing me with what I needed to claw my way back to existence—and I drank down the sweet nectar with gratitude. I drank until there was nothing left, only to have another wrist pressed to my bloodied lips.

A second offering of devotion.

This cycle of being drained and filled continued for hours—through multiple orgasms for all of us—until I was so spent, I could have slept for a week.

At one point, I was gently laid down on clean satin and surrounded by the familiar coolness of Max and Damon's naked bodies. Someone slid the coffin lid closed, plunging us

into a darkness that felt like shadows dancing on the edge of the light—like a new beginning where I’d previously only felt loss. Like never being alone again.

Like everything I ever wanted.

When I awoke, the coffin was open again, and the guys were up and about getting ready to go open the store for business. I debated sleeping the night away—and figured I could probably get away with it—but then I remembered my new makeup counter.

“Well, look who’s excited to start their first day as a baby vampire!” Max laughed as he pulled me into his arms. “How are you feeling, Star?”

I glanced around him to where Damon was watching us both with a soft smile on his face that made him look years younger.

This is his new beginning, too.

All of ours.

“Starving!” I exclaimed, my grin widening when their gazes darkened. “But the hunt will have to wait. First, I wanna wield some makeup brushes on the unsuspecting public, *then* you guys can teach me everything you know about being hot vampires.”

“With pleasure,” Max cooed. “Although I have a feeling you’ll be a natural.”

“Agreed,” Damon chuckled as he breezed by us, his lavender eyeshadow catching the light. “Especially with the *hot* part.”

Throwing Max a sassy wink over my shoulder, I followed Damon out of the lair, excited for the first time in what felt like forever for what lay ahead.

About the Author

C. Rochelle here! I'm a naughty but sweet, introverted, Aquarius weirdo who believes a sharp sense of humor is the sexiest trait, loves shaking my booty to Prince, and have never met a cheese I didn't like. Oh, and I write spicy paranormal/monster Why Choose + MM, MFF & MMF romance with dark, naughty humor. #loveislove

Think you may be one of my Weird-HO's? Learn more about my books, snag bonus content by signing up for my newsletter (**and stay in-the-know for the future alternate-ending, expanded edition of *this* vampire tale**), join my Clubhouse of Smut on Patreon, order signed books and N/SFW art prints, and stalk me everywhere: <http://c-rochelle.com/>

Also by C. Rochelle

Find all my books, audiobooks & playlists on my website:

[Monstrously Mythic \(World Mythology + Monsters, Why Choose + MM, Herculeia & Iola\)](#)

[Villainous Things \(Superhero x Villain MM\)](#)

[The Yaga's Riders \(Dark & Witchy Why Choose + MM based on the Baba Yaga legends, with an MFF spin-off\)](#)

[Wings of Darkness + Light \(Blasphemous Angels - not the biblically accurate kind - and Demons Why Choose + MM\)](#)

Don't forget to [sign up for my newsletter](#) for all the updates and [join Patreon](#) for sneak peeks. *And stay tuned for MORE monsters in the forthcoming **Strange Vacationland** universe!*

THE BEST BOY

WREN K MORRIS



Tracy thought she was adopting a dog. Instead, she got a protective lycan boyfriend.

Jay “JJ” Howell has a reputation to uphold as the stoic, intimidating enforcer for his pack, but every wolf needs a break. He’d love nothing more than for someone else to take the lead—literally—but his pack would never approve.

When he sneaks into the local pet store in his wolf form, he doesn’t expect to meet the woman of his dreams.

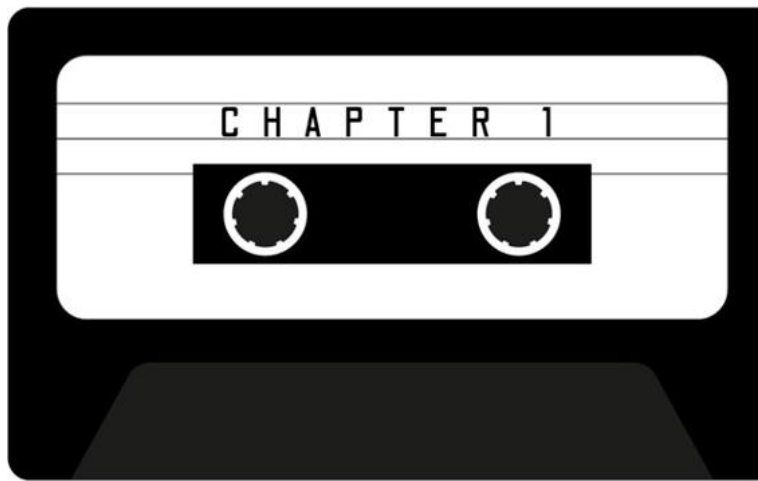
Tracy Campbell is fresh off a breakup with an ex that won’t stop calling. In need of a friend and a protector, getting a dog seems like a good idea. That is until her dog transforms into a monstrous wolf-man.

Monsters are real, but also... attractive. What’s a girl to do? Is Tracy willing to be a handler for JJ while he handles her problem?



Advisories in the care of your new pet: There will be shifters in various forms; shifted sex with knotting; pet play; collaring; discussions of emotional abuse (by an ex to FMC); stalking and threats towards the FMC (not from the MMC); mild violence (choking, not by the MCs); questionable meat products; foul language; and graphic sex between consenting sentient adults.

Featured tropes include: fated mates; shifters (lycans with three forms); touch her and die; size difference; he falls first; she takes the lead; 1980s slang; graphic sex between consenting adults.



JJ

MY NAILS DUG INTO MY PALMS, FISTS CLENCHED AS I FOUGHT the ball of emotion in my throat. I was fucking tired. Wayne knew it, but it was still hard to admit this to him.

“Please, man.” I shuffled as I said the words, my work boots scuffing the brightly patterned linoleum of the Twisted Whisker’s floor. As the pack’s enforcer, I never had to beg for anything. People begged *me* for second chances when it was time to do my job. Yet here I was, in the middle of a pet store in the Creepy Court Mall, begging one of my pack members and oldest friends for a favor.

Even a beast like me needed time to veg out. I was desperate for a break. There was only one way that seemed to work, even if other lycans wouldn’t understand.

“Man, it’s kinda weird. I’m not trying to shame you or anything, but...You really want to hang out in the pet store?”

As a *dog*?” Wayne gave me a pointed look, his heavily-lined, pale blue eyes gaining a hint of yellow as his beast peeked through.

This is why I didn’t tell people.

I fought the growl building in my chest and kept his stare until he rolled his eyes and looked away. Packmates didn’t challenge an enforcer, and staring down any wolf was asking for a fight. I knew that wasn’t what Wayne was trying to do, even if my beast refused to look away first.

If people knew about my secret, I’d be challenged left, right, and center. It wasn’t a practice a lot of lycans knew about, let alone would respect. The only person who had known was a witch who lived near pack lands, but Amelia had moved to join her aunt’s coven last year, leaving me without any options, and that’s the only reason I was telling Wayne. He liked what he did, and he liked to stay out of the spotlight. He wasn’t the type to try to take my place as enforcer.

“Look, man, I know you don’t understand it, but you know me. We’ve fought together. We’ve *cried* together. I don’t expect you to understand, but I hope our brotherhood means something here. I need your help... and your discretion. It’s the only way I can truly relax.”

His lips pulled into a tight line and he huffed with disbelief. “Why don’t you just go for a run, ya know, as your animal? Get some fresh air, some dirt under your paws...”

I shook my head before he could even finish. “It doesn’t work that way. People look for the Alpha first, then the Betas, and if they can’t find them, they come straight to me. Within a few minutes someone will find me, asking for help with a flea outbreak at the preschool, or to help find Terry when we all know he’s just gone for a run. If they can’t find the Alpha or

Betas, they come straight to me, and it's too much. I can't leave pack lands as my animal. There's too many hunters in the area."

"So what, dude? You want to sit in one of the puppy pens here for the day? Wear a collar? Drink out of a dog bowl?"

Fuck. This is why I didn't want to ask him. I knew this was a bad idea, but I was desperate.

"I just want to not be *me* for a while. Just my animal. This is what helps me get out of my head and just... breathe for a bit." I swallowed, before squaring my shoulders with determination. "Are you in, or are you out?"

Wayne leaned his head back, pinching the bridge of his nose with his fingers, nearly smearing his makeup. "Fine. I'll tell people you were a stray I found or something." He shrugged, then pointed at me with a hard stare. "But I'm not walking you on a leash. You better hold it or shift back if you need to take a leak."

My entire body softened with my exhale. All the tension and fear that he would just turn me away—or worse, tell the pack that this was my thing—left me. "Thanks, man."

"Yeah, yeah. Go shift in the back, I'll get a spot set up next to the real pups."

Feeling lighter than I had in weeks, I headed for the back of the store, stopping to pat the head of a sweet little cocker spaniel puppy on the way. She was terrified when she first met Wayne and then me, recognizing the animal in each of us, but had warmed up quickly. Her little tongue flicked furiously against my palm as I gave her a few head pats, making me chuckle. Soon I'd be in a pen near hers.

The stock room door creaked as I opened it; I was careful not to close it all the way, knowing I'd have to nose it open on the way out. Rows of floor to ceiling shelves were packed with extra pet crates, hamster cages, food bags, and other pet care items. I passed them to find a little two seater table, well-worn, with scrapes and stickers covering the surface, crammed against the back wall. To the side was an open door to a grody washroom.

I looked at the state of the washroom and decided against it; I wasn't sure how Wayne could stand it with our enhanced sense of smell. I sure wasn't dealing with whatever funk was left in there. I closed the door and opted to just change in the open room. Shifters weren't shy about nudity, and there wasn't another person here anyway. I'd hear or smell anyone before they made it to the door.

I threw my t-shirt on the table, followed by my leather wrist cuff and bandana. Fates, it felt good to have my ears uncovered. These past few years had been good to our kind, the rad style being big hair and bandanas that were perfect for hiding our long, pointed, furry ears. There was nothing quite like letting them be free.

My tail sprang free as jeans and boxers fell to the floor. Like our ears, it was one of the animal attributes we kept even in our most human forms. It swung happily behind me, thumping against the leg of the table while I folded the clothing in a neat pile.

Peace came over me as my bones cracked and realigned, my four giant paws hitting the floor. I was a big fucker, around the size of a mastiff, but humans were quick to dismiss things that didn't make sense to them. No one was going to expect a wolf in a mall. Wayne would probably call me some kind of mutt

and leave it at that—I just had to be sure the Alpha never found out. Shifting in front of humans was absolutely forbidden. He'd lose his shit if he knew I let my beast out in a mall full of people, even if I did do it in the privacy of a stock room.

The usually constant hum of pack chatter in our mental link was quiet. The mall was just far enough from pack lands to give me the peace I needed. Wayne was the only one close enough to link. As if I summoned him by thinking about him, his hoarse voice sounded in my head.

Come on out, everything is ready.

I padded across the room and nosed open the door, nails clicking on the tile as I went. The little cocker spaniel yipped at me, her tail going as fast as it could. The puppies beside her—shepherds, I think—went wild barking.

“Take a chill pill, pups,” Wayne grunted at them, but a hint of smile played at the corner of his mouth. He'd always been a hardass, but he had a soft spot for animals and he was good with humans. It was why he ran the Twisted Whisker so far from pack lands, leaving closer store fronts to lycans who needed a little more pack support. It brought in pack funds and let him keep an ear to the ground for what was happening with the humans, information he brought back to me so I could relay it to the Alpha if needed.

He held open the pen door for me, ushering me inside. The stench of stale, brown pebbles filled my nose, my animal sputtering around the horrible smell.

Kibble? You left me kibble? I looked at him in disbelief.

Wayne shrugged. *I'm not going to have anyone thinking I'm starving an abused stray.*

As long as you don't actually expect me to eat it. I'll ralph all over your floor.

He pointed at my animal with a stern look. "You will *not* get my floors dirty." He froze, realizing he'd said that part out loud, but when he looked around no one was there to hear him but me.

Just sit tight, and uh... do your thing, I guess. He added, back in our mental link. *I'll grab you a burger on my break.*

I huffed through my nose, the closest I could come to a laugh in this form. *Thanks, man.*

I spun in circles in the small enclosure, finding the perfect spot to lay down. The puppies beside me finally calmed when they realized I wasn't going to play, their disappointed little chuffs making me chuckle as they settled into their own sleepy pile. Maybe I would later, after Wayne gave me that burger, but first all I wanted was a nap.

Wayne went back to the counter, picking up his paperwork to resume whatever he had been working on before I came in. He had barely gotten started when the sound of someone falling in the hall and rushed apologies filtered into the store. He grunted in frustration but still hurried around the counter to check on what was happening.

I couldn't care less. This was my time off. I rested my chin back on my paws, trying not to listen and to get some sleep.

"Are you okay?" he asked in a gruff voice.

"I'm... fine." The woman sounded anything *but* fine. Something about her voice made my ears perk up. I lifted my head off my paws to look towards the door.

She wore a pink crewneck sweatshirt and rolled jeans, high tops peeked out below the cuff. Brown curls were piled high

into a scrunchy, her half ponytail bouncing as she moved.

She looked like just another shopper until her light brown eyes crashed into mine. Warmth flooded through me, concern nipping at its heels as I took in the haunted look in her gaze.

My plans for a lazy day were gone, gravity itself shifting to revolving around the mesmerizing woman.

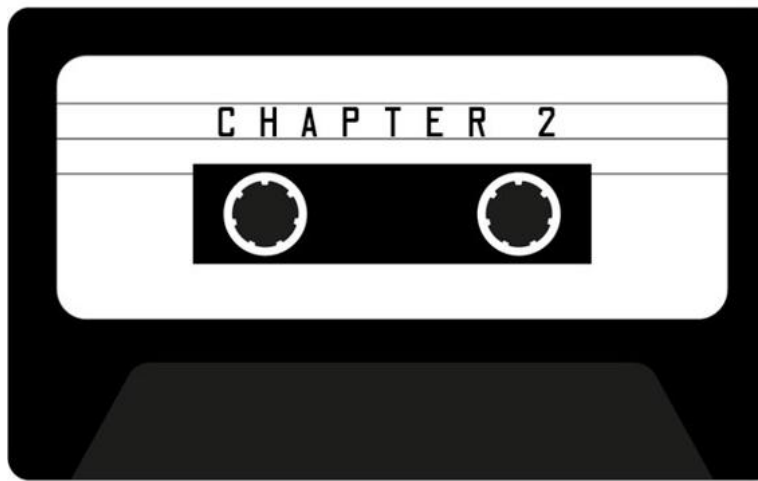
She was human.

She was terrified.

She was my *mate*.

For me? She was... everything. To her? I was a dog.

Today just got a lot more complicated.



TRACY

THE NEON GLOW OF CREEPY COURT MALL PROMISED VISITORS fast food, happening tunes, and the latest fashion. I hoped it could also promise me safety.

My hands trembled at my sides as I approached the building. Even the soft *shick* of the automatic doors made me jump.

I'll always know where you are.

The note on my apartment door hadn't been signed, but I knew Dillon's handwriting.

I thought that breaking up would be enough to get him out of my life. He wasn't supposed to contact me anymore. He wasn't supposed to know about my new apartment.

Somehow, he did.

The second set of automatic doors in the breezeway *whooshed* open, the sounds of shoppers and music welcoming me into

the department store.

A peppy brunette in an oversized blazer swooped in, scrunching her nose as she looked me up and down. She shoved a flyer into my hand.

“Hey girl, don’t shoot the messenger, but the bags under your eyes aren’t designer. We’re doing a makeup demonstration over in Cosmetics. You look like a Summer. Head over and tell them Mindy sent you. They’ll most definitely help with—” she looked at my face pointedly again “—your luggage. You’ll be back to a bodacious babe in no time.”

“Um... thank you?” I mumbled, at a loss for how to reply, but she was already working her way to the next woman. Were her crimes against perfection as heinous as mine?

I moved through the store quickly, knowing I couldn’t afford anything at Southstrom. I was out of cash, having spent most of my savings on my rental fees for the apartment.

The cacophony of the food court washed over me like a comforting wave as I reached the center of the mall. I surveyed the crowd, taking in the surly punks in their band tees and jean jackets, a nerdy group enjoying a snack, even the worker at Creepy Pasta watching a harried mall worker dart about—there were people everywhere. For the first time since finding the note, I took a breath of relief. There was safety in numbers.

Dillon couldn’t stalk me here.

I moved further into the food court and caught my reflection in the shiny chrome of the escalator. Even in the distorted image I had to admit—the makeup girl was right.

I looked exhausted. I was exhausted.

My phone kept ringing at random times in the night, disturbing my sleep. If I answered, they just laughed or hung up. I had a feeling I knew who was doing that, too.

I tried to ignore the siren song of slightly burned meat calling to me from The Good Char. I just knew that one of those golden fried delicacies would help alleviate my stress, but I was trying to save money.

I looked down at the flyer. It was a free demonstration. Something to pass the time.

Why not? After all, the last place Dillon would be was a makeup counter. He hated when I wore makeup so much that he had smashed the few compacts I had collected. One bright pink lipstick had survived. I reached into my purse and clutched the precious tube, reassuring myself that it was still there.

It was so much more than makeup.

I could head back there in a bit and try it out. I wanted to walk for a bit first and work off my nerves.

My steps mirrored the syncopated beat of the top 40 songs that played overhead as I made my way out of the food court and past various storefronts. A video shop with over-the-top displays. An antique store—I liked that place. The guy who worked there always seemed so sweet. I peered inside, wanting to absorb some of his peaceful demeanor, but didn't see him. I hurried past Frankie's—Dillion always laughed at me for being scared, but that place gave me the creeps.

As I rounded the corner to the next hall, I nearly ran into a group of lettermen. I dodged to the side, and that's when I saw him.

There, across the aisle, by a bench and a potted plant. Others may not find his lanky frame intimidating, but I knew better. I froze, like prey in one of those nature documentaries.

It was Dillon; I knew it was.

A body careened into mine, knocking me to the ground. I yelped, scrambling to my hands and knees looking where I could've sworn Dillon had been. The figure was still there, but now wearing a hockey mask.

Dread ripped through me. I *hated* those movies. I knew it. It had to be Dillon, and he was trying to scare me.

I wished it wasn't working.

"I'm sorry; you just stopped so suddenly!" I flinched as the woman's voice broke through my focus. She reached out a pink manicured hand, pulling me back to my feet as she tossed permed bangs from her eyes. "That was a gnarly fall! You've got to be more careful, hon."

I nodded, muttering some kind of apology as the woman walked away, but my attention went back to the empty space where I thought I had seen Dillon.

The figure was gone, replaced by a Halloween decoration. The holiday was coming up. Was I so exhausted that I mixed up a display with my own personal boogie man?

A strained sound, barely audible even to me, escaped my throat.

"Are you okay?"

I looked up... and up... to see the owner of the Twisted Whisker leaning out of his shop front. His familiar gaze bore into me, blonde brows furrowed over eyes rimmed in black liner.

The giant of a man would terrify just about anyone. I knew he was a softy at heart—he had let me play with the puppies in his store on several occasions when I just needed a quiet, soothing place, even if I had never bought anything.

But... if that was Dillon I saw... maybe he *wouldn't* know this man was actually sweet.

“I’m fine!” I brushed myself off and threw him a reassuring smile, even if I knew it didn’t reach my eyes. I scrambled forward and darted past him, sighing in relief when I entered the sanctuary of the pet shop. A hair band played over the speakers, the sound turned low enough that it didn’t compete with the mall’s music outside.

The owner followed behind me before tucking himself behind the counter and crossing his arms. His bleach blond mullet was teased tall and proud, but flattened where his head met the wall. He always wore a black bandana with a wolf pattern on it around his head. I never did figure out which band it was from.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” He leaned forward and drummed chipped, painted nails on the counter as he watched me. His pale blue eyes bore into me like he would know if I was lying. His gaze darted to the door, glancing around at the passersby before he looked back at me.

He reached over the counter to pat my shoulder reassuringly, but snatched his hand back to his side as if I had burned him.

“What?” His gruff voice jumped higher with surprise. His eyes went wide, darting to the rear of the store so fast he missed my flinch at the sudden sound, before freezing me again with eyes full of wonder. “You’re...”

“I’m fine, I promise. I just thought I saw someone and got distracted, that’s all.” He continued to stare, unmoving. “Or did you mean my name? I’m Tracy... We’ve met before, though, uh, I don’t think I’ve ever introduced myself.”

“I remember you. You like to visit the puppies.” His eyes narrowed as he glanced back to the door. “Where’s that boyfriend of yours?”

He asked the question loudly and with a note of disapproval. I wondered if he thought Dillon was outside. He hated stopping by the pet shop. He had only come in with me once, and he complained the whole time.

“We broke up.” I rubbed my hands up my arms, feeling awkward.

“That’s good.” The man smiled at me reassuringly. “Between you and me, he didn’t seem like the nicest of dudes.”

I eyed him curiously. I didn’t realize it was that obvious to everyone else that Dillon was a jerk. I wish I had caught on as easily.

“Go on,” he said, tilting his head towards the rest of the store. “There’s a few pups in the back.”

There was a pen full of raucous puppies with upright ears that barked immediately when I came into view. On one side of them was a little bitty cocker spaniel. Its ears looked velvet soft. I started to move toward that pen, needing soft cuddles to reassure me, but stopped when the dog in the last pen came into view.

Amber eyes locked onto me as if they were looking into my soul. The dog was an adult, not a puppy like the Twisted Whisker usually had. There were scars all over its muzzle and even a few notches missing in its ears.

My heart ached for the battered creature, so much it felt like it was reaching out my chest towards the animal. I headed straight for that pen as if pulled there by a tether.

The dog's paws pranced as I got closer. He chuffed happily as I reached my hand tentatively forward. He pressed his snout into my hand, rubbing against my palm.

"He's so sweet."

"He's more of a problem." He gave the dog a dark look, huffing out a breath.

I spun around to glare at the shop owner. "How can you say that about him? He looks like he's had a hard life."

The man chuckled, folding his arms again. "You could say that."

I'd always played with the puppies and then left, but the idea of leaving this sweet dog behind broke my heart. "Is he for sale?"

He looked at me, then at the dog, staring at the sweet canine with such intensity it made me nervous. I had always thought the shopkeeper was nice, but given how he was treating this dog, I was starting to have my doubts.

"I tell you what... You can have him for free, as long as you get him a collar and leash."

I smiled and scratched behind the dog's ears. "Do you want to come home with me, boy?"

The dog yipped, tail wagging furiously.

"I'll take that as a yes."

I had never had my own dog, but my apartment was lonely all by myself. We could keep each other company, and maybe...

just maybe... he would be enough to scare off Dillon as well.

Baby wouldn't be a guard dog, though, no matter how tough he looked. No, this boy needed a break. He seemed battered and exhausted, just like I was. We were going to start a new life together, one of comfort and peace. Long walks and sunshine.

The collars were hung on the wall in a rainbow of colors and materials. I ran my fingers across them, stopping on the softest one. It was pale pink with a big bow covered in a smooth velvet.

"How about this one, Baby?" I held up the collar so that he could see. He jumped to put his front paws on the edge of the pen, tail wagging even harder than before.

A loud snort of laughter came from the shop owner, now bent over the counter as he tried to cover his mouth and muffle the sound. "He does look like a Baby, doesn't he? That's a bitchin' collar. It will look nice against his fur."

"I think so, too." I couldn't tell if he was mocking me or being sincere, but either way, his opinion didn't matter. Baby stretched out his neck for the collar and I clipped the matching leash onto the D-ring. Baby liked it and I liked it, and that's what was important.

I looked over the bags of dog food. They would be too heavy to carry through the mall, but I could come back for one before we left. Even so, I wasn't sure this store had food that he liked. I had noticed a full bowl of kibble in his pen—it didn't seem like he had taken a bite.

"Are you hungry, Baby?" He looked up at me with those big amber eyes and whimpered.

“Oh, honey!” I crouched down to pat his head and scratch under his chin. His tongue lolled to the side as he stared at me affectionately. “Let’s go get some food, okay?”

I quickly paid the shop owner, even as he kept chuckling like he was in on a joke I wasn’t aware of, but I ignored him. He wasn’t usually like that. Maybe it was just an off day.

“Don’t get into any trouble!” Wayne called as I left the store, Baby trotting alongside me towards the food court. He watched everyone around us like a bodyguard, head swiveling back and forth to eye each shopper we passed. I studied his scars again. He had clearly been through a lot. I wondered if he was scared of the shop owner, and that’s why he hadn’t eaten. I’d seen dogs before who were afraid of men, especially tall ones.

“Why don’t we get ourselves a treat, huh, Baby?” I patted my thighs with my palms and crouched to get his attention. He nuzzled my cheek, tail swinging even faster behind him.

“You’ve got to be on your best behavior in the food court, okay?” His muzzle seemed to dip in the semblance of a nod. He was such a funny dog, almost human-like in how he responded.

Baby matched my pace as we entered the food court, perusing the stalls. Noodles weren’t exactly easy to share with a dog, so Creepy Pasta and even Broth with a Bite were probably out, but...

The rich smell of battered hot dogs called to me again. I had denied myself earlier, but I could splurge for Baby a little more—the collar and leash already dipping into my meager savings—and they would be easier to tear into small bites for him.

“Let’s go over here!” At first, he followed me as diligently as ever, but as we got closer to the stall, Baby put his nose in the air and went still. Tension in the lead pulled me to a stop as a low growl rumbled from his chest.

I stared down at him in shock, but Baby glared pointedly at the intimidating man behind the counter at The Good Char. The man scowled right back.

“Come on, boy, it’s okay.” I cooed, but that deep rumble continued. “Poor thing, did he scare you? It’s okay, that man won’t hurt you.” Baby huffed, eyes never leaving the buff, tattooed man who seemed determined to glare back.

I scratched behind his ears, trying to soothe him. “You want corn dogs, but you don’t want to see that mean man, right, Baby?” I tied the end of the leash to the table. “I’ll go get them. Just stay here, okay?”

Baby barked and lunged to the end of his leash after me. The table shook with the force of his pull, but I breathed a sigh of relief to see it was bolted to the floor. The punks a few tables over looked at Baby before turning their bored stares toward me, but I didn’t mind. I hated seeing Baby upset and I didn’t want to disturb the other diners, but I was sure the corn dog would calm him down. I called reassurances to him over my shoulder as I hustled to the counter.

“That’s an interesting dog you have there.” The cashier smirked at me before looking back at Baby. I didn’t like the gleam in his eye. There was something cold and sinister to it, but also a strange humor, almost as if he was mocking my dog.

“I’m sorry, he’s a little afraid of men.” I said uneasily, shifting my body to cut off his view of Baby. “Can I get one large corn dog, please?”

Baby continued to fuss while the man took the last of my money and dropped my corn dog into the fryer. When it was ready, he passed it to me with a wide smile, one that didn't convey any joy, sending a shiver up my spine.

I took my prize and hurried away from the counter, grateful to put space between myself and the strange man. It was worth it, though. With the corn dog in hand, Baby quieted, laser focused on the deep fried delight.

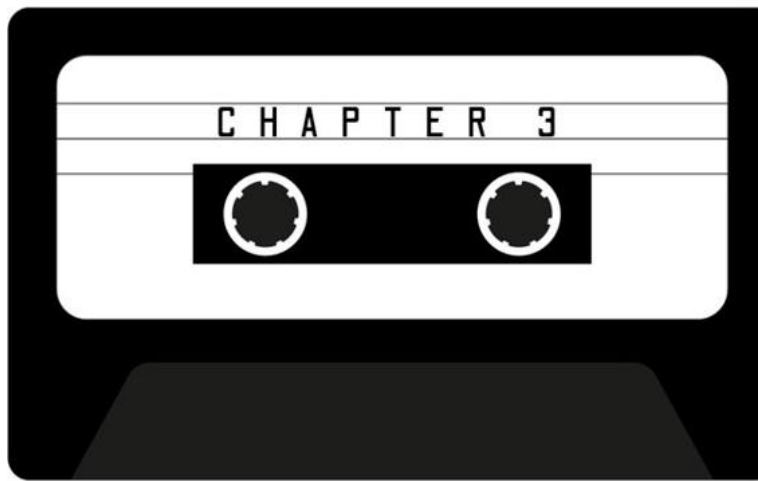
"I knew you wanted a treat," I cooed, smiling at him, excited to see his interest in the food. I pinched off a bite and offered to him, but he turned his nose, pawing to knock the entire plate on the floor. He pounced on the mess, grinding the corn dog into a mangled mess of batter and meat.

"No, Baby! Bad dog!" I stared forlornly at the lost meal. "I can't even get us another one; that was the last of my cash." He tucked his ears back and whimpered, pawing at me for reassurance.

"It's okay, I know you didn't mean it. You were just excited." I patted his head, scratching behind his ears.

A bark of laughter came from behind us. I turned to find the same man at the counter, brow raised as he stared at my dog, the same cold smirk in place. I hadn't seen him do anything to the corn dog, but he had been looking at Baby with a gleam in his eye I didn't like.

"Maybe you're right, Baby. I'll find something for you when we get home."



JJ

WAYNE BETTER MOTOR BACK TO THE PACK AFTER HIS SHIFT AT the store. He was supposed to report back on any news from the mall that might impact the pack. He mentioned that the mall had other monsters, but I didn't realize how many, or the variety. I should've visited him sooner. There was a lot he left out about this mall of freakazoids.

My mate had almost eaten a corn dog from a *demon*, and I know for a fact it wasn't made of pork, beef, or chicken. A lycan's nose didn't lie.

I trotted beside Tracy like a loyal pet as we left the food court and continued through the mall. Fates, she smelled good. Like vanilla and orange blossoms and oak. It was soothing and cheerful and earthy, but most of all, it was comforting. I downright pranced at her side, tongue lolling out of my mouth as I stared up at her, slack-jawed and already hella obsessed.

If anyone judged me for it they could eat my shorts. It was normal to be obsessed with your mate. I couldn't even handle Wayne trying to comfort her back at the shop, screaming into his mind that if he touched my mate, I'd bite his hand clean off. He had had a good laugh at her naming me Baby and giving me this pretty pink collar, but I wore it with pride.

I would be her pretty Baby forever—*if* she didn't freak out when... ya know, she found out I wasn't a dog, but a six-and-a-half feet tall lycan and her fated mate.

Humans didn't know about us. Rarely, one of our kind would end up like me with a human mate. I'd seen it go well and I'd seen it go badly. I watched Tracy as she walked beside me, her stride much more relaxed than it had been before, chin raised confidently.

She could handle it, I was sure.

She was an interesting thing. I loved the way she hummed to the music just under her breath, even if it was a little off key. She darted past the door to the kid's casino. I didn't blame her, the place got my hackles up too. It smelled like... death, pizza, blood, and... demon?

How many fucking supes were in this mall? There were even vamps. I caught a whiff of them when we passed Sizzling Discourse, dragging Tracy away as fast as I could.

I started the day exhausted, now I was thrumming with protective energy. I had a human mate who had no idea that we were in a mall full of demons, vampires, shifters, and who knew what else? I growled just thinking about how much danger she was in.

Tracy patted my head, cooing comfortingly. "Did something scare you, big boy?"

I huffed. Nothing scared me, but her gentle touch felt so good.

“You’re such a good boy, being so brave. You’re the best boy, Baby, isn’t that right?”

Oh shit. My tail thumped in rapid speed as I started to pant. Amelia had praised me like a dog when she had let me play at her house, but it never felt like *this*. That was strictly a platonic arrangement.

When my mate said it, my brain stopped working, all blood redirecting straight to my dick. I was going to be flashing a red rocket in a mall full of people if I wasn’t careful.

Paperwork. My to-do list. How many messages Margie probably had written down for me already.

Yep, that did it. Just thinking about everything waiting for me on my desk at the pack office was enough to stop me from embarrassing myself, but I filed the praise information away for later.

I loved when she called me a good boy, and I wasn’t even just a good boy. I was the best boy. I puffed my chest out and practically pranced as I followed her.

We passed the video store—Tracy seemed entranced as she looked at all the decor in the windows. It was very glam, but with a rocker edge that highlighted the horror titles showcased there. Her eyes darted all over the store until they widened, a bright blush taking over her cheeks.

I searched the store to see what had caused that reaction, my eyes locking on a sign: *Red Light Video: Purveyors of your deepest desires. Yes, that one. Walk-ins welcome to apply for membership.*

That was interesting. I wondered what deepest desires had made my mate so flush. Would she be willing to play with me

like I wanted? Just seeing her with the leash in her hand, knowing she had control... That I wore *her* collar was alluring. Would she understand, or would she judge me like I thought the pack would?

She scurried forward in her embarrassment and turned the corner. I trotted behind her, lost in my thoughts about what her secret fantasies might be. The possibilities distracted me, so much so that I missed the asshole lurking around the corner.

His hand darted out and grabbed Tracy, pulling her into a little alcove with so much force it pulled the leash taut, yanking me by my collar.

The stench of her fear surrounded us, curdling in my nose as he laughed, the sound muffled by a hockey mask.

He was just a human, but humans could be worse than even the most dangerous of supes. They acted on fear and impulse, and they had little regard for each other. He clearly didn't have any regard for Tracy.

Tracy was absolutely terrified. I snarled at him but she pushed me behind her, planting her legs firmly in front of me even as I leaned around them to bare my teeth. I couldn't push past her without knocking her over, and that would leave her vulnerable to this asshole.

"You're okay, Baby—" Tracy's words were soft and sweet. The man's lips quirked up when she said it before dropping into a scowl when he realized her words were for me.

"I won't let him hurt you." She was so brave, even as her voice shook with fear. *She* was trying to protect *me*. The stink of my shame joined her fear.

Tracy still thought I was a scared and abused dog in need of her protection. I could take this guy any day of any week, but I

sat frozen, unsure of what to do.

I couldn't just attack a human in broad daylight. They'd drag me straight to the pound and put me down, or realize I wasn't a dog and put me in a zoo or a sanctuary. If they realized I was anything but an animal, well... that would be the worst option.

We weren't supposed to shift in front of humans. That broke the agreements our kind had carefully laid out to stay hidden, unseen. They couldn't know about our world, not unless they absolutely had to. Tracy would. She was my mate. I was going to tell her everything as soon as I got the chance, but I didn't want to have that conversation like this.

I didn't want to scare her by suddenly turning into a man, or worse, my hybrid form.

I glared at the man, as he chuckled again, fingers digging under the mask with his free hand to pull it off and revealing his face.

He looked utterly forgettable, like any other guy off the street—except for the sadistic twist of his lips. Pure malice radiated from those cold, blue eyes. Tracy didn't seem surprised to see who he was, but the tremble in her legs grew stronger. She knew him, and that was not a comfort. Her terror had a history.

“Dillon...” Her voice wobbled.

“Hey, Tracy.” He leaned forward to loom over her, trying to appear both nonchalant and like he was in power. I wanted to press around her to get to him, but that would only shove her closer to him and it wasn't worth the risk... yet.

She swallowed, taking a deep, trembling breath. “W-what are you doing here?” Tracy dug her fingers into my fur. I nosed against the leg of her jeans trying to soothe her, even as my growl continued to rumble in my chest.

“Oh, you know. Wondering why I have to hunt my girlfriend down to drag her home.”

So this was the ex Wayne had asked about. He had done me a solid, asking her about her current relationship status so I would know. I wanted to call him through our pack link for back up, but I couldn't. Not yet. Pack linking required concentration. The conversation would be too much of a distraction.

“I'm not your girlfriend anymore, Dillon.” She shifted for stronger footing, hands fisted at her side, my leash carefully tucked in one. I was proud of her for standing up to him.

“Yes, you are,” he scoffed. “You're just throwing a tantrum.”

I barked, the sound echoing in the alcove as I bared my teeth and snarled again. How dare he talk to her like that. Is that what she had been dealing with?

Dillon sneered in my direction. “You're not bringing that mutt home, though. Get rid of it.”

Tracy reached down to pat my head, her hand fumbling as she moved without looking, not taking her eyes on Dillon. Good girl. I licked her fingers, trying to assure her I was fine. I didn't want her to focus on me right now.

“Baby is mine. I'm not going with you, and neither is he.”

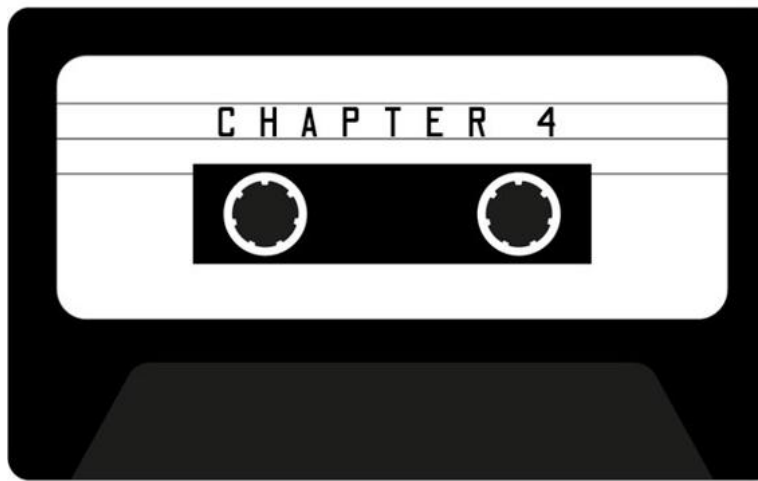
His anger radiated from every pore, the spicy scent making my wolf sneeze. “No, you threw a hissy fit over nothing and left. I gave you time to get over your bullshit, but this isn't over. Not until I say it is.”

“I don't want anything from you, Dillon. Leave me alone.” She wrenched her arm from his grip and turned to leave, but that was her mistake.

Never turn your back on danger. I barked to warn her, but he was already moving.

Dillon grabbed her throat, digging his fingers in so hard I knew she would have bruises. She dropped my leash, hand shooting up to struggle against his hold with a cry of pain, but it was already too late.

I hoped to fates my Alpha was ready to do some damage control. My joints popped and cracked as my body expanded, my shift taking over.



TRACY

MY THROAT ACHED FROM WHERE DILLON'S HAND SQUEEZED it, unable to scream as I fought for air. I didn't know what Dillon would do, but I hoped Baby could get away.

"I'll never leave you alone, Trace. I'll get rid of that dog, that stupid fucking apartment you leased, and then you'll be right back where you belong."

He shook me by the throat, my nerves rattling as my body jerked. I was afraid he would hurt my new, terrified dog, and for some reason that was scarier than Dillon harming me. I felt fiercely protective of Baby, and he was only in this mess because of me.

I had dropped his leash by accident, but I hoped he ran fast and far and found someone who was able to take good care of him. I wasn't going to have a chance to do it myself.

Dillon was almost gleeful in his rage as he smiled down at me. I closed my eyes, dreadful acceptance and lack of air weighing them down.

“What the—” The squeak of fear in his voice and a series of snaps and scuffling behind me made my eyes spring open. His mouth was agape, chin trembling in terror as he looked over my shoulder and *up*.

His forceful grasp let go. I gasped air into my lungs, stumbling back into something... enormous. A deep, guttural growl sounded, so close to me that my hair ruffled against my ears and I could feel the vibration in my chest.

I craned my head back, heartbeat cantering in my chest like a racehorse.

A monster.

I gaped in shock, frozen as I stared up at the elongated snout of a canine-like face. A meaty paw tipped with razor sharp claws and attached to a surprisingly humanoid arm shoved me behind their hulking, fur covered form. I slid to the ground, no longer able to support myself on my trembling legs. I stared at the monster, trying to make sense of what I was seeing. Black spots still danced in my vision from where Dillon had cut off my air. The fur was almost the same color as Baby's, but it was hard to make out anything clearly.

Baby! Panic flooded me, knowing the creature had to have scared him. Baby was... My eyes darted around the area as I rubbed my throat, trying to soothe the ache.

Baby was gone.

I turned back to the creature, standing a good six and a half feet tall. It looked back at me where I cowered on the floor,

my entire body shaking. There was a flicker of sadness in its amber eyes as it traced up and down my body...

Amber eyes the same color as Baby's.

The creature turned back to snarl at Dillon who was as frozen as I was. I looked closer, seeing Baby's soft, pink collar straining against the beast's throat, somehow still intact. The leash dangled over its shoulder like a bizarre scarf.

My... My dog wasn't a *dog*.

My next breath ripped from my chest and came back on a searing gasp. The stench of urine filled the air and I watched a dark stain spread over Dillon's pants where I could barely see him through the creature's legs. The beast lunged towards Dillon, but didn't swipe even though those claws would likely shred my ex to pieces. Dillon blitzed down the hall, turning the corner on squeaking sneakers, abandoning me to the beast.

It turned and reached for me, but I scrambled away, releasing a startled cry.

Would Baby hurt me?

"Why... What... What are you?" I croaked out, my throat still aching from Dillon's hold and choked with fear.

A whimper came from the monster. Its eyes looked panicked and remorseful, but how was I to know if that was real? If he was hungry and I was lying to myself, I was about to be a snack..

The giant form began to shift, dark fur receding to reveal skin. Human skin.

Baby shrank a good half foot, human muscles replacing furry limbs, the ruff of his chest becoming pecs and abs and... a truly buff bod.

God, Tracy, you're checking out your dog and he's about to eat you.

Somehow, I knew that wasn't true. Baby hadn't lashed out at me—he had shielded me—but I still didn't know what he was, or why he pretended to be a dog.

I watched on with wide eyes as Baby's body finished transforming. Where my dog had been replaced with a monster, *both* were now replaced with a man.

A man with long, dark hair that looked so soft. A scruffy beard I wanted to feel along my skin. Scars I wanted to trace with my fingers. Those soulful amber eyes that took on a whole new dimension when framed in a man's face and...

My eyes trailed down to an impressive...

All the blood rushed to my cheeks, worse than it had at the video store. Baby looked down at his body in panic and reached with a massive hand to cover his very large, very naked cock. His face flushed like mine.

"I'm sorry." His words were rushed, stumbling over each other in their hurry to escape his mouth. The frantic tumble seemed at odds with his deep, smooth voice, like river water over rock. "I'm so sorry, Tracy. I'm not a perv, I swear. Fates, you must be freaked... I can smell your fear and... interest? But nevermind that..." He paused, looking surprised for a moment, then cleared his throat.

"Wh-wh-what... *How?*" I had a million questions, but that seemed to be the most pressing.

"I'll explain everything, I swear, but not here. I, uh, I'm kind of in a compromising position." He nodded down at his naked form and then went quiet for a minute, gaze unfocused, but brow knit as if he was concentrating.

“Will you take me back to the pet store? Wayne will help.”

“Who?”

“The blond guy who owns the Twisted Whisker, he’ll help us.”

“How do you know—”

Baby whipped his head to the side at a loud laugh from further down the hall, the noise of the mall filtering back in. “I’ll explain when we get there, I promise.”

“But...” Was I really going to just walk with this monster-man-dog back to where his friend was waiting? How did Wayne even know we were coming? Would they hurt me?

“Tracy.” His voice was soothing as he said my name. I liked the way it sounded on his tongue. “I promise no harm will come to you. But I have to get out of here. I can’t be seen like this. If your ex comes back we need to be gone.”

A mix of emotions played across his face. Nervousness, embarrassment, pleading, and care danced through his eyes, but they lacked any of the hardness and chill that I had seen so many times in Dillon’s. For some reason, I trusted this man—this monster—but more than that, I desperately wanted answers to my questions.

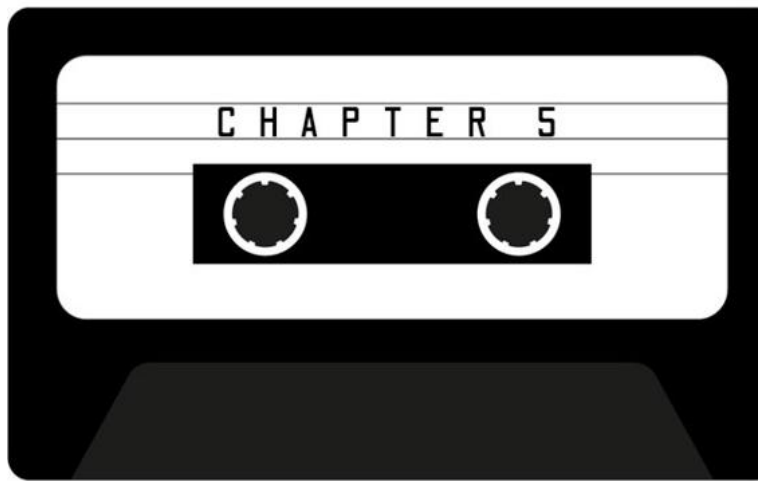
“Okay,” I answered, nodding as I swallowed my fear. “Let’s go back to the pet store.”

He heaved out a breath and seemed to relax. Something about him being at ease made my own nerves calm. “I’m JJ, by the way. It’s nice to meet you Ma— I mean, Tracy.”

I watched in awe as his body began to shake and then shift, shoulders and legs popping along their joints again as his body realigned. *Did that hurt?* It was one of the many questions I wanted to ask.

When Baby—no, JJ—the “dog” stood before me once more, he took the handle of his lead in his mouth and nudged my hand with his snout. I took it from him and sighed. “Let’s go, JJ.”

My monster-man-dog trotted after me, tail swishing behind him as we went.



TRACY

“I’VE ALREADY GOT AN INCUBUS BUDDY WORKING ON THE cameras. If they can’t handle corrupting the footage, I’ve got a backup guy. Ethan over at Lost and Found will help make sure nothing gets out.”

The owner of the Twisted Whisker—who I now knew as Wayne—wasn’t talking to me. He was talking to JJ. I was watching a man have a full conversation with a dog. Ten minutes ago, I would have thought he was crazy.

JJ chuffed, seemingly in response, then walked forward, pulling the lead as he looked over his shoulder, urging me to follow.

“He said he wants to talk to you in the back. Don’t worry, you’re safe here. I’ll keep watch and JJ can fill you in on everything.”

“How—”

Wayne tapped the side of his head. “We can talk in here. He’ll tell you all about it, don’t worry. Welcome to the real world, Tracy.” He gave me a crooked grin and then shoed me on.

I followed JJ to the stockroom, ready for answers. There were crowded shelves at the entry that gave way to a little sitting area with a small table and a pile of clothes stacked neatly on top of it.

JJ pushed one of the chairs out with his nose, pawing at the seat. He looked at it pointedly until I sat down. I watched in fascination as his body began to change once more, looking away as his nakedness became more apparent. It seemed I was going to be talking to the man, not the monster. The very naked man.

“I’m sorry, one second.”

The rustle of fabric and the sound of a zipper followed before JJ crouched down in front of me, turning my face to meet his gaze. He was still barefoot and shirtless, but had managed to put on some pants... though he hadn’t bothered to remove the pink collar and leash.

“Are you okay?”

I took stock of my situation. The more I thought over the last six hours, the more upset I got.

“No, I’m absolutely not okay.” I shot to my feet and he staggered back, watching me as I began pacing, hands moving wildly as I spoke. “My dog isn’t a dog—he’s a monster, or a man, or both, I don’t know.”

“I’m a lycan—”

“My ex is stalking me, and tried to threaten me, and then pissed himself.”

JJ growled. “He won’t ever bother you again.”

“And now I’m in some grody stockroom with said dog-monster-man and I don’t know what’s happening or what you want to do to me or where to go from here.”

“I know it’s a lot—”

I spun to face him, my hands going to my hips. “No. Getting calls from your creepy ex at midnight is a lot, this is too much.” I felt the tear roll down my cheek. I didn’t even realize I had started crying.

JJ twitched towards me and then froze as if he was fighting to hold himself back. “Please don’t cry, Tracy. I promise I will never hurt you, I physically *can’t* hurt you, even if I wanted to.”

“Yes, you can,” I said, wiping my cheeks. “You’re a big monster.”

“No, sweetheart, I wouldn’t ever, but I *can’t*.” He reached for me, even as I started to back away from him again. “You’re my mate.”

All my thoughts skidded to a stop. “What the hell does that mean?”

“Please, just... Let’s sit down, and I’ll explain everything.”



“SO LET ME GET THIS STRAIGHT.” WE WERE STILL IN THE stockroom of the Twisted Whisker, where JJ had spent the last hour explaining everything to me as I sat in the chair at the little table. “You’re a lycan... which is a kind of monster.”

“We typically call ourselves supernaturals, or specifically shifters, but yes.”

“And you can turn into a dog and a... werewolf? And Wayne is one, too. And you live in a pack with others like you.”

He nodded, staring at me intently with a hopeful expression. “That’s right.”

“And I’m your... fated mate? Which is like a soulmate, but more intense?”

“Pretty much. Did you feel drawn to me when you first saw me? Did you want to protect me, care for me?”

I paused, pursing my lips as I thought. JJ wasn’t wrong. I felt drawn to him as soon as I saw him. I thought it was because he looked like a kindred spirit. It also explained how protective I had felt of him when Dillon showed up, and why I hadn’t run like hell when he asked me to come back here and talk.

“You’ll feel it right here,” he said, pointing to his heart. “It’s like a thread connecting the two of us. Close your eyes and focus on feeling.”

I closed my eyes and concentrated. He was right. There was a flicker of something warm and bright that felt like it pulled me towards him, right from my heart. I opened my eyes and stared at where his own hand was placed over his heart in wonder.

I couldn’t stop my gaze from wandering over the chiseled muscles of his chest. I wanted to lick the bead of sweat that was rolling down his neck.

That was also apparently part of this mate bond thing. They triggered a very strong attraction.

The mate bond, the hidden supes, everything made sense now, even as wild as it all was, except...

“There’s one thing I still don’t get. Why were you acting like a stray dog? Is that a shifter thing?”

“I... It’s a *me* thing. No one else in the pack knows. No one except for Wayne.” JJ sighed and looked down at his feet, still bare. “It’s how I relax and get away from it all. My job is pretty stressful; sometimes I just don’t want to be me, and being a ‘dog’ is a great escape. I get to just be my animal and relax. Humans do it too, sometimes.”

He lifted his head to watch me, eyes full of so much yearning. For understanding. For acceptance. For *me*.

It was all a lot to take in, but I couldn’t deny his pull. JJ was attractive, protective, and in the short time we had gotten to know each other, funny and sweet.

“Is that something you do with other people?” I looked towards the door. “Or just Wayne?”

“I used to see a witch who understood and would let me hang out at her cabin for a few days when the need arose. She moved, and I got desperate. This is the first time I’ve come to Twisted Whisker.”

Jealousy burned through me at the mention of another woman. I didn’t like the idea of him being anyone else’s Baby. The feeling surprised me, but it did make sense considering what he had told me about mate bonds.

JJ chuckled and stroked my cheek. “Things with Amelia were nothing like you’re thinking, not with her. And not with Wayne, either. Purely platonic. But with you...”

He trailed off as he stroked my cheek.

“With me?” I waited patiently for him to continue.

“With you, I would... consider more. Want more, if you were open to it.” His heated gaze bore into mine. There was so much longing there, but the tightness around his eyes also spoke of fears. “If you’re open to that.”

JJ reached up to scrub his neck, gaze going to the floor. “I know it’s... Well, I know it’s not common, and it’s a lot to take on top of everything else. The last thing I would want is for you to feel uncomfortable...”

He looked up at me from under his lashes where he knelt before me.

With Dillon, I had craved affection and care, but I was only a possession to him. Once he had me on his shelf, he didn’t feel the need to care for me anymore. With JJ, things seemed different.

He had shown more care for my feelings and needs than Dillon ever had. Fate itself had tied us together. It felt good and reassuring. JJ wasn’t out to possess me like an object, not like Dillon had. He even wanted *me* to lead in these private moments—he was wearing a collar, after all. It was a little kinkier than things I had tried in the past, but I was intrigued.

I had no doubt there would be times when he would want to take the lead—he was a protector, a defender, and a leader in his pack, after all—but he wasn’t afraid to follow me either.

There was already so much trust between us. I reached up to cup his cheek, smiling as my other hand took the handle of the lead. “If you want to play, we can.”

His eyes lit up as his entire body went rigid, ears twitching forward.

“But you have to be a good boy and earn it.” I heard his tail straining in the leg of his pants as it tried to wag, making me grin. His eagerness was intoxicating. I loved how much he wanted to please me, to *earn* my praise instead of just demanding it.

“Sit, Baby.”

A growl rumbled up from his chest as he sank back to rest on his ankles. It wasn't the threatening sound he had met Dillon with, but instead one of pleasure. He *liked* when I called him Baby.

“Stay.” He froze, body rigid, poised for my next command even as an eager whine escaped his throat.

“If anything becomes too much, you just need to use your human words, okay?”

JJ nodded so quickly his ears bobbed, bangs falling in his face.

I bit my lip as I watched JJ on his knees for me, waiting anxiously for my command. Being in control was new for me, but I liked it. I liked it a lot.

I took him in, my eyes half-lidded. He was beautiful, even his scars. They dotted and lined his arms and chest, even along his face, but they told the story of his life. I wanted to know what happened to cause each and every one.

“Come here, Baby.” JJ crawled forward on his hands and knees, peering up at me expectantly.

I patted my thighs. “Closer, please. Right here.”

He scooted forward between my thighs and nuzzled my leg, pressing his cheek into the denim of my jeans. His hair felt like silk as I ran my fingers through it, scratching behind his ears. He let out a satisfied whimper as I pet him.

The tufts on the ends of his ears felt like the velvet of his collar, buttery soft, and they were so sensitive, twitching when my fingers grazed them in my exploration. I traced their edges before moving back to his hair, massaging his scalp.

JJ melted against me, completely relaxed. His hands smoothed languidly up and down my legs, squeezing my calves and thighs as he returned the easy affection.

After a few moments of just soaking each other in, he nosed at the edge of my sweater, lifting it and making me giggle at the tickle of his beard on my midriff. A flick of a tongue against my skin had me gasping and jumping in my seat.

“Naughty, Baby.” I chastised, pushing his face off of my lap and pointing at him even as I smirked.

He rested back on his haunches, looking chagrined.

I reached forward, taking his chin in my hands. “Did you want to kiss me, JJ? Is that what you were asking for?”

He whined with need but then shook his head, a determined gleam in his eye. “I want to do more than kiss you, Tracy.” His voice had deepened with need, the sound a husky and rich whisper.

In a quick movement, JJ rose to his feet, picking me up by my thighs. I threw my arms around his neck to balance myself, the room filling with my surprised laughter. JJ set me on the table, pushing his folded clothes off in one quick swipe as his lips met mine.

Every part of me came alive. It was more intense than any physical experience I’d had with a partner before, and all he had done was kiss me. He nibbled at my bottom lip, coaxing me to open so our tongues could tangle as he deepened the kiss.

The rush of it all almost made me dizzy. I wanted him, needed him in a way I had never experienced before. JJ broke the kiss, breath mingling with mine as he panted.

“That was intense.” My voice was breathy as I fought to calm my racing heart.

“It’s the mate bond,” he whispered. “It makes everything... more stimulating. More intimate. Just... more.”

“I want more.” I reached down and grabbed the hem of my sweater, pulling it over my head. I was never this bold, always afraid of what Dillon would say, but I wasn’t afraid of what JJ would say.

I trusted him, even if it seemed too early to do so.

JJ’s hands cupped my waist, pulling me close as he peppered kisses across my jaw and down the column of my throat. Fingers slid up my ribs to tease the undersides of my breasts. They had never really been large enough for me to warrant wearing a bra everywhere, especially not with a sweatshirt.

His teeth pressed into the juncture of my shoulder and neck. Not hard enough to break the skin, but hard enough to probably leave a mark, pulling a whimper from me.

“Why does that feel so good?” I moaned.

He laved at the spot before his hungry eyes met mine. “When you’re ready, when *we’re* ready, I’ll bite you here.” He nuzzled the spot affectionately. “It will bond us together forever. Your lifespan will extend to match mine, and you’ll be part of the pack. You’ll be able to talk to me mentally like I did with Wayne, but there’s no rush on that. Relationships tend to move quickly for shifters, but we have all the time in the world, and I want to go at a pace that feels comfortable for you.”

I pressed a kiss to the tip of his nose. “Thank you. I’m definitely not ready for that, but someday.” I watched for the familiar signs of anger, but JJ just smiled. He really was willing to be patient.

I returned his smile, but my lips curved up flirtatiously. “There are plenty of other things for us to explore in the meantime.”

His grin turned dirty, full of sensual promise. “I like the sound of that.”

I reached for the end of the lead, running my hand up it until it got close to his collar and gave it a little pull. “Do you think you’ve earned more, yet, Baby?”

He startled with surprise, blinking owlshly for a moment, lip poking out in a pout. An adorable whimper sounded from his throat.

Oh my God, I had no idea hearing a man whimper would make me feel like *that*. I could feel myself growing wet with need. I remembered how he said he could smell my “interest” before. I bet he could smell me now.

I swallowed, fighting to focus as I looked into his amber gaze. “Beg, Baby. Beg for your treat. You only get your reward if you’re a good boy.”

JJ sank back to his knees, pulling me to the edge of the table. His fingers went to the button of my jeans as he looked up at me in question. “Please, Tracy. Let me make you feel good.” He played his fingers across my stomach, sending little chills along my spine. “I’ve been such a good boy. I’m your best boy, remember? Let me taste you.”

Oh my God.

I nodded so fast it made my head spin, but JJ was already moving. He made quick work of my jeans and panties, pulling

them down in one quick motion as I lifted my hips to help him, before he dove forward and licked up my center.

I threw my head back as sensation took over, moans and whimpers escaping my throat as he licked and sucked, tongue circling my clit before pressing long licks to my pussy until I was quivering, hovering on the edge of bliss.

“JJ, please!” I cried out.

“Now who’s begging?” He chuckled against my pussy before diving back in again.

“I’m so close,” I whined.

Two fingers pressed into me, making my hips buck as that relentless tongue continued to work. I was wound so tight, rocking myself on his fingers and bucking into his face, chasing my release. When JJ’s teeth pressed against my clit in a gentle bite, that was it.

My orgasm tore through me, pleasure radiating from my core through my limbs until I was a puddle, sweaty and satiated laying on the table.

JJ continued to lap at my pussy, fingers gently curling inside of me to pull every last bit of pleasure from my body.

“Look at you.” He rose and leaned over me, licking the fingers he had inside of me clean before his big hands went to either side of my body. He leaned in to kiss me, beard still wet from my juices, but I didn’t care. I returned the kiss with a feral need, spent from coming harder than I ever had before, but still needing more.

“Skin flushed with that glow of satisfaction. Those gorgeous eyes glassy with need.” His chest rumbled with approval, the sound vibrating through his body into mine. “You’re so beautiful when you come.”

My index finger curled through the D-ring of his collar, pulling him close for another kiss. “I need you,” I whispered against his lips. “I need you inside of me.”

I heard a soft *schick* and the scrape of nails against wood. Turning my head, I could see the scores JJ’s claws had left in the table where his hands had shifted at my words.

“I want to, Tracy. Fates, do I want to, but I’m on the edge, sweet girl.” He nuzzled into my cheek before gently biting my earlobe, sending another jolt of pleasure through me.

“I don’t know how much control I have.” His voice sounded pained with the admission, even as I watched the claws and fur retract.

“What do you mean?”

“I... We shift when our emotions are heightened. I’m not sure I won’t change.”

“Become your... werewolf?” I paused. I thought about the monster that had protected me from Dillon, and the heat I had felt even then at seeing its hulking form. It wouldn’t exactly be a hardship. I smirked at him in challenge. “I’m willing to try if you are.”

JJ froze, eyes locked onto mine in question. I cupped his cheek, willing him to see my excitement and need. “I’m not afraid.”

He said he couldn’t hurt me, and I believed him. If I was mated to a shape-shifting lycan, I wanted him—All of him, the man, the wolf, and the monster.

“If you’re sure.” He rose up, reaching to remove my shoes and pants. We had left them hanging around my ankles in our rush. “The second you say stop, we stop, okay?”

I nodded as JJ pressed my legs open, leaving me bared to him completely on the table as he reached for his own zipper, shucking off the rest of his clothing.

Oh, sweet heavens.

JJ's cock sprang free of his shorts to hover between his legs, too heavy to snap flush to his skin. The tip was flushed almost purple, already weeping precum. It tapered midshaft, but at the base...

At the base, there was a large swell with a thick vein that pulsed with his arousal. It wasn't his balls, those hung below.

"What is *that*?" I stared in awe... and a bit of concern.

"It's a knot, sweet girl. Don't worry," JJ chuckled. "Fate literally made us for each other. You're my mate; you can take me."

The appreciative tone he used when he called me his mate sent a trill of pleasure through me. "If you're sure." There was still a thread of concern in my voice. It was a very big knot.

He leaned forward with a cocky grin, taking my mouth in a searing kiss. "It's okay, Tracy. I've got you. I'll make sure you're ready for it."

"Okay." I knew he would stop if I asked, but I trusted that it wouldn't be necessary, not if he was right.

JJ's body pressed me into the table, the weight of him reassuring as his hands began to explore me again. He pinched and brushed his thumbs over my nipples, bringing them into taut little peaks as he worked me back up until I was panting against his lips.

My hips bucked as two of his fingers entered me again, his responding growl rumbling against my neck as he licked and

nipped at my flesh. A third finger joined, stretching me slowly, then a fourth. I was so full, but I knew there was still more to come. The idea of being stretched around him sent a thrill up my spine.

His thumb rubbed circles over my clit as his fingers pumped in and out of me until I gripped the table, gushing down his hand as my orgasm crested. His fingers slid out of me and more of my juices pooled on the table as I felt the tip of his cock press against me. I shifted so I could look down, watching with wide eyes where he was lined up against my entrance, that bulge at his base looking a little more concerning from this angle.

“Eyes on me, Tracy.” His amber gaze held mine as he slowly pressed into me, stretching me wide. JJ cupped my face as his hips pressed forward.

“You’re doing so well, sweet girl. Do you feel how perfectly you squeeze me, how my cock was made just for you?” He whispered dirty reassurances and compliments, never looking away from my eyes. My breath caught, little whimpers escaping as he filled me.

The ruddy bulge of his knot met my body as JJ stilled. “Do you like the way I fill you up, Tracy?” He pressed soft kisses against my cheeks, my nose, my forehead.

“Mmhm,” I hummed. “I’ll be even better when you start to move.” I lifted my hips, sliding back just a little and then forward again on his cock.

He gave me another searing kiss. His hips canted back and forth, slowly at first, gliding in and out of me in a steady rhythm. The burn of his initial entry had faded, leaving only pleasure as he slid against every spot that drove me wild with each thrust. My legs locked around his hips, feet brushing against his furry tail where it swayed behind him.

Each of JJ's breaths was harsher than the last as he fucked me until they were a steady growl. Fur began to sprout along his arms, and I watched in wonder as his face began to elongate again. His eyes were filled with panic as his monstrous form took over, but I just stroked his chest in reassurance, fingers moving along skin and then tangling with fur.

His body shook as the change took over. I could feel the shake of his bones snapping into his hulking form until he rose up, now fully a monster.

He licked my cheek in one long slurp, his head larger and more canine, snout elongated with a massive row of gleaming white teeth. I pet his chest and smiled. "You're beautiful, my monster."

He preened, giving me a wolfish grin. Fur tickled against my skin as he bent over me, eyes locking onto mine. With a satisfied growl and a powerful thrust, he began to fuck me in earnest.

The wood of the table began to splinter as JJ thrust into me with wild abandon, his monster unbothered by the destruction as he pulsed into me, trusting that he wouldn't hurt me as he lost himself to the moment.

Giant, clawed hands cupped me to him as the wood gave way. He was careful not to scratch me, even as he lifted and lowered me up and down on his massive cock. I cried out, my moans filling the room along with his snarls. I felt like a doll in his hands, caught between the cataclysm of how carefully he held me and the feral way he fucked me, cherishing and claiming me all at once.

My fingers dug into his chest as another climax tore through me, ripping pleasure from me like it was owed. I screamed, burying my face against him, and then it happened.

JJ flexed his hips one more time as I came, pressing his knot into me. He stretched me further than I'd thought possible, filling me like no one else could.

I hissed in pain at the intrusion, but the sound became a long, drawn out moan as pain gave way to a sea of pleasure. It rolled over me in waves. The head of his cock twitched inside my pussy as warm jets of cum filled me, his knot locking us in place. A howl ripped from his throat, echoing around us. JJ rocked against me, unable to thrust completely but still chasing our shared pleasure with small movements that sent paroxysms shaking through me. His beast cupped my face in a massive paw that covered the side of my head. I nuzzled into the touch as he tilted my chin so my gaze met his once more.

With one last reassuring lick up the side of my face making me giggle, I felt as JJ, the man, took over once more.

Soon, I was back in his arms, surrounded by human skin as our sweaty bodies stayed pressed together. His knot shrunk and his cock slid free of me, our combined release sliding down my thighs. He slumped into the chair—it had survived the experience, even if the table had not—cradling me in his lap.

“Are you okay?” His voice was strained with worry.

“Mmm,” I hummed against his neck. I pressed my teeth into the same place he had on mine, his body jerking as he groaned. “I’m great. I’ll be sore tomorrow, but that was...” I searched for a word that would encompass everything that had happened, my pleasure-addled brain falling short.

“Amazing,” He answered, pressing a kiss to my forehead.

I looked up and brushed his hair out of his eyes, kissing the tip of his nose. “What happens now?”

“That’s up to you.” His eyes darted around the room, taking in the splintered table, our clothes in mused piles on the floor. “First, I’ve got to apologize to Wayne for his table.”

My face heated with embarrassment, knowing that Wayne had likely heard everything. But the tingles that still lingered in my body lessened my worry.

Worth it.

JJ chuckled, probably reading my emotions. “I want to be with you, Tracy, as much as you’ll have me. We can date. We can take our time, but I want to see you.” He stroked my cheek affectionately. “I know it’s fast by human standards, but you’re welcome to come stay with me and the pack, or I can come visit you here and go back and forth. Whatever speed you’re comfortable with.”

As if I was going anywhere after that performance. Earth shattering orgasms aside, my heart warmed with his understanding. He wasn’t pressuring me into anything. The idea of being apart from him hurt, but there were a lot of things to consider.

I had been so excited when I got the keys for my new apartment, but it was tainted by Dillon, his notes and stalking making it already feel unsafe. I didn’t want to stay there, but I also didn’t want to rush into living with his pack. They hadn’t even met me yet.

“My place is new, but Dillon...”

JJ growled. “He won’t ever bother you again. I’ll make sure of it.”

I smiled at that. “I trust you.” Without the danger of Dillon, my place would be safe, at least for now. It felt good to not be pressured, to be able to take things at my own speed. “Why

don't we start with a date, and we'll see where this goes? We can grab something in the food court."

"*Not* corn dogs," JJ said firmly as we dressed. "That place is owned by a demon and you are *not* eating whatever he puts in those things."

"That dude was a demon?" I glanced at him as I slipped my foot into the leg of my jeans.

"Yep, that's why I didn't want you going there."

"Huh." Wayne had already mentioned an incubus. They were lycans themselves. I wondered what other monsters were out there.

We finished dressing, sneaking glances at each other every few moments. I helped JJ fix his bandana around his ears, even if I was sad to tuck those adorable tufts under the fabric. As I grabbed my purse, I remembered my lipstick inside. I used my compact mirror to put some on, smacking my lips together before returning it to its pocket.

"That's a good color on you," JJ said, brushing my cheek affectionately. I felt light, even giddy, as he took my hand to lead me from the room.

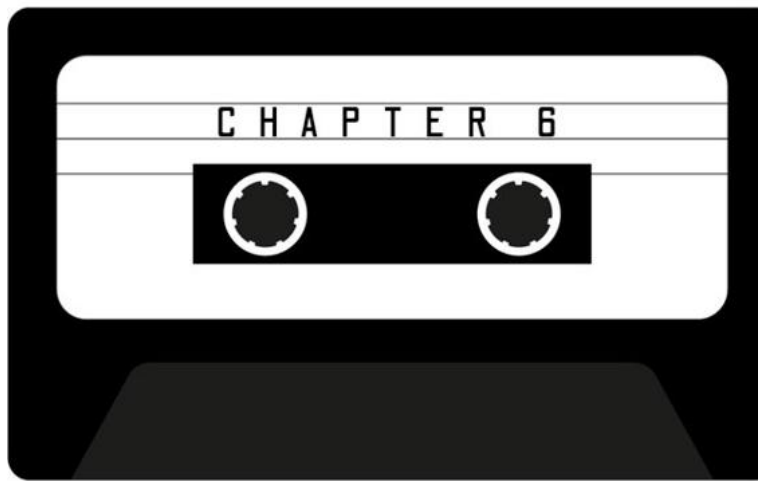
As I moved behind him I noticed he still had the pink collar around his neck, leash dangling at his side. "Wait!"

I pulled him to a stop and reached up to unclip the leash, tucking it in my purse, but when I went to unbuckle the collar, JJ put his hand over mine to still the movement.

"I want to wear it, unless it bothers you." He ran his thumb over my hand as he pulled it away from the collar, but didn't release my hand. "I want everyone to know I'm yours."

Heat rushed to my cheeks as I fought to contain my grin. “Are you sure? Do you think people will stare?”

“I hope they do.” He pressed a kiss to my cheek. “I’m proud to be yours.”



JJ

AFTER CLEANING UP THE BACK ROOM AND STACKING WHAT WAS left of the table in the corner, Tracy and I emerged to find Wayne leaning against the counter with a shit eating grin, pointedly watching the front of the store.

“Well, it sounded like your *talk* went well.”

“Don’t embarrass my mate,” I grumbled, pulling Tracy to my side. “And close your ears next time, perv.”

“You weren’t exactly subtle with the howl, but I’m happy for you.” He turned his gaze to Tracy. “It’s nice to see you with someone who will treat you right.” He winked, making my fur bristle, but she just gave him a smile.

“It is, isn’t it?” They shared a knowing look.

I narrowed my eyes at Wayne, but he just shook his head and sighed. “Pink looks good on you too, dude.”

I gave him a wild smile and fingered the collar around my neck. “It sure does.”

I cleared my throat, settling back into my enforcer persona. “I owe you a new table. I’ll order one from the pack supply and bring it by this week.”

“No rush. Get out of here and go enjoy time with your mate. Congratulations, you two.” Wayne went back to flicking through paperwork, and Tracy and I stepped out into the mall, this time hand in hand instead of her leading me as a wolf.

The sounds of shoppers surrounded us, but we were in our own little punch drunk haze, giddy and affectionate as we traipsed back to the food court. She was patient as I sniffed each counter, pretending to read the menus.

The Good Char was already out, and I glared again at the demon behind the counter who just smirked back at me. There was Broth with a Bite. It smelled like food, but it also had a questionable meat smell. I didn’t trust getting that for Tracy.

When we made it to Creepy Pasta, the scents of tomato, cheese, pasta, and meatballs wove their way through my nose. The man at the counter piqued my interest, but he just smiled knowingly. He wasn’t human, of that I was sure, but he didn’t stink of brimstone or sulfur like a demon, or the earthy notes of a shifter. He was something I hadn’t met before, but his posture told me he meant us no harm, and his stall seemed to serve actual food for humans, and that was apparently the exception here at Creepy Court.

“Italian sound good?”

Tracy squeezed my hand, her brown eyes sparking as she looked up at me with a smile. “It sounds great. I could really go for some pasta and meatballs.”

“Go ahead and grab a seat, I’ll get our food and bring it over.”

She rose up on her tiptoes to press a kiss to my cheek, then whispered in my ear, “You’re such a good boy.”

“The *best*,” I rumbled back with a chuckle.

Tracy pulled back and winked, then headed to the tables, hips swinging as she went.

I grinned after her like an idiot before turning to order, the man behind the counter hiding his own smile.



Thank you for reading *The Best Boy*. If you want to read more monster romances from Wren, check out *Surrendering to Scylla*.

Click the link or type this link into your favorite browser:

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About the Author

Wren K. Morris grew up surrounded by fields and cows but now resides in Atlanta, GA, enjoying city life with her herd of cats and two dogs. An avid reader and writer from a young age, Wren has been creating stories since she was old enough to form words, and now does so professionally.

Wren's books focus on a celebration of independent, powerful women and the beauty of our flaws. Her stories range from emotionally charged plot lines that make you feel to pun-laden, light hearted laughs.

If you like emotional, hard-won happily ever afters with Greek mythology and romance, check out her debut novel, Surrendering to Scylla:

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If you'd rather have a romantic comedy with a lot of heart (and puns), check out her Christmas series, Misadventures and Mistletoe:

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For more news on releases, you can sign up for Wren's newsletter. Enter this link into your favorite web browser:

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Misadventures and Mistletoe

[From Cocktails to Sleigh Bells](#)

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THE PHANTOM OF THE THEATER

ELLE M DREW



When something keeps interrupting horror flicks in the Creepy Court Cinema, it's up to Deborah to figure out what, or better yet who, lurks in the shadows, and what it is, or again who, they want...



Content Warnings:

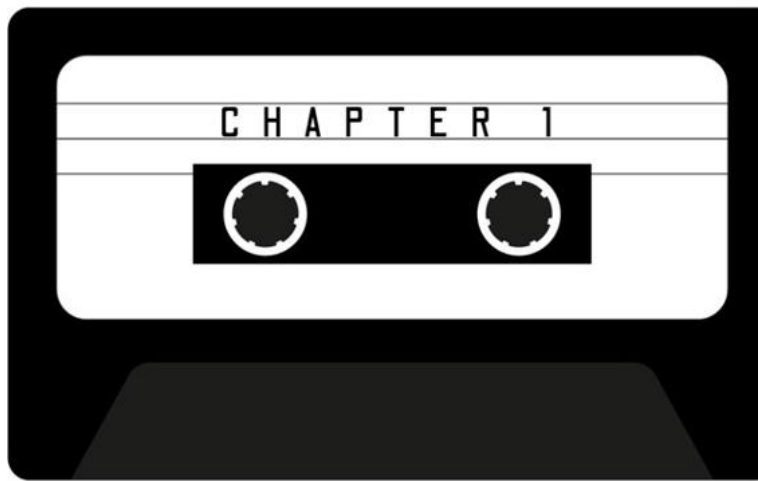
Neck Touching

Light Restraint

Explicit Consent

Light Foreplay

Cum Tasting



SLASHER FILM STRIKES AGAIN

IT WAS TAKING EVERYTHING IN DEBORAH NOT TO YAWN AS SHE stared out of the ticket booth of Creepy Court Cinema, watching the last of the mall patrons wrap up their evening of shopping, chatting, and general perusal. Boring. All boring. Even the normal kids running around and causing chaos in the mall were boring.

While the bubblegum in her mouth had long lost its flavor, Deborah could still manage to blow a few bubbles. The repetitive action of chewing, blowing, popping, and chewing again was just about the only thing to help pass the hours left in her shift. She had left her Walkman at home, so she didn't even have her normal tunes to zone out to, and she was in no mood for working on her coursework. Better to just stare at the wall. Chew, blow, pop. And reapply her lip gloss every few

minutes, because that did add a little more flavor to the bubble gum.

Ugh, why was nothing happening? It never took this long for it to happen! Never took this long for the disaster to begin! She was dying for it, dying to feel her heart racing and her blood pumping as she raced out of the booth and skated towards the stairs.

Maybe she should go check the R-rated movies for any kids who had snuck in? Yeah, that would give her a few minutes of something to do. Then, she could steal another piece of bubblegum from the stash for Trick or Treat Street, and that would kill at least ten minutes of her shift. By then, it will have happened, surely.

Chew, blow, pop, chew again. On repeat.

Not even anyone calling the phone looking for movie times or information on Black Friday shopping. There was only a few more weeks until that garbage, where parents would be dropping off their children unsupervised, and she really would be spending her whole shift dragging pre-teens out of the scary movies. How long until she could go home and veg out?

The phone rang, saving her from her thoughts, and she picked it up quickly, parroting out the normal greeting. Instead of an answer, however, or even some fumbling from someone who had called the wrong number, she heard only heavy breathing, followed by the chuckle of teenage boys in the background.

“Hello? If you have a question, ask it,” she groaned, rolling her eyes.

The heavy breathing only continued.

“Freakazoid,” she muttered while hanging up the phone. A prank call. How original.

Chew. Blow. Pop.

Maybe she would go grab a bag of popcorn to chew instead, even though after working at the cinema for a few years had made her love of popcorn fade with every shift.

A knock came on the door behind her, and she pushed back on the swivel chair to turn and answer it. It had to be a customer, because none of the other cinema workers would be stupid enough to knock on the door when they could use the walkie talkie. Great. Probably someone complaining about one of the slasher films being too scary and wanting their money back, even though a glance at the clock told her it had barely begun.

Opening the heavy door revealed two very annoyed adults, a few years younger than her, who she was positive had grabbed tickets to a slasher film. Great. Complaints because too much blood was interrupting their make-out sesh.

“The movie stopped running,” the guy said, before Deborah could even fake a customer service smile. “This happened last week too. It’s a hella headache to walk down here to get you to fix it.”

“Woah, take a chill pill. It happens. No big whoop. I’ll be right up to fix it.”

“You better,” he insisted, as though him blocking the door would somehow help her move faster. “Lazy kid.”

“Woah, again, not a big whoop. The film has barely even started. Like, what, five minutes in? Let me grab the keys and I’ll go fix it. Go get a popcorn or something, dude.”

The couple were huffing as she let the door shut in their faces, giving herself a moment to compose herself. A slasher film had stopped running. Again? This was the third time this week, bringing a smile to Deb’s lips. This was the sort of

excitement she had been hoping for. Waiting for. Dying for. And tonight, just to spice things up, she was going to test out her little theory.

After grabbing the keys to head up to the projection booth and spitting out her gum, she took a moment to check herself in her compact and reapply her lip-gloss. The whole movie stopping thing had been happening off and on for a while, but over the past month, it had happened more and more frequently, two to three times a week. This was the fourth time in only seven days, though, which meant it was ramping up.

Always a slasher film. Always a film with screaming. Always some disaster with the film that never should have happened, but somehow did, and required her special touch to fix.

It was almost like fate had seen her desires and knew exactly how to fix it.

The couple was gone from behind the door by the time Deborah skated out, and she swung by the popcorn booth, knowing she would find someone there snacking away, not paying attention. She found a trio of them, idly chatting while flipping through comics, with their backs turned.

“You know you’re not paid to stand around and look at comics, right?” she asked as she reached the counter.

None of them turned around, although one did look up. “Number eight’s film stopped working.”

“No duh, genius,” she retorted while holding up the keys to head to the projectors. “Get started on cleaning.”

“You’re not paid to tell us what to do either,” another one of the boys pointed out.

“Yeah, but I’m not cleaning up your crap,” she scoffed while skating away.

Yeah. No way she was cleaning tonight.

“Hey, get to cleaning,” she announced while skating past the usher station. “Seriously. Let’s not be here all night.”

“What’s your damage, Debs?” one of them asked. “Oh, the film messed up in six again?”

“Eight tonight,” she corrected. “No telling how long it’ll take.”

“Ugh, fine.”

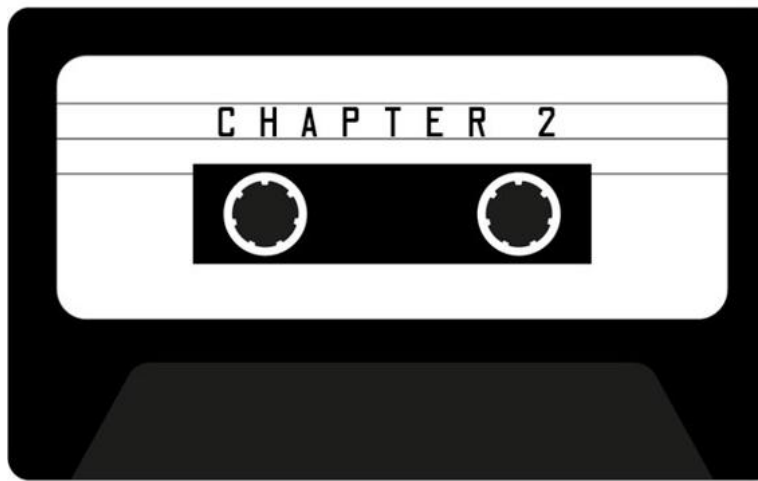
There was no way in hell Deborah was coming back down to anything being cleaned, but at least she had put in the effort to ask and let everyone know where she would be. Hopefully, no one would interrupt her, particularly since she had purposely left her walkie-talkie behind.

The door to the stairs which led up to the project booths was heavy and darkness greeted her as she pushed in, but Deborah was more than used to that. The only annoying part about heading upstairs was taking off her skates, but tonight, it wasn’t even something she lamented. In fact, it was giving her a head start on what was to come, or so she hoped.

Just had to get herself there.

With her skates off and the door automatically locked behind her, Deborah shoved the keys into her pocket and began heading up the dark steps. She could hear the complaints coming from theater eight almost immediately but didn’t waste her breath running up the stairs. She wasn’t made for working out like that and was totally not exerting any energy on it when she had other things to do.

Like finally confront her phantom.



A FIGMENT OF IMAGINATION

IT WAS FAR FROM THE FIRST TIME THAT DEBORAH HAD reached the projection booth to hear the complaints of movie watchers down below, but this time, their annoyance had her wanting to giggle. She was *not* the sort of woman who giggled.

The problem was visible the moment she flipped on the light switch, and she shook her head slightly. Of course. Obviously. The same as all the times before. A problem which none of the others would be able to manage to fix, simply because they had no experience with the projector. A problem which *theoretically* should never occur, simply because it wasn't an accident or a result of an error. The problem, really, wasn't a problem at all.

Someone had purposely sabotaged the film, and it was someone who knew how to do it without causing any real

harm. It was the sort of sabotage which would pull her, every single time, up into the booth. The kind of sabotage which she could lie and tell the others took *forever*, but would be a quick fix, followed by a moment for her to hang out and relax in peace, away from the others, with no expectations of interruptions.

If anyone interrupted her tonight, which was impossible because the door downstairs was locked and her walkie talkie was still in the booth, but if anyone did! She was going to bite their head off. Like, hella.

Messing with the guide arms on the projector and even leaving the pad roller open? So annoying, so weird, so pointless... so obvious that it was someone's attempt to get her up and into the box by herself, where they could watch her. Spy on her, really. That's what it was, technically.

There was someone spying on her, every single time she did this, and at this point, she was pretty sure they *wanted* her to know.

The first few times, she had thought it was one of the managers trying to psych her out, what with the dark shadows and the bumping around in the darkness, but one particular evening, she had been pulled from a meeting with the assistant manager to go and fix the film, and since then...

She should have probably freaked out when it happened earlier in the week, because out of the corner of her eye, she had seen something *moving* in the shadows. She had frozen immediately, and stared hard at where the movement was coming from. It had been her imagination, she had kept telling herself, until the light from the projector had reflected off something which *gleamed*. Like a disco ball or something. It

was a bright whiteness, and then it was gone, covered by the shadows.

She had more or less run back down the stairs out of there, and convinced herself it was her imagination.

Until the next night, and the projector had *once again* been messed with. But this time?

She had been prepared with her belt bag, and after fixing the projector, she had pulled out her mirror and lip gloss to reapply. Looking in the mirror, she had turned her back towards the dark shadows, so she could watch.

And there it was. Movement in the shadows. Almost like someone was wearing a sheet over them, only the sheet was more sheer, and it was black. She had told herself it was going to happen, and had kept breathing while checking her purple eyeshadow, only to then realize...

She could see the film pallets through the sheet. And the sheet was definitely still moving.

Which had led to the previous afternoon, before any showings. She had headed upstairs to check on the projector booth, making sure it was all set up and ready to go, with the lights fully on. She had looked around and checked all the corners.

No sheets. And nothing for light from the projector to reflect off of. At least, not as it had earlier in the week.

That night, nothing had gone wrong in the projector booth, which was odd, and she had obsessed over it, convincing herself it was nothing, until she had overheard someone in the library, while heading out to go to work, talking about disjunctive reasoning. She had frozen in her steps, listening as they talked about the idea that when there are multiple

possibilities, one had to look at what was true, in order to determine what was false... or something like that.

She wasn't a philosophy student or whatever they were geeking about.

But that had set her on a whole new path to figuring out what was in the shadows of the projector booth.

Something was in the shadows. Something that was not there when the lights were on. Something which she could see through. Something which had movement. A see through thing with movement.

Maybe it was the spooky season, maybe it was too many scary movies, maybe it was too much studying and not enough coffee, but now, she was open to the possibility.

The possibility that the thing, the person, watching her, was a ghost. A spectre. A phantom.

She had finally settled on phantom, because well, there was a possibility it really was a figment of her imagination. Yeah, she had to be open to that possibility as well.

But she really liked the idea that she had a phantom watching her, forcing her to come and visit them up in the shadows.

And tonight, she was going to confront it.

It had to want something. Obviously. It was doing this for her attention, so she was going to give it. Because boredom. Or maybe because the idea of some sort of ghostly spirit doing anything to get her attention made her heart race in a way that none of the boys in her class ever did. And maybe because she also wanted the attention.

Yeah, she liked the idea of something beyond this world desperate for her attention.

Fixing the projector was something she had done several times before, and really, she could have done it with her eyes closed and one hand tied behind her back, but this time, she was slow and methodical, taking her time, despite the rising complaints coming from down below. She double checked the film at each step, twisted each of the dials, checked they were all in place, all while occasionally lifting her head and rolling her shoulders. Each stretch of her neck allowed her to turn her head one way, and then the other, so she could look towards the shadows. It was there, she was sure of it, despite not seeing any signs of its presence, and so she kept going, until eventually, the projector was fixed, and ready to resume the movie once again.

She pressed the last few buttons, then took a step back to admire her work, before then turning to look towards the shadows.

She had expected to see nothing, as always, or perhaps catch just the whip of a shadow's movement, like with the shifting of a curtain.

Instead, emerging from the shadows, she was met with a pair of glowing eyes, focused on her.

Deborah froze, her tongue suddenly feeling stiff in her mouth, despite having previously told herself she was excited and prepared for such a meeting. Prepared she had certainly been, but she had expected to have to lure the creature from the shadows, to call out to them and urge them forward.

Them stepping out to meet her hadn't been on her plate.

Shit, she had practiced this! She needed to take a chill pill, before she said something stupid.

“If you’re expecting me to freak out, you’re going to be waiting for a while.”

There. That was good. A good place to start. And yet, silence remained from the pair of eyes with the shadowy figure.

Did it have a mouth? She had yet to see one. Was it even able to speak?

“Want to tell me why you keep messing with my projector?”

Silence still, and she wondered, for a moment, if it was a gleam of light reflecting on something. Maybe animatronic? No, she could see through the shadows. It was real. It was there. She could see it.

The eyes dimmed for a moment, and then glowed again. Was that a blink? Had it blinked at her?

Why did she suddenly feel like she needed to ralph?

“I mean, I think it’s pretty choice you’re so desperate to get me up here, but the staring? Don’t be grody.”

Maybe the thing didn’t have a mouth? How long was she supposed to wait for an answer? Should she walk away? Pretend as though she would accept having zero answers, and see if it would chase after her? No, no chasing. That idea had her flooded with fear, and now had her heart racing.

“You know, I have other things to do,” she pointed out while crossing her arms under her breasts. “So, I’m going to motor on out if I don’t get an answer, but I’ll admit, I’m curious why it’s always the horror movies you interrupt. Rad choice, and all that, but’—”

“You’re not afraid.”

A rush of cold whipped around her at the sound of the voice. It was deep and slow, almost dark and as though carried by the

wind that wrapped around her. It took her by surprise, and yet, the answer made her smile. It had a voice and could speak. Now, she would have her answers.

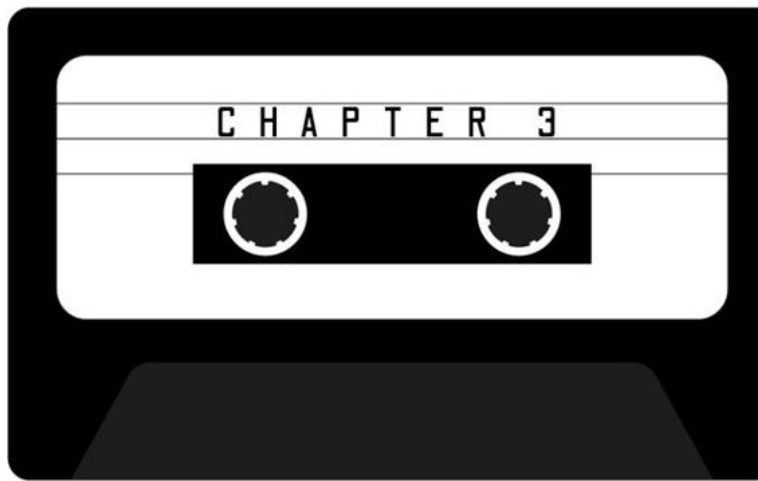
“Am I supposed to be?” she asked with the raise of her brow.

“Yes.”

Her smile curled into a smirk, and she scoffed while shifting her weight to one side. It had a voice, could speak, and it was real. It was very, very real.

“There’s nothing to be afraid of,” she answered, and looked at the being, the phantom, up and down. There was a form underneath the dark cloak of shadows, not that she could see it, but it was almost human, the way she could see the spread going towards shoulders, and then down, to where she could almost imagine legs coming from underneath. It was moving closer to her, until it was so close, she could nearly reach out and touch.

“We’ll see about that.”



SCREAM A LITTLE SCREAM FOR ME

“SO, WHAT ARE YOU?” DEBORAH ASKED, FINALLY FINDING HER voice, now that the creature before her had found theirs. “Are you a man?”

“I was, once,” they confirmed.

“What are you now?” she continued, wondering if she had been correct in her original assessment.

“Does it matter?”

“No. Yes. Not really.”

“Yes, or no?”

“Are you a phantom?”

The creature made a noise which sounded more like a snort than laughter, and yet, adding in the coldness in the air and the

depth of which the noise vibrated within her, she couldn't describe it as either.

"My, you are full of questions. Are you always this curious?"

"No," she admitted, and shifted her weight to her other leg.

"But I've been thinking of you as a phantom."

"You've been thinking of me?" the creature asked, and she could feel, somehow, with the movement of their gaze, that the creature was looking her up and down. "That is interesting. Far more interesting than what I am."

"Are you a phantom, or not?"

She received no immediate answer, which had her once more lifting her brow. The question seemed like a simple one to herself, for if the creature could speak, then surely it had a brain, and if it had the ability to think, then surely it had at some point considered what it was. And what sort of answer was, it had once been a man? Was it no longer a man? Or was it no longer a human?

"In what way would you define a phantom?" the creature asked, low and slow, as though considering it themselves for the first time.

Hmm. How odd.

"Something which... isn't real, but still produces an image?"

Now she was the one questioning her own definition. "Or perhaps a spectre? Or a ghost?"

"I think I like the term *phantom*," it answered, and the noise it gave her this time was *definitely* a chuckle. "I was once a man, but now I am something different. Something... beyond. Although, in the sense of which you are asking, yes, at times. And in those moments, I am very much real."

“Are you?” she questioned and chuckled herself. “No, of course you’re real. I could imagine up this conversation, but the damage you do to my projectors is certainly real.”

“I can do a lot more than mess with your film,” the phantom, which she was now sticking with, clarified. “Would you like to see?”

“Yes.” The answer was past her lips before she could stop herself. “Please.”

“Ahh...” And that, that noise, was like music to her ears. “Then you shall have to wait a few moments longer, but it will answer another of your questions.”

“Oh?”

“Yes.”

Well then. A phantom of many words.

“Alright. Not to geek out, but another question in the meantime. Why the theater? Are you trapped here?”

The phantom seemed to ponder her words, if that was possible, but the slight tilt of the shadow cloak gave her the image of him tilting his head slightly, as though considering their next words. “Another question which will soon be answered, but I offer you a question while we wait. If everything I desire is before me, why would I leave?”

“What is it you desire?” Deborah asked as she took a step forward. It wasn’t bravery, but instead curiosity. “What is it you want?”

The sound of gasps from the theater below interrupted their silence, and she glanced through the small window towards the theater screen. It was reaching the first scary moments of the movie, and she knew from previous viewings that a

character was about to die a gruesome death. She hoped it wouldn't ruin the current mood within the room they occupied.

The phantom moved forward before responding, his words slow and almost curled, as though the cool wind wrapped around her with each syllable. "You're a smart one. It's why I chose you. You'll figure it out, in about thirty seconds."

Deborah sucked in a breath, the chill running down her throat as she did so, as though taking a piece of him inside of her. She counted, slowly, each second ticking and burning with every beat of her heart. She couldn't look away, couldn't drag her eyes from the shadowy figure with the gleaming eyes. She could see nothing more than that, every part of him transparent, save for his eyes. He stared back, and she imagined him counting as well, for what she had no idea.

A loud boom flooded the theater below from the film, and screams followed, nearly jumping her from her skin. A jump scare, in the movie.

That was the only warning she had.

The phantom surged forward, and she had only half a second to register the transparency was gone and he was now a solid form. And with that solid form, he grasped her, the cold burning her wrist and her waist as he tugged her to him, so the shadows enveloped them both. She wanted to scream, to pull away, but she was frozen in fear, not one for the typical flight or fight.

She was very much frozen in fear, as frozen as his chilly touch.

"Are you scared now?" her phantom asked, from a mouth which she still could not see, despite the solid form. It was

covered by the darkness, much like the rest of him, as though his entire form was a cloak, and only his eyes peaked out.

Yes. Yes, she was scared. The phantom had touched her, grabbed her.

The screams stopped, and then his touch was gone, although not immediately. It faded, slowly, and she tried to grasp for him in response, to grab his clothing with her free hand, only to touch nothing.

“The screams. You have a form when there’s screaming.”

Her words were breathy, almost as though wrapped in the wind as his were, and she imagined, if it was possible, that her phantom smiled.

He didn’t pull away, despite the fact his touch was no longer something she could feel. All she could feel was the cold.

“You want me to scream, don’t you?” she asked, lifting her chin slightly as she spoke. “That’s why you want me to be afraid.”

“Yes.” Simple confirmation. One which sent shivers down her spine.

His touch tightened on her once more, before she even realized screaming was coming from the theater again, and her back hit the wall as he pressed her to it, having somehow rushed her there before she even realized. He was holding her upright; her legs must have given out at some point. She could feel his touch, could feel his hard body pressing against hers.

He was all man now, with strength in his touch and a hardness against her belly she couldn’t ignore.

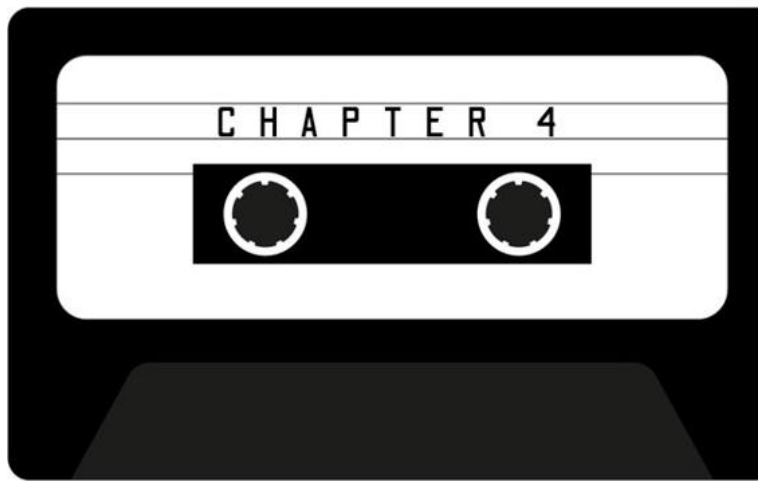
The screams faded again, and she closed her eyes finally, trying to imagine his touch still there as it once again faded. A

tiny whimper escaped her, followed by a low whine. More. She wanted more. More of his touch, despite the fear it gave her.

And then, despite the lack of screaming down below, she felt a hand at her throat. Her eyes opened, and she saw the phantom still held a form. It wasn't looking at her eyes, but instead down below, to where her breasts were surely rising and falling from her heavy breathing. She felt the hand move from her neck to her jaw, then into her hair, almost as though petting her.

“You are what I desire,” he murmured, and his voice, despite the cold, flooded her with a warmth that started low in her belly, and flooded down into her thighs. “What I crave. What I long to possess. All I need is your fear...”

And then, his touch faded.



POSSESSION

“MAKE ME SCREAM,” SHE BEGGED AS HIS TOUCH CONTINUED to fade. “Please.”

“Is that the price, to possess you?” he asked, and she could almost imagine his touch on her face again, could feel a cold chill across her cheek, and then on her lips.

“I don’t know what that means,” she fumbled, trying to find the right words. She didn’t want to talk anymore. She wanted the touch, wanted more of whatever he was doing to her. She couldn’t explain it, couldn’t comprehend her needs, beyond more of this, more of the exciting touch, and the slight fear.

“To bone,” her phantom clarified, the words sounding foreign coming from him. “Is that what your generation calls it?”

“What? My generation? How old are you?” she asked, despite wishing it was screams coming from her lips, and soft moans,

and gasps, rather than words.

“Does it matter?”

No.

“Make me scream with your touch, and you can do whatever you want to me,” she promised, and as though fate had answered her plea, screams erupted from the theater once again.

The hardness returned to her belly, then faded as the creature pulled back, only for her to feel a hand, because it had to be his hand, pressing at the juncture between her thighs. She spread her legs easily, to quickly be rewarded by his touch, pressing at her cunt through the polyester uniform pants she wore, and her underwear. She wanted them off, wanted them away, nothing between her and the phantom, save for the cloak of darkness he still wore, and tried to rock against his touch, as though it could somehow reach deeper.

“Yes, fuck, yes,” she cursed, trying to chase more, to feel more of him. She was uninhibited, felt wild, unrestrained with her shadowy partner, and reached out to grasp him, to touch and to explore him in response. She grasped at a cloak which seemed to bunch in her hands, thick and heavy, and she clung to it, even as the touch between her thighs faded. “Wait, no, no no no’—”

She screamed more than whined, in frustration rather than fear, and his touch resumed, rubbing her clit through the fabric. More. She wanted more. Needed more. More, more of him, more of his touch.

Again, his touch faded, and she felt a new fear run through her. A fear that she would never be able to get off like this or have

more of him. Fear that it would be touch and go, a constant edging, one she could never complete.

His touch resumed, somehow harder, despite the lack of any screams, and she felt herself hit the edge, so close she could almost taste her own pleasure, could almost feel the tingling in her fingers and toes. Never before had she reached the precipice so fast, so easily, and she knew it was the excitement, the rush of their meeting, the complete unknown of who he was or what she was doing, but it was also his knowing touch, as though he understood the shape of her body, and how to easily give her pleasure.

And then, right at the edge, his touch faded, leaving her throbbing and aching and empty.

“More,” she begged, unable to find anything else to say. “More. I need more. Please. I’m so—”

“Close, I know,” her phantom murmured, his words once again warm, in stark contrast to his freezing touch. Well, not freezing where she could almost still imagine his hand between her legs. That was deliciously warm. “You can have it all, so long as you give me your fear, and your screams.”

“All you need is my fear?” she asked, breathless. “You have it. I’m afraid this will end. That I won’t finish. That this isn’t real. That I won’t feel you inside of me, won’t understand this. I’m... I’m totally afraid.”

His touch increased against her aching cunt, but his fingers were not moving, not doing anything beyond cupping her sex. She could almost tell, with the slight movement of his eyes, that he was considering her words, considering what she was offering him.

It wasn't fear in the traditional sense, but she was most certainly afraid.

"Given the circumstances..." His touch faded from her sex, but then she felt it again at her waistband, along the top of her stretchy waistband. "It will be enough."

The breath Deborah hadn't realized she was holding escaped her, just as she felt his cold touch on her bare skin, followed by a tugging on her pants. They slid down, to her knees, and she found enough strength in her legs to shake them off, down to the floor. Stepping out of them, along with her underwear he tugged down as well, felt odd, leaving her in her bra and uniform shirt, and socks.

No one ignored her breasts, her best asset by far, and yet, the phantom seemed to have no interest in them at all. Her shirt was still lifted slightly, though, exposing her rounded belly, and below that her thick thighs. An approving hum came from her phantom, and she smirked to herself, pleased to meet his approval, not that she truly needed it, but—

She liked a man, which that was what she loosely considered him to be in the context, who wasn't afraid of a full-bodied woman.

"I'm afraid you won't touch me again," she whispered, although she wasn't really. No, she was totally afraid that she wouldn't be able to reach through the robes and find the hardness that kept brushing against her belly and her hip. "That you won't possess me."

She reached forward, trying to find the hardness hidden in the cloak, but he grasped her wrist, stopping her from exploring him at all. She tugged, trying to get free, but she was no match for his strength.

Her eyes met his once again as she stared back, waiting to see what he did next.

What he did only added to her growing list of fears.

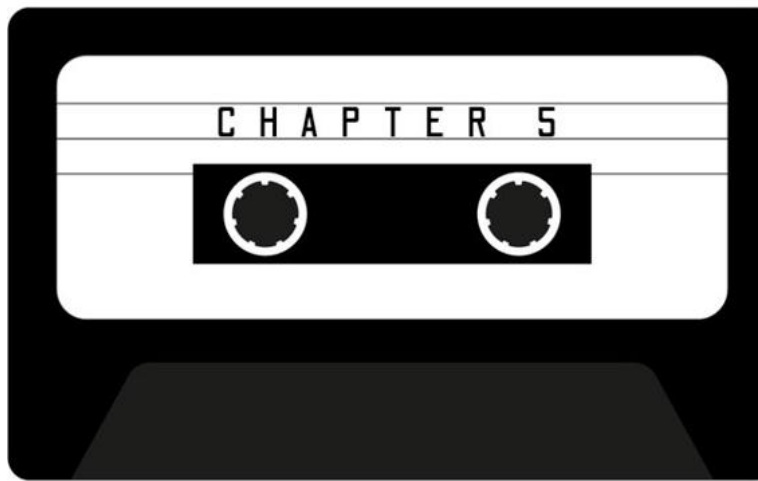
Up, she went, with a supernatural strength she couldn't explain as his free arm wrapped around her waist. Her feet were off the ground, and then he released her wrist as he moved to grasp her underneath her leg. She couldn't see much of anything as she looked down, both due to the darkness of the projector booth and his dark cloak, and so she was forced to look up into his eyes. How he was able to hold her up like this, she didn't know, but she also wouldn't question it. Wouldn't question anything as he shifted them around and pressed the cold robe against her burning hot sex.

"I'm afraid this isn't real," she confessed, her words soft and vulnerable.

Because nothing about this made sense. Nothing about this had any logic. Nothing about this felt true.

And then, he was pushing inside of her, the hardness confirmed in her mind to be a cock, if that was what a phantom of a man possessed.

And that was totally real.



SCREAM QUEEN

DEBORAH FROZE AS SHE FELT THE ICY COLD ENTER HER, THE contrast to the burning heat of her cunt confusing her for a brief moment. Inside of her. The phantom was inside of her. Filling her. Flooding her.

It was bigger, harder, thicker, longer, something.

It was unlike any of the boys she had ever messed around with throughout her undergraduate years, and she had to imagine it somehow felt better than she could imagine because it was breaking the celibacy her graduate studies had induced.

It was good. Great. Unreal.

And oh fuck, she was clenching around something that made her want to scream and beg for more.

“Oh, move, more, please,” she gasped, wanting more than just the weight of him inside of her. She reached for him, for his

cloak, to try and brace herself on his shoulders, but then he was shifting her, the movement awkward as her bare ass pressed against the wall and her forehead was forced onto his cloaked shoulder. Her hand fell downward, towards where they were joined, only to be grasped by his touch and moved to behind her leg. Her arm pressed against the wall as he held her wrist, with her knee thrown over his arm as she did so, and then he repeated the move on the other side, so she was held open by his hold.

It had happened so fast and easily, she knew it had to be one he had done before. She wasn't jealous in the slightest. Instead, she was glad he knew what he was doing, because she had clearly lost her marbles.

She was fucking a phantom, a ghost, a spectre, a cloaked shadow, whatever, in the projector booth of the theater where she worked.

Yeah. She was hella trippin'.

"Don't drop me," she begged, a new fear flooding her at the realization that if he lost his solid form, she would fall flat on her ass onto the grody carpet. That was her new fear to cling to. That this would end, and she would never be able to feel clean ever again.

"I have you," he insisted, his voice once again deep and low. "Now scream."

It was the only warning she had before he started moving, in and out, setting a rushed pace from the start. She could hear the loud music from the film, and realized almost immediately he was following the pounding beat coming from below, and closed her eyes, allowing herself to feel.

She could only feel. There was nothing else, given the hold on her wrists and the spread of her thighs, that she could do.

In and out, with her cunt throbbing around him, her clit begging for the return of his attention, and the icy cold coming and going with every movement.

It almost wasn't real, and yet it was. There was no denying her racing heart, the wetness she could feel dripping from within her, and the icy cold inside of her burning heat. This was real. She was being fucked by a phantom, a monster. It was all very, very real.

Just like her orgasm. The orgasm that slammed into her, sending waves of pleasure down her arms and legs and muddling her head and contracting her cunt? Very real.

The scream that escaped her was one she was unprepared for, as the movement inside of her tipped her over the edge. Orgasming without at least someone touching her clit was normally impossible, but the excitement of it all, the mystery, and the edging foreplay, must have been enough to help her finish the race. One moment, it just felt good, and then the next moment, she was blowing a gasket, overflowing with pleasure that ran from her cunt to her heart, and then down to the tips of her fingers and toes.

And that had her screaming, gasping, begging. She fought against his hold on her wrists and kicked her legs as well, trying to free herself so she could claw at the robes or dig her heels into something other than air, but he didn't let go, nor did he slow down. The pace her phantom had set was one he maintained, only changing in intensity, fucking her hard enough against the wall, she could feel the flimsy wall panel struggling to stay up.

There it was, a new fear, that the wall would give out and they would fall into the projector booth of the next movie.

He throbbed inside of her, actually *throbbed*, and she groaned at the added stretch. Was it getting bigger with her fear? That was an almost terrifying thought, one which could have surely added to his size, except then it was a humorous thought. How big could he come? She could test it, test how much she could take, test how much—

Oh. *Oh*. She was orgasm stupid. And he was still going. He was still moving inside of her, fucking her, and she was getting sleepy, and she was humming, almost vibrating, and...

Fucking monsters. Monster fucking. Orgasms apparently not only guaranteed, but plentiful. Amazing. Fabulous. She wanted more. So much more. All of them.

“Again. Scream,” the phantom demanded, his voice vibrating inside of her as he spoke.

It shouldn't have been possible, not when she was still giggling and disoriented from her first, but she was somehow back on the edge, ready to fall and tumble back into pleasure. Two orgasms back-to-back? That quickly? She hadn't even realized that was a possibility, that it was something she could do. Two of them?

“Make me,” she gasped, knowing he most certainly would.

Almost like it was a challenge, he shifted her body. His cloaked arms moved higher up her legs, and her hands were pulled along the wall with him, so they were further from her body and opening her up more. She wasn't a jazzercise kind of girl and had never done any sort of stretching, but it seemed almost natural to be split open like this and held in place. Particularly when she had a hard cock inside of her. That made

it all very worth the slight burn on the inside of her thighs and the ache in her wrists.

“More,” she gasped, wanting to feel more of him. He had shifted for a reason, and she wanted to know why. “Harder, make me’—”

The wall behind her was totally moving now, the thudding of it audible even over the booming noise coming from the theater below, but Deborah didn’t care. Not when his cock was slamming into her cervix and stretching her open with every thrust. Not when the cold was whirling around them, moving both his cloak and her hair. Not when she could almost imagine another hand, a finger, something, thrumming her swollen clit in time with his thrusts. Not when she was so close to another orgasm, this one somehow more earth shattering than the first, that all she could remember to do was breathe, and scream.

Wave after wave of pleasure crashed into her, and all the while, Deborah screamed and breathed and stared into his eyes, watching as they dimmed slightly, and grew smaller. He was still looking at her, she was sure of it, but it was almost as though his eyes were closing slightly. In pleasure? Were his eyes closing in pleasure?

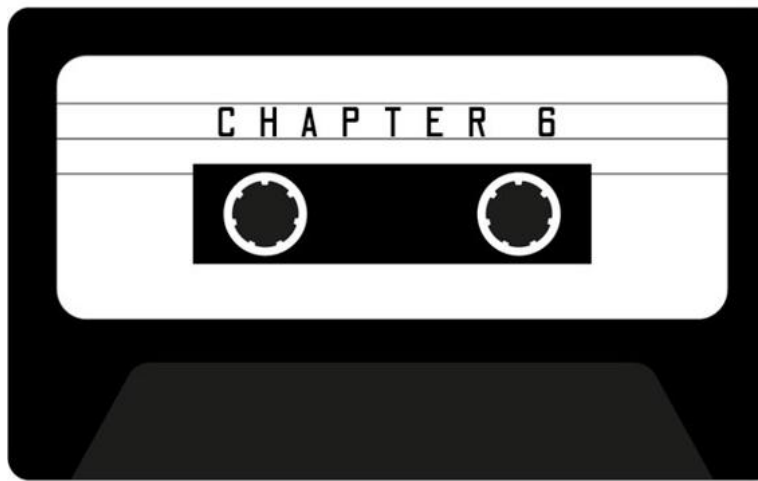
“More, more,” she gasped, the only word she could find. She was choking on it almost, choking on air itself, but the phantom seemed to know all the same what it meant, what she wanted. More of him. More of his thrusts. More orgasms.

It wasn’t real, the way he filled her, the way he kept going even through her pleasure. He was insatiable, he was eternal, he was... possessing her. As he had insisted he would.

Possession had never seemed so delicious.

She was out of her mind, with pleasure and need, and even remembering to breathe became impossible. He had told her to scream, demanded it even, and she screamed again as his thrusts started to hurt, to ache inside of her, like pushing a bruise too hard, and yet it gave her more pleasure, another orgasm, another aching of her heart and waves of endorphins through her body, and she wanted more, wanted to be consumed with it, consumed by him. Over and over, and over, and over, and over, and—

She screamed as ice rushed through her veins, in complete contrast to the burning she felt all around her.



RETURN TO THE SHADOWS

DEBORAH SEARCHED FOR AIR AS HER FEET TOUCHED THE ground, only for a gasp to come easily as her legs gave out entirely. She landed, thankfully, on her discarded pants, saving her from touching the grody carpet with her bare ass.

She was still burning both inside and out, and her fingers and toes tingled as she struggled to stand up. Everything about that was unreal, everything about him was unreal. Right, because phantom. A monster.

He was turning away from her, heading back towards the shadows, and fading with every step.

“Wait,” Deborah called out, not wanting him to leave. Not yet. Not until she had her answers. “Where are you going?”

“The film has almost ended,” her phantom answered, pausing in his movement away to glance back towards her. “And so,

too, will your shift.”

“What?” She glanced towards the theater screen and saw that the movie was indeed almost over. How long had she been up there? Had anyone heard her screaming? Why had no one checked on her? And how he had lasted for so long?

“I must return to the shadows, where I belong.”

She forced herself to fully stand, and reached down to grab her clothes, needing to pull them back on, before she was caught bare-assed. The last thing she needed was someone going all Sixteen Candles on her and showing off her underwear.

As she pulled her underwear up, however, she paused at the last moment and reached between her thighs, touching herself where she still burned for more. She could never have enough. Would always crave more of that touch. More of what he made her feel.

What she found there seemed normal, or at least, as normal as she could remember. His cum wasn't cold as she had expected, but perhaps her own body temperature had simply heated it quickly enough. Good thing she was on birth control, since they forgot a rubber, although could a ghost even get her pregnant? Hopefully not.

But as she lifted her fingers to her lips, curious by the taste, she noticed something odd. She had expected it to be overflowing, given how long everything had lasted, but instead, it was as though it was only her normal wetness, from when she touched herself. The extra goopiness that came with cum? Not there.

Still, she licked out, curious all the same, and tasted only herself. It was as though there was never any cum in her at all.

“What?” she muttered, confused, before pulling her pants up the rest of the way, and looking towards the shadows.

He was still there, although fading into the darkness, with only his gleaming eyes still visible.

“Do not fear, my dear, for you will see me again. And remember, I’m watching you.”

“I will?” she asked, hopeful, and stepped towards the shadows, only for him to disappear into them entirely, not even the white of his eyes still there.

Racing towards the light switch, Deborah flicked it on, knowing it would produce a glow into the theater and not caring in the slightest. With the light on, she could clearly see the area he had faded into, only to see nothing at all. He was gone entirely, as though faded into the walls.

There was no sign of him. He was simply... gone.

Was it even real? Was any of it real? How had that happened? Had she bumped her head and imagined it all?

No. It had to be real. She knew it was real. Knew every second of it was real.

Because her imagination never could have conjured up what had just happened. It was like some sort of freakish nightmarish dream, to be held against the wall and fucked until she could no longer breathe by some sort of robed creature. Her fantasies were never *that* rad. She wasn’t creative enough.

It was real. It had to be real.

Except, as she turned off the light and headed down the stairs to pull her skates on and figure out what time it was in the rest of the theater, she questioned herself all the same. Maybe she had been staying up too late. Maybe she needed to lay off the

chewing gum and it was giving her a sugar high. Maybe she needed to quit with the coffee.

Or maybe...

Disjunctive reasoning. What did she know to be true?

She knew her heart was racing, and her pants had come off. She knew she was sore as though fucked thoroughly. She knew something had been messing with the projector.

It had to be true. Had to be real. Because what did she know to be false? Nothing. They were simply things that had not yet been proven.

It had to be real. He was real.

Only, she wished there was a sign, something to prove it. Something to prove to herself, when she looked in the mirror, that it had really happened.

Deborah stepped into her skates and tugged the laces tight before opening the stairwell door and glancing out cautiously. The fact that no one had come looking for her, despite her time away and her screams, was another thing that made her question what was real and if she had imagined everything. She could see two ushers messing around behind the booth with their headphones on, listening to their Walkman as they goofed off. Beyond them, it was deserted.

So, maybe no one had heard her. Maybe no one was looking for her.

Of course, that didn't prove it was real. But...

As she closed the door behind her and went to skate towards the ticket booth, she glanced down at her hands, and noticed her wrists. There, she could see the start of some bruising, as

though she had been held down by her wrists—which she had been.

Proof. There it was. She couldn't have done that to herself. Couldn't imagine it being there.

She was bruised from him holding her against the wall while he fucked her.

That was kind of rad and made her want to run back up the steps and ask for more.

No. He said she would see him again, although she had no idea when.

And until then...

She would have to live on the memory of it. Of being fucked by The Phantom of the Theater.



Thank you for reading *The Phantom of the Theater*. If you want to read more monster romances from Elle, check out *The Vampire in the Bookstore*.

Click the link or type this link into your favorite browser:

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About the Author

Elle M Drew is an avid writer and reader of spicy fantasy and paranormal romance. Her career began with fanfiction and took off from there. Elle infuses a touch of magic into all of her work.

When she isn't busy writing, Elle lives with her husband and two children in Okinawa, Japan. She always has iced coffee and a stack of bullet journals on hand for impromptu writing and plotting sessions, and she always has instrumental music playing.

After twenty steamy and extraordinary years of writing fanfiction, she's finally publishing her own books where a magical blend of fantasy and the paranormal mix with dark romance... with an adult, sexy spin, of course.

To find her on social media, sign up for her newsletter, or check out more books, visit her website:

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THE GOOD CHAR

YD LA MAR



Life had always felt like a never-ending loop of expectations and rules. That's why when I spotted the "Help Wanted" sign at The Good Char, the hot dog on a stick food place in the mall. It was perfect! Like the condiments were calling my name. Little did I know, stepping into that vibrant hot dog stand would lead me straight into hell.

Dzik, my grumpy manager with an air of mystery about him, brooded and grumbled even after he hired me. His standoffish ways made me curious, even as his sharp wit tested my patience. As I served customers and wielded the tongs, a slow realization dawned on me—there was something different about this place, something beyond the ordinary.

With each passing day, I found myself fascinated by Dzik's gruff exterior. There was something more to him, something hidden and intriguing. Through the grease-splattered aprons and shared moments at the grill, I caught glimpses of it.

Then I found out what it was.

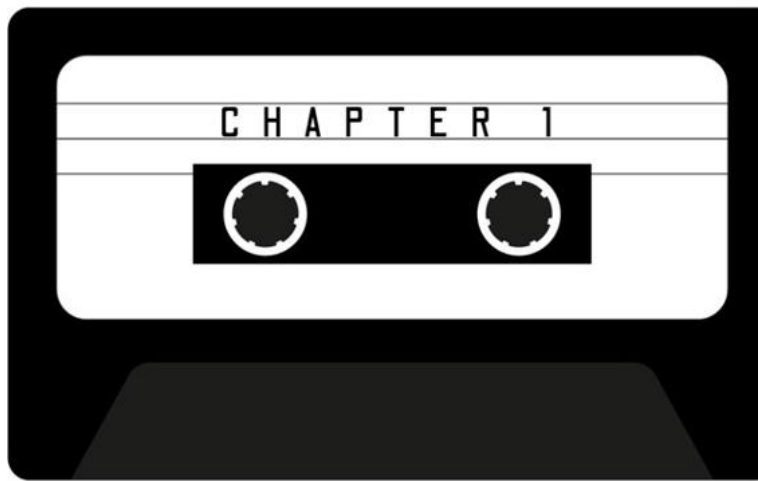
He's a demon, banished from the underworld, working as my manager.

Now I'm not sure which of us is actually being punished.



Content Warning

This book may contain triggers for some. Triggers include but are not limited to implied torture (not on page) and consumption of human flesh.



DZIK

“DO YOU HAVE ANY OTHER OPTIONS? LIKE, MAYBE A CRUNCHY outside?” the kid with the boils on his face asked. He turned to his friend and continued. “The last time I went to the county fair, I got this really good deep fried one. Dude, it was the best corn dog I ever had.”

Pimples, my mind supplied. Humans called it pimples, not boils. Bah, it was all the same. Whatever it was, our demon of infection back home, Sabnock, did a better job than what I was looking at.

I leaned over the smooth, white counter, my nails raking the inside of my palms as I stared into the boy’s face. “The menu above my head is all we have at The Good Char. You’ll be guaranteed to not leave here wanting. We use only the best selected meats for our products.”

The boy's face turned splotchy as if a disease ran through him and I leaned back and crossed my arms wondering if Sabnock was playing tricks on me. Humans were a strange lot and if it wasn't for the fact that I had a little too much fun back in the underworld, I wouldn't have been banished to this wretched place they called a mall. The name was false advertisement—Creepy Court indeed.

And who didn't like messing with the damned souls back home? It wasn't entirely my fault one of the souls somehow figured out how to escape back to the realm of men. It just so happened that the Master had also been moody lately and I happened to be in his path of destruction.

“Yeah, you're probably not going to get a deep fried corndog here. Just get something, you're holding up the line Henry!” the friend says sheepishly, bringing me back to my current sorry existence.

Second hand embarrassment. It was a common trait among humans I came to find, though it still didn't make much sense why anyone would care what others were feeling.

“All right, all right. I'll have the GC special, please,” the boy finally said with false exasperation.

A large, menacing grin split across my face before I made my way over to the grill—a vortex to the underworld. But to the humans, it was how we got our *good char*.

I worked alone once again after our last staff fell into the vortex from tripping over the recently cleaned floor—one that *he* mopped. Daniel never did watch what he was doing and created more extra work than necessary. Wasn't the point of hiring help...to get help? Luck was on my side that he wouldn't be missed. Daniel was a lone wolf, one that didn't

have any family that cared. Not that any of that mattered, he was a crap employee. Good riddance, I say.

Spearing the meat and dipping it in our secret batter, I made my way over to our fryer and plunged it into its own personal hell and torture. Once the product was satisfactory, I pulled the sizzling product out and placed it on its flimsy paper tray, handing it over.

Their eyes widened and I could practically see their mouths watering as I rang them up and stood there with my arms crossed once more. The shop sported a trio of colors as the theme to match the other deplorable food stalls beside us. The red, yellow and deep purples made me want to wretch into the batter but being manager of The Good Char had its perks.

Customers were sparse this early in the day. Being the last stop on the food line also had that effect. The store beside us recently went under renovations, the construction leading most of our customers away.

I stood there with my chin in hand, pondering if I truly needed another worker. When more of the human teenagers looked over to my corner as the day went on, I curled my lip into a snarl, anticipating their jabbering and wishy-washy tendencies when ordering.

Yes, I needed another worker before I ended up inadvertently killing one of the customers from annoyance. I let out a resigned sigh as I bent over and pulled out the 'now hiring' sign and placed it against one of the glass sneeze guards. Master help me, if I come across one more incompetent worker...

Leaning back against the opposite counter, I watch as the gaggle of teenage girls stroll past the construction, right for The Good Char.

“Oh! I haven’t had a good corn dog in so long! Let’s get some!” one of the girls screeched. She stood a few heads shorter than me, with large framed glasses that covered half of her face.

“You just ate one a week ago at the other mall, you liar,” replied the tallest one with a snarky tone. She held an air of authority among this throng of females.

“Don’t be mean, Cindy. You know what I mean. I’m craving it.”

“It does smell delicious...” a softer feminine voice chimed in. This one was partially hidden behind the other two.

“Why do you want to eat this crap if your parents own a restaurant, Kimmy? You should be eating everyday over there, *for free,*” the one with the attitude barks out like a command. Her voice grated my nerves and my fingers itched to do something I probably shouldn’t. She wouldn’t be this snarky when her soul was tortured down below. The demons of the underworld would make sure of it.

When she casted her gaze in my direction, her eyes perused me from the top of my head, downward. It made my skin crawl.

Here in the human realm, I was forced to take on an appearance that wouldn’t disturb the order of things. Though my demon form was perfectly sound, the master didn’t want me wreaking havoc up here the same way I did back in the underworld. As part of my punishment, I was forced to ‘play nice’ while I served my time—and I had to do it looking like one of the locals.

I chose the flesh suit of a muscular male of a taller human build who decorated his body with imagery. Some of which

reminded me of home. In my annoyance, I chose to replicate one of the human criminals I had come across back home—minus his hideous face. It was my bad luck that girls like this dark haired one in a leather jacket took to the likes of a male like me. Her blond roots revealed her true colors but she knew that. I've concluded that females tend to tie their manes to the side in order to make themselves look bigger with their frizzy locks. An attempt at dominance.

The more I looked at her and the rest of them, the more I realized this gaggle of girls weren't girls at all, but older than I initially assumed. I scrutinized the timid one that finally chose to emerge from her guardians. She looked younger than the other two.

“Maybe we should stop for a snack before we hit the streets,” she purred before bringing herself to the counter and leaning against it, trying to showcase her upper assets in my direction. Human men would find her attractive from my observations. Me? I wanted to gauge her eyes out to see if I could fix her face into something even worth giving attention to.

I ignored her and stared at the other two. The shortest of the bunch was the female with the timid voice. She had her hair pulled back in a neat ponytail, her hands clasped before her as she gazed up at the menu, oblivious to the wretched humans around her.

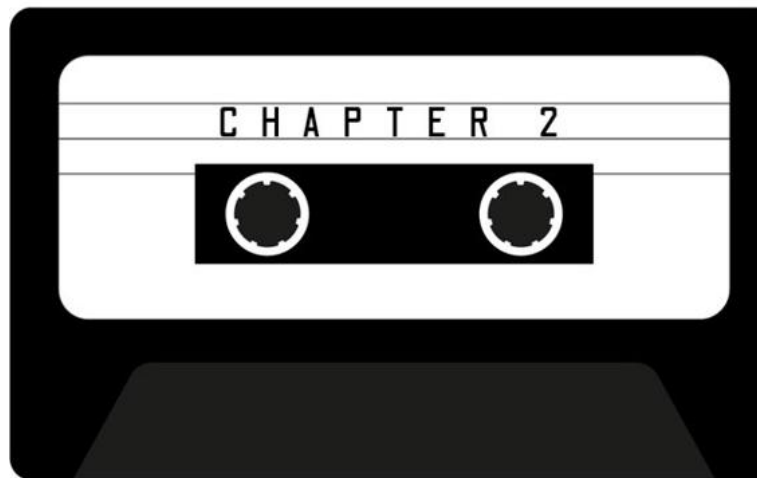
She had an air of innocence and my perchance for corruption gnawed at me the longer I looked at her. Her blatant lack of overpowering, frizzy mane done two sizes too big for her head only reiterated her submissive nature. How this one got stuck with the other two was beyond my comprehension. She didn't even dress like them. In fact, she was the total opposite

without any bright war paint splattered across her eyes like the others.

Fingers snapping stole my attention as I slowly turned my head to look at the annoying woman at the counter.

“Hey! I’ve been calling you twice now. I want an order of number three with a side of fries and the pink lemonade.”

Without a word, I flicked my gaze at her once and completed her order in silence, continuing to eavesdrop on their conversation. This corner of the Creepy Court had nothing going besides that—part of my punishment, I was sure.



KIMMY

WE'D BEEN WANDERING AROUND CREEPY COURT FOR OVER AN hour at Cindy's insistence. Halloween was coming up and she wanted to find the perfect costume for one of the parties she had lined up. I didn't mind being dragged along with her and Nicole but sometimes their explosive personalities could be exhausting.

But I loved hanging out with them anyway.

I thought it was such a perfect place to find what she needed. The hot pink neon sign on the outside was more than inviting and the fact that the building offered much needed air conditioning from the blistering sun also helped. It was said that Creepy Court mall was named after the Creepy family. It added to the spooky atmosphere some of the stores were starting to decorate in. The more we walked, the more excited I became over all the spiders and ghost and stringy webs.

We'd just finished hitting the upper level stores and decided to come downstairs to the food court for a short snack break. It was located right smack in the middle with all the best eateries. One of the food shops even looked like it was under construction. I wonder what was going to pop up there.

Cindy pointed us in the direction of The Good Char and my stomach cramped from both excitement and hunger. I haven't had one of these since I was a teenager. The man working behind the booth was tall, dark and broody with his arms crossed as we approached. But I was caught by the expanse of the menu and the very delicious looking lemonade dispenser that was in front of me. I should definitely get some lemonade.

Cindy was rambling beside me, stealing my attention when she tapped me with the backside of her hand with annoyance. "Do you see him? It's like he is totally ignoring us. Rude."

I looked over at the tall man and he stared straight at me. I quickly averted my eyes and went back to pursuing the menu, mentally cataloging what I wanted.

Cindy did what she always did when she couldn't get her way. She began to snap her fingers in front of the worker.

"Hey! I've been calling you twice now. I want an order of number three with a side of fries and the pink lemonade," she said with her hand on her hip. Cindy was one of pretty girls with her hair beautifully teased before she left the house.

I obediently lined up behind her ready with mine excitedly with my hands clasped in front of me.

"Three corndogs and three lemonades," Cindy ordered.

Oh! How nice, she ordered for us! The smell that came from this food stall was exquisite. I was drooling over imagining myself taking a huge bite out of the corndog when my

attention was drawn to a sign at the window. To my surprise, it looked as though it might be the answer to one of my prayers, something I needed horribly.

In big, bold black letters it read: **HELP WANTED.**

“Holy cow! Look Cindy!” I pointed to the sign while dancing to the beat in my own head. This was it! I was asking for a sign and here it was!

Cindy immediately snarked at my excitement.

“Like, girl, there’s no way I would be caught dead working here. The guys will think you are a total spaz. I would rather work with my parents than a place like *this*.”

I couldn’t be mad at her. It was because she would never understand the things I went through. She was rich and her parents were more than well off. She never had to worry about anything. I bit my bottom lip as thoughts continued to race through my head. This might just be my way out of the house, which was a total drag since I graduated. My parents weren’t terrible, they just weren’t what normal parents usually were. They came to this country with a purpose, to make a better life for their family. But their rules and expectations became a bit much the older I became. They were more than willing to give me the money I needed, but it always came with a cost. So, the perfect solution would be for me to make my own cash quickly and I also needed some type of escape.

I tried to contain my giggle of nervousness when I slowly walked up to the counter and helped to grab our order while Cindy paid. Nicole had saved us a spot at one of the nearby tables and once I placed our food down, I worked up my nerves so I could inquire about the job. All the while, Cindy looked completely annoyed that I was asking about the position.

“Can you, like, hurry up? This is such a drag. I’m ready to eat,” she whined. Admittedly, this was Cindy’s way of saying she wouldn’t hold me back from what I wanted and that gave me the extra confidence I needed to go through with it.

The owner was large, but he seemed so nice. He wasn’t brooding this time around. I was so nervous, feeling butterflies in my stomach as I wrung my hands before me that I sort of blurted out the question without thinking.

“Has that position been filled, s-sir?” I asked while pointing at the sign and giving him the biggest smile I could, hoping it would convince him to hire me. I had been told I had a friendly face. Places liked that didn’t they? It would help drive more customers here.

He took a few moments to look me over. A few different emotions crossed his features but I continued to smile with hope. Finally, he shook his head and answered with a deep tenor that made my eyes bug out in surprise. “Not yet. The last person who worked for me didn’t work out. It’s like he fell off the face of the earth.”

Perfect! I’ll take it! Pick me! Oh, please pick me!

I cleared my throat and tried to stave off the waiver in my voice. “Well, sir, if you want someone that will give you 110%, I will gladly take the job,” I confidently told him. I had always been a hard worker, my parents raised me that way. “I may be small, but I work super hard and I promise that you won’t regret hiring me.”

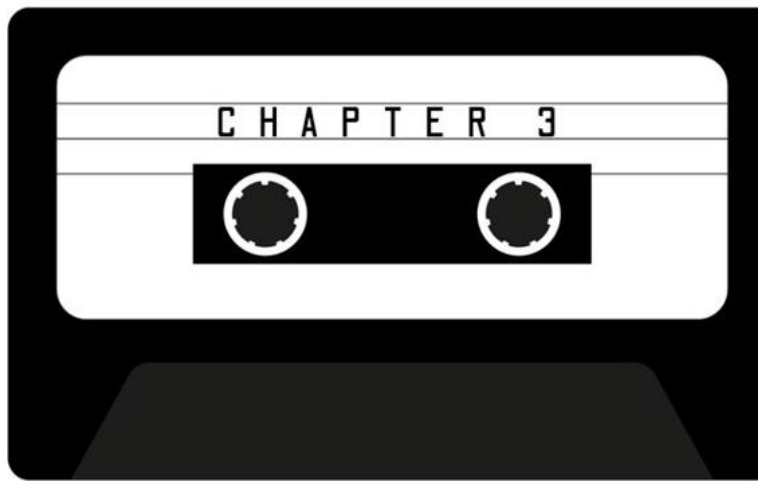
I forced my hands to my side and bit my bottom lip to stop myself from smiling like a crazed animatronic clown.

“We will see,” he said with a scowl pointed in Cindy’s direction. I looked over my shoulder in confusion to find

Cindy scowling right back. She then rolled her eyes and I could mentally hear her say, “ugh.”

“Oh, don’t pay any attention to her, she always looks like that,” I nervously laughed, hoping he wouldn’t change his mind about hiring me.

“If she always looks like that, as you say, she needs to get her face checked out.” He turned his attention back on me and I gave him a bright smile. “You be here early tomorrow morning and we will get you trained. The job is yours.”



DESPITE SEEING ME WALK OVER THERE, KNOWING WHAT MY purpose was, Cindy was flustered upon my return, crossing her arms with an audible exhale.

“I can’t believe you just did that,” she huffed before stuffing her face with a corndog.

“You know I’ve been trying to find a way to not work at the restaurant anymore, Cin! I mentioned it to you, remember?” I sheepishly whined. I wasn’t a complainer and I didn’t like the feeling I got from having to explain it to her again.

“But a hotdog shop? Really?”

Nicole quietly ate her corndog as she stared over both our shoulders. I was too excited to be as bothered as Cindy wanted me to be, there were so many things that I could do with this extra money and there was nothing she could do or say that would take my excitement away.

I happily turned around and waved at my new boss before grabbing my own corndog. We devoured our amazing food and drank down our pink lemonade with a giant gulp. The cold liquid was refreshing and gave me a pep to my step. Cindy and Nicole finished up their meals and quickly got up to throw away their paper trays. I took one last delicious bite and waved at my new boss again before tossing my food away. He stared at me with a blank expression but I knew he was excited to have me on board as well.

We continued to explore the stores on the bottom level and I couldn't take my mind off the fact that with my new job, soon I would be able to do all the things I wanted to do.

"Girl, what you need to do is party more," Cindy called out to me from across one of the clothing racks. "Greg took me to Deadman's Hill last night, and girl, he pulled out his little dick and asked me to suck it. I told him I wasn't interested in cocktail weiners," she laughed.

I choked on the remnants of ice in my cup, spitting it everywhere. I quickly wiped my mouth with the back of my hand, hoping no one saw me.

"That is so funny. I mean, how uncool can someone be? Like, eww, but you really need to calm down," Nicole told her with nonchalance. "You are going out with a new guy every week and I mean, are you sleeping with them?"

Cindy gave us a sly smile before pretending to place her finger in her mouth, tapping in consideration. "Well, only if they have a nice large—"

"Okay!" I exclaimed, tossing the rest of my drink away in a nearby trash can. "I don't want to know!" I placed my hands over my ears and began humming.

She was my best friend and I know I'm not supposed to judge her but she was becoming a tramp and didn't realize it. Cindy didn't realize she was so much more than what her body had to offer.

Nicole bursted out with a laugh of her own and they both turned into a fit of giggles by the end of it. I rolled my eyes and gave them a smile.

We exited the store after Cindy bought some sexy lingerie and looked left and right. The Pizzeria Arcade enticed everyone nearby with animatronic laughter and bustle of teenagers going inside. All of the stores lined up near us offered everything a person could want.

“Where should we go next?” I asked the girls, my eyes straying to Dark Spells Comic shop.

“Girlfriend! Is that you?” We all turned to see several people coming toward us, none that I recognized. They must be Cindy's other friends from her subdivision from the looks of them. I stood there silently as they began chatting up.

“I see you brought your pet with you.” A tall redheaded girl, dressed in a fashionable checkered dress and high top sneakers noted. The other two girls giggled at her joke when Cindy quickly put them in their place.

“Pet?” she snapped. “She's my friend and a hell of a better friend than you! So if you don't like her, see yourself the hell away from us. You got that?”

She grabbed my arm and pulled me right between them, splitting the crowd like the red sea. Most of their mouths were hung open, some of them glaring but I innocently turned my head away and continued to let Cindy lead me from the wolves with Nicole following right behind us.

“Let’s go. We don’t have time to talk to losers, Kimmy,” she said aloud for them to hear even though we were already a few feet away. “They let anyone in here, don’t they?”

She began to giggle and then we all did at her crazy antics. I pretended to laugh boisterously with her but that girl really did hurt my feelings. I get it. I’m not the prettiest. I don’t have the money they have. Maybe Cindy would be better off without me. *She should be hanging out with people like them, shouldn’t she?*

As if reading my change in mood, Cindy quickly piped up again. “Girl, you know what would cheer you up? Photo booth! Let’s take some bestie pictures!” she squealed. Her enthusiasm made me smile because sometimes I didn’t feel I deserved such a good friend.

We all climbed inside the picture booth together and began making funny poses, holding up peace signs and making a lot of other bizarre moves while the camera flashed. Once it was done, we spilled out of the booth in a fit of giggles as we impatiently waited for the pictures to print.

We hugged each other while the pics finally decided to print out. They looked so cool. I pulled out my trusty scissors from my purse and began to cut each picture individually. We decided which pics we each wanted before we walked arm and arm into the game room.

The game room was the sort every teen wanted to be, from basketball, to fighting games, bowling and games of skill. This place was the coolest. The flashing lights and all the people winning prizes made it a place of pure relaxation in the midst of total chaos. Despite our ages, we still found this to be the best place to unwind.

“Ms. Pacman!” Cindy yelled in excitement before hurrying to put money into the token machine. “You are going down this time, I promise you that, little miss high score.”

“You sure about that?” Nicole laughed as she wandered off to play something solo.

Cindy placed her token in and, like always, the highest score came on the screen and there was my name at the very top: *gamerqueen*.

“Yeah, just you watch me take that high score from you,” she taunted. Cindy was always so competitive with me. Some might see it as one of her flaws, I saw it as one of her endearing qualities. I laughed it off her threat because when it came to games, she was pretty bad. But I let her think I was scared she could beat me. It was what best friends did.

Her excitement crashed and burned after losing several thousands of points from my high score. I covered my mouth trying to hide my laughter because Cindy was also the world’s biggest sore loser.

“Ugh! This thing is broken!”

“It probably is,” I teased. “Hey, let’s go play skee-ball instead!”

It was moments like these that my confidence was strong. Cindy had a way in making me put down my walls when I’m around her. Nicole joined our dynamic duo not long ago so I was still feeling her out. Cindy vouched for her though, mentioning that things at home for her weren’t the best. I could understand that and empathized with her.

“You’re going down, Cin!” I laughed and with her index finger and thumb, she placed an L on her forehead, mouthing

that I was going down first. We both got serious quickly as the game started.

Thirty minutes in and I easily beat her again, gaining hundreds of tickets. We then walked up to the counter and cashed them in, I got all of us several cheap items.

“Why did you get more than me?” Cindy whined as she stuck her thumbs in her ears, wiggling her fingers and sticking her tongue out like the immature brat she was.

“Stop being a brat, Cin,” I playfully teased, slapping her arm.

“Someone’s gotta take the spot. Might as well be me!” she sings.

We all left the game area and Nicole told us she needed to check out one more store and for us not to wait up. Shrugging my shoulders, Cindy looped her arm in mine and we both headed out the front doors of the mall. The heat blasted our faces and we both groaned in unison.

I playfully shoved her off me, the leather of her jacket starting to stick to my skin. We both laughed when a small pickup with a rollbar pulled up with several guys inside. They rolled down their window and called in our direction—well, in Cindy’s direction.

“Hey sexy, wanna come and sit on my lap,” the guy from the passenger seat suggested.

I cringed but Cindy responded smoothly the way she always did. “How much booze ya got?”

The guy lifted up a 12 pack when Cindy laughed, looking at him seductively. “Sure, I will come with you Jarred.”

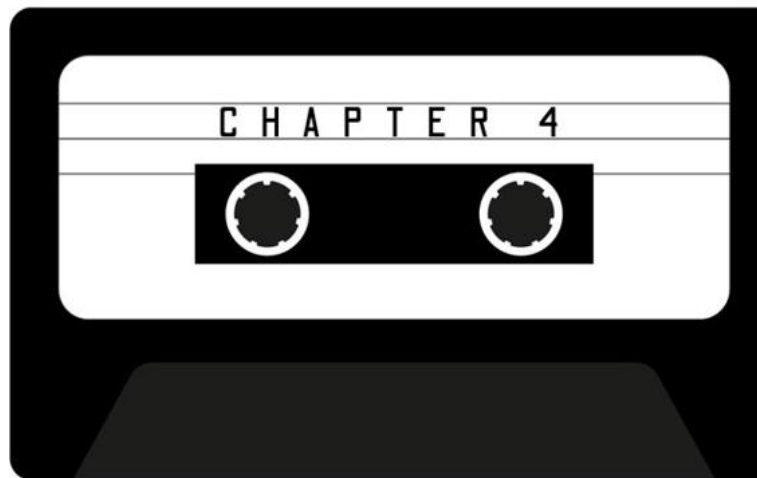
I quickly grabbed her wrist. “They’ve already been drinking. You don’t need to be riding with them to god knows where

Cin, you need to grow up and think,” I pleaded.

“Grow up?” she snapped. “Really? You are the one with a bottle stuck up your ass! I am grown and I will go with whoever the hell I want to go with now let me go!” She jerked her arm back.

“Fine! Then go!” I said in a huff, turning my heel in frustration as I walked away from them all. The truck sped past me and I could hear them laughing while the truck accelerated up the street. I wasn’t going to let it bother me, not one bit. *I hope she gets so drunk that her hangover tomorrow makes her sick all day.*

Once the thought left my mind, guilt assaulted me and my eyes burned with unshed tears. After walking about thirty minutes in the blazing heat, I made it home and ran up the stairs and closed my door. I threw my purse on the floor and fell face first across my bed, replaying the argument Cindy over and over in my head until I fell asleep.



THE NEXT MORNING CAME FAST. IT FELT LIKE I ONLY CLOSED my eyes for ten minutes. I jumped out of bed quickly, put on my pants and a tie-dyed t-shirt and swiftly ran down the stairs and outside to my bicycle.

“Oh, no. My helmet!” I jumped off, ran back into the house and quickly picked the bicycle up, heading to The Good Char. *He told me to come today. I need to make sure I’m there early.*

I rode my bike as fast as I could on the sidewalk while enjoying the breeze of the morning cooler air and ringing my bell so I wouldn’t accidentally run over anyone. The sun was already starting to rise as I parked my bicycle and made my way into the front of the mall. I arrived to find him already sweeping the floor and grumbling to himself.

“Darn kids with no training, how hard is it to put trash in the garbage can?” he griped. I watched nervously as he cleaned in front of his area, bending over to pick up cups and tossing it in

the nearby trash bin. His biceps stretched out the sleeve of his shirt as he grabbed his broom again.

I felt bad. I should be the one doing that. Teenagers didn't care about keeping our environment clean, it was something that frustrated me too. I walked over to where he was cleaning and without speaking a word, began to pick up the trash with him.

"You're the girl I hired yesterday," he snarled while shaking his head at the last bit of trash on the floor.

"Yes, I am. I'm so sorry, I didn't catch your name the other day. My name is Kimmy," I told him cheerfully.

He looked at me like he was constipated and I worried if he was taking care of himself. Maybe that was why he needed extra help at The Good Char.

"Dzik. Call me Dzik."

I beamed and quickly went to grab the broom from his hands to alleviate him of the mundane tasks. I assumed he was the manager. He shouldn't have to be doing this. He was so nice in taking me in as an employee. While I swept, I began to nervously ramble, trying to get my bearings around him. "I figured I should come and get an early start on learning everything I could from you about my job."

Thank goodness there wasn't a lot of trash left. I quickly swept around our area and then gave him a brilliant smile when I was done.

Mr. Dzik was dressed in a black t-shirt and black shorts beneath his apron. I suddenly looked at myself and my face flushed with embarrassment.

"Oh, was I supposed to get a uniform? I'm so sorry. That was my fault. I should have asked for one the other day. Do you by any chance have any on hand that would fit me?" I gave him

my best puppy dog eyes and realized that beyond his grumpy exterior, he wasn't that much older than me, I didn't think. He looked to be in his mid thirties.

That constipated look was back. He quickly shook his head and stared at me with such intensity that my face flamed even more. I tended to ramble when I was nervous and feeling like I was letting someone down. I didn't want to let him down on my first day.

After we finished, he mumbled something and walked back inside, behind the counter. He wasn't gone long before reappearing with an apron draped across his arm. He threw them at me and I almost didn't catch it in time if it wasn't for my awkward acrobatics saving me before I could fall. I turned them in my hands and examined them. *The Good Char* was written across the chest.

“What was your name again? I have to make a name tag for you.”

I beamed at him and quickly put my apron on. “It's Kimmy, Mr. Dzik.” My first real job that didn't require me working for my parents. This new experience was totally exciting for me. A woman of the world without any ties to the Ngo name. I wasn't ashamed of my name, but I needed to do something for myself without obligation and expectation hanging over my head.

I quickly finished another round of sweeps outside our area before following him behind the counter. Gently placing the broom to lean against the wall, I clasped my hands in front of me and watched everything he did closely.

When he began turning things on and setting things up, I got on my tiptoes and leaned around his body to get a good look. I

was distracted by how veiny his forearms were when he sputtered and quickly turned to look down at me.

“What are you doing?” he barked.

I smiled. “Learning!”

“Have you never worked before, girl?”

Uh oh. That constipated look was back. I quickly straightened and looked at him innocently. I didn’t want him to think I was incompetent. I really wanted this job to work out. “Y-yes, sir, I have. But mostly in my parents’ restaurant. I’ve never worked with corn dogs before. We don’t serve corn dogs at the restaurant. Sir. I mean, Mr. Dzik.”

“Dzik. Just Dzik.” He looked at me curiously and I tried my best to not be a bother. “You’re going to man the register for now. Get familiar with the names on the menu and the prices. We’ll go from there.”

“Yes, sir!” I saluted him and quickly positioned myself where I needed to be. “Oh! I didn’t know we had a breakfast menu! People actually eat corndogs for breakfast?” I asked excitedly, anticipating my first day.

“You are a peculiar human,” he grumbled as he casted his gaze in my direction before bringing out the secret batter. I mean, it must be a secret because he doesn’t want me over there yet. Maybe one day he’ll tell me what it was made of and I would finally understand why his corn dogs are so addicting.

Suddenly, the first customer made his way in our direction. I straightened my back and waved happily only to find the elderly old man continue walking past us and around the rest of the food court in a loop. Oh.

A chuckle came from behind me and I quickly turned to find Mr. Dzik—I mean, Dzik snickering.

I joined in. “It was kind of funny, wasn’t it? I totally thought he was a customer.”

Dzik shook his head as he watched the hotdogs burn on the grill. “A lot of the ancient ones come to Creepy Court to get their exercise in. They don’t have any interest in eating.”

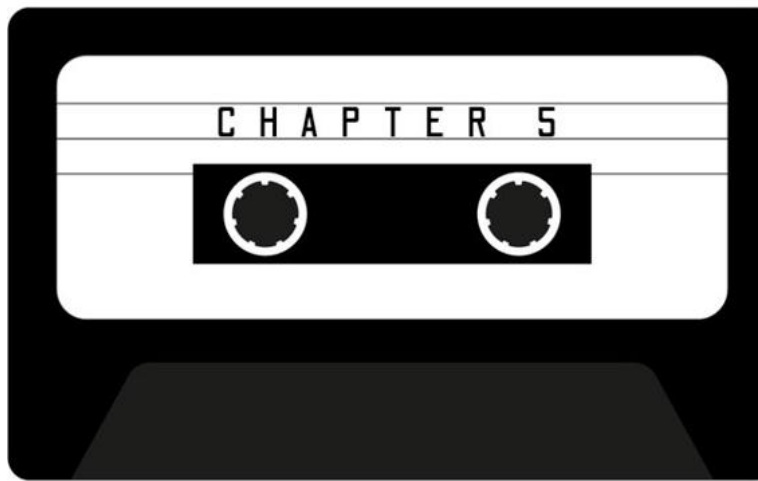
“How nice! I should encourage my parents to do that too. Wait, ancient? You’re so silly Dzik. They’re not that old. That man that passed us couldn’t be older than sixty. If they’re ancient, what does that make you?” I teased.

He curled his lip into an adorable snarl and huffed, crossing his arms over his chest. I was distracted by the intricate images and flames that slithered and wrapped around his forearm when his voice pulled me back to attention.

“It makes me your damn boss. Now get back to work!” he barked.

I squealed at his sudden change in demeanor and quickly turned around and faced the heart of the mall with my heart pounding inside of my chest.

Was it wrong of me to say that it still made me excited to see what the day would bring?



DZIK

THIS BIZARRE HUMAN GIRL HAD THE STRANGEST REACTIONS TO things around her. Her overly jovial nature disgusted me but she seemed like she would do my bidding and that was all I needed for this wretched shop. I needed to be able to remove myself from the humans when my aggravation would get the better of me.

I stared at Kimmy's back again and it looked like she was trying her best to stop herself from dancing to tune only she could hear. Strange. What was she so happy about? The only people milling around Creepy Court at this hour were humans that had seen their last time of day, ones that needed to let go of their tight grip on life.

Unlike my last employee, she didn't look like she minded working.

“Kimmy!” I growled. Caught in my thoughts, I almost missed her inching her way toward the grill. “Stay away from that grill.”

I quickly made my way over to her, grabbed her by the sides, picked her up and plopped her back behind the register. I was going to have to watch out for this one. She was wiley, like that cartoon those annoying little human minions liked to watch on television.

Kids, my mind supplied me. Humans called their spawn kids.

I didn’t need the master getting on me about another wayward soul finding its way in places it didn’t belong. I looked at Kimmy again who waved at another ancient human walking by. I wouldn’t hear the last of it if she fell into the vortex. Her soul was too innocent and pure.

“Are you guys open?” a new voice approached us. It was the old man who passed her the first time.

“Yes!” she squeaked with excitement. “What can I get you?”

He rambled off his order and her fingers quickly moved across the register. When she looked over her shoulder in my direction with a smile, I cleared my throat and went to complete his order, handing it to her.

“There you go, sir! Enjoy your meal!” she hollered after him after he left, almost falling over the counter with how far she was leaning.

“Get your feet back on the ground!” I growled, grabbing the back of her shirt and pulling her back into place. “You don’t need to glue yourself to the customers once they’re gone. Just place their orders.”

She bounced on her feet as she turned to me. “Did I do good? He looked happy! First satisfied customer of the day!”

When she clapped her little hands in front of her, I ran my hand down my face. What have I gotten myself into?

I grumbled and walked away, leaving her in her happy little bubble as I observed the mall picking up over the course of the next hour.

Kimmy excitedly greeted anyone within a ten foot radius and I had to physically pull her back a few more times before my command went through her thick skull.

Working The Good Char in the realm of men was the worst punishment the master could bestow upon me. For all I knew, he probably planted Kimmy here just to watch me suffer. I peered at her through the side of my eye and wondered if the master would shorten my sentence if I tainted her soul. It would show him that I deserved my old position back.

“Mr. Dzik, what else can I do now?” she asked with enthusiasm, following me around the area. “Are you going to show me how to do the corndogs?”

“No.”

“Pretty, please! I’m a fast learner, I promise! I just want to make your day easier. That’s what I’m here for.”

Was she? I was suddenly sure she was here to torment me with her overly happy demeanor.

“Take a seat somewhere if there are no customers.”

“But what if they don’t see me? I’m not that tall. It’s the Asian in me. They might think we’re closed. It’s okay. Thank you though. I’ll just stand behind the register and wait for the next person to come,” she rambled.

My head hurt as my annoyance climbed and it wasn’t even lunch hour yet. I needed to get her out of my hair before I

threw her in the vortex myself.

“Kimmy.”

She popped up like an animated character in one of their human box contraptions and quickly ran back to my side.

“Yes, Dzik?”

I leaned back, not wanting whatever infected her to get on me. When she leaned in with a smile that overtook her face, I grimaced and blurted out the only thing I could think of to get her away from me. “Pop open the fridge and grab a pop. This will be your break time for today.”

Her eyes practically sparkled as if flames danced within her. “Really? Oh wow! My parents never gave me a break. Especially not one this early. And with a treat to boot! Thank you Dzik!”

She skipped over to the fridge and I exhaled a sigh of relief. That was close. I bet if she touched me, I’d end up infected with whatever positivity that was inside of her. It couldn’t be normal. Something was definitely wrong with this little human. But that was not my problem. I just needed her to work The Good Char.

With her finally occupied, I began creating more batter. Suddenly a chill ran down my spine from someone watching me. I slowly looked over my shoulder to find Kimmy’s eyes staring intently at everything I was doing with a pen and little notepad. How the hell did she manage to bring one with her when she didn’t even have a purse?

“And just what are you doing? Why are you writing? And why are you looking at me like that?” I asked through gritted teeth, my paranoia rising to infernal levels.

“Well, I was writing down your steps according to what you were doing. You can never be too prepared,” she explained, nodding with seriousness. She then placed the pencil behind her ear and placed the writing tablet in front of her apron pocket.

I stood there, contemplating what she said for a few moments. I never had an employee so diligently want to learn before. This could work out well for me.

“Why don’t you use that writing tablet you have and take down orders as they come. Then hand it to me and I can prepare the food. I cook and you take the money and put it in the money box and give change. You can count, can’t you?” I asked after giving some thought to the fact she never told me how old she was.

“Of course, I can count, Mr. Dzik,” she giggled, covering her laughter with her dainty little hand.

Why would she think she could stop herself from laughing with her hand that far from her face? The best way for anyone to stop something from coming out of a human mouth would be to slap their hand entirely over their face and shove them into the flame—

“I graduated high school three years ago and I have just been working for my parents,” she started, going over to sit down on the stool. “But sometimes you need to make life for yourself, ya know? Not for my Mom or Dad, but me.”

I looked at her, perplexed. How in the world did the conversation route itself in this direction?

“I really didn’t need to know all of that. The only thing I needed to know is if you could count.” These humans were too much. It was a wonder they managed to stay alive this long.

You ask them one simple question and they will tell you their entire life story. “You better enjoy that break of yours. It’s nearly lunchtime and we’re about to get swamped. Today, we’ll see how much you really want your job,” I told her with a menacing smile.

“Oh, yes, Mr. Dzik,” she said, her face showing nothing but pure determination. All this positivity was causing me to itch. I wanted to scour my skin and peel it from the overload of her upbeat attitude. It was humans like her that were causing a shortage of souls back home in the underworld.

Right on cue I could hear the crowd beginning to gather as the mall became alive with chatter. I could hear a line begin to form in front of the counter. I looked over to her with a wicked grin. “It’s showtime, Kimmy. Take your time and it will be fine.”

I wanted to break her, show her that working under me wasn’t going to be as easy as she thought.

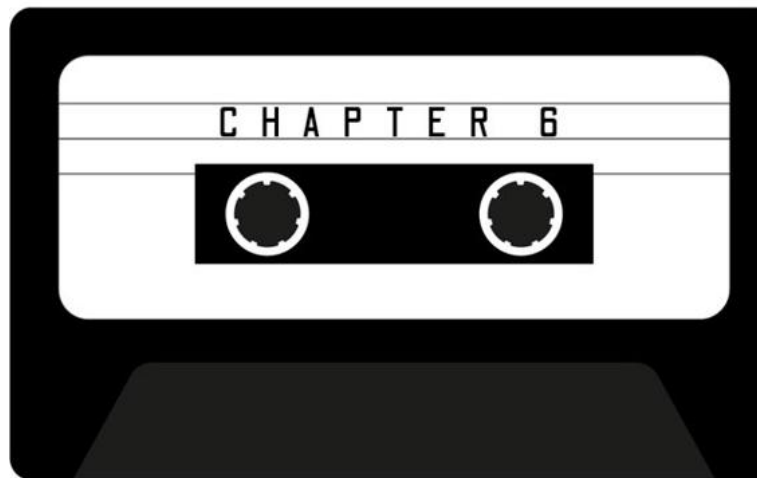
As if possessed, she stood up, wrapped her hair into a bun and walked over to the front counter like she owned the place. With her pad in hand she leaned over the counter with a large smile and was bombarded immediately.

She happily took orders with giggles in a meticulous manner, handing me the notes and quickly taking the next order. I stood there dumbfounded as I watched her, running the register like a pro. *Where the hell did she learn to handle orders like this? There’s more to this girl than meets the eye.*

“Mr. Dzik, we need to push! We got a bigger crowd coming.” She walked back and grabbed the first couple of completed orders and made change before handing them their food all the while humming cheerily.

To my dismay and wonderment, my business had never run this smoothly before and it was only her first day. I could get used to this. Other than all of that humming and smiling, she was actually okay. This may work out after all. I'm one of the smartest demons there was! And the master needed to see that for himself.

I nodded to myself at my own brilliance. I had been in the human realm long enough. It should be time for me to come home!



WE WORKED TIRELESSLY TOGETHER BUT IN PERFECT UNISON until after a few horrid hours, it finally slowed down. I took a seat on one of my folding chairs and so did she on her stool.

“Phew! That was quite a rush, wasn’t it, Mr. Dzik? But we got everything done,” she prattled with a bubbly expression.

And there goes the hives again. This girl is going to be the death of me or make me rich on earth.

After sitting for only a minute, she walked to the fridge, quickly came back and handed me a soda. I hesitantly took the syrupy can of liquid and watched as she drank one while walking herself back over to the counter. She began to clean all of the trash and then placed the trays on the counter and ran hot dishwater in the sink.

The little menace wouldn’t stop moving long enough for me to figure out what she was up to. Slamming my can on the

counter, I stood up and glared at her. “What are you doing? I didn’t ask you to clean up.”

She looked over with a smile that reached her ears and continued to wash the trays without looking at them. “It needs to be done, sir. You go on and rest, this is what you are paying me for.”

Her words made a light go off in my head. So this human was like a servant to me? I had been looking at this hiring help thing all wrong. Now, *I* was the master and she was the servant. Perhaps she wasn’t planted here for my torture after all. The more I thought about it, the more I grinned.

Nodding my head, I sat back down and leaned back, putting my feet up on the side of the counter while I watched her clean, tidy all the paper trays meticulously and rearrange the paper cups in order by size and groups of twenty.

When her little figure moved to turn off the deep frying in an attempt to empty it, I shot to my feet. “Okay, that’s it,” I said with accusation as I walked over to her. “Where did you work before you came here? You know a little too much about the cooking business to be a rookie.”

I admitted I was completely blown away at her knowledge and speed. But at the same time, my paranoia began to creep in again, telling me this was too good to be true.

“Well, I’m so glad you asked! It’s so nice of you to want to get to know your employees more.”

What? “That wasn’t—”

She cleared her throat and continued before I could complete my thought. “My last name is Ngo, as I mentioned. You know, the giant Ngo diner?” She maniacally laughed to herself and placed her hand on her stomach. My eyes narrowed in

suspicion. “Sorry, it’s always funny to hear it out loud. It kind of rhymed! Well, maybe not. But close enough. Anyway, it’s owned and operated by my parents. I have worked there since I was thirteen,” she said triumphantly and I took a step back, wondering if all this blabbering was a lie.

She doesn’t look that much older.

She placed her finger under her chin and looked deep in thought before she began prattling on once more. “No, I was eleven when I started waiting tables. I was thirteen when I started helping in the kitchen. Either way, I have worked in restaurants most of my life,” she giggled.

I absorbed everything she was spilling about herself. Even I, being a demon, had heard of that diner. Strange that their daughter had been uncorrupted by money and power. *It still didn’t explain why she chose to work here.* I decided to keep my thoughts to myself for the time being, until I was able to collect more information.

“That’s enough for the day, Kimmy. Be here at the same time tomorrow. You did good.”

She literally preened and glowed at the praise and I filed it away in the back of my head.

“Thank you, Mr. Dzik! I promise I will make you proud.” When she smiled brightly this time, a hint of a dimple appeared on her left cheek, stealing my focus. I cleared my throat and watched as she danced and took off her apron, quickly turning to leave the area and skipped toward the mall’s exit. It wasn’t time for the place to close but I didn’t care. I shut down the lights and followed her a few feet behind, wanting to know how she brought herself here.

“Hey! I want a corndog!” someone hollered. My back stiffened and I looked over my shoulder and gave the ingrate a snarl. The teenage boy squealed like swine and slipped as he tried to jump back, crawling until he turned and ran away. The other customers who were beginning to line up at the shop slowly backed away and followed him.

Ignoring them all, I made long strides to the front of the mall to watch Kimmy pedal herself away in a light blue bicycle across the parking lot with a basket in the front. She rang her little bell when someone was but a yard away to warn them of her arrival.

I shook my head and made my way back into the mall. The sun had gone down some time ago, the other food vendors slowly closing shop one at a time.

“How’s your new employee working out for ya, Dick?”

I growl, turning to find Justin, the manager of the sickly sweet pastry shop, from two bays down. He crossed his arms over his midnight blue apron and smirked. Justin was always trying to find a way to steal my customers. As if his customers’ sugar crashes brought them back. They didn’t. They ventured toward my counter for our signature lemonade made from the tears of men.

“Better than the two you have. Better get back to your counter, Justin, looks like one of your employees is about to fornicate over the dough.”

His face reddens as he quickly turns around and starts spitting expletives. The two employees ceased their lip lock and scrambled to get back into positions.

I snickered as Justin continued to lecture them and threaten their jobs.

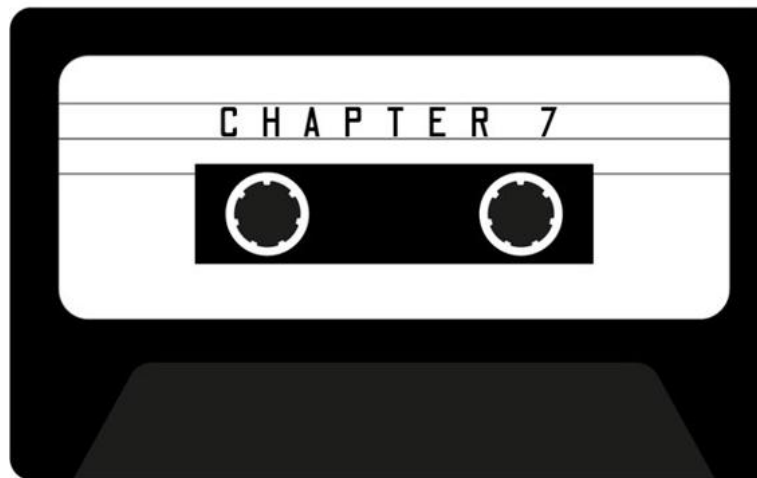
The crowd began to dwindle as the night went on. I finally put everything away, turned off the lights and closed up the shop. I sat on the stool in the shadows, waiting for the rest of the food court staff to make their way home, watching as their bodies released the tension they had been holding on to during work hours.

Once all of the humans were away sans the security that walks the parameter, it was time for me to open the portal back home.

I turned the grill back on and jumped into it. My probation demon waited for me on the other side. He was a tall, bony looking creature with curved horns and a grotesque face only a mother could love—except for the fact that he didn't have a mother. I didn't blame the universe one bit. Nothing wanted to claim *that* thing came out of their womb.

The roaring flames and dark mountains were a comfort to me. As were the screams of agony in the background, constantly playing like a lullaby. *I missed this place.*

“Hey, Dick. I see you're back from the human realm. Still on punishment, eh?” A familiar voice sounded from behind me, making my shoulders tense in agitation.



MY PROBATION DEMON, ZYCHOR, LAUGHED. CHITTER chatters of sprites fading in and out around us added to his disgusting, teasing voice.

“It’s Dzik, you fool. You already know I’m here for my normal pick up,” I snarled. His smile grew wider, showcasing rows of sharp fangs. I never did like the bastard. The authority he had over my punishment went to his head.

As if he knew what I was thinking, a long tongue snaked out and flickered in my direction.

My hands itched to rip it out of his skull when better company came toward us with a giant grin. Belchar was a demon of adultery and one of the few I got along with well.

“You know the master still wants to kill you, right?” he teased.

I grumbled and ran a hand down my face, needing to complete my allotted task before having to return to the realm of men. “I made one little mistake. A soul escaped under my watch and they were revived somehow, following some of the sprites

back to the other side. I had to take a leak and they escaped, and the master is still charging me with that shit. Plus, I've been in the human realm for all this time—for one measly soul—and the guy died a week later!" I crossed my arms angrily when one of the sprites chitter chattered and poofed in front of me, pointing at my face. I grabbed its neck and kicked it back into the flames licking up the side of one of the mountain walls nearby. The sprite splattered against the surface into black goo, sliding down to the ground before reforming into a cackling being once more.

"Yeah, but he went up above," Belchar needlessly reminded me. *I thought he was on my side.* "That's why the master's pissed off."

"Right, right," I humored him, glaring in his direction. He threw his head back and let out a booming laugh, holding his stomach while I continued. "Who would've thought he would do so much good and get to go up *there.*" I pointed upwards with a disgusted look. "But enough of all this blabbering. My time here is nearly up and I will be back home soon enough, doing what I normally do—torturing human souls with the rest of you lot," I chuckled.

"Aren't you torturing them now? I mean you are in the human realm...where all the humans come from?" Belchar questioned with a confused look on his beast-like face. His tusks and half sloughed off skin wrinkled as he gave me another wide grin, holding back his laugh.

"Do you have any idea of the torment I am under? Do you even want to know what I'm doing? I'm feeding them, that's what I'm doing. But because I'm a demon and enjoy being evil, I'm feeding them human flesh from the underworld

which I then turned into breaded weiners dipped in their own vat of torture.”

The two demons in front of me fell over each other laughing, slapping each other’s heads like imbeciles. It really wasn’t that funny.

“T-They’re eating human flesh?” Zychor snorted.

I began to laugh with them the moment sprites began popping onto their shoulders and falling to the ground from cackling in their chitter chatters. I lost my own breath while slapping my knees, the humor in the moment too much to overcome.

“Yes, well,” I slowed down to a chuckle and caught my breath. “It is kind of funny and ironic that humans will pretty much eat anything. Especially the ones that come to my counter.”

Belchar rolled his eyes once he got a hold of himself. “So, you’re feeding humans. That’s so *dastardly*, Dzik,” he snickered.

“I’ll have you know I have done so much bad since I’ve been gone!” I snapped immediately, my tail in my true form whipping about angrily. “I have done horrible things since I left, things that would make your skin crawl.”

“Oh, do tell,” piped in Zychor. “Tell us all the bad you’ve done since you’ve been in the other realm.”

I sputtered and then cleared my throat, my hands on my hips with my chest puffed. “I randomly break parking meters. I have single handedly jaywalked several times and, not to mention, told a police officer a drug deal was going to happen.”

All laughter around us ceased before it started anew, louder this time around. My head felt hot from the flush beneath my

skin and I bared my teeth at the sprites, grabbing the closest one and throwing it.

“Hey, stupid,” Belchar choked out. “That’s a good deed. And you breaking the parking meter gave them all the time they needed, it saved them from getting a ticket.”

Zychor fell to the ground laughing so hard, his horns got lodged in the dry, cracked ground. Sprites began to appear on his chest, dancing and laughing with him.

“And about that jaywalk thing. We heard all about it,” Belchar continued. “That guy that swerved around you, missing you after *almost* killing you? He was supposed to have an accident right up the street from where you walked because he was drunk. But instead, he pulled over and fell asleep and no one was harmed. Great job *demoning*.”

Belchar shook his head in utter disappointment and I felt my shoulders slouch as Zychor got back on his feet, dusting himself off and shaking his head in my direction as well.

“Your demon card is about to be pulled,” Zychor chortled. “I hear angels are accepting applications.”

Leaving the two bastards behind me, I made my way into the mountainside, weaving through the tunnels until I came upon the chamber I was looking for.

The crates of products were ready for me in the far corner when I caught sight of a familiar face from my periphery. My former dumb employee Daniel. All the souls around us cried out for mercy as Melkgard continued humming a tune, chopping on his table.

“All your shipments should be ready, Dzik,” he laughed as he slammed down his blade once more with a loud thud.

I nod in acknowledgement even if continued to keep his back to me.

“Dzik!” one of the souls cried out as I performed human body mechanics before lifting the first crate. Looking over my shoulder to see Daniel, reaching his arm through his cage, his face distorted in anger. “Why didn’t you tell me that you were a demon? I was a great employee, wasn’t I? Can you let me out of here, please, Mr. Dzik!”

“Silence, human!” I snap, straightening out my knees. “It wasn’t my fault that your stupidity led you to fall into the vortex. Now, you’ll be trapped here in the underworld forever, especially around the likes of Melkgard. Plus, you were a thief and you cheated on your girlfriend. And by the way, from what I’ve seen, she’s moved on to someone much better looking than you,” I laughed hysterically.

See. I could be evil when I wanted to, I mentally told myself.

I began moving the other boxes when Melkgard finally turned around, his distended, five arm body comically wrapped in a midnight blue apron. I narrowed my eyes in suspicion. He ignored my glare.

“Here you are, your box of human parts. I hope they enjoy them,” he says with a wicked smile.

I ignored his dripping maw and brought all the boxes outside the mountain where Zychor stood in wait. “Look at you. You’ve been working out, have you? Last I remember, you could barely hold onto the soul that got away,” he roared in laughter. My tail whipped in the direction of his face but he quickly ducked. “You should visit more often, Dzik! Oh wait, you can’t,” he howled. “You can only visit once a week! Master’s orders and all.”

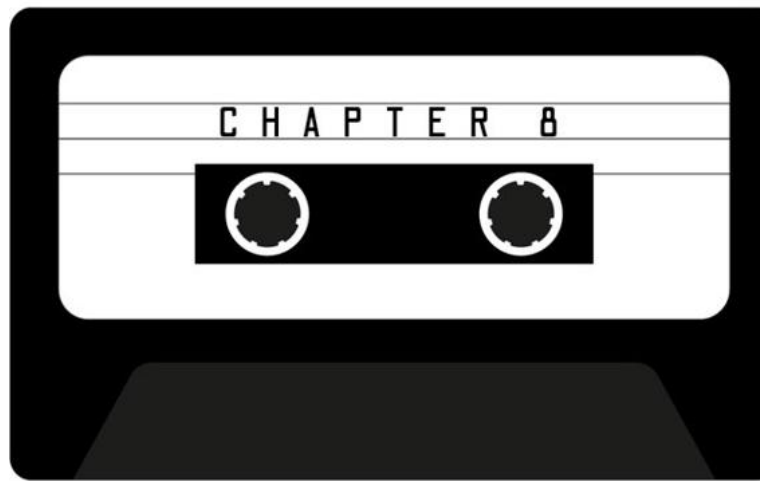
“Goodbye, Zychor,” I mumbled under my breath before I reopened the portal and jumped through again and again with each crate, one at a time.

When the final crate was placed in the back room, I no longer heard the screams of torments or felt the flames of home. Any happiness I felt, dissipated like the portal, into thin air. By the time I stacked the crates in the farthest corner of the room and re-emerged at the front of The Good Char, the only screams I heard were the cackles of teenagers and the only boils I saw were the pimples of these darn hormone-filled gangling humans.

Why, me? Why?

The master knew exactly what he was doing when he exiled me here for my punishment. I pulled up a folding chair to the counter, sat my flesh suit down and slammed my forehead on the counter with a sad groan, resigned to my fate.

“Hey, sir?” a squeaky voice floated from in front of me. “Are you open? I want a corndog.”



KIMMY

I FINALLY MADE IT HOME WHERE MY PARENTS WERE WAITING for my arrival. Taking off my helmet, I looked at them curiously, placing it on one of the side tables beside the front door.

“...Is everything okay?” I asked quietly, unsure if I should say anything at all.

Both of them had the look of disappointment etched across their faces.

“Kimberly Anne, can you please come in here for a moment,” my father commanded with an all familiar tone. When my parents came to this country to start a new life, they decided the best way to fully commit to assimilation was to give their daughter an Americanized name. I didn’t like hearing it being said like this though.

My mother sat beside him, obediently, while patting the chair beside them where a gift was sitting. It was wrapped in my favorite colors.

“That’s for you,” my father said with a huge smile. I couldn’t wait to open it. I ripped through the decorated paper, revealing a brand new walkman. My heart was racing and I squealed with utter joy before hugging my mother and father.

This is exactly what I wanted! Suddenly, my heart deflated a bit. *There had to be a catch. There was always a catch.*

“Kimberly, you would never believe what I heard today. Is it true that you’re dipping hotdogs for a job now? And just look at how you are dressed!”

His eyes bored into my tie-dye shirt which had a ketchup stain on it. My face flamed and I wasn’t sure if I should cover myself or stand there obediently with my arms to my sides.

“You are single handedly trying to destroy the Ngo name which I fought so hard to build!” He hung his head in his hands dramatically and moaned.

“Harold, now, this is just a phase all teenagers go through,” my mother cooed. My parents decided later in life to change their names as well. “She’s just trying to show some independence. She’ll be back working at our restaurant soon.” My mom rubbed his leg in comfort while she explained softly.

“No,” I blurted out, snapping both their heads in my direction. “I won’t. I’m not coming back to the restaurant. I like where I work,” I told them firmly, putting my metaphorical foot down. I wouldn’t dare to do it physically. I liked living too much.

“Wait a minute. Who is your boss?” my dad asked with authority and I knew what was coming. “Is he a man? What

does this man have over you? There has to be a reason why you are so dedicated to dipping hotdogs.”

“I don’t dip hotdogs, Dad. I dip weiners!” I raised my voice, blurting the first thing that came to my mind, while I bolted up from my seat. *I swear, they aren’t listening to anything I’m saying!*

“Oh my god. No, Harold, our little girl, she must be pregnant. It’s the music she’s been listening to, Harold,” she said fervently. “Look at the pants and shorts she’s wearing right now! Dipping weiners? That must mean sex. Kimberly Anne, you tell me right now, are you having sex? Harold, that’s it,” she cried. “She’s pregnant!”

My father jumped up from his and began pacing, about to wear a hole in the carpet. “Why me?” he called out to the ceiling. “Why would a daughter dishonor her father so terribly? She’s pregnant by a hotdog dipper?”

I felt like I was going to die. What in the world was going on right now? How did we get here? “You sound just like Mr. Dzik. Chill out dad. I’m not having sex. I just like what I’m doing.”

“Mr. Dzik?” His voice changed to a higher pitch and I grimaced. “My daughter works for someone named Dick! This is too much to bear. Why me, why me? Oh, the shame.”

If parents had an oscar award for the most dramatic parent, he would win, hands down.

“If you aren’t pregnant, what is it, baby? You can tell us anything,” my mother pleaded. “Oh, no. That has to be it. She can’t tell us because we will be accomplices.” She covered her mouth dramatically and I rolled my eyes. “She killed someone!”

“What? No. I didn—”

“Harold, call our lawyer right now! We have to get her out of the country. Isn’t your sister still visiting Sweden? Aren’t they neutral? They can’t expedite her if she’s there.”

“I didn’t kill anyone!” I tried again to stop the nonsense. How did we end up here? “I just like my job. Are you even listening to yourselves?”

They both looked at me, puzzled, right before it started up again. “Now we know something is wrong. *No one* enjoys dipping weiners for a living!”

“That’s it!” my father hollered then pulled out his checkbook. “I will pay him off for you. That has to be it. Margie, she must owe him money and she’s working to pay off her debt.” He paced around the room until he found a pen. “But you *will* pay me back every cent, young lady. Do you understand me?”

I swear my parents are mental. “I don’t owe him any money! I haven’t killed anyone and I’m not pregnant!”

“It’s drugs, isn’t it?” my mom cut me off while standing there with her hands clasped in front of her, crying giant alligator tears. “Harold, look at her face. It’s flush. That’s one of the symptoms. My little girl is addicted to drugs. Is that why you turned down those scholarships to college? Baby, didn’t you watch that commercial? Just say no.:

“I cannot. I simply cannot!” I got up before they could drive me to insanity and walked to my room, slamming my door behind me.

My parents are delusional! I could still hear them ranting in the living room. My mother was crying and my father was yelling ‘why me’. I needed to vent but I wasn’t about to call Cindy, not with the way she treated me the other day! I

groaned into my pillow. This was too much! This was exactly why I couldn't work with my parents anymore.

I laid across the bed angrily while I listened to them the rest of the night through the walls. I drifted in and out of sleep, the sound of their voices turning into a hum in the back of my mind. Hugging my chibi plushie closer to my face, getting comfortable when there was a knock at the door. Judging by the pattern, I knew exactly who it was. *My mother.*

“Sweetheart, please talk to me. Tell me why are you doing this to us? Why are you going against us?”

“Against you?” I scoffed, incredulous. I pulled my face away from my pillow and stared at the closed bedroom door. “I’m just trying to live my life. Why do you think I’m going against you? I’m trying to love myself and find out who I am.”

The door creaked open, revealing my mother with her hand still on the knob. “Sweetheart, just let me help you.” She looked sincere but how could she help me if she wasn't willing to listen to me. My mother, for all the good she tries to do in my life...still didn't know *me*.

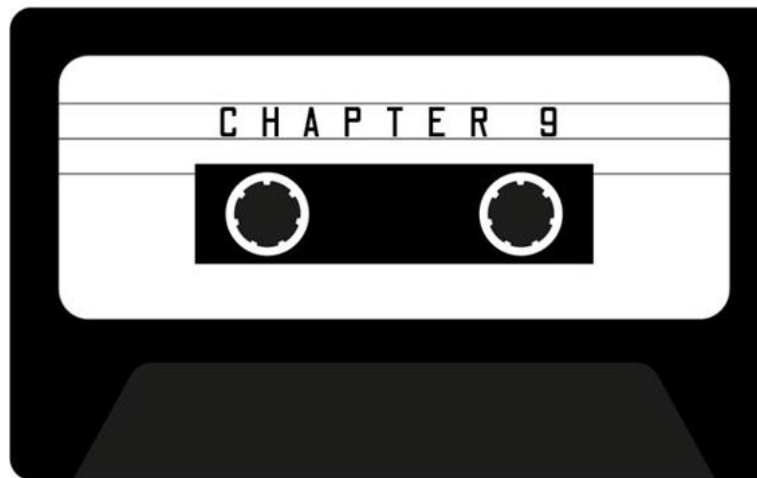
Guilt hit me in the chest but it wasn't all my fault. I had rights too, didn't I? I was an adult for crying out loud.

“I don't need help. I just want you to accept me for who I am. Why can't you just love me for who I'm trying to be, not the person you want me to be.” I sat up on the edge of the bed really looking at her. I couldn't believe how much I had been brainwashed under the guise of cultural expectations and obligations.

The only thing they wanted was for me to be what they wanted me to be. The realization hit me like an acme anvil falling from the sky. Communication would always be strained

between us, our generations and environmental influences worlds apart.

She parted with a sad goodnight and I waited until she closed the door completely before removing the evidence from today. Thinking over my first day at work, a smile crept across my face. Mr. Dzik was proud of me. He pointed out how impressed he was and I liked the feeling it gave me. My heart slowly hammered inside of my chest. He was also nice to look at. I shook my head and squealed against my pillow, forcing myself to sleep so that I could wake up bright and early for work tomorrow.



THE NEXT MORNING I GOT UP, GOT DRESSED AND LEFT THE house quietly. My parents had already left for the restaurant, their hours of operation much earlier than The Good Char. I put on my helmet and hummed as I rode my bicycle along the street, headed to my job and to see Mr. Dzik. I had work to do and a job that I actually enjoyed. I spread my arms wide while pedaling, enjoying everything life had to offer. The sun was out and the air was fresh. I arrived at Creepy Court and the door was already unlocked for me. I quickly made my way to the food court.

“Hey, Mr. Dzik!” I said with a half wave and a smile.

“Hey. Get stuff prepped for service,” he instructed.

He didn’t look at me as he put the wieners on the grill and watched them rotate over and over, glazing until they got that good char. Mr. Dzik was wearing all black again under his apron. I wondered if he had any other colors in his closet.

“There’s a uniform for you in the corner. Put it on.”

My eyes widened and I jumped in place with my hands clasped in front of me. *I’m official! This is it!*

I quickly excused myself to the back room and put on my uniform and hat. It fit me like a glove. How did he know my size so well? I came back out to the front and set up the cash register. It was a slow morning, the weekday keeping a lot of patrons away.

The silence between us made me replay everything that happened with my parents the other day in a loop. Frustration seeped into my being once again. I didn’t like this feeling. I just wanted to be happy. “Hey, Mr. Dzik—”

“It’s Dzik.”

“You’ll never believe what my parents said about me working here.”

“I don’t care to know, just work,” he said coldly. He must be tired from opening up the store. I didn’t blame him.

“They called you Mr. Dick, and they just couldn’t understand that I enjoy working here with you. I appreciate having this job, truly. I look forward to coming in all the time, to, you know, work here, with you.”

He gave me a puzzled look, his jaw clenching and nostrils flaring. What I thought was a constipated look, I had come to find was something else. It must be his serious look. I liked looking at his face.

“Just work. I don’t need to know,” he said again, completely ignoring what I was saying.

It reminded me of my parents. And now my frustration amped up a little more, my mouth rambling before I could control

myself. “They just want me to work at their restaurant and be under their thumb non-stop. I’m a woman and I don’t need their approval to work where I want to work,” I huffed, rolled my eyes and placed my hand on my hip. “I’m not a little girl anymore. No, sir. I am all woman. You know they asked me if I was on drugs and if I was pregnant? They had some nerve. I’m actually a really good person, Mr. Dzik.”

His nostrils flared again and I blinked back my unshed tears. I didn’t know why I was so emotional about all this. I shouldn’t even be thinking about it. I should just enjoy working beside my nice boss.

“Is your stuff ready for the lunch rush?” he said dryly. A quick glance at the clock told me we had about thirty minutes before it was time for our lunch rush.

Why is he ignoring me? I know he hears me and he cares about me. I can tell.

Mr. Dzik went to the other side and began working the batter with the giant spoon. I watched as the muscles on his back and arms flexed. He was a very fit man. The more he worked the batter, the more I became lost in his movements.

Look at him go! That was a man who was proud of his work. I admired that about him. Actually, I admired a lot about Mr. Dzik. My face flushed when I caught myself staring at his profile, hoping to catch his smile. I bet he has an amazing smile.

Get it together Kimmy. You don’t need to be looking at him like that, he’s your boss.

Mr. Dzik’s back suddenly tensed up right before he snapped his head over his shoulders to look directly at me. I blushed

and giggle-coughed, before turning away, pretending to be busy dusting off the register.

An idea crossed my mind and I spontaneously went for it. I dropped my pencil onto the floor and slowly bent down to pick it up, to see if he would check me out the same way I did him. I mean, I think I had a nice butt. Why wouldn't he look? When I finally picked it up and looked over my shoulder, he was already back to doing whatever he was doing on the other side.

He completely ignored me, choosing instead to continue to stir the batter for his corndogs. *That was a major fail. Maybe I should just get back to work.*

Embarrassment now laced my prior frustrations as I pulled up the stool, sat down, placed my chin in my hand and watched as the patrons of Creepy Court make their way toward the food area with their arms full of shopping bags.

A couple of young boys came toward the counter.

"We should eat before we go meet the girls," one of them said.

I straightened in my seat and offered them a kind smile, waiting for their order.

"Speaking of girls, how are you doing, pretty little thing. Do you have a boyfriend?" the second, older looking boy threw my way as he swaggered toward the counter and leaned in. He gave me a smirk that made his face look weird and I frowned when his demeanor immediately changed and he backed up.

Did I smell, or something? I know I showered this morning and I don't think I sweated too much on the ride here. I pretended to wipe my brow to discreetly smell myself. No, I smell fine.

"Either put in your order, or move out the way," came a deep, gruff voice over my head. I tilted my head back to see Mr.

Dzik standing right behind me, looking directly at the two boys in front of me.

“Oh, Mr. Dzik! Did you want to take this order? Do you want to switch places?” I asked chirpily. He had such a lovely, strong jaw from this angle—one that was currently flexing. I wonder what was bothering him? I tilted my head back down to see a new set of patrons in front of us. I guess the boys changed their minds, after all. Maybe they were late to their dates.

Mr. Dzik went to the back room grumbling and I shrugged my shoulders as the lunch rush started to line up at the counter.

“Mommy, Mommy! I want a corndog!” a cute little girl cried out, pulling her mother by the sleeve toward our counter. I fulfilled a few of the orders alone since Mr. Dzik was in the back. It was pretty easy. The fryer was vicious though. With my five feet three height, the oils threatened to slatter against my exposed skin on my neck. I quickly made my way back to the counter to take the next order: the little girl’s.

“What are you doing?” Mr. Dzik barked behind me, making me jump in surprise.

I placed my hand on my chest and growled, turning to hit him on the arm. “Don’t scare me like that! I almost felt my soul leave my body. Geez.”

I quickly turned around with a smile and took the next order and ran to the fryer, placing the hot corndog on a paper tray and handing it to the customer.

“Thank you so very much. Come again!” I called out, waving at them. The little girl waved back with a face full of ketchup and cooked corndog batter. I giggled at the sight and my mood was lifted again.

Once the lunch rush began to finally die down, Mr. Dzik grabbed my arm and pulled me aside. I gave him a smile as I wiped my brow.

“That was a lot of hard work. We did it though! We make a great team, you and I.”

“What were you doing near the grill?” he snapped irritably, confusing me. “I told you to stay away from it!”

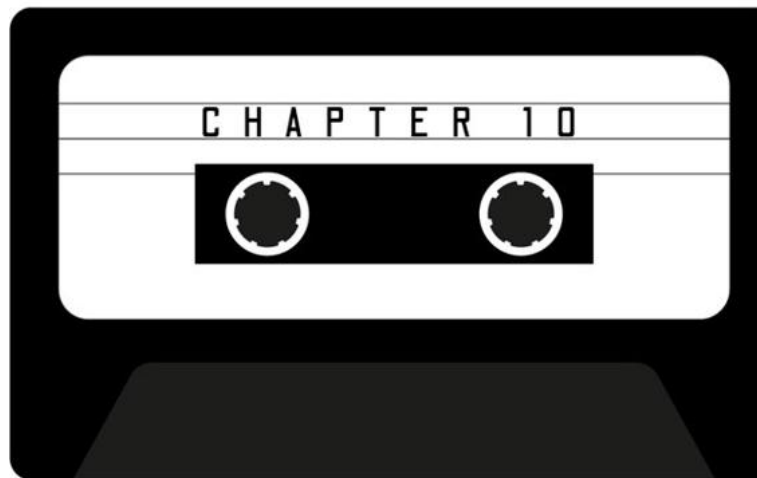
“I wasn’t by the grill, really, I was by the fryer. I had to complete the orders. You were gone,” I told him confidently.

He glared at me for a few seconds before shaking his head and releasing my arm. His hands were so large and warm. I kind of liked the way they felt on me. My face flushed again the moment the thought ran through my mind. Mr. Dzik stared at me in confusion as I quickly made my way to obsessively clean the counter, hoping he didn’t notice my reaction to him.

“Don’t forget to clean around the fryer. You made a mess in your rush.” His voice was softer this time around and I inwardly groaned.

He did notice.

“Yes, sir.”



THE NEXT DAY STARTED THE SAME. MY BOSS HAD ALREADY set everything up upon opening before I got there. All I had to do was sit behind the register obediently, waiting for customers to line up. We didn't say much to each other this time around. I was embarrassed at my behavior yesterday and couldn't find the courage to start a conversation.

You practically told him your whole life already.

It was the weekend and the early mornings brought in more patrons today. People began to gather in the food court. Voices of children whining and some babies crying floated through the air. It was going to be a long day, I could already tell.

Usually, I was excited to start the day but something was off. Perhaps it was the residual feelings from my parents and the strange reaction I had to Mr. Dzik that threw me off today.

I leaned over the counter and gave everyone around us a welcoming smile. A few of the shoppers caught sight of me,

smiled back and made their way over. The first order was four corndogs and two pink lemonades.

I yelled over to Mr. Dzik who was concentrating on stirring the batter again. “Four dogs to the window, please!” I called out to him. The sheer amount of customers lining up didn’t allot for me to write down the orders quickly enough on my little writing tablet. I began to make the cups of ice and added the lemonade, handing it to them to give Mr. Dzik time to complete the orders.

It was hectic but we were able to get all of the orders out in a timely fashion when Nicole showed up. I smiled at her while trying to keep everything professional. I didn’t want Mr. Dzik to think I was messing around with friends while I was working.

“How are you holding up, Kimmy? I know you and Cindy were really close,” Nicole said with red eyes.

I was confused. It looked like she had been crying. Her makeup was smeared and her clothes were wrinkled, nothing like the beauty queen I was used to seeing when she hung out with us.

“What are you talking about?” I asked genuinely curious. More people were beginning to line up behind her and she stepped aside.

“Excuse me, can I have a corndog please?” someone asked.

“Get the orders,” Mr. Dzik butted in, his first words to me all day. I continued taking orders and passing it along to Mr. Dzik, handing people their meals quickly without spilling their drinks on their trays.

“You mean to tell me you don’t know?” Nicole said again as I filled another order. “No one told you?”

“Can I have a lemonade?” another person asked.

“Told me what?” I questioned as I took in another order. *This was beginning to get strange.*

“It just doesn’t feel real,” she choked out and began to sob, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand, smearing more mascara down to her snotty nose.

This has to be something serious. She would never be caught dead looking this bad. When I finally got a reprieve from the customers, I took in a deep breath and fully turned to her. “What is going on? Tell me.”

“Can you get the crying girl from the counter? She is detouring customers,” Mr. Dzik growled. “Hey girl, this is a place of business! If you need therapy, call a therapist!”

I frowned and slapped his arm with the back of my hand. I was trying to listen to what she had to say! Mr. Dzik growled and shoved me toward her as he picked up where I left off with orders.

Her voice cracked while she continued to force out words through her sobs, hiccuping now and again. “Cindy went missing two nights ago,” she finally got out, and my heart stopped. “She was in the truck with some guys and the truck has disappeared. The last person who saw them said they had all been drinking.”

As she began to break down, my heart stuttered. My chest ached like a physical wound—a hole having been ripped from my chest. My eyes burned and suddenly my face was as wet as hers.

People who stood in line began to console her when my world started spinning. My mind replayed the last words we spoke to

each other and now...*I would never get to see her again.* I broke. Everything became a haze.

I wasn't sure what happened but I came back to myself, sitting on a fold out chair at the back of The Good Char, my hat still on my head. My face was covered in tears and snot covered the back of my hands as I wiped my nose again, sniffing silently in my little corner.

Mr. Dzik was spraying disinfectant on the counter and mumbling to himself. I literally don't know what just happened. The girl's voice floated back to my head like it was on a boombox and my memory came back. Cindy was missing.

I bursted out with a new fresh set of hot tears.

"Are you crying *again?*" Mr. Dzik growled. "You already scared off customers, dripped snot on several corndogs and have been crying for thirty minutes instead of working."

"I'm sorry," I sobbed louder. "It's-it's just, Cindy is gone I may never see her again! And the last thing we did was fight!" I was feeling all kinds of emotions when I began to scream.

"Hey, calm down," he said, bringing his hands up, palms out in a placating manner with a grimace on his face. "You're stirring up the pigeons. I don't want them to fly in here and crap on my stuff. Are you listening to me? Breathe."

He was so silly and knew exactly what to say to make me feel better. Mr. Dzik was such a funny man. I got up from my seat and walked over and spontaneously wrapped my arms around him before breaking down again. I couldn't help it. He always stood by me like a strong pillar. I needed that strength now more than ever. He awkwardly patted my shoulder but I

couldn't hold it back anymore. I wanted to laugh, I wanted to cry. I didn't know what I wanted.

Yes, I do. I want Cindy back.

"If you're done leaking from your face, I need you to close shop," he said in a softer tone, his fingers still patting my back.

I gave him another squeeze and exhaled. He smelled nice. The hug made me feel better even though my heart still hurt.

"Okay," I said softly, sniffing.

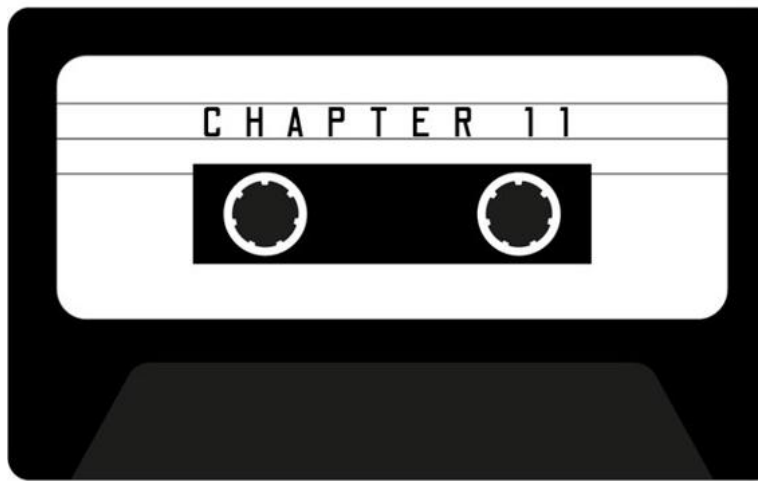
Mr. Dzik handed me a towel and pretended to look toward the food court. I smiled brightly at his thoughtfulness and blew snot into it. It was embarrassing that he had to see that, but it was better than not being able to breathe without something running down my face.

"Thank you, Mr. Dzik."

"Dzik," he said, clearing his throat gruffly. "Get back to work."

I threw away the towel and washed my hands to the sound of Mr. Dzik spraying disinfectant. We silently closed shop together and even with keeping my hands busy, my mind was still overwhelmed. I slowly walked to my bicycle and before I could reach for my helmet, someone was already strapping it on my head. I turned to see Mr. Dzik in full concentration as his large fingers fiddled with the latch.

We didn't say a word as my eyes began to mist again, staring at his strong, stubbled set jawline. When the helmet was secure, he lifted me up and placed me on my bicycle before turning and walking back to Creepy Court.



MR. DZIK

SHE'S SMEARING SNOT ON MY APRON. I NEED TO REMOVE HER from me? I've never been hugged by a human before except for when they want to jump and attack me in the underworld, thinking it would stop the tortures.

This little human was upset. She was holding me firmly in her deathly grasp. I did the only thing I could to pacify the situation so she would release her grip on me. I mimicked her as best as I could and patted her with as little contact as I could.

She still wouldn't let go. In fact, she gripped me tighter.

I'm getting human all over me. If the master hears about this, my sentence in the human realm might be extended.

"There, there," I tried, audibly swallowing bile before letting out the next set of words. "It's going to be okay, just let it all

out.”

I should just give her the rest of the day off. I was tired of her leaky face. I didn't need any more of her minions coming by the counter with any other bad news.

I opened my mouth to tell her just that when she let out another sad snuffle. Something inside of my chest twinged. I didn't like what I was feeling. I didn't like any of this at all. It needed to stop and it needed to stop now.

“If you're done leaking from your face, I need you to close shop,” I tried to tell her in a softer tone, one that wouldn't cause any more of these disgusting sounds. I patted my fingers on her back for emphasis and handed her a towel, anxious to disinfect the place once more to rid myself of her strange tumultuous emotions. For all I knew, it was contagious.

“Thank you, Mr. Dzik.”

Why did this female insist on calling me with that title? I was a demon! *I am Dzik!* If she saw me in my true form she would cower in fear. The imagery made me feel much better.

“Dzik,” I told her yet again, clearing my throat. Sadly, she didn't know I was a demon. To her I was just her superior here on the human realm in this wretched corndog vendor. “Get back to work.”

She unhooked me from her latch and wiped her eyes. It looked like she wanted to say something further but I purposely ignored her, pulling out the mop to clean up the mess near her chair.

She quietly worked beside me and I let out a sigh of relief. *I will be expecting her tomorrow without the snot and crying.*

Something inside of my chest pulled at organs as I watched her dejectedly walk out of the mall to her bicycle. I cursed

myself and grumbled as I followed behind her to make sure there were no other surprises waiting. That would just be my luck. I needed her employment to remain sound. I didn't need any other accidents that would cause me to have to hire anyone new.

No one would compare after working with Kimmy. It was a horrible fact I was now stuck with.

I watched as her hands shook, reaching for her helmet and I bared my teeth. Humans were frail. Weak. It was no wonder so many ended up in the underworld.

I quickly grabbed her helmet and placed it on her head, fiddling with the straps the way I had seen her do. What the blasted hell was this sorcery? Why were the clasps this tiny?

She stared at me with her large innocent eyes. My skin itched and I forced myself to work my fingers faster to get away from her. When the stupid latch finally clicked I wanted to roar in triumph. When her eyes began to mist, I inwardly groaned. Not again. Quickly lifting her onto her bicycle, I nudged her along. She needed to keep on task and get herself home safely so that she would be able to come back to work bright and early tomorrow.

I quickly left her, unwilling to allow her disgusting emotions to cloud my own. I needed to disinfect everything once more. *Who knows what kind of weird human diseases she or that other snotting girl left behind.*

I didn't need the health department to threaten to shut me down again. I was still paying that fucker off when he found the human finger that didn't get grinded down. I couldn't wait for his demise. By then my sentence should be over and I would be able to torture him back in the underworld. I

snickered aloud. Karma was very much a real thing, especially for him.

Thoughts of that blasted health department employee and Justin in the torture chambers lightened my mood enough for me to take off my apron, throw it with the dirty towels and change into new one.

I diligently cleaned the counters and sprayed disinfectant in the air before I started on my new germ free batter. I swear these humans are a plague on the earth.

Thoughts of Kimmy's face melting made me grimace in both disgust and a tinge of something else I couldn't put my finger on. I scowled, concentrating. Trying to figure it out.

"Got crying employees now, huh. Why am I not surprised? And why are you closing so early, it's not even sundown yet," came the last voice I wanted to hear. I slowly raised my head up to find Justin with a smirk in front of my counter.

I pointed my gloved hand with the spray bottle right at his face and sprayed. He sputtered comically and waved his hand in front of his face.

I cackled and sprayed again and again until he let out a bunch of expletives and finally left my sight back to his sickly sweet cave he passed off as sustenance.

After my laughter died down, I sighed. The entertainment was short lived. Another day in this fucking fairytale that I have been cursed to live in. A deep, low growl sounded off in the distance. I turned my gaze to the glass front of the mall and up to the sky.

Ah, we were blessed to see the wondrous sight of dark clouds moving in. Finally some darkness. The day was turning for the better. Now this is what I'm talking about!

My spirits were fully uplifted at last. I bobbed my head to the low music in the mall, a heavier tune coming over the speakers. When my sentence was over, I was going to introduce some of the other demons to it so that it could be played along to the sounds of screams of agony.

Flashes of lighting brightened the room and I smiled as I finished sanitizing The Good Char. It was the perfect background to go along with everything that had happened.

My happiness was interrupted by the sun peeking its eyes through the clouds, cutting through the beloved darkness like a hot knife through butter.

Just a little darkness, that's all I ask for. But, no. The sun has to shine. This punishment is becoming more than I can bear. Is it too much to get a small plague? A swarm of locusts, maybe a tsunami wave? Instead we get sunshine and happiness. Why me? Groaning, I slammed my disinfectant down and sat myself on the same chair Kimmy was in earlier during her breakdown. Running a hand over my face, I tilted my head back and clasped my shoulders, staring at the ceiling. *Someone wake me up from this fairytale ending!* I wanted to cry out in frustration when a group of kids came up to the closed counter after seeing me there.

“Hey, mister. We want some snow cones.”

I snapped my head in their direction and my nostrils flared with agitation. It was him again. The kid with the red hair and freckles, and he had his flunkies with him this time.

When was this blasted sentence going to end? Everyday these brats come to my stand asking for snow cones and everyday I tell them, I don't sell snow cones. *Okay, I got something for the little bastards.*

A menacing grin slowly stretched across my face. “Okay, little boys,” I purred before getting to my feet and making my way toward them. “What flavors would you like?”

“Um, we like red and blue mostly,” the redhead leader said.

I leaned in and grinned wider. “That will be a dollar a piece. So three dollars in total.”

Each of them pulled a dollar from their fanny packs and handed it to me. I put the money into my cash register and I made my way to the back of my kitchen, filled up three cups of ice and squirted some blue and red food coloring onto some pink lemonade and handed them the cups.

One of them frowned. “Hey! These aren’t snow cones!” His tone was filled with indignation as he looked into his cup. The other boys looked as confused as he was.

“I know,” I chuckled. “I don’t sell snow cones but since you wanted some, I always stick to the moniker of the customer’s always right. You three make sure to come back tomorrow now.” *I hope you all wake up with boils.* “And we’re closed for the day, so enjoy your snow cones.” I cackled before leaving them standing there and making my way into the back room once again.

Little brats got what they deserved.

When I heard the sound of ice and liquid hitting some of the equipment, I barreled out of the room to find the little shits laughing and running away, the cups left on the floor. Growling and shaking my fists at their retreating form, I memorized their faces for future reference when I was back in the underworld.

Nasty little ingrates. Quickly cleaning up the place once again, I throw my apron down and leave the area, walking out of the

Creepy Court mall. I was done with human-ing. Done with them all. Once outside, I let out a frustrated sigh and stretched my arms up.

What else could happen today?

A man wearing a suit and carrying a black book decided that he wanted to test his mortality around me, walking right in my direction with a smile on his face, bent on harassing me.

Why did I ask that question? I set myself up, didn't I? Or was this part of the master's punishment?

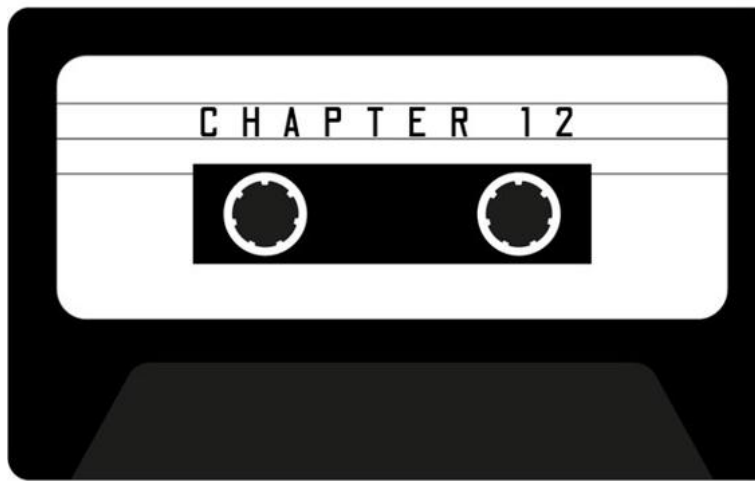
The stranger opened his mouth before I could tell him to go away. "Do you have a minute to talk about Revelations? The end of the world is coming, are you prepared? If you aren't, I have some pamphlets right here to help you be prepared for the end of days."

The fires lit within me. I was at my wits end. I looked at him with a menacing grin. "I hope it comes tomorrow. There's nothing like watching the flames of the underworld consume everything, including you!"

I let out a hysterical laugh, the madness creeping in. It didn't matter anymore. None of it did.

His eyes grew as large as those sickly sweet rolls before he hurried away in the opposite direction from me, tripping on his own feet and scattering his pamphlets all over the parking lot.

I bit the air in threat but it wasn't like he could see me do it. That wasn't the point. The point was I was done. *Why can't these humans just leave me be?*



KIMMY

I COULDN'T BELIEVE CINDY WAS MISSING. WHAT IF I NEVER got to see her again? What if they never found her and the last thing we did was fight. I rode my bike as fast as I could to get to my parents' restaurant. *Maybe my parents could help me find her.*

I arrived at the back of the restaurant, dropped my bike and ran through the back door. My heart was breaking with every step I took.

“Mom, Dad!” I sobbed while I walked through the kitchen where several of the workers were cleaning and prepping food for service. They looked at me, saw my current state and quickly got out of my way. My mother was the first to hear me and ran toward me when I was close enough.

She took one look at me and pulled me in for a tight hug. “What’s wrong, Kimmy?”

My sobs got worse and I began hiccuping. It was hard for me to get the words out. She grabbed my hand and pulled me into their office for some privacy.

“What happened? You are pregnant, aren’t you? Sweetheart, it’s okay you can still live a great life as a single mom,” she said while trying her best to comfort me.

“Mom. Once again, for the hundredth time, I’m not pregnant!” I screamed through my sobs.

“Shhh, baby, listen to me. Our workers don’t need to hear about your pregnancy, not right now. It’s not that we are ashamed that you got yourself pregnant at such a young age but you have us, and we will get through it together as a family.” She rocked me back and forth, patting the back of my head, shoving my face against her chest.

Was she listening to anything I was saying?

“Mom!” I cried out, pushing against her forced comfort. This was not what I needed right now! “I’m not freaking pregnant. Cindy went missing and they can’t find her!”

My father came in just as new sobs bursted out from my overwhelming emotions. “What is the meaning of this, Margie? What did you say to her?”

“Harold, her friend Cindy went missing,” she informed him before she gasped aloud, turning to me with knowing eyes and grabbed both of my hands. “You murdered her, didn’t you? Baby, we need to get you out of the country right now! Harold, we have to fly her out tonight, do the police suspect you in any way?”

What?!

My father quickly interjected with his fatherly logic. “No, Margie. If she killed someone’s child she needs to turn herself

in and do the right thing. Like I've always said, don't do something if you can't live with the consequences."

I watched, dumbstruck at the turn of conversation while my father began pacing around the office with his hands in his pockets.

How in the world did we get to this? "Both of you, just please, stop! My friend is missing and you both are rambling on and on about nonsense." I bolted up and stared directly at them, wiping my wet face with the back of my hands. I was so mad, I couldn't even cry anymore. "I'm not pregnant. I didn't murder anyone. Gah! What is wrong with you two? And you wonder why I don't want to work here anymore!"

I left their office, slamming the door behind me and got back on my bike. *I'm going back to Mr. Dzik's place. At least he listens and understands me.*

I pedaled as hard as I could back to The Good Char. I didn't know if he was there since he sent me home early but I was willing to try. I didn't have anywhere else to go or anyone else in my life now that Cin was gone. When I finally made it back to the mall, our spot was closed.

Growling in frustration, I stomped back out the mall and toward my bicycle. My hands were shaking from my anger that I couldn't snap my helmet back on.

"What are you doing here?" came an overly gruff voice that sounded like he had been yelling. But to me, it made my body deflate in relief. He was here after all. "I gave you the day off."

I turned to find him walking toward me in all of his glory, his steps confident, his strength emanating off him like a visible

aura. My lips trembled. I needed him. I needed him to keep me from falling into pieces.

“My parents are crazy! They think I killed Cindy and they keep asking me if I’m pregnant. I mean do I look pregnant to you?” I lifted my shirt up and showed him my flat stomach.

His eyes widened and his nostrils did that flaring thing again. He looked left and right as if searching for something then brought his gaze back to me, his hand rubbing the back of his neck. “No, you look like a normal girl to me.”

I felt a set of fresh tears threatening to spill so I tilted my head back and tried to blink them away. How many times did I need to come to Mr. Dzik looking like a hot mess? He didn’t deserve this. I was surprised he hadn’t fired me.

I shouldn’t be. He was too nice. That was why he hadn’t fired me. I tried to take my helmet off but my hand slipped and I gasped, anticipating it hitting the ground. Mr. Dzik arm shot out and he grabbed it before it could, placing it into my basket safely.

My breath stuttered. I felt like an utter failure. I hung my head in my hands and cried. “Why did Cindy have to go missing? She is my best friend. Why didn’t I stop her from going with those guys? I knew something bad was going to happen. This is all my fault, isn’t it?” I said with a whisper.

Mr. Dzik grumbled before he pulled me in for a hug. I wrapped my arms around him and wiped my face against his black shirt. His body tensed but I held him tighter. Soon enough, he relaxed and began patting my back before rubbing it.

It felt nice and I turned my face to lay my head against his hard chest.

When he spoke, I could feel the deep vibration of his voice going through me. “No, this isn’t your fault at all.”

I let out a sigh. I shouldn’t be enjoying his hugs this much. Wasn’t this what my father always warned me of? His fear of my naivety leading me to latch onto the first man that gave me attention?

But it wasn’t true. That boy the other day was trying to flirt with me and I felt nothing for him. This wasn’t like that. This was so much different...

I fell into a comfort in his arms and found myself rubbing his back too. He didn’t push me away. Instead, I think he pulled me closer and rearranged us so we would fit together better.

My face flushed and I wanted to giggle in nervousness but I bit my lip instead to hold it in. When his hand ran to my lower back, something poked me from the front. My eyes bulged out. Was he...was he getting aroused by our proximity?

My entire body felt hot as embarrassment and intrigue coursed through me.

Wow, he was big. I mean, he was a big man in general, standing a few heads taller than me but he was really big.

When it twitched against me, we both kind of choked and coughed, scrambling to detangle from one another. When my hand accidentally grazed his crotch, I wanted to die. He let out a groan that made me press my legs together before quickly turning around and letting out some deep breaths.

Oh, my god. Oh my god! I discreetly fanned myself, trying to calm my nerves.

Okay, so I just touched his junk and it grew. Did that mean he likes me? Kimmy, he’s your boss! What are you doing? Mr.

Dzik is always there for me and Cindy always said the best way to get over sadness is to get under happiness.

I didn't hear him leave. He was still standing there behind me. What do I do? Should I just go for it? I mean, there had always been a strange tension between us. I was going to do it. Life is so short. I felt him close the distance behind me so I spontaneously turned around, closed my eyes and tried to kiss him. But of course, it wasn't going to happen smoothly like the movies I love to watch. I twisted my legs and tripped on myself somehow, falling onto the floor hard with a loud thump.

I guess he moved! I'm such a spaz!

"Are you okay?" he asked with nonchalance, cool and collected. "You need to be careful. I don't want you breaking your bicycle."

I was too embarrassed to look at him. "Yes, Mr. Dzik, I'm fine," I lied through gritted teeth.

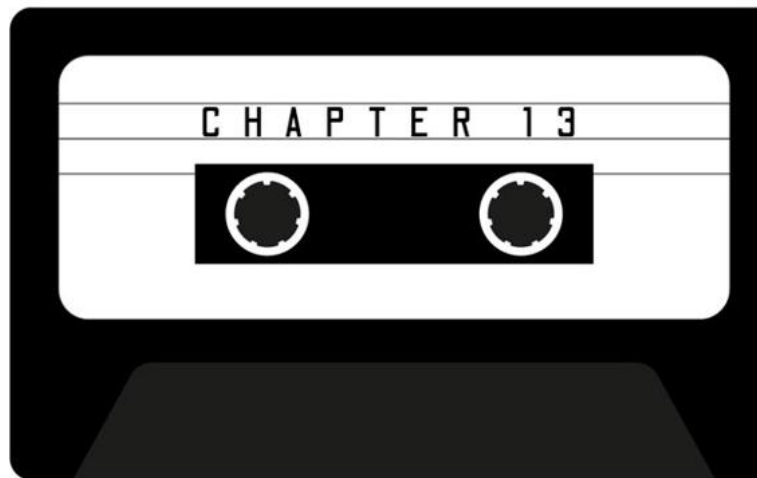
Nothing on my body was hurt but my ego was crushed, shot down completely, and he pretended like nothing had just happened between us. I had to change the subject quickly to save myself further embarrassment as I got back to my feet.

"Well," I laughed nervously, dusting myself off. "One thing we should be able to agree on is we can thank God for the storm passing over. Look at how pretty it is. I was wondering if it was gonna storm today, but just, like, I was hoping the sun wins! Whoohoo!" I gave a little fist pump toward the sky like the dork I was. "We are going to have a bright and sunshiney day, aren't we?"

I giggle nervously, looking up at the sky. It was a beautiful day, even though Cindy was missing. Maybe she would turn

up. I tried to think of the bright side. They probably took a trip to the beach and here I am having a meltdown. I should be more grateful. I shouldn't think of all the worst case scenarios and work myself up. It's a sunny day and I have a job I love—and a guy I'm gushing over.

Today is a good day.



DZIK

I INWARDLY GROWLED. *NO, NOT THE G WORD.* WHY AM I continuously tortured by this little human female? Haven't I been tortured enough being forced to manage that wretched place? How long must I live a life of serving humans with no end in sight? There was only so much a demon can take and I was at my limit with all this goodness and happiness.

I needed death and destruction. Is that too much to ask?

Not only did this little female have the audacity to touch my phallus, she went as far as lifting her shirt up and showing me her flesh. Was this a human ritual of some sort? Was she asking to copulate? Her cackles were almost as bad as mine. I did get a good glimpse of the underside of her bazookas though. If she was performing some sort of courting, I had to say, they were impressive.

What the hell was I saying? Was I truly entertaining the thought of copulating with a human? Haven't I had enough of them during my time here?

But there was something about Kimmy. She wasn't like the other imbeciles.

I narrowed my eyes in concentration as she continued to babble on, distracted by the sun in the sky. She was simple, I'd give her that. Perhaps that was what made her so intriguing. Pashar was another demon in the human realm I came across during my sentence at the Creepy Court mall. He manned the Dark Spells Comic book store. He'd surely have access to a manual about fucking humans.

I don't remember if it was punishable or not. I rubbed the scruff of my face as I continued to watch her animatedly talk about some bullcrap or another. I wasn't listening, but I did enjoy looking at her face the longer I was around her.

She was definitely hard working. It was an admirable trait, one that was rare among the idiots that walked the mall. She would be perfect if she wasn't so happy all the time and randomly leaked from her face at odd times.

If I could just get her to shut her damn mouth.

"Kimmy."

She kept babbling and I scowled.

"Kimmy," I tried again to no avail. "Blasted hell woman!" I roared, grabbing her by the waist and placing her against my side as I dragged her back into the mall and behind the counter of The Good Char. Placing her back on her feet, she looked at me stunned with her mouth in a little 'o'.

It shouldn't be as enticing as it looked. Her shutting up probably played a good part in why my hands landed on her

shoulder, pulling her into me and my lips slamming on hers.

My hands squeezed her shoulders every so often, unsure of where they should be. I'd never kissed a human before but her lips were decadent against my own, hesitantly moving against mine.

Her fear of what we were doing made something grow inside of me. I enjoyed the fact that her little hands crawled along my shoulders, wrapping themselves around me as if I was the only thing that kept her from sliding onto the floor.

She let out a soft sigh and my cock strained further against my pants, wanting to make its claim right then and there. Surely we wouldn't fit. She was so tiny. My phallus would break her in two.

Wouldn't you like to see and feel that anyway, you debauched demon, you?

When her tongue entered my mouth, I groaned, lost in whatever witchcraft she was weaving over me. My mind began thinking about the consequences—*blasted hell, fuck the consequences.*

I playfully nipped at her lip as my tongue sparred with hers. She closed whatever small distance remained between us and my cock slapped against her through the fabric of my pants. She giggled and for once it wasn't annoying me.

The more passionately she kissed me, the more I felt my flesh suit begin to strain against the expansion of my true form. I could feel the phantom sensation of my tail wagging back and forth and my horns itching against my scalp.

When her hand slid down the front of my pants and began rubbing in a circular motion, I almost ripped out of my skin. I kissed her jaw to give myself a chance to collect myself,

breathing in her scent, memorizing it until my body finally calmed enough to continue.

I didn't know who this female was in front of me when her little hands grabbed my face and forced our lips together once more. The intensity of our kiss amplified to infernal heights. Everything around us became nonexistent as I let the little vixen guide me whatever way she wanted as long as she didn't stop.

Was this why so many demons found themselves not wanting to return home? I didn't blame them. I didn't know it could be like this.

I was completely lost in the moment when her hand performed some sort of sorcery and made me unanticipatedly released in my pants. My eyes snapped open in utter surprise.

Fuck! I can't believe I just did that. How is that possible? I hope she didn't notice. I grimaced when I felt her wipe her hand on the back of my pants. *Blasted hellfires.*

She broke the kiss and pulled away from me, looking at me from beneath her hooded lashes. What was this? Who was this woman? I felt the phantom sensation of my tail whipping again, but this time in agitation.

"I-it's okay, you know. It's alright. I hope that helps you from being Mr. Grumpy," she giggled.

My flesh suit threatened to rip again. A growl escaped me and her eyes widened with a sparkle. My nostrils flared as I took in her scent again, one that was surrounding me, seeped into my clothes. *I wanted her.*

Despite feeling better from my release, as she put it, my mind continued to wonder where the hell I put that damn manual?

It was a prank gift from the other demons upon the first day of my sentence, sent with the initial crate of human meat. It was a hand scribed tome that dictated what I could and couldn't do as a demon while on probation in the human realm.

This situation with Kimmy was precarious. I desperately needed its guidance now. But I couldn't let her know I was a demon. Not yet. I left her standing there as I found a rag and cleaned myself up in the backroom. I hadn't had a release like that in centuries and my cock continued to strain against the fabric of my pants even after I resituated things.

This was going to be a problem. A big problem. And a demon like me, didn't need any more problems.

I returned to the main area to find her still standing there, with her hands innocently clasped in front of her as if she didn't just try to pull my soul out of my cock with her bare hands.

"Kimmy." I cleared my throat and straightened myself in front of her. She needed to understand who was in control here and who was the servant. "What just happened, can't happen again. You're my employee and we have to keep this a business relationship." I was talking out of my ass and I knew it. I very much wanted her little hands on me again and her lips. I began to fantasize about what it would feel like to have her lips where her hands were... "And I don't want to take advantage of your grief."

A wicked smile crossed her face and a tinge of fear coursed through me. I took a step back, watching her closely. She truly was sent here to torture me. *The best and worst kind of torture.* I scowled, trying to right the order of things between us.

"You aren't taking advantage of me," she purred. Where did she learn how to purr like that? "But I understand," she

continued solemnly. “From now on, it’s strictly professional Mr. Dzik, and I’m sorry for getting out of line.”

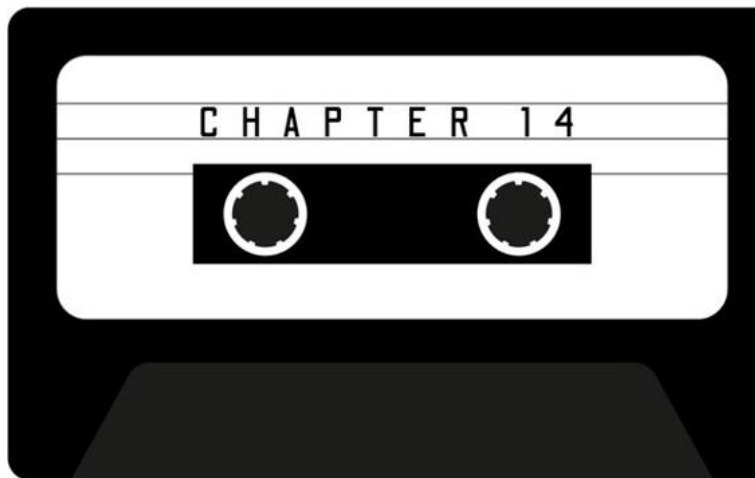
I was annoyed. I wasn’t sure if it was from the way she quickly brushed it off and followed my command or the way she initially purred her response to me.

My emotions and thoughts were in a jumble and that only further agitated me in my current state of being. We both stood there awkwardly. I crossed my arms and she watched the way my body flexed, making me puff out my chest in response.

I chastised myself. This had to end. This couldn’t happen between us. The demons back home were setting me up. I turned away and randomly began cleaning the counter top.

“Well, if you’re going to be here. Get back to work!” I barked.

She laughed softly and began sweeping.



KIMMY

I LOST TRACK OF HOW LONG I'D BEEN WORKING AT THE GOOD Char. It wasn't until Mr. Dzik called me to the back room one day. Was it wrong of me to react in excitement and anticipation? I wanted to be more than friends, giving him extra smiles and touching his arm when we would talk but he wanted to keep it strictly business and I had to respect that. Didn't I?

They still hadn't found Cindy or the guys she was with. Both Nicole and I hoped she would turn up soon. I could use my best friend to talk about my feelings. It was different with Nicole. We didn't have that kind of relationship yet. And with us both silently grieving, it was hard to try to establish anything.

We had closed shop when he called me to the backroom. I couldn't stop watching the way his stubbled jaw would flex

when he was around me, or the way his shoulders would tense up when I caught him looking at me too.

He cleared his throat and shoved an envelope in front of me. “Your first couple of weeks went well,” he said with absolutely no emotion.

A new excitement bubbled up within me. I was excited to see how much was in the envelope. I ripped it open and my eyes widened at the numbers. “Two hundred dollars? Holy crap! Thank you Mr. Dzik!”

He groaned and I pressed my legs together, shooting my eyes toward his.

“About the mister thing, let’s just call me D or Dzik. Drop the mister, for the love of hell.” His annoyance with me quickly disappeared. It was something else I noticed about him. He was different lately. “If you keep working the way you do, I may actually be able to take a day off,” he chuckled.

I beamed at him. That would be nice. I wanted to do that for him. He deserved it. He gave me a chance when he knew nothing about me. In fact, I don’t even remember filling out any sort of application.

His voice cut through my thoughts. “Now get out of here, go have some fun.” When he cracked a smile, my heart raced and I felt flustered. It was the first time I had seen it and it was glorious. No wonder he didn’t smile much. How would we get any work done if girls started flocking The Good Char.

I didn’t like the thought. Not one bit.

I gripped the check close to my chest and beamed at him again, letting him know how grateful I was.

I quickly took off my hat and apron and ran out the front glass doors and got on my bike.

This was more than my parents paid their cooks. *Hell yes! I'm a weiner dipper and I like it! Oh my god, I'm so freaking happy. He paid me so well.* Now, what exactly was I going to do with this money? I wanted to make sure that I made a difference and do some good with it.

I rode my bike up the street, my mind was giddy, constantly thinking about what I could do with my money. When my eyes caught a glimpse of movement, I turned my head to see several stray cats. One of them had just had kittens. I knew exactly what I could do. I could get those kittens and take them to the vet and get their shots and then I could get them adopted out. This would be the perfect way to spend some of my money to give back and I owed it all to Mr Dzik.

I pulled up to the local grocery store and asked if I could have a large box. One of the workers asked me what I wanted the box for and I told him. He was very nice. *He was nice just like D. It felt weird calling Mr. Dzik anything else but maybe this was his way of us getting closer.* The worker gave me a super large box. It must have once been filled with watermelons or something because it was just the right size and smelled good.

“Can I leave my bike here for a few minutes while I take these little guys to the vet?”

The worker looked at me for a few moments. “Yeah, of course.”

The mother cat was nowhere to be found when I returned. I happily gathered up the little fellas one at a time, listening to their little mewls and reassuring them I was going to take care of them. I quickly made my way down the street and to the vet. I struggled a little to get myself and the box through the door but I managed it.

Blowing my frazzled hair out my face, the person at the counter addressed me. “Hello, young lady. May I help you with something?”

Tightly gripping onto the box, the kittens began to tumble and play. “Hi! Yes, I found these strays and I would like to get their shots so I can help get them adopted.”

“Well, aren’t you just the sweetest?” She smiled before leaning over the counter to peek into the box. She handed me some paperwork as she took the box from me. She informed me I could come by and pick them up tomorrow and gave me the cost.

“That’s fine. I work now and I can afford it,” I cheered so hard. It felt so good to do something on my own without using money from my parents. I was also glad the kittens would get a chance to live a good life. I walked out of the vet’s office smiling and twirling with my hands up to the sky.

When I finally made it home, I went straight to bed. I tossed and turned all night, wondering if they would ever find Cindy and if she was okay along with if I could actually get the kittens adopted out. I eventually dozed off sometime later and was reawakened by the sound of birds singing outside my window.

A smile crept on my face. *It was time to go to work.* Saturday was one of the busiest days of the week for us. I got myself ready and walked outside only to remember that I left my bike at the grocery store. I didn’t think I had time to detour to get my bike. I was going to have to foot it to work today.

It was warm like any other day and when I finally made it to work, I was sweating. That walk was further than I remembered but I couldn’t wait to tell D what he had helped

me do. I was so excited that I could barely get the words out of my mouth when I saw him wiping down the counters.

He actually waved at me with his rag when he saw me come in. It made my already elated heart jump for joy. He was happy today.

“Did you enjoy your evening?” he asked while he stirred the batter.

“I bet you can’t guess what I did with my first check!” I singsonged in his direction.

“I don’t really care. It was your money. I’m happy you enjoy working here, but we can keep our personal life separate.” He moved from the batter to adding more wieners to the grill.

“I know D, but I have to tell you. If it wasn’t for you, I wouldn’t have been able to take care of those little kittens I found and now they have a bright future instead of dying on the streets. It’s all because of you. Thank you so much!” I just wanted to hug him in gratitude, but I wasn’t sure where we stood since the incident that shall not be named. Mr. Dzik was such an amazing man and I couldn’t help but admire him more and more as he continued to do his duties. A man shouldn’t look that attractive with an apron on, but here he was, making me lust after him with every stretch and flex of his arm.

I quickly grabbed some paper towels to wipe my brow and readjust my ponytail before grabbing my hat and placing it on my head. I can’t wait to see how the kittens are doing at the end of the shift today.

I hummed a little tune and danced to the beat in my head as I leaned over the counter and began to wave at the potential customers in the area with a bright smile.

A couple of teenage boys laughing together caught sight of me and smiled, waving in my direction. I didn't know who they were but they seemed friendly so I waved back, hoping they'd come by the counter.

They took two steps forward and their smiles fell before they quickly turned and walked away. I wonder what that was about. Maybe one of them needed to use the restroom or something.

I straightened and my back hit something solid. I yelped and turned to find Mr. Dzik standing behind me, staring after the boys. Did I miss something?

"You shouldn't lean over the counter like that," he told me bluntly.

"Why? Is it dirty? Sorry, I should have cleaned it first."

He cleared his throat and looked over at the grill. "Button up your shirt, Kimmy."

"What?" I quickly looked down and forgot that I had unbuttoned it on the way because I was getting so sweaty on the walk here. I quickly redid them and grabbed one of the flyers on the counter and began to fan myself. The mall air conditioning felt amazing but my body had yet to fully cool down.

"Why is your face flush after those humans waved at you? Do you know them? Don't bring your friends around here, you got it? This is a place of work and I will not have you dilly dallying around during work hours."

I was so confused.

"N-No. I don't know them. I was just waving hoping they'd come over to buy some wieners."

Mr. Dzik did something I could never anticipate. He grabbed me by the arm and pulled me to the back room, shutting the door dramatically. *Oh no*. Was I in trouble for something? I shouldn't have ever talked back. Didn't my parents always teach me not to talk back? I was going to get fired, wasn't I?

Mr. Dzik backed me up against the wall and leaned down, snarling in my face. "You shouldn't hope for any male to come in your direction, do you understand?"

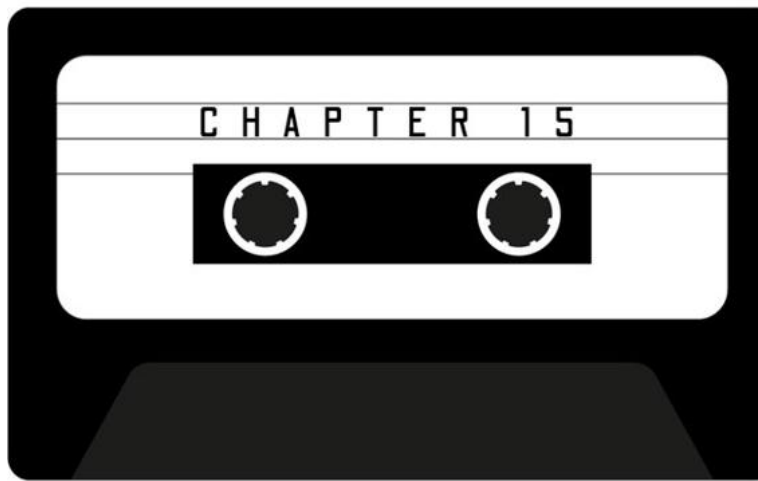
Huh?

"You don't want customers to come to The Good Char?"

"I don't care about any blasted customers when they're looking at you like meat on a stick. If they value their lives, they'll keep their distance."

Mr. Dzik's face began to waver and I wondered if I was overheated from the walk. He must have known that, maybe that was why he pulled me back here. How very kind of him. In fact, with his proximity and my eyes glued to his lips and the way they moved, I think I did need to sit down for a moment.

"I-I think I need to sit down—" Before I could finish my sentence, my head became light and I fell forward.



DZIK

THERE WAS SOMETHING TERRIBLY WRONG WITH ME TODAY. I was anxious for her arrival. I watched the clock as the hand slowly crept to the next minute wondering where the hell she was. She was never this late. She was always here at least ten minutes before the official opening and it was already nine minutes til.

My skin prickled and my back tensed the moment I sensed her presence. It was the smile and look of pure joy on her face that made her practically glow as she made her way to the counter. she just had to walk in singing a happy upbeat song.

Must she always come in so...loudly? I found that though she still annoyed me, she didn't agitate me.

She placed her hand over her mouth endearingly as she giggled, relaying to me her tales of saving tiny beasts from dying on the streets.

“Now they have a bright future instead of dying on the streets. It’s all because of you. Thank you so much!”

Now, wait a blasted minute. She was accusing me of assisting her in her good deed. This female is going to be the death of me. I’m gonna end up in the human realm forever.

As I pondered what to do to counteract what happened, the hairs on the back of my neck rose when I watched her wave at a couple of young human males across the mall. Something took over me and all I saw was red from their limbs being torn apart.

Didn’t she realize that the claim was already made. She made it, for blasted hell! How dare she tempt others when I was standing right beside her. I walked up behind and glared in their direction. My skin itched to take off their heads. They must have felt the death aura I was sending in their direction because they quickly left the vicinity without me having to cross the other side of the counter. *Good.*

I needed to make things clear to her simple little mind. Perhaps she just needed a reminder. I pulled her to the back room and gave her a piece of my mind. She responded by giving me her large, dark innocent eyes but I wouldn’t fall for her tricks. Not this time. No, this time, she will understand exactly who the master is around The Good Char.

Oh, but she had another trick up her sleeve I didn’t anticipate. She fell forward and I quickly caught her before she could hit the ground. Of course, her plan to deter my anger would work. My anger quickly morphed into worry as I dragged her over to one of the folding chairs and lifted her onto my lap.

“One shouldn’t look this enticing while unconscious, Kimmy. Your womanly wiles never fail to tempt me.”

Of course, she didn't answer. I gently wiped her brow and pushed back some of her strands as her striped hat fell to the ground. Her skin was hot. I didn't think humans ran this hot but what did I know? Most of them were being burned alive back home.

Gently tapping her face, I called out her name to no avail. I could feel my flesh suit ready to tear apart as my anger over this uncontrollable situation coursed through me.

With a split decision, I got to my feet with her cradled in my arms and gently laid her down on the bags of dried batter mix. Making sure she wouldn't fall off the mound, I took off my apron and swiftly made my way to the main area of Creepy Court.

I needed Pashar's advice and aid. I couldn't go back to the underworld with this. The other demons wouldn't let me live it down if they found out. As luck would have it, Pashar's shop was on the first floor.

I made my way through his doors and he snapped his head up from where he stood behind his dark counter.

"What the bloody hell do you want?" he greeted me.

"I need your assistance. How does one revive an unconscious human?"

He tilted his head curiously without leaving his spot.

"And why would you want to do that? Are you having a problem killing humans now, Dzik? Has the human realm softened you?"

I stomped toward his counter and brought our faces nose to nose. He didn't back down from the challenge. His eyes bored into mine with the same hatred I had for him.

“I need to revive my human, Pashar. She seemed to have overheated herself on her way to work. At least, that’s my assumption. I also need...” I casted my gaze at his store and wares. “A book on how to coerce a human to stay with a demon.”

Pashar threw his head back and cackled and my hands turned to fists on top of his counter.

“Look here, you bloody stupid demon. There are no books on how to coerce a human to stay with you. You just make them! Did you lose your demon card while you were here?” He shook his head in utter disappointment and I snarled, biting the air in front of me.

He ignored it and leaned into my face.

“I suggest you get your ass out of my store, demon. There’s nothing that will help you here.”

“Fine!” I barked out. “I need to get some fleas, can you at least do that?”

His eyes sparkled as an evil grin broke across his face.

“Why, I may indeed be able to help you with that...”

I left the store in a sour mood. At least I was able to obtain some fleas. I was going to find Kimmy’s little rescued beasts and infect them. I was not going to be accused of being an accomplice to any good deed while I was serving my time here. The master was going to see just how evil I could be and what havoc I could wreak. *Good luck adopting these stupid kittens out if they have fleas*, I snickered to myself. *No, that little female wouldn’t get me anymore years stuck here in this wretched fairytale land.*

When I made it back, Kimmy was still unconscious on the batter. I put my hands on my hips, wondering what the hell my

next move would be. How did one wake up an unconscious human? This was exactly why there needed to be a handbook on these matters.

An idea formed in my head and I made my way to the sink, gathering a pitcher of water. This should do the trick. Killing two birds with one stone and all. I did like killing and it was a demony thing to do. I nodded my head as I made my way to the back room and splashed her face with water. She sputtered and quickly came to. I puffed out my chest in triumph until I realized I could see her breasts clearly from here.

Thoughts of those boys coming back around to specifically see her in this state grated my nerves. With a growl, I lifted her up with the intent on finding her another set of uniform to wear. But I got sidetracked with her arms wrapped around me as she continued to gasp for air, pushing her round mounds against my chest. Something inside of me rumbled and I found myself nuzzling the crook of her neck, taking in her scent that, for some reason, began to take over my senses.

Did she always smell this good?

“What happened, D?” she whispered against me. Her voice seeped into my demon skin as if in a caress and I couldn’t help myself. I licked the water trailing down her exposed skin and she sharply inhaled.

When her little hands began to massage my neck and head, I was lost. Our lips found each other and we frantically began to devour each other’s faces as if in a race against time.

I didn’t forget my mission and broke the kiss in order to quickly divest her of her wet clothes. Her eyes widened as her hands quickly moved to unfasten my pants and I choked, warring against myself if I should stop her or not.

Bloody hell. When her hand gripped my phallus with a strength I didn't know she had, the master turned into a servant and we both fell back onto the bags of batter, exploding one of them into a cloud of dust all around us.

We both coughed and waved our hands in front of our faces, but quickly closed the distance between ourselves as our mouths continued to explore each other's bodies.

"I need you, Dzik. I can't stop thinking about you."

I growled at her command and quickly kicked off my boots, then removed my pants, freeing the beast between my legs once and for all. It wept against her skin as I divested her of her coverings, forcing her legs around my hips.

She cradled my face and our frenzied kiss slowed. I didn't understand why there was a shift and was desperate to get back to where we once were. Nipping her jaw, I trailed kisses down to the top of her breasts, wishing I could be in my demon form to take a bite out of her and see what she truly tasted like.

Since I couldn't, I had to do the next best thing. She squealed when I folded her in half and made my way between her legs with my face. I slapped my hand over her mouth to muffle her cries before the other vendors could hear us. If we were back home in the underworld, I would make it my mission to make her scream for the other demons to hear, but alas, we are stuck in the human realm for now.

"Open up for me, Kimmy. I need to taste you. I deserve it after what you put me through," I growled. *She's been nothing but a menace since she barged into my life. She deserved to be punished for it.*

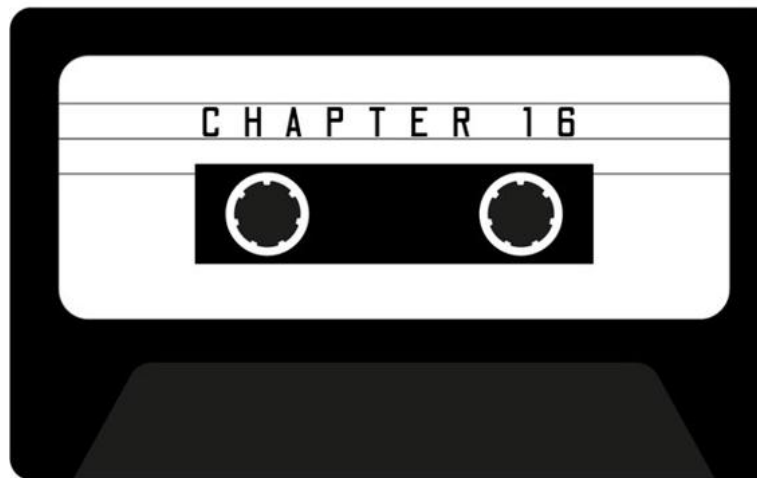
She said something against my hand but I didn't care to hear it as I dove my tongue inside of her and groaned against her taste. When her blunt teeth threatened to pierce the skin of my fingers, I pressed my mouth harder against her. She was trying to rile me up, make me lose control. But I would show her. I would show her that this demon was the most evil she had ever encountered.

Kimmy reacted beautifully to every pass of my tongue. When I pushed a finger inside of her, she wrapped her legs around my head and threatened to break it with her thighs. I took every challenge she threw my way. Nipping and torturing her pussy, she mewled against my hand and I trembled beneath my ministrations. Every time her body wound up and her thighs threatened to squeeze my head to oblivion, I slowed my torture. She began to cry against my palm and I gave her a wicked smile, watching her face as she watched mine with lust.

“If you scream, Kimmy. I will kill you.” Her eyes rolled back in carnal desire and my demon skin expanded in pride. “I want to devour you. But not like the others, no. I want to savor every inch of you alive and feel your veins throb against my skin.”

When I slipped my tongue into her again and flicked it upward, her body shook and she slapped her own hands over her mouth to stifle the scream that threatened to rent the air.

My body heaved as I lapped up everything she offered me in sacrifice and suddenly, a sound rented the air and I felt my physical tail whipping back and forth.



KIMMY

DID HE JUST—

Did he just pass gas?

He crawled up my body and I patted him on his back. “It’s okay. It happens to the best of us. It’s only natural.”

I tried my best to comfort him. After all, I didn’t want his embarrassment to derail our little tryst. To be honest, I was the one that was embarrassed. The furthest I went with anyone was a fumbling third base with Jim when we were juniors in high school.

“What?” he mumbled, licking my stomach and giving me goosebumps.

I lifted my head up to comfort him again when my entire body froze at the sight in front of me. “M-Mr. Dzik.”

He nipped my skin and crawled up to lick my shoulder. “It’s Dzik. Say it with me, Kimmy. Dzik.”

I tentatively cradled his face and reached up to touch the quadruple horns that now protruded out of his head in a curve, intertwining in different directions. “Dzik...you have horns.”

He snapped his head up and something whipped my outer thigh. I squealed and he covered my mouth again with his hand before he looked over himself and cursed under his breath. When he pulled his hand away from my mouth and turned it over, some of his knuckles were busted and spikes protruded out the back of his hand, revealing skin a very familiar color to our wieners.

“What’s happening, Dzik? Are you okay? Do I need to call the police? Do I need to call area fifty one?”

He growled before slamming his mouth on mine, a very different tongue entering into me. I was already hot and bothered and the touch of fear growing within me took my arousal to new heights. I knew I was a freak on the inside with my love for movies like *The Black Lagoon*. Whoever said they weren’t attracted to that monster was a liar. Cindy used to tell me how she would diddle herself to thoughts of him back in high school. That only led me down a road to do the same.

“Dzik, I—” I didn’t know what else to say. When was opening time anyway?

His long tongue dove down my throat and I gagged. He groaned as if he could barely contain himself as he pulled his tongue back to wrap around mine seductively. My breast felt heavy and tender against his body the more he rubbed himself against me. He was such a large man to begin with but whatever was happening right now made him feel so much larger.

“Your mouth has caused me nothing but grief, Kimmy. And now it tortures me. Do you like how you taste? I could tie you to this mound and feast on you until you beg me to take your soul.”

Sweet lord, who was this man? Was he even a man at all?

As if he read my mind, he grinded his dick against me and I gasped in surprise. This was not the same as I felt earlier. It left a trail of wetness on my inner thigh as ridges and something else that was moving. Or maybe it was me who was squirming?

“Do you have protection?” I panted against his mouth. Dzik refused to let me up for air as he began giving me drugging kisses once more.

He pulled away from me and his eyes glowed an eerie mix of yellows and browns. I was mesmerized. Did I think he was handsome before?

“I left my battle axe back home,” he replied. I scrunched my face and he chuckled deliciously against my cheek. I blushed in response. “But I brought another beast in its stead.”

I was going to end up pregnant. My mother was right. It didn’t matter that I was in my mid early twenties. The man was too virile. I couldn’t convince myself to push him off me. Not when his hands were worshiping my body with his caresses along my sides and breasts. Both guilt and shame coursed through me as well as a thrill of the forbidden, especially because he was so much older *and* my boss.

When his tongue stretched out to lave at my nipple and pull it, I moaned and wrapped my arms around him tighter. If Cindy were here, she’d tell me you only live once. And she was right.

“Open your legs for me, Kimmy, before I tear you in two. You’re going to take me either way.”

What if I wanted him to? It sounded appealing. My old ex Jim had only rubbed his dick against me skin to skin. It couldn’t be that much different, right?

“I’m so horny for you right now,” I told him. It was the truth. I didn’t know if it was unsexy to say, but there it was.

“Then open wider for me, my little flesh morsel. I’m going to make sure every male around you knows exactly who you belong to.”

Oh sweet baby jeebus.

When the large, bulbous head of his cock pressed against the apex of my legs, I tried my best to relax myself but when the skin of his shoulder began to stretch apart like string cheese, I got distracted and tightened up.

He groaned against my shoulder, licking it and grazing it with teeth that were much too sharp to be human.

“Dzik. I-I’m nervous. I’ve never—”

“—copulated with a demon before. Good. And no other demon will touch you but me.” He ended his sentence with a thrust and I could feel my pussy stretch around me to the brim.

“I can’t. You’re too—” I was blabbering at this point. It was uncomfortable but I didn’t want him to stop. My hands clawed at his back and I swore it felt like my nails were coming away with more of his flesh as ridged skin and spikes broke through his skin.

“You will, little carrion.” He thrust again and my body was forced to accommodate his size. Did he just say he cared for me? I didn’t have time to think about when I was distracted by

his tongue laving my jaw right before he grabbed my chin and forced my face toward his for a kiss. It was drugging and I was under his spell, very much a willing participant to see where we were going from here.

He surged his hips forward and swallowed my cries as he buried himself to the hilt, making me feel like he was going to come out of my throat. My stomach was distended and I could feel something pushing against it. I screeched but he stuck his very inhuman finger into my mouth and distracted me once again from what he was doing.

And whatever it was, made me feel so good. I was euphoric as he continued to thrust into me at a harsh pace. When he pulled his finger out and pushed the back of my thighs up, I thought I would pass out from his invasion. I couldn't anticipate my body convulsing from the orgasm that hit me like a ton of bricks. I jerked so hard, we both fell onto the floor in a pile of limbs, but he didn't stop. Dzik simply turned me onto my stomach and lifted my butt into the air as he inserted himself and continued to pound into my tender flesh.

Hands reached over and grabbed my breasts. Hands slid down my sides and grabbed my hips. I was suddenly so overstimulated, I lost count of what was touching me. Pleasure began to climb in tune to his rapid pace when his fingers crept to the apex of my legs and began to play with my clit. I couldn't fight the ecstasy, the top half of my body fell forward and my hands clawed at the tiled floor as a splash gushed between us with him still inside.

Oh god. Did he come? Did I pee myself? What just happened.

Dizk groaned and agonizingly slowed his thrusts, as my body went through waves and waves of an orgasm that wanted to

kill me. Tears flooded the floor as I mewled and arched my back, wanting to pull away and craving more all at once.

Dzik leaned over and covered my body, trailing kisses along my shoulder blade. “My little carrion is a squirter. It burns me that you wanted to mark me the same way I’m going to mark you.”

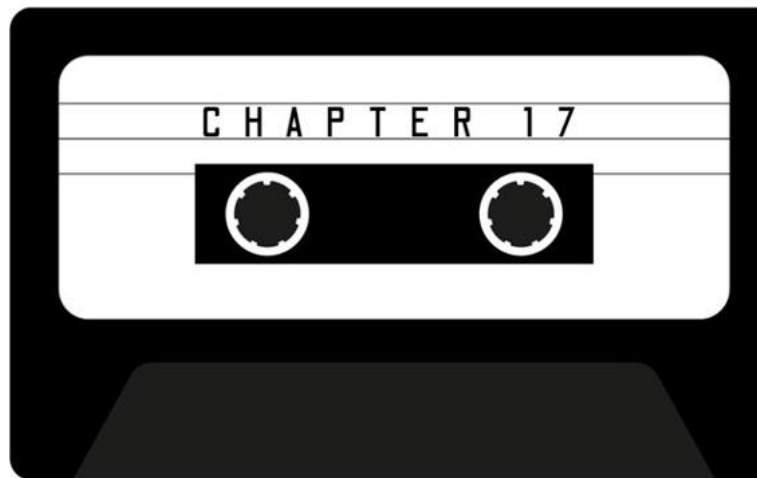
Is that what it was? Embarrassment consumed me as he quickly pulled out, making me squirt again before invading me with another thrust.

Before I could cry out for him to stop torturing me, he increased his pace, sliding me across the floor until he groaned and snarled, biting down on my shoulder as my body was thrown into another orgasm I didn’t think I could take.

My body limply fell to its side as I tried to catch my breath, darkness threatening my vision.

Voices came from the other side of the wall but it all sounded like a low buzz as Dzik pulled my body against his and began to nuzzle the back of my head, occasionally licking the wound on my shoulder that was throbbing.

“Hey! Are you open today? I want a corndog!” was the last thing I heard as my tired body gave into the encroaching void of slumber.



DZIK

SHE WAS BEAUTIFUL WHEN SHE WAS UNCONSCIOUS.

I cleaned her up the best I could while waiting for the wayward customers to leave. Intruders were more like it. Didn't they know that important matters needed to be had back here.

Possessiveness crawled along my flesh like maggots the longer I stared at her relaxed form. I couldn't leave her here. I didn't trust any of the other humans to not take advantage of my little carrion.

Bending down, I grabbed one of my extra shirts and covered her in it before lifting her in my arms. Backing into the door, I quickly looked left and right to make sure no one else was around. It was times like this I was glad for the construction beside us.

Quickly making my way to the front counter, I threw the 'we're closed' sign on top and jumped into the vortex grill with my female safely tucked in my arms.

"Dzik. You're not due to be back for another day. Are the humans consuming that quickly?" came Zychor's voice.

I growled at him and shoved his shoulder aside with my own as I made my way to my original chambers back home in the mountainside.

Gently laying Kimmy down on my bed, I called for my old sprite companion, Fenia. The sprite quickly poofed into the room, flapping her necrotic wings rapidly.

"Have you returned home, Dzik? Is your sentence finally over?"

I scowled. "I need you to take care of her until I can repair my flesh suit. Do not let her leave this chamber and do not answer too many of her questions if she wakes."

Fenia's head was practically attached to her shoulders sans a neck as she flew around the new specimen on my bed curiously. Straggly hair wisped around her as her wings beat faster and faster akin to the hummingbirds seen in the human realm.

Not waiting for her answer, I quickly left to find the demon who helped me pick out this flesh suit the first time.

A few questions and curses later, I was back to my intact human form and stomped my way toward my chambers to find Kimmy sitting in the middle of the bed, with her back to me.

I approached her cautiously, unsure of what she would make of her new surroundings when she squeaked and looked over her shoulder at me. The moment her eyes met mine, they

shone with welcome as she scrambled off the bed and threw her arms around me.

“You’re back! I thought you had left me. I woke up and wondered if I landed in some weird beach resort but then I realized that this looked more like a cave than a hotel. I mean, a beach trip would be nice for a date, you know? That’s what I thought was happening. But did we even close the shop? What if customers are lined up waiting for us?”

The only way to stop her incessant chattering was to kiss her. She immediately molded against me and I could feel my tail threaten to rip through again to wrap itself around her.

I ended the kiss with a nip on her lip and cleared my throat. “How long have you been awake? Were you taken care of?”

“Oh yes. Your little flying friend—a sprite she called herself, I think—was very nice. She reminded me of you.”

I grumbled. “I am not a nice person, Kimmy. I am a demon.”

She gave me a beaming smile and got on her tippy toes to plant a chaste kiss on my lips deflating my puffed chest. “Oh, I know. I mean, it took me a while to figure it out, but I did.”

I narrowed my eyes in suspicion at her reaction. “Are you not scared, my little carrion? Do you not know where you are?”

This little female was proving to be more than meets the eye—if my true form had eyes.

“I know that you care about me, and sent someone to make sure I was alright when I woke up,” she nodded, completely oblivious to her surroundings. This was exactly why she needed a demon like me to claim her. She wouldn’t survive very long without one by her side.

“We need to get back. Come, Kimmy. The Good Char awaits its mistress.”

She let out a raw laugh and my tail did rip out again which only made her laugh harder as it wrapped around her leg and caressed her hip. When she cradled my face and kissed me, I felt my entire body expand and all that was left was my true form.

When she pulled back, her eyes widened with a mixture of fear and lust. My phallus throbbed in reaction and I groaned in frustration and annoyance. She would be the death of me at this point. The master would never forgive me for bringing her here if I got caught.

Her fingers began to explore my face, one that was striated and torn, melted away and reformed until all that was left was exposed teeth and holes where my human nose should be. My horns itched with its freedom and as if she felt it, her little fingers grazed across where skin met bone, making me shiver.

“I’m going to need you to stay out of trouble,” I exhaled. “I shall return.” Needing to repair my flesh suit, yet again, I left her.

She nodded her head with a dazed smile and ten minutes later upon my return she stood there, patiently waiting for me with her hands clasped in front of her. Fenia must have found the black dress she was wearing that showcased her curves more than it should. I would have to punish her for that later.

Grabbing her hand, I quickly made my way back to Zychor and his portal. I could hear Belchar’s voice asking me questions about who Kimmy was and a new emotion reared its ugly head. I bared my teeth at him right before he leaped through and landed on the other side of The Good Char.

Luckily, no one was around. I pulled us both to the backroom and grabbed her hat, gently placing it on her head.

“You really are the perfect man, Dzik,” she sighed happily.

I scowled and put on my own apron. “I am not a man, Kimmy. I’ve told you this already. This body you see is what I need to blend in with the humans. The only reason I’m here is because of a sentence I must serve.”

She gasped and I turned to look at her.

Her eyes shone with surprise and morbid curiosity. “Ooo! I knew you were a bad boy, Dzik!”

I rolled my eyes, a bad habit I picked up from the little female and grumbled as I pulled her out to the front and took away the ‘we’re closed’ sign.

Without missing a beat, Kimmy leaned across the counter, smiled and waved at the closest victims pulling customers in with her disgustingly happy aura.

Watching her cheerily perform her menial job and the smiles she brought to everyone around her, I had to admit...brought a smirk of pride to my face as well.

When we finished the last of the customers before closing, she looked over to me and winked, blowing a kiss which I pretended to catch and throw into the deep fry oil with pseudo revulsion.

Her laugh tinkled like a sweet melody and made everyone’s eyes turn our way, prickling my possession into overdrive.



KIMMY

WE WENT A FEW MORE WEEKS STEALING KISSES AND MAKING love in awkward locations during the slow hours at The Good Char. I had never felt so happy in my entire life. Somehow my little kittens caught fleas but I was able to use my next paycheck to give them the best shampoo that made their fur glisten so nicely that they were immediately adopted out.

Dzik was the same grumbly man I met the first day in front of everyone. I enjoyed the fact that I was able to see the other side of him behind closed doors. After reassuring him that his true form didn't scare me but in fact turn me on, he complained about the fact that he had to sneak away to the underworld more often to fix his 'flesh suit' without the master catching him. I still didn't know who this master was but I do hope he forgave Dzik. He was such a good demon.

Today was a normal Thursday and soon after our shift began, two familiar faces showed up that I was not looking forward to seeing. My body tensed up as I watched my parents make their way toward The Good Char. I was nervous to say the least. I was scared too. D instantly noticed my composure changed and walked over, placing his warm hand on my shoulder to ask me if I was okay right as my parents made it to the counter.

I covered my face with both hands. There was an awkward short period of silence when my parents finally spoke.

“Well, sweetheart, we have good news for you. Cindy’s mom called and she is home safe and sound.”

I quickly dropped my hands from my face and began crying, leaking tears all over the counter. D grumbled and began spraying and cleaning the area in front of me when my father extended his hand.

“So you are the famous Dick that my daughter has been raving on and on about.”

I groaned. Did he really have to say that out loud? He was trying to embarrass me on purpose!

D confidently shook his hand and I blushed like my whole body was being dipped into an oil vat. They both ignored me.

“I know you and my daughter are more than employee and owner,” my dad gruffly said, trying to hide the words with a cough or two before quickly changing the subject. “This is a nice place you have here, *Dick*.”

“It’s Dzik,” D said nonchalantly but with a hint of firmness. I had to admit, it turned me on when he was mysterious like this.

“Well, let us get one of those dipped dogs everyone has been talking about,” my dad blustered as he puffed out his chest.

What was going on right now?

D nodded silently as he personally dipped and fried two—one for both my parents. I wiped my face with the back of my hands and now I wanted to cry for another reason. How did I get so lucky with a man like him?

My father turned the food in his hand and examined it while my mother, trying to bridge the weird tension in the air, dipped hers in ketchup and took the first brave bite.

“This is exquisite, Harold!” she said with the biggest smile on her face. “Hurry and take a bite. It’s to die for.”

“To die for, you say?” D smirked and chuckled.

My dad finally took a bite and nodded his head in silence, not expressing one way or another if he liked it or not. My heart hammered inside of my chest. No matter what happens next, I wouldn’t let him come between us. I laced my fingers in Dzik’s hand behind the counter and he gripped it firmly, calming me down.

Finally, my father cleared his throat and placed his corndog down in its paper tray. “Please, come talk a little business with me, Dick—If you have a moment.”

D invited my father to the back leaving my mother and I standing at the front of The Good Char in silence.



Dzik

“Well, I’m going to cut right to the chase,” Kimmy’s sire continued. “This is a hell of an operation you have here. My little Kimmy means the world to me and I know she means a lot to you.” I braced myself for whatever threat was going to come out of his mouth. Kimmy would forgive me in time if I had to speed up her sire’s demise. My phallus and I would make sure of it. “So, how about a partnership?”

His expression, once hard, finally softened a few degrees. I didn’t trust him. Why would I want to join forces with a human? Kimmy was different. She was mine. This one I owed nothing to.

“Now just take a moment and think about it,” he continued to coerce me. “We could open up several of your businesses all over, franchise it.”

I mulled over his proposition. “Hmm. I had never considered it. *I wonder how many demons I could get to come to the human realm to work for me? I would be the boss, their master...Yes. Yes, I liked this Idea.*

He extended his hand again in their human custom and I shook it. “So there we have it. I will get the papers for you and we can write up the contracts. You understand contracts right?”

He was testing me the same way I was testing him. “Of course,” I said slowly. “Buying and selling souls.” I nodded with a chuckle. “If you’ve seen one contract, you’ve seen ’em all.”

Two seconds of silence later, he slaps his knee and barks out a laugh while walking us back to the front. “This guy is a hoot, sweetheart. I like him. You have to bring him over for dinner.”

Kimmy’s sad eyes brightened when she saw me and my hidden tail wanted to thrash left and right. My cock wanted to feel her insides and without my control, my face broke into a smile for her.

“Okay, Dad, I promise.” Kimmy waved at them, trying to push them away from the counter as she blushed and walked into my arms.

“One thing, Mr. Dzik,” her mother piped in, watching our embrace closely then darting her eyes to Kimmy’s stomach. *Yes, I plan to plant many spawns there. There was no doubt about it.* “You just have to give me your special recipe. I would love to bring some of this to my church for our special revival. Would you consider catering? Because I love your weiners!”

Kimmy choked as she buried her face against my chest while her mother smiled brightly and her father continued to scarf his down behind her.

Catering? More and more doors are opening up for me to continue wreaking havoc in the human realm. *Having a bunch of goody two-shoes eat human flesh at a place like that?*

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world,” I told her with a wicked smile.



Thank you for reading *The Good Char*. If you want to check out some of my other books, then why not check out *Beguiled by the Beastly Baron!*

<https://books2read.com/u/bPeXPA>

Or *Fantasies Inflamed!*

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About the Author

If you get your kicks in a magical manner, order toys from websites like bad dragon, and prefer your monsters *in* your bed instead of *under* them, then Y. D. is your girl.

Writing everything from spicy dark fantasy to fluffier-than-a-cool-marshmallow romance, Y.D. La Mar has her fingers in all sorts of man-meat pie, and the sky is the limit. Somehow, this magical mistress manages to balance her spicy author life with her responsibilities as a mom, a wife, and a resident of Sin City—*oh, irony, you've felled me.*

When the world is full of black-and-white, Y.D. plays in the grey zones, spending her time creating new ways to shock and awe her editor, as well as her readers.

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Sinful Attraction

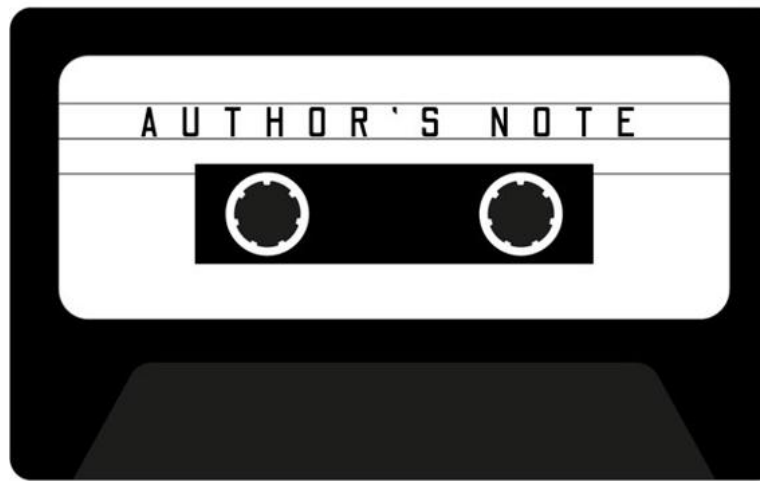
The Sky Below

Maeonia

Between Heaven and Earth

MALL RAT

ASHLEY BENNETT



Jackie Marstadt dreams of making it big as a fashion designer, but for the time being, she's stuck working at the family business, the Creepy Court Rollerdom.

While taking out the trash one night, she meets a woman with the most impressive Halloween costume she's ever seen—but things aren't quite what they seem.

Rhonda Rodgers lives her life how she likes her music: hard and fast. But after a no holds barred night of fun with the woman she's had her eye on, she starts to reconsider her rock n' roll lifestyle.

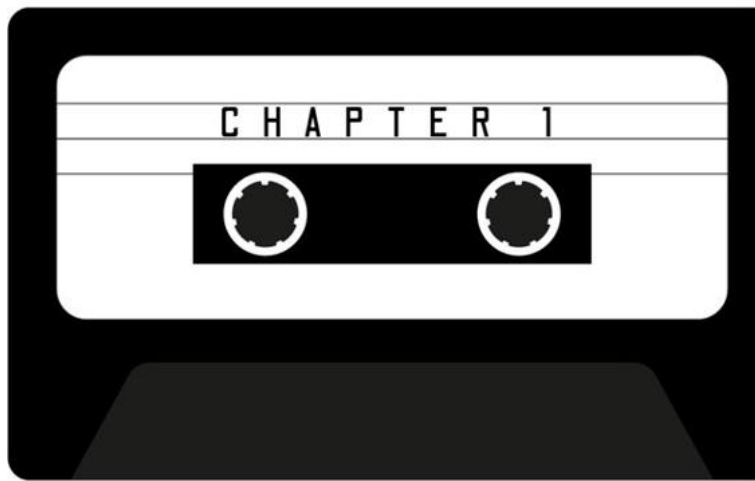
Will their relationship stay in vogue or will it go out of fashion just like leg warmers, big hair, and fishnets?

It turns out some things can't be left behind with the 80s.



Content Warning:

This story contains the following: marijuana use, spying, voyeurism, tail play, vaginal penetration.



JACKIE

“BYE! HAVE A GREAT NIGHT!” I GAVE A FAKE SMILE AND overly enthusiastic wave as I watched the last two lovesick teenagers stroll out of the Creepy Court Rollerdome. Locking the glass doors behind them, I let out a sigh of relief.

My brother, Dean, started laughing from behind the snack bar counter. “Jeez. I thought they were never going to leave.”

I glanced at the clock above the polished floor of the skating rink. The adjoining Creepy Court Mall had closed an hour ago.

“What happened to curfews? They couldn’t have been older than what—fourteen?”

Dean shook his head. “Mom and Dad would have never.”

The mention of our parents made me wince but he didn’t seem to catch it. Since our parents passed two years ago, Dean had taken over the family business. The rollerdome had been my

fathers pride and joy, even if it was a neon abomination that smelled like musty feet, leather conditioner, and cardboard pizza.

Dean and I were doing our best to keep the rink afloat, which meant keeping pimple faced teenagers happy and staying open past the posted business hours. In order to save on payroll, we worked ourselves to the bone. It didn't leave me extra time, or money, to pursue my real passion.

Fashion.

I dreamt about runway shows filled with bold-colored taffeta dresses, wrap belts, and sexy, bustier tops. I wanted to dress Madonna, Grace Jones, maybe Prince. I wasn't going to work here forever and let life just pass me by.

A series of thuds sounded from the doors.

Dean's girlfriend, Barbara, was pounding on the glass.

"Dean," she screeched. "Dean! Let me in!" Her shrill voice was like nails on a chalkboard. It annoyed me. Actually, everything about her annoyed me.

"Shit!" Dean vaulted over the counter of the snack bar, rushing to the door to let her inside.

She ran her hands up his chest, pouting her lip and giving him puppy dog eyes. "Oh smoochy bear, I've been waiting for forever."

Smoochy bear?

Gag me with a spoon.

Dean tilted her chin up, giving her a kiss that quickly turned into a full on make-out session. It left no doubt as to what the two of them were getting up to once they left here.

Grody.

God, I hoped they were using protection.

Barbara was a total airhead.

I cleared my throat and Dean wrenched himself free.

He flashed me an apologetic smile and brushed back his bangs. “Let Jackie and I finish up and then we can get out of here. Alright, babycakes?”

Babycakes?

“Like, you can finish up, can’t you Jackie?” Barbara asked, batting her clumpy blue lashes to try and convince me.

I didn’t need convincing, though. I wanted her out of my sight before I barfed all over the carpeted floor.

“Most definitely,” I said with a wave of my hand.

Dean looked conflicted. “You sure, sis?”

“Totally. I’ve got everything under control,” I reassured him.

It wasn’t like I had any plans. My social calendar had been pretty open since Gina and I broke up. I was going to go home and veg out on the couch with a microwave dinner while infomercials played in the background. Talk about an exciting Friday night.

Dean gave me a soft smile and shrugged on his Members Only jacket. “Thanks, sis. I owe ya one.”

Giggling and snuggling, they slipped out the front doors and Dean locked up behind them.

Thank God.

I set to work shelving the last of the skates, wiping down the counters, and running the vacuum over the sticky astro-print

carpet. After weathering one too many soda spills, it desperately needed to be replaced, but it just wasn't in the budget right now.

I tucked the vacuum into the storage closet and clicked off the main lights on my way back to the snack bar. It was eerie being in the rink without the whoosh of skates over the hardwood, the chatter of tweens, and the pulse of the music.

The shadowy silhouettes of the Halloween decorations dancing along the walls didn't help either.

I checked the snackbar, making sure the deep fryer and the heat lamps that dried out french fries to a crisp were turned off. You know, the fire safety necessities, when I noticed *it*.

A mountain of trash bags by the back door.

"Dammit, Dean," I seethed.

He was in such a rush to bolt out of here that he forgot the one task that was always his.

Don't get me wrong, I was a feminist and had no issue with taking out the trash.

I had an issue taking out the trash *here*, at Creepy Court Mall.

Even though the skating rink had its own entrance separate from the mall, we shared the same back hallway that led out to the dumpsters. The stark white corridor seemed to stretch on forever, and I totally expected those freaky twins from *The Shining* to show up and block the exit.

The actual dumpster area wasn't much better.

For months now, the light that was supposed to illuminate the area had been burnt out, leaving it completely dark.

Maybe I could leave the trash by the backdoor, just for tonight. Dean would understand, wouldn't he? Especially if I thought it was unsafe.

But what if it started to smell?

Who knew what sort of questionable contents were inside those bags.

I sighed and adjusted my mini-skirt, praying to God that nothing would leak on me, and grabbed the bags. And I mean all of them. There was no way I was making more than one trip.

I stumbled out the door and into the hallway, tugging the heavy bags along with me. The fluorescent lights lining the ceiling hummed and flickered, casting shadows down the walls.

“Stay cool, Jackie. You know how shitty management is. The bulbs just need to be replaced, that's it,” I mumbled under my breath. I was trying to reassure myself, but I couldn't shake the feeling that something sinister was going on at Creepy Court Mall.

My heart raced and I picked up the pace, the heels of my Hush Puppies clicking against the tile as I ran past the doors of Frankies Funhouse, Red Light Video, and Sizzling Discourse.

I had tunnel vision, focusing on the exit in the distance. The white liminal space never seemed to end—until it did.

Slamming into the panic bar—it was accurately named—I burst through the exit and out into the crisp October air.

“Fuck,” I panted, collapsing against the wall and dropping the trash bags at my feet.

There was no way I was doing this ever again. The trash could sit there forever as far as I was concerned. I'd seen enough horror movies to know that something was off here.

I dragged the bags over the asphalt to the dumpster, not giving a shit if they ripped open. Trash littered the area, old cups from Creepypasta, and shredded tickets from GalaxyGames spread around like confetti. There was also the overwhelming stench of rotting food...

"Gross," I hissed.

I hoisted up the first bag and just as I was about to toss it into the dumpster, a loud clang made me jump.

"W-who, who's there? I-I know self defense!" I screamed into the dark as threateningly as I could.

A rough voice answered me. "Will you take a chill pill? I'm not going to hurt you."

I backed towards the door, trying to put distance between me and the shadowy figure. "That's what everyone who intends to do harm says." My body shook and my voice wavered with fear.

It was at that exact moment that the overhead light flickered on, spotlighting the figure.

I almost wished it wouldn't have.

A scream tore out of my throat, shattering the quiet.

Standing in front of me was a person dressed in a rat costume, complete with two round ears, a long nose, whiskers, and a thick pink tail that swished in the air. They were also dressed like a punk—think fishnets, studs, and shit-kicker boots.

It was a weird combination, but somehow it worked.

“Oh my god,” I panted, collapsing against the door. “Your costume. You scared me.”

“Costume?” The woman asked, tilting her head.

I nodded, noticing the way her nose scrunched and her tail twitched. “It’s so—realistic.”

She shifted on her Doc Martens. “I hate to break it to you, sweetheart, but this isn’t a costume.”

I chuckled nervously and rose to my feet. “Of course it’s a costume.”

I stepped closer, close enough to see each tiny black hair and each delicate whisker, completely disregarding her personal space—but she didn’t seem to mind.

“This is some movie quality special effects work.”

She leaned in, her whiskers prickling the side of my face. “I promise it’s not a costume. Go ahead and feel it.”

She tilted her head to the side, exposing the furry column of her neck.

I swallowed hard, slowly raised one hand, and ran it through the fur.

It was downy soft and heat radiated from underneath it.

There was no way.

Absolutely no way.

I gripped the fur and gave it a sharp tug.

“Ouch,” she hissed, her clawed hand snapping up to grip mine.

“That fucking hurts.”

I whipped my hand back as if she’d burned me and clutched it to my chest. “You’re—you’re a giant rat woman,” I murmured

in shock.

“Guess the cats out of the bag.” She grinned, showing off two stark-white buck teeth.

Rat teeth?

“How? How is this a thing?”

She shrugged. “There’s a lot that goes on that humans don’t notice. I’m Rhonda, by the way.”

“Rhonda.” I blinked, unamused. “Rhonda the rat.”

She sighed and rolled her eyes. “I know. My parents really had a sense of humor.”

“You have parents?” I asked, a little too shocked.

Rhonda cocked a brow. “Of course I have parents. Are you going to tell me your name or not?”

“It’s Jackie.”

“Jackie. You work at the skating rink, don’t you?”

“Yeah,” I said with a nod. “How do you know that?”

“Well, I live inside the mall.”

“You live inside Creepy Court?”

“Mhmm.”

I guessed that was what she meant by humans being blind to what went on behind the scenes.

“Are there others?” I asked pensively. “Like you?”

“Not here, no. There are other monsters but none of them are rats.”

“I knew it!” I mumbled under my breath. Something *was* going on at Creepy Court Mall.

Rhonda's gaze caught on the trash bags. "Do you need help with those?"

Before I could say yes or act like I had it under control, she was already tossing the bags into the dumpster like they weighed nothing.

I snuck a glance at her, checking out her curly black mullet and watching as her leather jacket strained against her muscular arms.

I must have really been oblivious. How could I have missed her?

"So," she said, turning around to face me. "Do you, uh, have any plans for tonight?"

"If you count watching b-horror movies and eating a microwave dinner that's frozen in the middle as plans."

We both chuckled awkwardly.

"Would you want to hang out at the mall or something?" she asked quietly. "I don't really have a lot of opportunities for company."

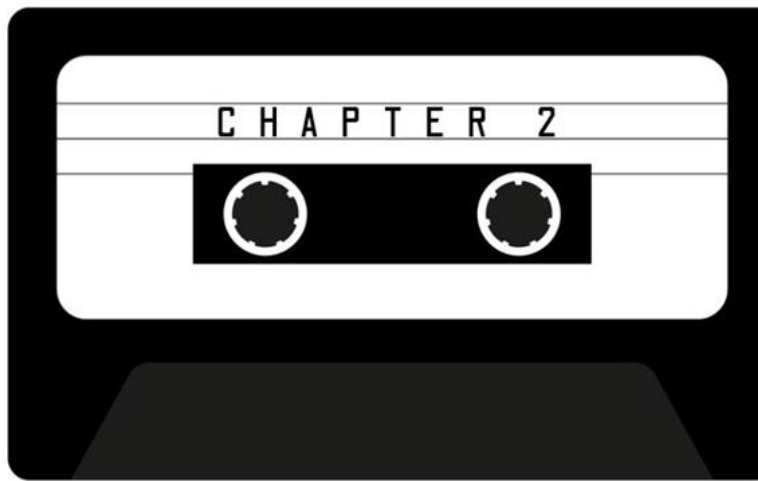
She sounded so sad...So lonely.

It resonated with me, because I had been so fucking lonely too.

"That...That would be great," I said, completely unbothered by the fact that she was a monster.

Let's be real, if she meant me harm, a creepy dumpster area would have been the place for it. For some reason, I felt comfortable with Rhonda.

And it sure beat sitting at home by myself.



RHONDA

SOMETHING WAS SERIOUSLY WRONG WITH ME. REVEALING myself to a human? To the human woman that I watched from the ceiling of the skating rink?

Every Friday night I'd spy on her, my gaze fixed on the frown tugging at the corners of her mouth, her body slouched over the attendant's stand.

She was just so beautiful I couldn't help myself.

And now we were hanging out.

We walked side by side down the back hallway and I could feel her trying not to stare at me.

I stopped walking and grabbed her hand. "It's okay, you know. To be curious. To look at me."

She shifted her gaze up to my face, her cerulean eyes assessing me. "I didn't want to be rude."

“It’s not rude. Not at all. Stare at me all you want.”

I wanted her to stare. It felt so good to be seen. Especially by her.

She smiled and ran her fingers through the bleach blonde curls at the nape of her neck. “So um, where are we headed? Aren’t you worried about security?”

I shrugged and we started walking again, the thump of my boots echoing down the hall. “Do you like music? I was thinking we could swing by the record store. There’s a new release I want to check out.”

“That sounds great, but you didn’t answer my question.”

I grinned and shook my head. “You’ll see. I have my ways. How do you think I’m able to live here and go unnoticed? How do you think all of us live here and go unnoticed?”

Jackie stopped in her tracks. “All of you?”

I nodded, the long earring dangling from my ear swinging against my temple. “Yes, all of us. The guy who works at The Good Char, the incubus at Red Light Video. This mall is full of monsters.”

Her dainty little mouth gaped open. “The guy that works at The Good Char?”

“Mhm. I hope you’ve never eaten there.”

“No way.” She wrinkled her nose.

“Good.” I’d spare her all the details, but she really dodged a bullet there.

We stopped at the rear entrance of the record store and I jiggled the doorknob.

Locked, as usual.

“We can always—” she started as I shoved a mangled bobby pin into the lock, giving it a few twists before the door popped open.

“Well, that’s some real criminal behavior,” Jackie said with a laugh.

“What would you expect from someone who looks like this?” I gestured to my outfit.

“Dressing like that is just a fashion statement, not an indicator of who you are as a person.”

She saw right through me. Yeah, I looked like a punk, but I was a total softie. At night I’d sneak into the Twisted Whisker and play with the puppies and kittens. My appearance was just a front, a uniform to match the music I listened to.

But boy did I like looking like a total badass.

I flipped the light switch inside the record store and held the door open for Jackie. “After you.”

The scent of stale cigarettes, pot, and patchouli wrapped around us as we stepped inside the back room. Old fast food cups covered a folding table that must have served as the lunchroom and a fat joint sat perched on the ashtray in the middle.

Jackie stepped through the beaded curtain separating the back room from the main portion of the record store and I plucked the joint from the ashtray, tucking it between my tits for later.

Opportunities to get stoned were few and far between, but I could usually count on the burnouts that ran Spin Me Round to come through when I was in a pinch.

Jackie was browsing the rows of milk cartons in the new-wave section when I found her.

“The Cure,” I said, peeking over her shoulder at the album she held in her hands. “I’ve gotta be honest, I expected some shitty pop music.”

Knowing what she listened to after hours at the rink, I wasn’t surprised, but she didn’t need to know I spied on her.

“Excuse me,” she said, whipping around to face me. Even when she was scowling she was still so fucking cute.

I laughed and held up my hands. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“You better not have.”

She went to tuck the record back into the stack and I put my hand on hers. “Did you want to listen to it?”

“Won’t security hear us?”

“I told you we don’t have to worry about that.”

I grabbed the record and headed over to the state of the art stereo system that took up most of the store’s back wall.

“Do you know how to work that?” Jackie asked as I popped the record on the player and hit a few buttons.

In Between Days started to play and I cranked up the volume. “Of course I know how to work it. I’ve seen the guys that run this place do it plenty of times.”

I walked over to the bean bags with my tail swishing casually behind me, sat down, and patted the beanbag next to me. “Have a seat.”

Jackie bit her lip and gave me a shy smile before plopping down on the beanbag.

“I love this song,” she said, bobbing her head to the beat.

“Me too.”

But there was something that would make chilling to this album *that* much better.

I pulled the joint out from between my tits and wrestled a lighter out of my pocket. “Do you mind?”

I wasn’t sure if she was the smoking type, you know, the whole D.A.R.E thing, but I figured I might as well ask.

“I’ll take a few hits,” she said calmly.

This fucking girl.

I flicked the lighter and held the flame up to the joint for a few seconds before bringing it to my lips and taking a deep inhale. When you’re covered with hair, you don’t play around when it comes to fire safety.

The smoke slithered into my lungs and I held it for a few seconds before blowing out a milky white cloud. I passed the joint to Jackie and watched her take two dainty puffs. Her eyes widened with each inhale, her soft lips drawn into another adorable ‘o’ around the joint.

I shimmied in my beanbag, wondering what those lips would feel like on my mouth—and other places. More than once I’d fantasized about her.

I’d seen her with her girlfriend at the skating rink. The two of them laughing and smiling, gliding across the polished wood floor under the shimmer of the disco ball.

I’d also seen them making out after the place had closed. The memory of the other girl pinning Jackie to the wall, claiming her lips, sliding her hand under Jackie’s shirt to grip her dainty breasts. The tiny gasp that slipped out of her mouth when the other girl dragged her tongue over the column of Jackie’s neck.

I was wet just thinking about it.

“Rhonda,” Jackie said, holding the joint out to me.

“Shit, my bad.” I took two deep hits, feeling the soothing calm that came with being high settle over me. It was a good idea to do this, for my nerves and my libido.

I looked over at Jackie. She was leaning back with her eyes closed, her tiny body practically devoured by the beanbag.

“You alright?” I asked with a laugh.

“Mhm.” She nodded dreamily.

I stubbed the joint out on my boot and tucked it away for safekeeping.

We were quiet for a few songs, just enjoying the music and our high, until Jackie finally spoke.

“How do you know about me?” she asked quietly. “About the skating rink.”

Shit.

I had to handle this delicately or I was going to seem like a total fucking creeper.

“I, uh. I like to watch the skating rink.”

She squinted one of blood-red eyes open and focused it on me.

“But, like, how?”

“You know those tiles in the ceiling? The ones so you can get to the pipes and lights and shit?”

She murmured, “Yeah.”

“I watch from up there. Either slide the tile, or peek through a hole.”

Her eyes widened slightly. “Like, do you watch frequently?”
Her voice lowered. “*Did* you watch frequently?”

I laughed, catching what she meant. “I’ve watched enough.”

“Fuck.” She broke out into giggles. “You peeping Tom. Peeping Rhonda!”

“I just couldn’t help myself!” I dragged my hand down my muzzle and whispered, “You’re really cute.”

She struggled to sit up in the beanbag, leaning closer and grinning at me. “You think I’m cute?”

I nodded.

“Have you shown yourself to anyone else?”

“Yeah. Sometimes on purpose. Sometimes not. I sneak out to punk shows here and there. Tuck my tail into my jeans and wear a hood. Stay in the back. Most of the time everyone’s too wasted to notice.”

“I believe it.” She closed her eyes again, tilting her head up toward the ceiling. “But what about, like, intimacy? Do-do you date anyone or?”

“Why do you want to know?” I asked as cool as I possibly could.

“No reason.” She tried to turn away, but I caught a glimpse of her bright red cheeks.

The record turned to white noise, signaling the end of side one, but I wasn’t ready for the night to be over, not yet.

I swallowed hard. *Play it cool, Rhonda.* “Do you, uh, wanna get out of here? Go check out the mall?”

“That would be cool.”

The tip of my tail wiggled happily, but she didn't seem to notice. "If you could do one thing at the mall after hours, what would it be?"

"Hmm." She tapped the heels of her shoes against the floor. "I've always wanted to try on clothes at Frillards."

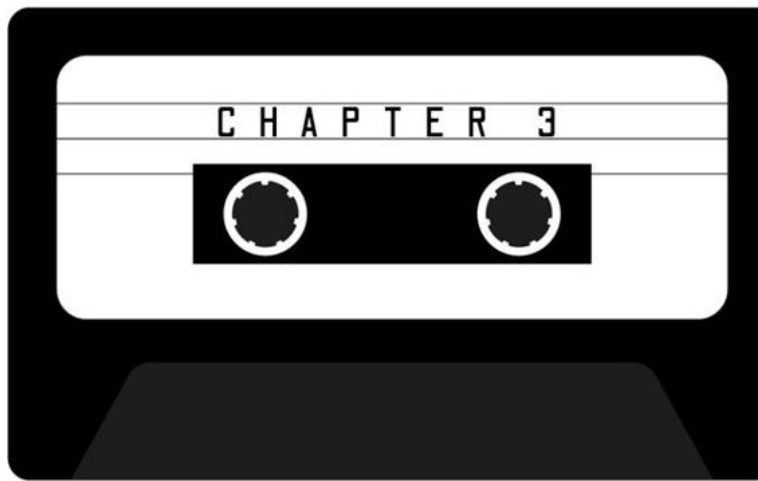
I tsked. "That snooty department store?"

"That's the one. The salesgirls give me looks every time I go in there. Like they know I can't afford anything."

"Let's go then." I practically shot out of my beanbag, extending a hand to pull her out of her squishy prison.

Jackie looked at my outstretched palm then shifted her gaze to my face. "Can we do that?"

"We can do whatever we want." I wiggled my fingers. "Come on."



JACKIE

“ARE YOU SURE THIS IS SAFE?” I ASKED, PEEKING FROM THE doorway of the record store.

It was eerie being in the mall without smooth jazz playing over the loudspeakers and the bustle of shoppers. I was just waiting for security—and now that I knew about the other monsters—to find us.

Rhonda turned around to look at me. “I promise it’s fine. I know the route the guard patrols and I stopped the tapes. Have some faith. This isn’t the first time I’ve done this.”

She was standing tall and proud.

Confident.

It was fucking hot.

Something I never thought I’d be saying about a rat woman.

Before I knew what was happening, Rhonda grabbed my hand and tugged me along with her. Like her tail, her hand was smooth and hairless. Shiny black nails tipped her fingers, well manicured and rounded to a gentle point. Her skin was warm. *And soft.*

I had absolutely no urge to pull my hand away.

Rhonda looked down at our twined fingers and slowly raked her gaze up my body, giving me a bright rat-toothed smile when she reached my face. I felt my cheeks getting hot, so I looked away.

She didn't tease me about it, didn't push it further, just softly ran her thumb along the back of my hand while we walked through the deserted mall.

Spider webs and paper bats hung from the walls and ceiling, decorations for Creepy Court's annual Halloween celebration, Treat Street. Rather than being scary, it was cheesy, catering to little kids and their parents. It reminded me of attending the event when I was little, dressed as a princess or a witch, walking the mall with Dean and my parents, and trick-or-treating at every store we passed. Things were simpler then, like the world was at my fingertips. Now things just felt impossible.

"Everything okay?" Rhonda asked, her voice a raspy whisper.

"Just thinking—about how easy life seems when you're a kid."

She sighed. "It's like you're in such a rush to grow up, and then you do and there's the weight of all this responsibility."

Without getting too deep too fast, all I could think to say was, "Yeah."

After a few beats I cleared my throat. “You have responsibilities?”

“Of course I do,” she said with a laugh. “They just look a little different than yours. I don’t have a job or anything like that, but I still have to stay hidden. Still have to take care of myself.”

For some reason I assumed her life was easy, but when she put it like that—it was probably more difficult than mine. Worrying about paying for college wasn’t the same as keeping yourself hidden in a world full of humans.

“Do you hate it?” I asked pensively. “Being a monster?”

Rhonda took a deep breath and wiggled her nose. “Sometimes. But most of the time I think it’s pretty fucking cool.” She stopped at the metal grate covering the entrance of Frillards. “Here we are.”

She dropped my hand and fiddled with the lock on the grate, easily popping it loose. She slid it open and the sound of clinking metal echoed across the deserted mall, making me wince.

“It’s fine,” she laughed, and gestured to the shop entrance. “After you.”

“So chivalrous,” I teased, and walked past her.

“Always.”

A smile spread over my lips as I stared at the racks of designer brands lining the walls and the perfectly placed display tables on the sales floor. The vibe in here was totally different without the shop girls staring daggers at me. I had time to browse the hottest styles, and feel the materials between my fingers.

And look at the price tags.

“Holy shit,” I mumbled under my breath.

Rhonda was there in a second, her hand at the small of my back. “Everything okay?”

“I just didn’t realize how expensive some of this stuff is.” I mean, I did, but seeing it for myself. Knowing I’d never be able to afford high fashion clothing like this...

Rhonda leaned in and whispered in that sensual, raspy voice, “Why don’t you try it on?”

Heat spread through my body, and I instinctively leaned against her. “I can’t.”

“Yes, you can,” she insisted. “Tell me what size or I’ll have to guess.”

I told her my dress size and she snatched it off the rack. With her hand still on the small of my back, she led me over to the dressing rooms.

“Go on,” she said, when I stood there paralyzed with the dress in my hands.

Biting my lip, I looked down at the dress and slipped inside the changing room.

I couldn’t get undressed fast enough, kicking off my heels and tearing off my clothes, leaving everything in a messy heap on the floor. It was a spaghetti strap cocktail dress, and it would look better if I wasn’t wearing a bra...

I unclasped my lace bra and tossed it over with the rest of my clothes. Carefully, I slipped the dress off the hanger and slid it up my body, wriggling my hips until I could pull the straps over my shoulders. I reached behind my back, fumbling blindly for the zipper, but it was no use.

“Rhonda,” I called out to her. “Can you zip me up?”

At first there was no answer, but after a few tense beats, she replied, “Of course.”

I stepped out of the stall and Rhonda sucked in a breath, her eyes going wide. She stared as I walked over to her, turning around to give her access to the zipper. The featherlight touch of her fingers grazing my spine as she pulled it up made me shiver, and I stifled a gasp that threatened to slip out.

There was something about how she touched me—so soft and so tender. I couldn’t help but react.

“There we go.” She cleared her throat and stepped back.

It wasn’t what I wanted. Not at all.

I forced myself to walk over to the mirror, feeling Rhonda’s hungry gaze following my every step.

The dress really did look stunning, hugging every inch of my body like it was made for me. From the look on Rhonda’s face, she agreed.

She stepped closer, until she was behind me, the familiar warmth of her hand pressing against the small of my back.

Leaning in, she whispered, “You look beautiful.”

I melted against her, reaching behind me to run my fingers through the fur covering her neck. There was such a stark contrast between us. Her, a punk dressed in leather and fishnets, and me, wearing a designer cocktail dress. A rat monster and a human.

But there was this pull between us.

Tension.

Sexual tension.

I spun around, wrapping my arms around her neck and staring up into her golden eyes.

“Jackie,” she breathed, bringing her face closer.

My name in her rough whisper made my stomach tighten and my skin tingle.

“Rhonda,” I murmured with my mouth near hers, so close that our lips were almost touching. “Kiss me.”

She pressed her mouth to mine, kissing me with lavish pulses of her lips, being careful of her whiskers. Her hands slid around my waist, and she gripped my ass, tugging me tight to her body with a groan.

“Do you know,” she said through reverent kisses. “How long I’ve wanted to do this?”

I should have been freaked out by all of this. Bothered that she was a monster who would watch me make out with my ex at the rink after hours. But if the wetness between my legs was any indication, I thought it was incredibly hot.

We fumbled forward until I was pressed against the mirror with Rhonda on top of me. I could feel her breasts brushing against mine with each of our breaths, the thin material of the dress teasing my sensitive nipples. If she would just...

“Do it.” I dug my fingers into her curls and feverishly whispered, “I want you to do the things you saw me do with Gina.”

God, this was so fucked up.

I was so fucked up.

It was like something inside Rhonda snapped. Our kiss turned feral, heavy sweeps of our tongues and rough nibbles on my lips. Her hands slid down my thighs to the hem of the dress,

yanking it up with a sharp tug to reveal my high-rise panties. I parted my legs and her hand slid between them.

“Shit,” she murmured, running her fingers over the silky material at the apex of my thighs. “You’re drenched.”

Things between us were moving fast but my body screamed more, more, more.

I bucked against her hand, whimpering into her mouth, “Please.”

That was all the encouragement she needed. Her slender fingers pushed my panties to the side, gliding over the slick entrance of my pussy with tantalizing strokes. I shut my eyes, relaxing with her touch and letting my head fall back against the glass.

“Open your eyes, Jackie. Look in the mirror. I want you to see how pretty you look when you come,” she rasped in my ear.

I forced my eyes open and looked at the reflection of Rhonda and I in the mirror, taking in her cocksure smile and the blissed out daze on my face.

Her fingers moved faster, swirling in tight circles over my clit, edging me toward my orgasm with each pass. She hummed, skating her free hand under my dress and over my stomach. The tips of her fingers found my nipple and pinched, making me whimper.

“Yes,” she whispered darkly. “This is exactly what she was doing. This is what you like.”

Her words lit me up and my orgasm blazed through me like an inferno, spreading heat over my body.

“Look at yourself,” she groaned, rubbing her pussy against my thigh and kissing her way up my neck.

It was no wonder she liked watching me. The way my cheeks flushed pink and the little cries that fluttered out of my chest were hot—made hotter by how much she enjoyed it.

She worked me through my orgasm and pulled her fingers away, bringing the hand she used to tease my nipple up to grip my chin.

“You are so beautiful,” she said, staring deep into my eyes with her forehead pressed to mine.

I wrapped my arms around her neck, putting my weight on her to stay upright on my shaking legs. “You are too.”

She ran her finger along my jaw, her smile almost sad before she pressed her lips to mine in one last soft kiss.

I cleared my throat, pulling my arms away from her neck to tug down the hem of my dress. “I should probably get changed.”

“Okay.”

She moved to the side and I walked into the changing room on legs that felt like Jello.

There was something wrong with me. Seriously wrong with me.

I meet a rat monster who used to watch me hook up with my ex and then I let her fingerbang me in a dress I didn't even intend to buy.

I enjoyed it though. Every second of our evening together. And I wasn't in a rush for it to end.

I came out of the dressing room to find Rhonda casually leaning against the wall. She looked me up and down and gave me a shy smile.

“We should probably get going. It’s getting late.”

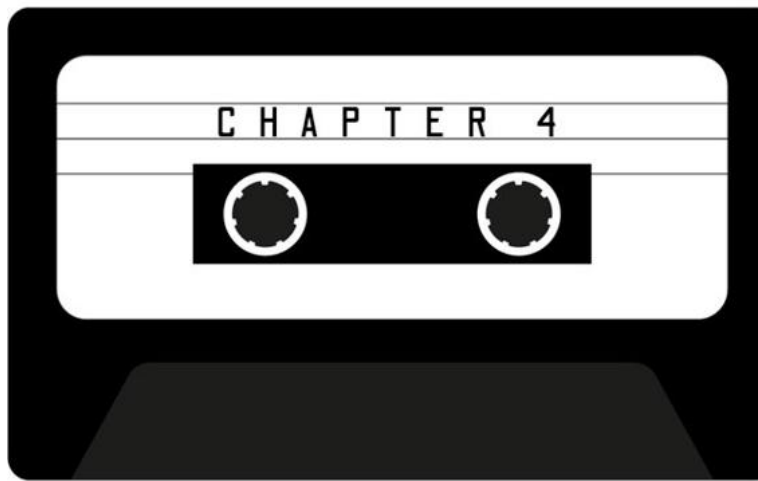
I bit my lip. “I was actually hoping you’d show me your place.”

She snorted and gave me a sideways glance. “You want to see my place?”

I nodded.

Please say yes. Please fucking say yes.

Her lips turned up in a lazy grin. “Alright.”



JACKIE

“I REALLY DON’T LIKE BEING BACK HERE,” I HUFFED, MY GAZE shifting up one bright white wall of the hallway to the other.

Rhonda grimaced. “That’s probably a good thing.”

She stopped at one of the doors lining the hallway and pulled out a worn brass key.

“No lock picking?” I teased.

“Not this time.”

Rhonda unlocked the door and grabbed my hand, tugging me inside the pitch black space.

“Where are we?” I asked, tightening my grip on her hand.

“Give me a second,” she murmured.

There was a soft click and the room lit up. It was a typical utility room, covered in pipes, gauges, and electrical boxes. A

ladder snaked up the wall and disappeared somewhere in the ceiling.

She gestured to the ladder. “Go on.”

I swallowed hard and stared up at the ladder. Heights were usually a no from me, but I wanted to see where Rhonda lived...

I grabbed the first rung, the metal cold on my sweaty palm, and hoisted myself up. The further I got from the floor, the more my body shook.

“You okay?” Rhonda asked, and quickly scurried up the ladder behind me.

“I-I’m fine. I just don’t like heights.” My voice trembled and she gave my leg a gentle caress with her tail.

“Look straight up. We’re almost there,” she reassured me.

After a few deep breaths, I found the courage to climb the remaining rungs, and stopped at the hole just below the ceiling.

“Climb in,” she instructed with a tilt of her nose.

Taking another steadying breath, I climbed through the hole and into Rhonda’s room.

It was nothing like I expected. Not some dingy, creepy crawl space, but an actual bedroom.

A lamp with a sheer red bandana hanging over the shade gave the room a warm pink glow. The walls were plastered with band posters—some I’d heard of and some I hadn’t. Stacks of milk crates full of records sat next to a record player hooked up to a set of expensive looking speakers.

Her bed sat in the middle of the room. It was just a mattress, but it was neatly made.

It was nicer—and cleaner—than my room.

Rhonda climbed out of the hole behind me, smiling when she caught me checking out her room. “Welcome to my nest.”

I gave her a blank stare. “Your nest. A rat’s nest.”

“Well what else would I call it?” she asked with her hands on her hips.

“Your bedroom,” I said, stepping toward her and gripping her waist with one hand.

She ran her hands up the sides of my neck, cupping my face. “I’m lucky to have such a beautiful woman in my bedroom.”

I kissed her, one that started out slow but turned into a frenzied tangle of lips, tongues, and teeth. Our hands swept over each other’s bodies, caressing and exploring, and I felt that familiar ache between my legs.

“Rhonda,” I murmured, my voice breathy.

“Why don’t you go sit on the bed and I’ll put some music on?” she asked, raking her rat teeth over her lip.

I nodded and made my way over to the bed, slipping off my shoes and lying down in the middle. The sheets smelled like her, like leather and Drakkar Noir.

Rhonda flipped through her collection, slipping out a record and starting the player with a crackle.

“The Cult,” I said, propping myself up on my elbows and grinning at her. They were one of my favorite bands. One I played after hours at the rink.

“Oh, I’ve seen you.” She returned my smile and unlaced her boots. “You’ve got some serious moves.”

“Oh my God, shut up.”

I felt my face getting red, but not just from the fact that Rhonda had seen me dancing. Her smoldering gaze was stuck on me, sweeping up and down my body appreciatively.

“Aren’t you going to lay down?” I asked, batting my lashes, and trying to look as seductive as possible.

She flopped down on the bed next to me and grabbed my hand, her thumb stroking the back just like she did when she was walking me through the mall. It was nice, relaxing, but it wasn’t exactly what I had in mind.

I climbed on top of her and straddled her waist.

“Jackie,” she said, running her hands along my thighs. “Are you sure this is what you want?”

I knew what she was asking. She was a rat monster and I was a human. She didn’t want me to wake up tomorrow and regret this whole thing. Deep down in my heart, I knew I wouldn’t.

“Rhonda”—I leaned forward, caging her in with my arms and bringing my face to the tip of her nose—“I know this is what I want.”

I tilted my head and pressed my mouth to hers, sensually running my tongue along the seam of her lips until they parted. Groaning into her mouth, I imagined what it would be like to run my tongue over the other parts of her. What she would taste like and if she would let me.

Rhonda’s hands slid up my thighs to grip my waist, guiding me through slow thrusts. The feeling of her underneath me, warm and solid, and the drag of my panties along my pussy

made me pant. I moved faster, pressing my pelvis to hers harder, needing more pressure, more friction.

More Rhonda.

“Fuck yourself on me, Jackie. Use me,” she rasped, her dirty talk making my spine tingle.

One of her hands slid under my shirt, pebbling my skin. Her fingers found my nipple, gently rolling it between them a few times before giving it a little pinch that made me gasp. She started to move, rhythmically thrusting her hips to meet mine, her breaths coming out of her nose as heavy pants.

“Fuck,” I moaned into her mouth. Tension built in my stomach, like a string about to snap.

Reading my body, she asked, “Do you want to come?”

“Please.”

I fucking needed it.

She tugged up my skirt, sliding her free hand inside my panties. Her fingers grazed my entrance, gliding up and down, and coating her fingers.

“You’re so fucking wet for me, Jackie,” she said, strumming her fingers over my clit while I rode her. “Are you going to be this wet when I fuck you?”

Her fucking me.

The mental image tipped me over the edge and my orgasm crashed into me like a series of unrelenting waves. I clenched my thighs around Rhonda, gasping into her mouth while she worked me through my orgasm.

When I was finished, I reluctantly pulled away and collapsed on the bed next to her.

Twice she'd made me come and I was desperate to return the favor.

"Get naked," I breathed, my chest heaving.

Her furry brows pulled back. "You want to see me naked?"

I nodded and started taking off my clothes for the second time tonight. Out of the corner of my eye, I watched Rhonda tug her shirt over her head and slide her leather miniskirt down her legs. She dropped to her knees on the mattress and I joined her.

"You're so beautiful," I whispered against her lips, trailing my fingers through her fur.

She shook her head. "Not nearly as beautiful as you."

"Can I touch you here?" My fingers traveled lower, to just above her pussy.

"Fucking please," she groaned.

Her legs parted for me and I teased her slick folds. It was clear that she was just as turned on by all of this as I was.

I dipped one finger inside of her, savoring the way she sucked in a breath. A few slow pulses in and out to work her up, and I added a second finger. The tips of my fingers fluttered over her G-spot and she moaned, her body practically melting in my hands.

"Lie down," I said between kisses.

I withdrew my fingers and Rhonda slumped back on the mattress with her legs parted wide and her tail off to the side. I settled in between them and ran my hands over her furry thighs, making her shudder.

Holding her gaze, I lowered my face and traced the length of her pussy with my tongue. She tasted sweet, so fucking sweet.

“Jackie,” she groaned, looking down at me with hooded eyes.

“Mmm,” I hummed and swirled my tongue over her clit.

Her hips jolted, her thighs tightening around my face as she threw her head back with a raspy moan.

So responsive.

But I knew how I could make it better.

“How many times did you touch yourself and think about me?” I asked, each word a warm caress over her center.

“So many times,” she gritted out.

I wrapped one arm around her thigh, holding her tight while I pushed two fingers inside her again. Smiling up at her, I watched as her eyes clamped shut and she threw her head back against the pillows.

My fingers pulsed in and out of her pussy, and I teased her clit with fast flicks of the tip of my tongue. She writhed against my face, chasing her orgasm until her body went rigid and she cried out.

It was like I could feel the pleasure rolling off of her body, that her satisfaction was just as good, if not more important, than my own.

When she was finished, I crawled over and snuggled up against her side.

After she caught her breath, she said, “You liked it, didn’t you? You liked it when I said I was going to fuck you.”

I smiled sweetly and nodded. “It’s hot.”

“Would it be hot if I fucked you with my tail?” she asked in that raspy whisper.

The thick, hairless length of her tail slipped between us and teased my nipple, making me suck in a ragged breath.

I was used to penetrative sex with a strap on or a vibrator, but a *tail*. It was *different*, but the fact that it was prehensile and slightly ribbed was certainly appealing...

“Yes.” I nodded. “I want you to feel you inside of me.”

She grinned. “Get on all fours.”

I moved to the middle of the bed and braced myself on my knees and forearms. Rhonda came up behind me and I could feel the soft tickle of her fur against my ass and thighs.

“You have such a nice ass,” she murmured, rubbing her fingers over my cheeks. “Are you ready?”

“Yes.” The word came out on a needy exhale and my body trembled with anticipation.

I looked down, watching as Rhonda’s tail slithered between our legs to the entrance of my pussy. She ran it through my slick folds, ensuring it was well lubricated.

“Relax for me,” she said calmly, stroking up and down my back. “Take a deep breath.”

I sucked in a steadying breath, and on the exhale, Rhonda slowly pushed her tail inside me.

“Shit,” I gasped as my pussy stretched around it. I watched ridge after ridge disappear inside of me, grazing my g-spot as they popped through.

“Everything okay?” Rhonda asked, her voice edged with concern.

“More than okay.” I rocked slightly, enjoying the sensation of being so utterly full.

Her tail started to move, pulsing in and out of me while her body stayed completely still. There was no slapping skin, just our heavy breaths drowning out the beat of the music.

Rhonda reached around my waist to rub my clit, the first rough pass of her fingers making me gasp. I was so sensitive from the two orgasms she’d given me that I could already feel a third building inside of me.

“Are you going to give me another one?” she asked. “I can feel you gripping me.”

Her tail and her fingers moved faster, tight spirals and thrusts bringing me to a fever pitch. My orgasm crested and I cried out Rhonda’s name, shuddering as pleasure coursed through me.

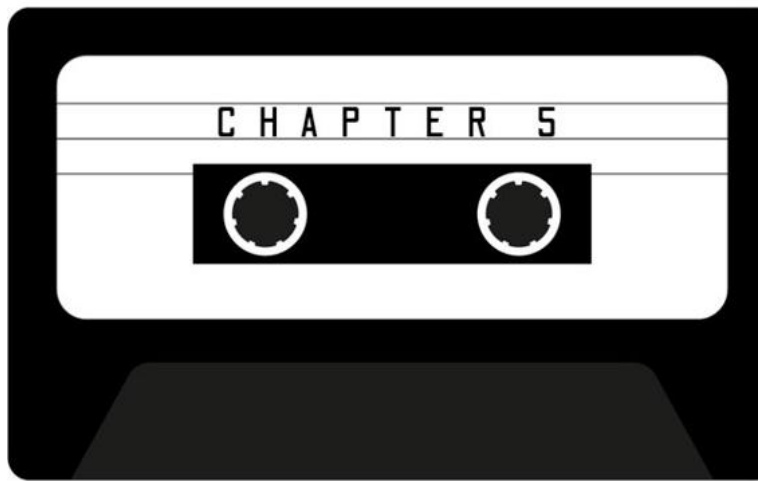
It was different, but God it was so fucking good.

Rhonda wrapped her arms around me, pulling me onto the bed next to her with her tail still inside of me.

“You are so fucking sexy,” she murmured against my temple.

“Was it just like you imagined?” I asked, knowing she’d thought about these moments with me.

She hugged me tighter. “Better.”



RHONDA

“READY?” I ASKED WHEN WE WERE BOTH DRESSED. IT WAS getting late and I worried about Jackie making it home safe.

She gave me a pathetic nod, one that broke my heart.

We were quiet as we climbed down the ladder and walked through the hallway to the back entrance of the rollerdome.

“Do you want to come in?” Jackie asked, biting her lip.

I stepped closer and ran my thumb right over the spot she’d just raked her teeth. “Did you think I was just going to drop you at the door and let you walk out to your car by yourself?”

“Let me just grab my stuff.”

I followed her through the doorway and past the snack bar.

It was so weird.

Being here.

With her.

“Have you ever used the rink after hours?” she asked from behind the attendant’s desk.

“As tempting as it’s been, no.” I leaned over the desk, locking eyes with her. “I, uh, I’ve only really pictured myself here with a certain someone.”

“Oh stop.” She smiled and her cheeks flushed. “What size skates?”

I laughed. “I thought we were wrapping it up for tonight.”

“We will.” She grinned. “After we go around the rink a few times. Now, what size skates?”

“Eleven,” I mumbled shyly.

“Pardon me?” she asked with wide eyes.

“Eleven,” I said a little louder.

“I knew your feet looked big,” she murmured as she turned towards the wall of skates.

“Rude,” I snorted. I liked seeing this side of her.

Jackie passed me a pair of skates and led me over to a bench by the rink entrance.

“Mine aren’t nearly as cool as yours,” I said, comparing my red and blue skates to her bubblegum pink pair.

“They aren’t really my thing, but they were the last gift my parents gave me.” Her eyes went misty, tears threatening to fall at the mention of her parents.

Shit.

I didn’t mean to upset her...

I grabbed her hand. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay,” she said, wiping her eyes. “Are you ready?”

Cautiously, I slid my skates back and forth over the carpet.

“As ready as I’ll ever be.”

Jackie stood with ease and pulled me to my feet, watching as I fought to keep my skates from slipping out from underneath me.

“It’s actually easier when you have a little bit of speed going,” she reassured me, grabbing my arm to keep me upright. “Bend your knees and move your feet like this.”

She did a slow push and glide, gently moving her feet to the side and propelling us forward. I followed suit with small, shaky strokes.

“There you go,” she said, directing us over to the rink.

We moved onto the polished hardwood and I scrambled slightly, almost losing my footing.

“Easy.” She pulled me over to the handrail. “Stay right here.”

I grabbed the rail and shot her a puzzled look as she skated off toward the attendant booth.

What was she up to?

After a few seconds, the multi-colored lights around the rink blinked to life, and the disco ball above the rink started to spin. Don’t You Forget About Me by Simple Minds echoed over the hardwood.

It was perfect.

“You didn’t have to do all of this,” I told Jackie as she skated back to me.

She smiled, grabbing my hand and giving it a little squeeze. “I wanted to give you the full experience.”

We moved away from the wall, gradually picking up speed as we went around the rink. The disco ball bathed us in silver specks of glitter and our skates rhythmically whirred over the floor. It was clear that Jackie was in her element here, her movements fluid and confident.

“This is pretty rad. Being down here with you instead of watching from the ceiling.”

She grinned. “It is pretty rad. Tonight’s been a lot of fun.”

I was sad it was almost over.

“So, are you in school or anything?” Based on how often I saw her here, I figured the answer was no, but I wanted to ask anyway.

A frown tugged at her lips. “No, not yet. I want to attend the Fashion Institute, but tuition is insane. And Dean needs my help here. This place was my Dad’s dream.”

“Jackie, it was *his* dream. Not yours. There’s student loans, payment plans. You’re still young. There’s plenty of time.”

“Yeah.” She slowed and looked over at me. “I guess I’m not in that much of a rush.”

My heart fluttered at what she was implying.

We went around until the song was over, just chatting and laughing, and I only almost fell once.

“That was definitely more fun than watching,” I said as I laced up my boots.

“But not more fun than watching other things?” she teased.

“Oh my God,” I groaned. “You’re never going to forget about that are you?”

Jackie leaned in to whisper, “Oh, absolutely not. It’s too hot to forget about it.” Before I could say anything, she grabbed our skates and hopped off the bench. “I’ll be right back.”

She shut off the lights and music, disappearing behind the attendant’s desk and reappearing with her jacket and purse.

“All set?” I asked with faux enthusiasm, trying to hide my disappointment that our date was over.

Because that’s what it was, wasn’t it?

Our first date.

Hopefully the first of many.

“Yep.” She slipped on her jacket and hiked her purse over her shoulder. A ring of keys jangled in her hand. “If I lock the doors are you going to be able to get back inside?”

I nodded. “Lock picking, remember? I’m a seasoned criminal.”

She laughed and locked the door behind us.

A beat up Buick sedan sat under one of the light poles, the lone car in the sprawling parking lot.

“That’s me,” she murmured.

Silently, we walked over to the driver side door.

“Jackie.” I stepped closer and slid my hand around her waist. “I had a really great time tonight.”

She bit her lip and smiled. “I did too.”

“Would you like to do this again sometime?”

Without missing a beat, she blurted out, “Yes. I’d love that.”

With my free hand, I cupped her face. “Bitchin’,” I whispered, leaning in to give her one last kiss.

There was a dreamy expression on her face when I pulled away, and I grinned, knowing it was there because of me.

“Goodnight,” she said, getting into the car.

“Goodnight. Drive safe.”

She started the car, giving me a little wave before she drove away. I watched her pull onto the interstate, following the red glow of her tail lights until they disappeared.

Walking back to the garbage area, a wide smile spread over my face. I’d revealed myself to her and the night had gone better than I expected. It was perfect even.

I raised my fist in the air and shouted, “Fuck yeah.”

About the Author

Ashley loves to write spicy-sweet monster romances. You can expect fluffy vibes and all the feels from her characters and stories. She enjoys brown sugar oatmilk iced lattes, stockpiling candles, the perfection of fall weather, thrifting mid-century modern furniture, and a good nonhuman romance. She also loves to commission NSFW art. You can find it on my [Patreon](#).

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DON'T EAT YOUR HUMAN BOYFRIEND

LILY MAYNE



Elliot—a self-described ‘ethical’ ghou!—has been working at Broth with a Bite in the Creepy Court Mall food court for eight years. Spending his days in the restaurant’s ‘special’ kitchen, he prepares food for the customers with... ahem, very specific nutritional needs, but he’s totally fine working alongside the humans who run the other kitchen. Who have no idea what’s actually served there.

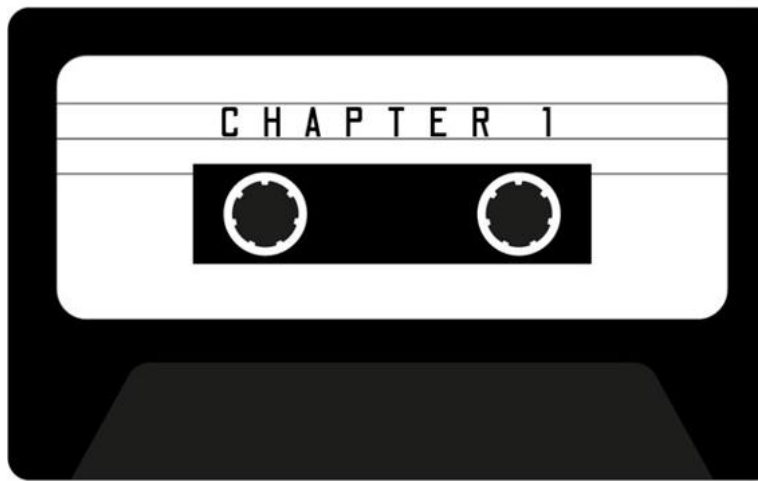
Until the new guy starts. The new *human* guy with the cutest shy smile, who looks like a very decent mouthful and smells like the best five-course meal rolled into one. Suddenly, Ricky is all Elliot can think about. Sweet, delicious Ricky who has no idea he’s working in a restaurant for ghouls, who has no idea ghouls even exist, and who Elliot just wants to take a big bite out of. Not, like, *literally*. Kind of.

It’s totally wrong for a ghou! to lust after a human. They’re *food*. But Elliot can’t help it. He wants Ricky hella bad. He just has to remember to keep his teeth in check.



Content Warning

This m/m love story contains explicit sexual content and features an inhuman MC who has to eat humans to survive.



ELLIOT

I WANTED TO EAT THE NEW GUY.

And by ‘eat,’ I of course meant... you know. Find out what his dick tasted like. Run my tongue over every inch of that sun-kissed skin. Maybe make him have a steak and drink a beer so his mouth tasted like all-American dude when I kissed the shit out of him.

I also meant I literally wanted to eat the new guy.

I contained multitudes.

Look, being a ghoul was tricky. We literally *needed* to eat human flesh to live. It wasn’t about fighting baser instincts by ‘denying’ ourselves. It was about survival.

All of us in our small community knew someone who knew someone whose cousin had tried to go ‘clean’ and ended up breaking into a graveyard when they let themselves get too

hungry, digging up and consuming someone who'd been pumped full of chemicals or was *well* past their expiration date, then getting sick as a dog or losing their mind permanently. We stopped thinking all that well when we were starving. We kinda stopped thinking altogether.

But I prided myself on being an ethical ghoul. No eating humans willy-nilly. It was the main reason I'd started working at Broth with a Bite, a proudly independent eating establishment located in the food court of Creepy Court Mall, and still hadn't left—free meals that I didn't have to do anything abhorrent to eat.

I had no idea how our 'special meat' supplier obtained their... goods. The manager, Liz, assured us that we used a reputable business that swore all the humans had died naturally, but ghouls didn't exactly have the luxury of being picky. Not when the alternative was roaming the streets late at night and tearing into the first person we saw because we'd let ourselves get too hungry and desperate. Or landing a cushy job in a morgue or funeral home with extremely questionable operational standards.

But I'd opted out of that lifestyle. I preferred this one. And usually, I was totally fine working with the humans here. We had to have two kitchens at Broth with a Bite: the human one, with human staff, for our unsuspecting human customers. And the other one. The one I worked in and oversaw.

As far as the human staff were concerned, the reason for the separate kitchen was because we specialized in catering to a clientele with a very complex, unique set of dietary requirements. Which, I mean, *was* the truth. They didn't question it too much, because we *did* get a lot of customers of a certain... complexion.

Pasty white skin that was almost gray. Sunken eyes that were permanently shadowed. Teeth that were maybe a little sharper than they should've been. Dark fingernails and prominent veins and the faint whiff of sweet almonds that always lingered around them. The human staff just seemed grateful that they didn't have to deal with the 'difficult orders' off the 'special menu,' so they mostly kept their questions to themselves.

At first, when I started working here at eighteen, it had been tougher to ignore the fact that there were several humans practically basting themselves as they sweated away in a steamy kitchen right next door—chopping herbs and vegetables, stirring big pots of fragrant stock, wiping garlicky fingers on their aprons. Hissing when the fat from sizzling meat spat onto their hands, which—goddamn. There was no other smell like it. Mouthwatering.

After working here for eight years, it was much easier. We all got at least one meal with every shift, so it wasn't like I didn't already have a well-balanced diet containing plenty of tasty, nutritious human. And like I said, ethical ghouls here. Although, in some small and overzealous circles, I was considered a lazy, immoral ghouler because I didn't hunt for my own food. But I mean, come on. This was the twentieth century. I was a busy guy. I had video games to play. Beer to drink. People to fuck. That kinda thing.

Which brought me back to the new guy I wanted to eat. In various ways.

I was pretty sure even thinking that made me a depraved pervert. My traditional ghouler grandparents would be turning over in the family grave if they knew. But my relationship with humans was a little complicated given that they were a

main food source for me and all. I tried to equate my nutritional needs to that of those two wannabe goth vamps working in the store downstairs. *They* needed humans to survive too, right? It wasn't *that* different. Right?

That was what I told myself when I left the back office at the start of my shift, still tying my apron, and crashed directly into the unfamiliar person about to walk through the door. His scent hit me first. Hot skin and sunscreen and something spicy, like he'd literally been marinating himself before coming here. My mouth actually watered.

Then he spoke, and his smooth voice made my skin prickle with a weird mix of lust and predatory instinct.

"Darn, sorry." He chuckled, face turning bright pink, the heat in his cheeks only intensifying that delectable scent. "Already making a crappy first impression."

"It's all good," I heard myself answer automatically, too busy staring at him to even fully take in what he'd said.

He was... perfection.

Messy brown hair that was short on top and longer at the back. Light brown eyes with little specks of green and long, dark lashes. An aquiline nose, square jaw, and cute little snaggletooth that I spotted when he gave me a shy grin.

And he was... meaty. There was no other word to describe him. Wide shoulders and thick arms and a sculpted chest, with the tiny curve of a belly under his tight T-shirt.

He was like my ideal sexual fantasy come to life, *and* the perfect meal. Which was so totally fucked up—I was fully aware. Like I'd said, complicated relationship with humans over here. *So* complicated.

“Um... I’m Ricky.” He held out his hand when I didn’t move. I finally tore my awed gaze from his face and blinked down at it, then I watched myself slowly reach out and shake his hand. My pale skin looked almost gray against his warm tone.

“Elliot.” My voice was a little raspy.

“It’s my first day.” Ricky blushed again and scrubbed a hand over the top of his head, ruffling his hair. “I mean, um, you probably know that seeing as you work here. Sorry.”

Fuck. On top of everything else, he had to be adorable. And that blush brought out the smattering of tiny freckles on his cheeks and the bridge of his nose, especially as it deepened when I continued to stare at him in stunned silence. Was I drooling? I hoped not.

“Okay, well”—Ricky shifted on his feet, then made an awkward attempt to get past me—“I should probably...”

Finally coming back to myself, I blinked and moved out of the way. “Oh. Sorry.”

My nostrils flared when he brushed past me and I caught another whiff of that scent. Instead of going to the kitchen, I found myself wandering back into the office and watching as he grabbed an apron.

“So you’re working in the kitchen, huh?” My voice came out a little huskier than normal.

Ricky jumped, not having realized I was still standing there. Turning, he gave me another sweet grin as he tied on his apron.

“Uh huh. I’ve worked in a kitchen before, but I’m a little nervous,” he admitted, then flushed again as his eyes darted down my frame. “Are you, um—Do you work in the... other kitchen? The special diet one?”

It wasn't surprising that he'd already reached that conclusion. I looked like all the other staff who worked in the "other kitchen." Same inhumanly pale skin. Same permanent shadows under my eyes. Same discolored fingernails. Same lanky, sinewy frame and somewhat gaunt features.

The 'catering to special dietary needs' cover for the restaurant was a pretty good one, to be honest. We ghouls didn't look all that healthy by human standards.

"Yep." I crossed my arms and leaned my shoulder on the doorframe. I was gonna be late, but fuck it. Ricky, I had already decided, was worth being late for.

"Liz said in my interview that it's for a, um, rare vitamin deficiency that causes extreme allergies?" he said uncertainly. "That sucks, dude."

I smiled, trying not to look like I wanted to sink my teeth right into him. Even though I totally did. "Yeah, that's right."

"Pretty rad this place caters for it specifically." As he said it, his dark brows twitched a little, like he was finally realizing how weird that actually was. Then he shrugged with a chuckle. "I'm just grateful to have a job, but... I'm kinda glad I don't have to work in the super strictly controlled kitchen."

"Yeah, we're locked down pretty tight in there," I said absently, my gaze already roaming back over his frame. "To, you know, keep out any contaminants."

I knew I should probably stop staring at him. I'd been told I could look a little creepy when I was focusing intently. The inhuman features—just enough to unnerve someone, but not quite enough to make them suspicious—probably didn't help.

Plus, I had no idea if he was into dudes, but as he shifted from foot to foot and fiddled with the ties of his apron, I realized he

kept stealing glances at me too. And he was blushing again. His throat bobbed in a swallow, and when his pink tongue darted out to swipe over his lips, I felt a tingle in my pants. I wanted to suck on it. And maybe bite down on it a little. Not bite it *off*. Probably. Just... nibble on it. Maybe his lips too. And his neck. And nipples.

I was now hungry and horny, and I really had to let us both get to work, so I straightened and gave him what I hoped was a sultry grin. “Well, better get to work. Have a good first shift, Ricky.”

His name felt good in my mouth. I was already having visions of myself screaming it in the throes of passion. While being bent over the clutter-filled table in here, or maybe when he was on his knees in front of me. I bet his mouth would feel blisteringly hot on my skin. Specifically around my dick.

“Yeah, thanks. You too.” Ricky blushed again. “I mean, have a good shift too. I know it’s not your first one... Um, will Brett be in the kitchen already? Liz just told me to come here and get an apron then head straight there...”

Brett was one of the cooks who oversaw the human kitchen. He was a mondo dick. I kind of didn’t like the thought of sweet, delicious Ricky having to work with him, but it wasn’t like I had any say in what went on in that small side of the business.

“Yeah, Brett’s working today.” I nodded at the big shift schedule on the wall. “What time does your shift end?”

“Closing.”

“Me too.” I tried to keep my grin from looking too predatory.

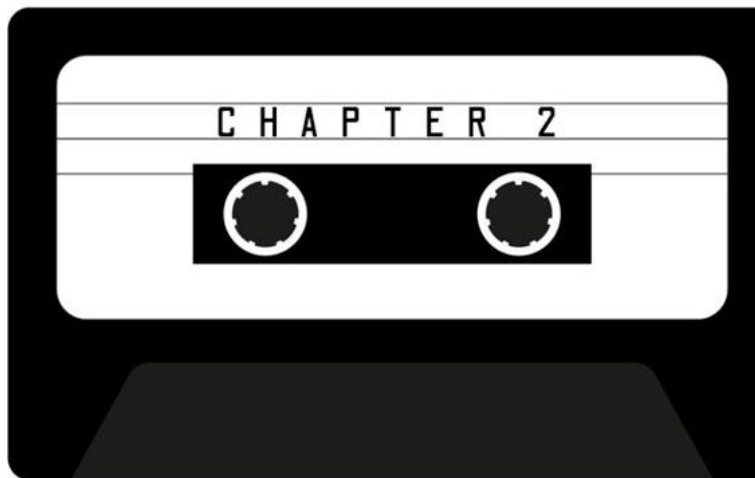
“Maybe I’ll see you again later then.”

Ricky went bright red. “Y-yeah, maybe. That’d be... Um, okay, so I’ll... see you.”

“See you, Ricky.” Finally tearing my gaze from him, I turned and walked out of the back office, then down the short corridor to the second of the two kitchen doors. This one had a sign on it, *SPECIAL KITCHEN STAFF ONLY*, printed in big letters.

I paused with my hand on it and waited until Ricky made his way to the other door, nervously smoothing down his apron. He saw me and offered another sheepish grin before pushing open the door and vanishing inside.

I barely suppressed my sigh of longing as I did the same. Yeah, I wanted to eat the new guy. Eat him right up.



RICKY

“SO YOU’LL BE ON PREP.” BRETT DIDN’T SOUND ALL THAT interested or enthusiastic as he showed me around Broth with a Bite’s small kitchen. Well, one of its kitchens.

I wondered what Elliot’s was like.

“Vegetables.” Brett gestured at a workstation with some green plastic chopping boards. Several big bags of carrots, celery, potatoes, garlic, and onions were already resting on it. “Peel and chop ’em small and put them in the containers so Daphne can add them to the soups.”

Daphne, a quiet girl with long black braids, glasses, and braces, gave me a shy smile as she stirred the giant pot of broth.

“When the meat’s done, take it out and shred it.” Brett pointed at a row of big slow cookers. “Beef, chicken, and pork. And if

you're on close, you gotta put in tomorrow's meat before you leave so it's ready in the morning."

"Okay," I said nervously. "So it's all... pretty fresh, huh? That's rad."

"Yeah, we pride ourselves on using the freshest ingredients, blah blah blah." Brett waved a hand.

"Is it, um, the same in the... other kitchen?"

He shrugged. "Think so." Then he glanced at me with a smirk. "You met any of the goth freaks working in there yet?"

I shifted, trying not to frown. "I thought they had the, um... condition we catered for here."

Brett snorted. "Yeah, well, they look like all the pasty weirdos we get coming here, so I guess so."

Clearing my throat, I scrubbed the nape of my neck and casually said, "I met, uh... Elliot. I think that's what his name was," I added in a rush, heat creeping into my cheeks.

I was trying not to think too hard about the way he'd smiled at me. And stared at me. Because it had sent tingles over my whole body.

His pale blue eyes were crazy intense. And his husky voice was... nice.

Really, really nice.

Hot, I thought to myself daringly, hoping it wasn't showing on my face. *He's hot. He's super smoking hot.*

"Ugh, Elliot. What an ass."

My stomach jolted. "How come?"

"Thinks he's such a funny guy or whatever," Brett muttered. "He's a total turd. Thinks he's hot stuff just 'cause he's worked

here so long.”

“How long has he worked here?” I asked quickly, wanting to know everything about him.

“Dunno. Years. Since before I started. You notice that weird smell they all seem to have?” Brett wrinkled his nose. “Kinda sweet. I try to stay away from them, man. Don’t wanna catch whatever messed up disease they have.”

“It’s not a disease, Brett,” Daphne said flatly. “You can’t catch allergies.”

“Whatever.”

“How many people work in the other kitchen?” I asked hesitantly.

“Dunno. We don’t ever go in there.”

“Do they ever come in here?” My face was burning. “For, um... To grab ingredients, or...?”

“Nah, they have separate refrigerators and stuff, to stop anything from getting contaminated.” Brett rolled his eyes, then slapped me on the arm. “Best get choppin’, bro. Need to get ready for the lunch rush.”

“Of course.” I jolted toward my new workstation. “Sure. Um, thanks.”

“Let me know if you need a hand with anything.” Daphne gave me a smile, so I smiled back. I was already warming up to her way more than Brett, who seemed like kind of a douche, to be honest.

Why was he so mean about the guys in the other kitchen? It wasn’t their fault they had a medical condition. They couldn’t control it. And Elliot wasn’t a freak. I mean, he’d watched me

kind of intensely while we were talking, but... it hadn't freaked me out.

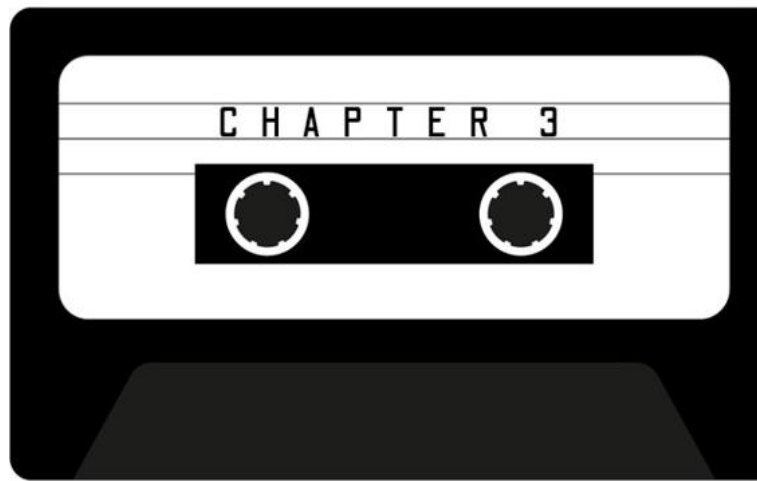
It hadn't freaked me out at all.

It *had* made me super nervous, to have the hottest guy I'd ever seen focusing solely on me. Those shadows under his blue eyes made them look even paler and more intense. His features were all sharp and angular, and his dark hair contrasted starkly with his super pale skin.

And his body was... I gulped, keeping my head bent and hoping my thoughts weren't showing on my face as I started peeling garlic cloves. He was tall and lean, with a couple inches on me. Rangy. Masculine, but... super pretty.

Really, really pretty.

I spent my whole first shift thinking about him.



ELLIOT

US GHOULS TENDED TO LATCH ONTO PEOPLE. IT WAS HOW packs ended up forming. I had a small group of close friends I'd known for years, and there was a fairly decent ghoule community in California, because we tended to migrate to warmer areas. We weren't that great at retaining body heat.

We were only supposed to latch onto other ghouls. Not humans, which was totally what I'd done with Ricky, even though we'd only had a few short conversations when we bumped into each other at the start or end of our shifts over the week he'd been working here. But I was always weirdly aware of him on the other side of the wall while we both worked. I could always tell if I'd just missed him in the back office or the corridor. That mouthwatering scent would still be lingering—spice and clean, warm skin. Most humans smelled good to ghouls, especially when they were around food and it made

our brains think dinner was ready, but Ricky smelled... glorious.

Ricky, with his shy smile and soft-looking hair and sun-kissed skin, *was* glorious. Ricky was my new obsession.

I'd always had a slightly addictive personality. I was addicted to cheap, off-brand orange soda. I was addicted to the soup we made here with lots of garlic and celery. I was addicted to kung fu movies. I was addicted to vegging out at home when I didn't have to work. My mom thought I was wasting my life—she said I should've gotten a “real” job by now, that this was only supposed to be a stopgap while I decided what I wanted to do after school.

But I liked my life. I liked my job. I'd worked my way up to oversee the ‘special’ kitchen here, and even though the pay wasn't all that great, it was enough for me to afford my own tiny place. And when I clocked out, I didn't have to think about work anymore until my next shift.

My dad said I was turning my back on our “traditional ghoulish values.” He'd wanted me to work at the family-run funeral home. But my perfect, do-no-wrong brother ran the place now, and Bobby was a total narbo. Yeah, sure, it would've meant I had a steady supply of meat, but I had that here *without* being bossed around by my bogus older brother.

Wonder if Ricky has any siblings, I thought as I ladled soup into four containers for a waiting order. What were his parents like? Did he still live at home? He looked to be around my age, maybe a little younger. Had he gone to college?

It was lucky I'd worked here so long, because muscle memory let me keep doing my job while thoughts of him consumed my brain. What shampoo did he use to smell so freaking good? What did he do in his free time? Did he sleep naked? Did he

jerk off in bed or in the shower? Did he like dudes? Did he want his dick in my mouth? Because I was totally down for that. I wasn't sure how great my control would be if there was an actual warm, living piece of human in my mouth, but I was pretty sure getting to swallow his load would be enough incentive to stop me from... you know. Biting down or anything. Or at least biting down too hard.

No, zero biting, I sternly told myself as I snapped the lids on the containers, then grabbed a pen to scribble the order number on each of them. *Human dudes don't like teeth near their dicks*.

Maybe just a gentle nibble though. *Real* gentle. I found the lightest scrape of teeth on my junk extremely enjoyable, so maybe a human would too. I wouldn't know. I'd never fooled around with a human, because ghouls weren't supposed to want to fuck them. We were *supposed* to only want to eat them. I was crossing major lines here, even just inside my own head, but I couldn't stop thinking about it. About him. Sweet, delicious Ricky. I'd sell my left nut just to give his neck a quick lick.

"Taking an order out," I told Johnny, who was idly stirring the broth. He jerked his chin in response.

After sliding the four containers into a paper bag with our logo printed on the side, plus our tagline, *It's Ghoulishly Good!*, I left the kitchen and made my way to the store front. The other kitchen had a window that let them pass their orders through, but we had to hand ours directly to the customers to make sure no one—as in, no humans—accidentally grabbed or was given the wrong one.

"Order two-one-seven?" I called woodenly when I reached the front counter.

A group of four young female ghouls stepped forward, the one at the front flipping back her hair as the other three giggled behind her.

“Thanks,” she said coquettishly, eyelashes fluttering as she smiled and showed me her receipt.

I smiled tightly back and handed her the bag over the counter. Aside from the fact that they looked barely out of high school, they were barking up the wrong tree with this guy.

“Enjoy,” I said flatly, ignoring her pout as I turned to head back. I let my eyes dart over to the pass to the other kitchen, but I couldn’t see Ricky in there through the window. My lips pursed into a pout of my own.

Then a huge smile was spreading over my face before I could stop it when the door to the kitchen opened and Ricky stepped out. I felt like an overjoyed dog seeing its master after a long day of waiting at home alone.

“Yo,” I said quickly before he could walk off. “How’s it going?”

He blushed, like he did every time he saw me, and it was still just as freaking cute as the first time.

“Oh, hey.” His eyes darted behind me to the front counter, his blush deepening. “I, um, didn’t know you were out here. I was just...”

As he trailed off, fidgeting but not making a move to leave, something a little dark and primal flared to life inside me. My smile widened.

He’d totally seen me through the kitchen window. He’d come out here hoping to bump into me. He wanted to see me.

My sweet, sweet Ricky. You can see as much of me as you want.

“You were just...?” I smirked and ambled closer until I could smell his delicious scent. Oh god, he smelled even better than normal. He’d just been chopping garlic—I could tell instantly. The savory scent of it was clinging to his uniform.

“Bathroom,” Ricky blurted, then went even pinker. “Just needed the bathroom.”

I nodded, crossing my arms and leaning my shoulder against the wall right next to the door. Ricky’s throat bobbed, his eyes darting to my mouth, then down my front, before he focused on a stain on the floor.

“When’s your shift over?” I asked, gaze roaming over the slope of his neck as I fought the urge to lean in and rub my nose against it.

“I’m closing.”

I chuckled. “Putting in a lot of hours, huh?”

“Yeah.” He gave me a shy grin. “I need the money. I’m, um, saving up to finally get my own place. Or at least move out. I’ll probably need to find somewhere with a roommate.”

My head cocked. “How old are you?”

“Twenty-three.” His eyes met mine, a flush staining his cheeks again. “I know I should’ve moved out already, but I couldn’t afford college and... Um, how about you?”

“I’m twenty-six.” I smiled at him. “Worked here about eight years.”

Some of the embarrassment fled his gaze. “No college?”

“Nah. Not for me.”

He unclenched a little with a laugh. “Yeah, me neither, honestly.”

I grinned at him. “Nothing wrong with that. So, what do you do for fun?”

“Oh.” Ricky blinked. “Um, I like to surf, but I’m not all that good. Just... hanging out, I guess.” He shrugged, chuckling self-consciously. “Not much. I guess I’m a little boring.”

“Not boring.” My voice came out lower than I’d intended. Almost a purr. Once again, Ricky’s eyes darted to my mouth before he quickly looked away. “I don’t do all that much either. Just like to veg out when I’m not working. Play some video games. Drink some beer.”

His eyes brightened. “Awesome. Me too.”

“Maybe we could do it together sometime. Hang out after work.” I tried not to look too creepy and intense as I said it, but the thought of being alone with Ricky...

He swallowed, his blush spreading down to his neck. Even his ears turned pink. It was, without exaggeration, the most adorable thing I’d ever seen.

“Y-yeah, that sounds... That’d be rad.” He sounded a little breathless. My smile widened.

“Sweet.” I straightened up from the wall. “Well, better head back. See you later, Ricky.”

“Yeah, see you... um, see you, Elliot.”

Gah, the sound of my name coming from his mouth was freaking *exquisite*. I wanted to hear him crying it out in ecstasy. Moaning it. Gasping it while my hand was shoved down his pants.

I let my shoulder brush against his as I walked past and heard his breath catch. I was still grinning when I sauntered back into the kitchen, visions of watching Ricky sip beer in my apartment before I crushed my mouth to his already filling my head.

“What the hell was that?”

I glanced back to see Johnny sitting in the rickety old chair by the door, flipping idly through a magazine. “Huh?”

He gestured at the door. “I could hear you out there. Did you seriously just ask to hang out with a *human*?”

Jaw clenching, I turned to busy myself at the counter, needlessly rearranging the utensils. “So what if I did?”

Johnny snorted. “You wanna go hang out in the freezer with all the meat too?”

“Yeah, ’cause it’s totally the same thing,” I said sarcastically, crouching to grab more containers from under the counter.

“Just sayin’, it’s weird.” He chuckled and flipped the page in his magazine. “If it was a girl, I might’ve even thought...”

I gritted my teeth harder as I straightened. “Thought what?”

“That you’re some freak who likes to fuck his food.”

Paul, over by the chopping boards, burst out laughing as I stiffened. “Grody.”

Voice tight, I said, “They’re not food when they’re alive.”

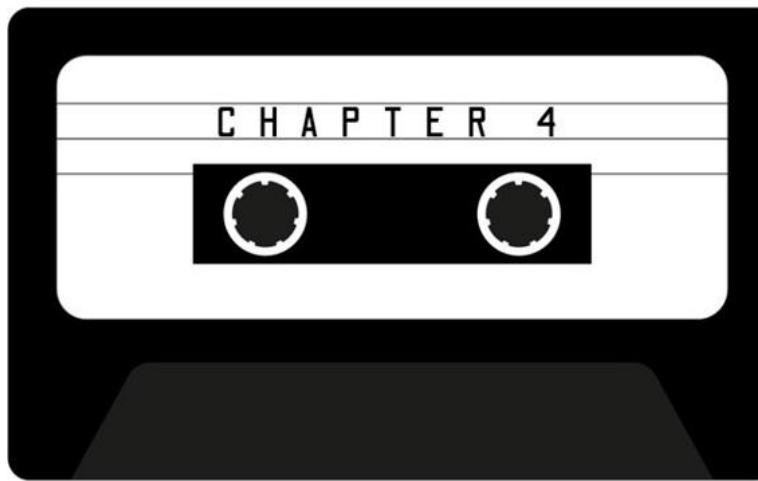
Johnny spluttered a laugh, lowering his magazine. “So you’re saying they’re fair game until we eat them? Barf. That’s messed up, dude.”

“I’m just saying they’re people.” I turned to glare at him. “Don’t remember telling you to go on break yet, Johnny. Get

back to work.”

“Chill,” he muttered, but put down the mag and heaved himself up. “But I guess I should probably stand guard over the meat in case you get any sick ideas.”

He and Paul glanced at each other and snickered. Nostrils flaring and my skin prickling with anger, I turned back to the counter and snatched up the printout for the next order.



ELLIOT

IT WAS JUST ME AND PAUL LEFT IN THE KITCHEN WHEN WE heard a knock on the door a half hour before closing time. After exchanging a glance, Paul swiftly picked up the container of leftover meat and vanished into the walk-in refrigerator.

Shuffling over to the door, I opened it just a crack and peered out with a frown. When I saw who it was, my lip curled. “Yeah?”

Brett scowled from the corridor. “Don’t worry, I’m not gonna barge into your precious sterile kitchen.”

“I know you’re not,” I said flatly, leaning my shoulder on the wall. “What do you want?”

He huffed, jaw clenching as he glanced down the corridor toward the other kitchen and the storefront. “Okay, look. I’m

supposed to be closing tonight, but—”

“Ah.” I smirked at him. “But you wanna leave early.”

He glared at me. “My girl just stopped by and said she wants me to go with her to a party. She’s out there waiting for me.”

“Congrats,” I deadpanned.

“She just got back from visiting her grandparents. I haven’t seen her for two weeks. *Two weeks*,” he emphasized with a meaningful brow raise. “Tonight might be the first night I don’t have to jerk off.”

My nose wrinkled. “Don’t make me ralph all over the kitchen, Brett.”

“Come on. You know what it’s like.” He gave me a pleading look, as if the fact that we were both dudes meant we were united in his lofty ambitions to get laid. “And you’re locking up tonight anyway, right? Ricky already said he’d be okay closing down our kitchen on his own. All you have to do is give it a quick check before you go.”

My spine had shot straight the moment the word *Ricky* left his mouth.

“Fine.” I tried not to sound too eager. “But you owe me big time.”

“Yeah, yeah, of course. You got it.” He turned to rush eagerly away.

“Think of me while you’re with your girl,” I called after him snarkily, “not jerking off.”

“Dick,” I heard him mutter before he vanished back into the other kitchen.

Letting the door swing shut, I turned and wiped my face clean of any emotion as Paul reappeared from the fridge.

“You can finish a little early,” I said quickly before he could ask what that had been about. “I’ll clean up.”

“For real?” He was already untying his apron. “Bitchin’. Thanks, man.”

“No prob.” I waited as he made his way to the door.

“Oh, and...” He stopped and shifted awkwardly. “Uh, sorry about earlier. We were just joking around. I know you’re not... you know. A weirdo perv who wants to hump the food.”

Welp, apparently I am. I just couldn’t bring myself to care about it all that much. Not when I was about to be alone with Ricky.

“It’s all good,” I said blandly. “Later.”

“Later.” He hurried out of the kitchen.

The moment he was gone, I started cleaning up in a manic rush, paying avid attention to the sounds coming from outside the kitchen. I heard Paul leave, then Brett, then a while later one of the cashiers—the ghoul one—poked her head in to let me know they’d cleaned up front and locked down the registers for the night.

After I listened to them leave, my whole body tingled with awareness. It was just me and Ricky now.

He’d know it was just us left too. Brett would’ve told him I’d be checking over his kitchen before locking up for the night. Was he as keenly aware of my presence as I was of his? Was he excited that it was just the two of us here? Nervous?

After running through the end-of-day checklist a final time and locking up the walk-in fridge and freezer, I locked the kitchen

door behind me and darted into the bathroom to check my reflection. My hair still looked good. Nothing in my teeth. My breath was minty fresh from the gum I'd chewed after lunch. I gave my armpit a quick sniff, even though we ghouls didn't sweat much.

Then, feeling a little jittery with anticipation, I made my way down the corridor before casually sauntering into the other kitchen.

Ricky was leaning against the counter, chewing his thumbnail. He straightened the moment he saw me, hand dropping from his mouth. "Hey."

"Hey." I grinned at him. Even though I'd heard Brett leave, I casually asked, "Brett gone?"

"Yeah. He said you wouldn't mind..."

"Sure." I looked around the spotless kitchen. "Looks like you did a good job."

He flushed. "Thanks."

"Nothing left out? Fridge and freezer doors definitely shut?" I gave him a wry grin as I stepped farther into the room. "Someone left the freezer door ajar overnight a few years back. Had to throw out a whole bunch of stuff."

He chuckled. "I've double-checked. All good."

"Sweet. I trust you, but I gotta run through the checklist real quick," I told him with a rueful smile.

He gave me a sweet grin. "I get it."

God, it felt like my whole body was melting into goo just looking at him. Maybe if it did, I could just engulf him with my new goo body and make him live inside me. That sounded pretty hot, actually.

“Wait.” Ricky’s brow had furrowed with worry. “Is it safe for you to be in here?”

“What do you mean?”

He gestured at the kitchen. “Aren’t there things in here you’re allergic to?”

“Oh. Uh, it’s okay. As long as I don’t touch, um, certain ingredients.” I wanted to squirm a little at the lie. “You’ve put everything away and cleaned the counters, right?”

“Yeah.” He nodded quickly, but still looked concerned. Gah, he was such a precious little ball of sugary sweetness. I wanted to lick him all over.

“Then it’ll be totally fine. And it shouldn’t take long.” I smiled at him, then hesitated. “Hey... what are you doing after this?”

“What am I... Oh. Nothing,” he said quickly. “Just... going home.”

I nodded, throat bobbing with an uncharacteristic hint of nerves as I met his gaze. “Wanna maybe hang out for a while?”

Blood rushed to his face, and my insides tightened. I wanted to lick his cheek and feel that heat under my tongue.

“F-for sure,” he stammered. “Yeah. Um...”

“Why don’t you go chill in the back office until I’m done?” I nodded at the checklist on the wall. “Won’t take me long.”

“Okay,” he breathed, fumbling with the tie of his apron. “Um, okay. I’ll... I’ll go wait.”

I flashed him a grin. “I’ll be quick.”

He let out a slightly nervous laugh and beelined for the door. I sped through the checklist, realizing quickly that Ricky had

done a great job. Everything was washed up and put away in its rightful place, the fridge and freezer neatly organized, and tomorrow's meat already in the slow cookers at the correct temperature.

"Stellar job," I told him as I walked into the back office a short while later. "Better than if Brett had been there to help."

He grinned. "Thanks. You guys, uh, don't really get along, huh?"

I snorted. "He just can't take a joke. And he looks at us like we're dirt unless he wants something."

"You... you mean you guys in the other kitchen?"

"Yeah."

Ricky flushed, looking down. "That sucks."

"Anyway," I said, because I definitely did not want to talk about Brett. "Want a beer?"

"Sure." His eyes brightened as he reached for his jacket. "Got somewhere in mind?"

"Well, actually..." I walked over to my backpack and unzipped it. Straightening, I presented the six-pack to Ricky with a flourish. "Got 'em on my break," I told him with a sheepish grin.

He laughed, but looked around nervously. "Um, are we allowed to..."

"I won't tell." I grinned at him slyly, twisting a can free and holding it out.

After a pause, he reached out and took it. His warm fingers brushed mine, and I tried not to outwardly react to the tingling sensation that spread up my arm. I could see the little patch of

reddened skin from where he'd been chewing at the side of his thumbnail before. I wanted to pop it into my mouth and suck.

Nudging my bag out of the way, I sat down on the floor with my back to the wall and cracked open my own can. Grinning, I patted the empty space next to me as I stretched out my legs and crossed my ankles.

Cheeks pink, Ricky lowered himself beside me as he clutched his beer. I shifted until our shoulders brushed, tapping my can to his. "Cheers."

At my first sip, I sighed and let my head rest against the wall, listening to the crack and hiss of Ricky opening his own can. Rolling my head, I watched as he lifted it to his mouth and took a sip, then licked his lips. My stomach tightened.

"So." I smiled at him when he looked over. Fuck, our faces were really close. "First week over."

He sighed in relief. "Yeah."

I nudged his shoulder with mine. "How you finding it?"

"Good." His ears went pink as he grinned at me. "At least, I mean, I think I'm doing okay."

"You are."

"Thanks." He flushed, glancing down at the can in his hands before lifting it higher. "So, um... you can drink this okay? There's nothing you're, like, allergic to in it?"

"No, this is fine." I didn't really like lying about having a medical condition, but it was a widely used excuse among ghouls to explain our appearance and strict dietary habits.

The rampant goth culture helped a lot with that too.

“That’s good.” He paused, running his finger along the rim of his can. “Must be hard to eat out at many places. Like, with a... girlfriend and stuff.” His inflection rose at the end in a slight question as his face flamed pink.

A slow smile spread over my face as I turned my head to look at him again. *My sweet, totally unsubtle Ricky. You are a delight.*

“No girlfriend.” I had a sip of beer, then added, “No boyfriend either.”

He went completely still beside me. Hesitantly, he looked over, his cheeks still flushed and a hint of fear and nerves in his gaze that made me want to hug him.

“M-me neither.” His tongue darted out to swipe over his lips. He dropped his gaze to my mouth and exhaled sharply. “I mean... I don’t—I don’t have a... boyfriend either.”

I gave him a tiny smile, wishing I could thread my fingers through his and give his hand a comforting squeeze. “Have you ever? Had one, I mean.”

A hard crack of laughter left him. “No. I... My parents wouldn’t...”

“I get it.” After a hesitation, I let my shoulder settle more firmly against his until our arms were fully pressed together. Some of the tension left him, and he looked more relaxed when he glanced at me.

“How about you?”

I shrugged, sipping my beer. “Never had a boyfriend. Fooled around with a guy before, but never with someone like—”

I cut myself off abruptly. I couldn’t say ‘someone like you,’ because then he’d ask what I meant, and it wasn’t like I could

tell him, *'Human! I meant human!'*

“Someone I really care about,” I finished instead, because it was still the truth. I knew of only one other gay ghoul. He was an okay guy, but we hadn't been in love or anything. We hadn't even dated, just got each other off every now and then.

“Straight people have it easy,” Ricky muttered, pulling his knees up and resting his chin on them.

I snorted without humor. “Yeah. Hard enough sometimes to tell if a guy likes other guys, let alone finding one who does that you actually like.”

Ricky turned his head to look at me, resting his cheek on his knee. “Yeah.”

I stared at him and heard myself say, “Who you're actually, like, attracted to.”

He cleared his throat, lifting his head to sit up straight. “Yeah.”

“And who's attracted to you too.”

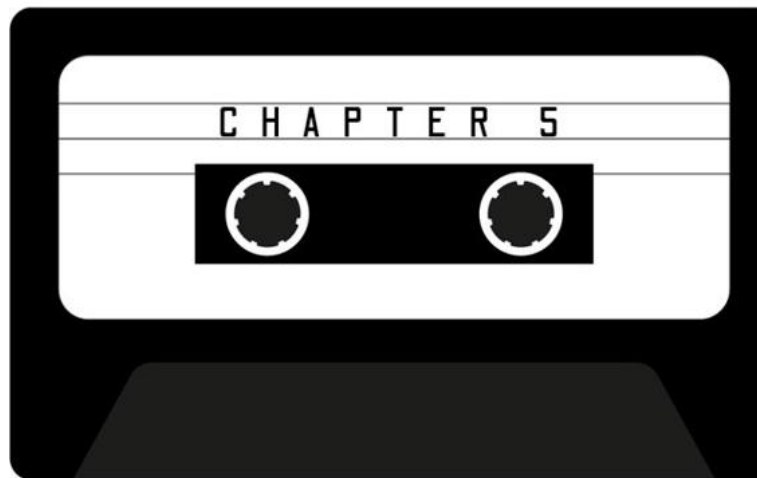
He swallowed. Slowly, he let his knees drop until the right one rested on my thigh. His gaze dropped to my mouth, pupils expanding in a rush.

“Yeah,” he said hoarsely. “Yes.”

When my tongue swiped over my lips, his breath caught. I discreetly set my beer can on the floor, my heart beating a little faster as we stared at each other in silence. Neither of us moved.

Fuck it.

The only sound in the room was my shirt rasping against the wall as I leaned in. Ricky stopped breathing, but after a split second, he leaned in too.



ELLIOT

THE KISS WAS SOFT AT FIRST. I DIDN'T WANT TO FREAK HIM out by getting too frisky straight away. But oh my god, it was mad hard not to grab his head, crush my mouth to his, and plunge my tongue inside. His lips were so warm. His skin smelled so good. Cautiously, I let my hand creep onto his knee, which was still resting on my thigh.

Ricky's breath hitched, which parted his lips a little against mine. I couldn't help but tilt my head more and let my tongue brush against them. He shivered, but then his lips were opening wider, and a low sound left me when our tongues met and slid together.

I shuddered. God, his mouth was so hot. He tasted like beer and heat and the most delicious meal of my life. I squeezed his knee before sliding my hand just a tiny bit higher until I could feel thick, firm muscle under my palm. My fingers tightened. I

wanted to sink my teeth into it, then trail my lips and tongue higher...

A hoarse groan rumbled up my throat when a warm, lightly trembling hand rested on my chest, then slid up to cup the side of my neck. Fingers sifted through the longer strands of hair at my nape, making me shiver. His tongue brushed against the edge of my teeth when he timidly sank it back inside my mouth, and I shuddered again as I fought the urge to bite down. Just a little. Just to test the supple texture of the soft, slick muscle.

Ricky was a fantastic kisser, which wasn't a surprise to me. I'd already figured out that he was pretty much perfect. His lips were soft but firm. He was still a little shy and unsure, but the longer we kissed, our tongues slicking together hungrily, the more confident he became.

My dick was already straining in my pants. Was Ricky hard too? I wanted to feel but didn't want to rush him. But when I felt him begin to exert gentle pressure on my neck, tugging me closer, I finally moved.

We broke the kiss momentarily as I clambered between his knees in a rush. Ricky swallowed and set his can down on the floor with a thud, a fizz of beer splashing up and over the side, and he was already reaching for me as I leaned back in.

This kiss was deeper. Hotter, more aggressive as our tongues thrust together greedily. I pressed as close as possible, and we both moaned when my stiff length brushed against his through our pants. And my apron. Fuck, I hadn't taken my apron off.

Ricky's hips shifted restlessly. His erection nudged mine again, and he moaned helplessly into my mouth as his hands shot up to grip my sides. Trying to pump the brakes just a

little, I gave him one more deep, tongue-tangling kiss before easing off.

“Doing okay?” I asked breathlessly, then couldn’t stop myself from giving his kiss-swollen lower lip a little nibble. Just a very gentle one.

He seemed to like it. His fingers tightened on my sides as he panted against my lips.

“Y-yeah. You... you taste...” He exhaled shakily. “Sweet.”

I grinned against his mouth. “You taste hella good too, Ricky.” Lowering my head, I pressed a slow kiss to his jaw, then his neck. “You taste perfect.”

He shivered as I trailed my fingertips down his front, softly stroking the tiny curve of his belly. “Elliot...”

“Want to stop?” I murmured, back to kissing his neck, darting my tongue out to taste his skin.

“N-no,” he whispered immediately, hips straining up again, a fine tremor running through his body.

“Can I touch you?” My voice was ragged. I forced my hand to go still on his stomach until he answered.

He nodded frantically. “Y-yes. Please.”

My cock throbbed. Lunging back up, I crushed my mouth to his and slid my hand down until I felt the hard, hot length of his dick through his pants. Ricky gasped into the kiss as I groaned, mapping him out with my fingers. Then I was fumbling with his fly, our kiss growing messy and feverish.

I burrowed my hand into his underwear and cupped his balls, moaning into his mouth at the smooth, soft warmth of them. Ricky choked on a breath, his hips straining up. Curling my

fingers around the base of his shaft, I gently pulled it free and broke the kiss to look down.

“Fuck.” I smoothed my fist up the thick length. “You got a nice dick, Ricky.”

“D-do I?” His breaths were fast and shallow, trembling hands clutching at my T-shirt.

“Yeah.” My voice was gravelly. His dick was so hot under my fingers, pink and smooth, and there was already pre-cum welling on the flushed head. My mouth was watering, but not in a hungry-for-food way. Only in a hungry-for-Ricky way. I wanted to make him feel good.

I wanted to suck his perfect dick and drink him down, then wrap him up in blankets and hand-feed him croutons from the giant bag in the kitchen. He was still straddling the line between being nervous, a little self-conscious, and too horny to care anymore. I needed to tip him over the edge so he could truly enjoy this.

Crushing my mouth back to his, I squeezed his hot cock and smoothed my thumb over the leaking tip. Ricky shuddered, making a plaintive noise into my mouth.

“I wanna make you come,” I murmured, grinning against his lips when he choked on a breath.

“Y-you... you don't have to.” He didn't sound like he really meant it, which made me huff a tiny laugh. My sweet, polite Ricky.

“I really wanna suck you off.” I began kissing down his neck again, listening to the choppy breaths escaping him. “Can I?”

“Oh m-my god. Elliot...”

“Is that a yes?” I shuffled back and pushed the hem of his shirt higher with my free hand, exposing the little dip of his navel and the line of dark hair that trailed down to meet the nest of curls on his pubic mound. I wanted to growl as I lowered my head and nuzzled it. Ghouls had some body hair, but not as much as humans. Fuck, it smelled so good, and it was warm and soft against my nose and lips.

“Y-yes,” Ricky croaked, knuckles bleaching as he pressed his hands hard into the floor either side of his hips, like he was bracing himself. “O-only if you want to.”

Instead of answering with words about just how freaking much I wanted to, I stuck out my tongue and flattened it against the base of his shaft, jutting out from his fly, then dragged it up. Ricky gasped, his cock throbbing under my tongue. His arms jerked, which made his wrist connect with his abandoned can and tip it over. The sharp, tangy smell of beer filled the air as it gushed out and spilled all over the floor.

A ragged moan left me when I drew the head of his cock into my mouth and sucked. Fuck, his pre-cum tasted so good—*way* better than a ghoul’s. And his dick tasted like clean, hot skin. So, so hot. It was stiff but still supple, and okay, I may have overestimated my ability to stay in control while I did this.

No! I thought to myself fiercely as I wound my tongue around the head. *No biting! You don’t want to hurt Ricky. Listen to his sweet, breathless little moans.*

See if you can get him to moan your name.

With that goal in mind, I sank my mouth deeper and started up a gentle suction as I bobbed my head. I didn’t want him to come too soon, and his cock was already throbbing and aching stiff in my mouth. Every time my tongue reached the head, I got to lick up another shot of pre-cum.

“Ah!” Ricky’s fingers scrabbled over the floor, his chest heaving with panting breaths as his hips shifted restlessly. “Oh m-my—Elliot—”

Almost a moan. I started to smile, so I slid my mouth free and trailed my tongue down the side of his cock as I grinned up at him. Ricky’s face flushed a deeper pink when we made eye contact, his lower lip clamped between his teeth.

“Feel good?” I murmured, twirling my tongue around the leaking tip.

He nodded desperately. “Uh huh.”

“You like it?”

“Yes,” he said tightly, then cried out when I plunged my mouth back over his dick, sucking harder and faster now.

At the same time, I hurriedly shoved my apron out of the way to fumble with my fly. I was so unbelievably hard, it felt like I’d come the moment I touched myself. But I had to. How could I not? I was sucking Ricky off. Sweet, perfect, *human* Ricky.

This was so dirty. I freaking loved it.

A trembling groan left me the moment I wrapped my hand around my dick. Instantly, I could feel the difference in heat between us. His cock was so much hotter, and he produced *way* more pre-cum than I did. But maybe that was because he was already on the brink. I could tell from the way he was writhing beneath me, his breaths getting choppy and faster, his hands shaking when he finally, *finally* lifted one to tentatively thread his fingers through my hair.

I moaned to show him how much I liked the touch. I hoped he could see my dick as I furiously jacked myself off while my head bobbed over his lap. I liked to think I had a pretty nice

dick too. It was slimmer and paler than his, with lots of prominent veins. A mental image of Ricky's hot, pink tongue lapping at the tip made my hips jerk until I was desperately humping my fist.

Damn, I was going to come very soon, but I couldn't stop. Flattening my free palm on his tense stomach, I increased the suction of my mouth with a moan. My jaw was starting to ache—Ricky had some nice girth, but it was also because I was still fighting a teensy, deeply ingrained animalistic urge to bite down. That urge was mostly drowned out by the white noise in my head, the frantic need to come and make *him* come, but I could still feel it at the back of my mind. My instincts getting all twisted.

Then Ricky stiffened and started to shake. His knees fell open wider, hips straining up to meet my mouth in tiny, erratic thrusts.

“I—I—Elliot,” he moaned, fingers tightening in my hair. “I’m—I’m g-going to—”

I didn't pull away. His cock throbbed in my mouth, then he sucked in a choked gasp as his other hand shot up to grip my hair as well, holding me in place. At the first shot of cum hitting the back of my throat, a helpless groan left me. Oh my god, okay, this was *sooo* much better than anything else. This was worth fighting all my instincts. I swallowed his cum greedily, sucking on the head to get every drop as he shook and spurted in my mouth.

The taste of it made my scalp tingle. My fist was a blur as it shuttled over my cock, until my hips began to jerk and my orgasm hit in a sudden rush, and I was shooting onto the floor with a desperate groan. I kept sucking, even after Ricky had stopped coming and sagged back against the wall. A languid

moan left me as the tension finally melted from my body, but I kept sliding my fist up and down my cock to draw out the last moments of pleasure before I became too sensitive.

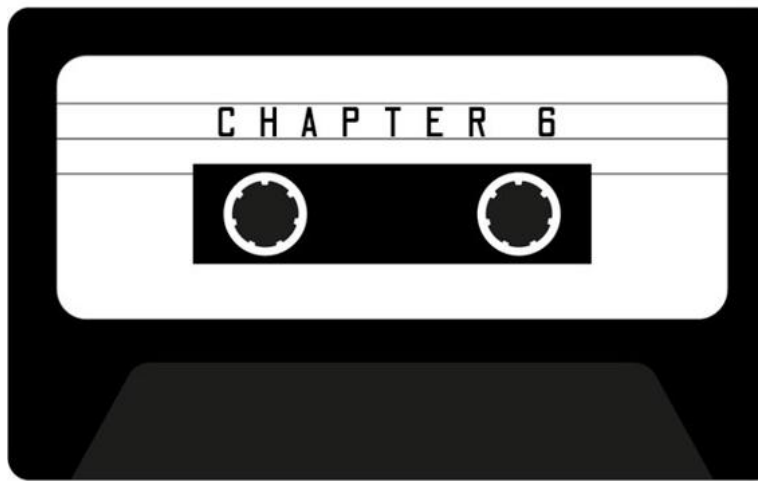
When Ricky flinched with overstimulation as I lapped at his tip, I finally pulled back, but found myself pressing soft kisses down his length, not wanting to stop yet. Then, unable to help myself, I nuzzled his inner thigh before scraping my teeth gently over it. Just a tiny nibble.

Ricky jerked with a breathless laugh. Grinning, I lifted my head to look up at him. His cheeks were sweetly flushed, eyes heavy and drowsy with satiation. But when I sat up, his gaze shot down to my softening cock jutting from my fly and his eyes flared with renewed heat and longing.

I wiped my hand on my apron, then scrubbed my mouth with the back of my wrist before shuffling closer to kiss him. Ricky kissed me back eagerly, hands slipping from my hair to cup the sides of my neck. The touch made me shiver as I slicked my tongue lazily against his.

“I really like you, Ricky,” I murmured after breaking the kiss, keeping my face close to his.

A shy smile tilted his mouth. Sweet, nervous determination creeping into his eyes, he darted in to kiss me again. “I like you too, Elliot.”



RICKY

WAS THIS HOW EVERY GUY FELT AFTER RECEIVING HIS FIRST blow job? Or was Elliot just really, *really* good at it?

I was still smiling when I floated back into work the next morning. Everything just seemed... better. The sun was shining brighter. Traffic was good on my way in. Even the old building that housed the Creepy Court Mall looked nicer than usual. I hadn't spent all that much time browsing here, but the little boutiques and specialty stores seemed interesting. GalaxyGames, the arcade place, looked kinda fun. I wondered if Elliot liked arcade games.

Did he shop at that dark, moody accessories store, Sizzling Discourse? I was too intimidated to even step foot in there, but if I hadn't known about Elliot's medical condition, I would've maybe assumed he was a goth. His perpetually messy hair was

black, although it didn't look dyed. And I'd only ever seen him in his uniform. How did he dress when he wasn't at work?

I flushed as I made my way through the mall to the food court. I probably dressed a little boring. Just shorts and T-shirts most of the time. My sneakers were ancient, but I couldn't afford new ones—not if I wanted to get my own place as soon as possible. Not that living at home was *bad*, but my little sisters—fifteen-year-old twins—had kind of taken over and always had a gaggle of friends over. My parents were okay, they weren't bad people, but... I wanted my freedom. To live how I was supposed to. To be fulfilled and not so lonely.

Elliot had given me my first taste of that freedom last night. My belly twisted with excitement as I approached Broth with a Bite, its neon sign glowing electric green above the storefront—a tilted soup bowl with a splash of broth spilling from the side, flashing on and off, and a cartoon-esque bone sticking out of it.

When I walked into the back office, a huge grin spread over my face the moment I saw Elliot in there tying his apron, looking a little tired. But then he always looked kind of tired, thanks to his super pale skin and the dark shadows under his eyes.

I opened my mouth to say hey, but a flurry of nerves kept me quiet. What if he'd... changed his mind? About liking me? Looking back, I was embarrassed to realize I hadn't actually done much while he was... I'd just kind of slumped there, desperately trying not to come the moment his tongue connected with my dick. And then he'd started touching himself too, and it'd felt like my head was gonna explode.

Then Elliot looked up. The nerves calmed when his face lit up, but I still felt kinda dorky and shy as I just stood there

clutching the strap of my backpack.

“Hey.” He strode across the room, peered over my shoulder at the door, then pressed a quick, firm kiss to my lips.

Heat flooded my face, and a big, silly grin stretched my mouth. Elliot chuckled, briefly stroked my hot cheek, then stepped back a respectable distance.

“You sleep okay?”

“Uh huh.” I was still smiling like an idiot as I set down my backpack and started tying on my apron. “How about you?”

“Oh yeah, I slept great.” He smirked at me, then lowered his voice to add, “Well, after I jerked off again thinking about you.”

My breath caught. I quickly glanced back at the door, then whispered, “M-me too.”

His smile widened, pale eyes darting to my mouth. “After we close up tonight, do you maybe wanna—”

“Why does it smell like beer in here?”

My head whipped around to see Brett standing in the doorway. He looked a little green, his hair messy and his eyes bloodshot.

A bolt of panic kept me silent as I darted a look at Elliot. Last night, after kissing for a long, long time, we’d finally mopped up the beer I’d accidentally spilled—as well as the, um, other fluids on the floor—before Elliot handed me a new one, and we sat there drinking a can each and talking. And kissing more. It’d been *so* rad. We’d finally left when we heard the security guard out in the food court, hastily sneaking out after Elliot finished locking up.

He looked calm and unruffled as he glanced over at Brett. “It doesn’t.”

“Yeah, it does.” Brett took another step into the room, the little color in his face leaching further as he sniffed. Then he narrowed his eyes at Elliot, not even glancing at me once. “Did you drink in here last night? For real?”

“Did you have fun with your girl at the party you left early for?” Elliot countered in an easy tone, shooting me a secret grin as he sauntered toward the door. “*You* smell like beer, dipshit. Not the office. It’s coming out of your pores.”

He clapped Brett on the shoulder as he passed him, then winked at me from behind Brett’s back before disappearing. I lowered my head to hide my smile.

Brett swallowed, looking nauseated, then lifted his arm to give it a sniff. “Shit, he’s right.”

“Did you have fun?” I asked, hoping I sounded somewhat normal.

He gave me a tired grin as he dumped his backpack after pulling out his apron. “Big time, bro. Got to spend some *quality time* with my girl, if you know what I mean.”

He chuckled and nudged me with his elbow, so I smiled weakly back.

“You got a girl?”

I tried not to tense up at the question. “Uh, nope. Not... Anyways, better get in there.”

Managing to give him a bright smile, I beelined for the door. Brett followed.

“Tiff has some friends I could introduce you to. Some total betties. What’re you doing tonight, bro? We’re gonna hang out at the beach later.”

I let out a nervous chuckle. “Isn’t it getting a little cold for that? It’s nearly Halloween.”

“Not if you got a girl on your lap.” Brett nudged me with a sly grin as we walked into the kitchen. “So, wanna come?”

Not in a million years. Especially because it sounded like Elliot had been about to ask me to hang out again before Brett interrupted us.

“Can’t tonight.” I managed a rueful smile. “Sorry. Thanks for the invite, though.”

“Another time. You seem like a legit dude, Rick.” He paused, looking over at me curiously as I heaved a big bag of onions onto the counter. “Hey, were you talking to him in the office before I got there? Elliot?”

My face flamed red. “Um, yeah. Why?”

Brett shrugged. “No reason, I guess. Those guys in the other kitchen are just kinda freaky, dude.”

I frowned. “He’s not freaky.”

“He kinda is, dude.” Before I could answer, he smirked and asked, “You notice the weird smell yet?”

I tensed, trying not to get too mad. I had noticed Elliot’s unique scent, but it wasn’t *weird*. It wasn’t *bad*. It was super nice. He smelled like sweet almonds. Kinda like cherry pie. And I freaking loved cherry pie.

“They don’t smell weird.” I dropped the sack of potatoes on the counter with a bit more force than necessary. “And they have a medical condition.”

Brett lifted his hands placatingly with a little chuckle. “Woah, don’t wig out, man. I’m just saying. I know it’s not their fault

they look like that, but... they're still kinda creepy, dontcha think?"

"Who's kinda creepy?" Daphne asked as she walked in, catching the tail end of our conversation.

"The other kitchen guys," Brett told her.

She rolled her eyes at me. "You're such a turd, Brett."

He scowled and finally turned to start stacking containers on the counter. "I'm just saying. My dad says you have to be careful who you associate with. It reflects back on you, ya know? That's why my frat was so strict about who we invited to our parties."

"Yeah, and that's why everyone hates your frat."

I suppressed my snort. Daphne grinned at me, and I smiled back as I started peeling potatoes. Brett went quiet after that, and when the kitchen started getting steamy from the big pot of bubbling broth, he had to go and sit in the back office with a soda for a while until he stopped feeling like he "was gonna ralph everywhere."

The day passed super slow. It kinda sucked that I barely got to see Elliot during our shifts, but none of them seemed to leave the other kitchen much except to take their orders out to the front. I was pretty sure they all even ate their lunches in there.

Brett dragged himself back into the kitchen when Daphne's shift ended. She was still at college, so she didn't work as long hours as us. Liz, the manager, popped her head in before leaving at seven. She definitely had the same condition as the others, so she didn't come into the kitchen—just told us that Elliot would be locking up once we were closed.

My gut fizzed with excitement that I refused to show. When closing time finally started inching closer, I glanced over at

Brett, who was slumped over the other counter fiddling with an empty container.

“Hey,” I said as casually as I could. “If you, uh, wanted to head to that beach party now, I’ll be okay cleaning up.”

He immediately perked up. “Yeah?”

“For sure.” I gestured at the window. Through it, we could see the food court starting to clear out. “It’s quiet, so I can start now between orders. Won’t take me long.”

“Sweet. Knew you were legit, Rick.”

I didn’t bother pointing out that it was Ricky, not Rick. I just gave him a tight smile as he shuffled for the door.

“Oh.” He paused, looking uneasy. “I should probably tell Elliot—”

“I’ll do it,” I blurted, then flushed. “I don’t mind. I’ll ask him to quickly check the kitchen again.”

“Kay.” Brett still looked a bit wary. “He might rat me out for leaving early again.”

I was pretty sure he wouldn’t, but I smiled and said, “I’ll tell him it was my idea.”

“Rad.” He grinned at me. “Thanks, Rick.”

Then he was gone. I hovered for a few seconds, patting my hair to make sure it wasn’t too messy, then took a breath and headed for the door.

Brett had already left by the time I walked the short distance down the corridor to the other kitchen. My palms were a little clammy, stomach jittery with anticipation and nerves. I knocked twice on the door, then took a few steps back so I wasn’t at risk of, like, contaminating the kitchen or something.

A few long seconds passed before the door inched open just a crack. A familiar face peered out, already frowning. Then his frown melted away when he saw it was me, replaced by a big grin.

“Hey.” He glanced over his shoulder into the room. I didn’t know who was in there with him, so I tried to keep my tone neutral.

“Hey, sorry to bother you. Um, I told Brett that he could go early, so…”

I trailed off, heat rushing to my cheeks. A slow grin spread over Elliot’s mouth.

“I can check your kitchen, no problem.” He kept his voice just as even, but gave me a secret wink. “I’ll be in once we’re all done here.”

“Okay, thanks.” I shifted, not wanting to walk away from him just yet. “Um, thanks.”

“No prob.” He grinned again, watching as I turned and walked away before closing the door.

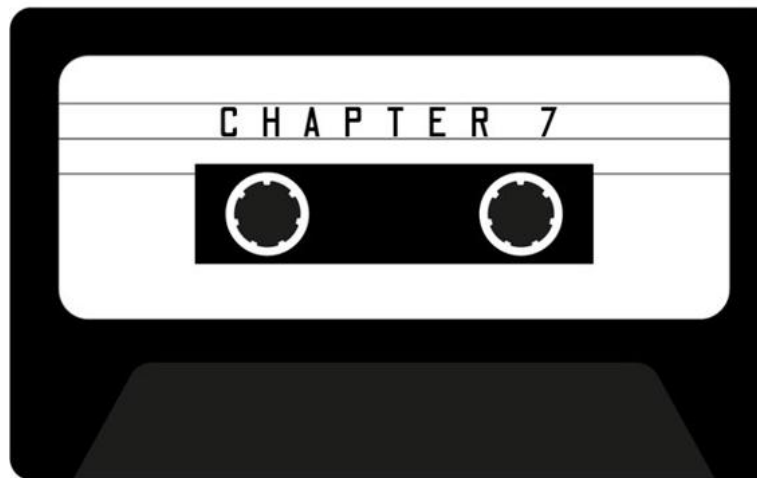
My heart was beating faster already. Thank god I was alone in the kitchen for the time being, because I already had a boner forming just from seeing Elliot’s face and hearing his husky voice. I couldn’t stop thinking about last night. Wondering if we would do it again.

“You taste perfect.”

“I wanna make you come.”

“I really like you, Ricky.”

My breath shuddered out of me as I started to clean. I really, really liked him too. So much.



ELLIOT

I WAS CONFLICTED.

I didn't like being conflicted, I liked stuff to be easy. I wasn't a big overthinker. Mainly I just did what I wanted, when I wanted, as long as it didn't mess up someone else's day or whatever. I wasn't a dick about it. I just didn't let stuff get to me.

But this blossoming thing with Ricky was getting to me. Because I really, really didn't like lying to him.

He was so sweet and gentle and kind of innocent. And it was pretty clear that this was his first time doing anything with another guy, which meant hiding the truth from him felt... dirty. The wrong kind of dirty. Not the fun kind.

I'd thought about him all day, but that wasn't unusual by this point. I was officially, one hundred percent addicted to Ricky.

I wanted to know everything about him. I wanted to carry him home and wrap him up in my bed and... I dunno, rub his feet or feed him grapes or just stare at him adoringly. I wanted to suck his dick again. I wanted to get naked with him.

And that was where the internal conflict was coming from.

I was a ghoul. I literally had to eat humans to survive. I did it in the most ethical way I could, but I still had to *do* it. And the thing was... humans didn't really like being eaten. It was a-okay for *them* to eat whatever other animal they wanted, but cannibalism was, like, a big no-no in most places, and they definitely wouldn't like it if they knew there was something higher in the food chain than them.

I'd spent a good chunk of my teen years questioning the moral dilemma of my very existence, which had made things pretty bleak for a while there, to be honest. I hadn't *asked* to be born. I didn't *relish* the fact that I had to eat humans to survive, like some other ghouls did. My dad had eventually gotten sick of all my questions, snapping at my mom that "this is why ghoul kids shouldn't go to human schools."

In the end, I'd come to terms with it all, mainly because there wasn't really another option. That was when I'd stopped letting stuff get to me so much, because if I didn't, I'd probably be in a permanent state of existential dread.

Kind of like the one I was in now.

It felt wrong to start stuff with Ricky when he didn't even know I wasn't human like him. I was desperate to touch him again, to kiss him, to maybe feel his hands on *me* this time. Or, oh my god, his mouth. But letting him do any of that without knowing the truth felt like a line I shouldn't let us cross.

At the same time, that imaginary line I'd created already felt somewhat arbitrary, seeing as I'd already kissed the shit out of him and sucked his dick. But I'd been caught up in the moment, damn it. It was *Ricky*. My sweet, perfect little sugar muffin who tasted so good and made me all kinds of horny. And hungry. Horny. Hungry.

Now, as Ricky waited for me in the office while I checked over the kitchen, a rare bout of anxiety was making my stomach go all jittery. Would he be disgusted if he knew what I really was? Would he feel sick for letting me touch him? Was I a total freaking idiot for even considering telling him the truth?

We didn't tell humans we existed. Period. None of us beings of the non-human variety did. It was just... a thing. Did humans find out in other ways? Yeah, sometimes. Did they start legends and folktales about us? I mean, yeah, and some of them were actually pretty entertaining. But they didn't really *know*. A lot of them wouldn't be able to handle knowing we actually existed. Especially not us heinous, people-eating ghouls.

But would Ricky be able to handle it? He was a sweet, sensitive guy. He'd been super understanding and compassionate about my "medical condition." Would he *really* react that differently if I told him it wasn't actually a medical condition, but more like a... whole-other-species condition?

I gave him a slightly nervous smile when I met him in the back office, and the smile he offered in return was so sweet and hopeful that my insides turned to mush.

I couldn't do it. I couldn't continue things with him and keep deceiving him. Which meant I had two options—tell him the truth, or end this now before it even really had a chance to take

off. The second option was the ‘right’ one—not that any other ghouls would’ve gotten themselves into this situation. I was the “weirdo perv” for feeling this way about a human. Other ghouls would say it was depraved. Unnatural. They’d say the *only* option was to cut all ties with the human warping my brain and not be such a sick bastard in the future. They’d say even considering exposing us to a human was despicable and dangerous.

And they’d be kind of right. The noble thing to do was to gently end this now, let Ricky move on with the memories of his first experiences with a guy and find another human to be with. The noble thing to do was *not* to expose him to something he might not be able to handle knowing, and in the process risk a lot of other things, not least the very business we both worked for.

But was I capable of being that noble? Noble wasn’t really a word I’d ever used about myself before, and I definitely couldn’t see anyone else using it to describe me either. My dad and brother thought I was a total wastoid. My mom was as supportive as she could be, but clearly wished I’d make something more of my life—join the family business, settle down with a nice ghoulish girl, have some ghoulish babies. Some of my friends thought it was hilarious that I was still happy just working in a mall food court instead of taking a cushy position at my family’s funeral home. A lot of other ghouls thought those of us who worked here were lazy and becoming too “humanized.”

Before I could decide what to do—as I stood there agonizing over it—Ricky approached. His tongue darted out to swipe over his lips, his eyes simmering with nerves and determination and longing. He hesitated, then placed a warm

hand on my chest, making my heart thud hard, before leaning in to kiss me.

Oh fuck. I couldn't stop him now. I wasn't strong enough. Not when he'd plucked up the courage to make the first move despite all this being so new to him. Plus... it was *Ricky*. I was already obsessed with him. Honestly, I was already half in love with him.

Like I'd said. We ghouls tended to latch. Hard.

My fingers threaded through his hair as I kissed him back with a helpless groan, sliding my tongue into his mouth. Ricky shivered, arms slipping around my back as he pressed himself against me. My dick started perking up immediately, already conditioned to respond to his scent and taste and warmth.

I knew I had to pump the brakes until I figured out what to do, but it was, like, physically impossible for me to stop kissing him. The kiss quickly grew frantic and messy as we both stopped thinking all that much, Ricky's fingers clutching at my back, his tongue thrusting eagerly, his hard dick rubbing against mine through our pants. And my *fucking apron*. For fuck's sake, not again.

He was the one to eventually end the kiss. We were both breathing faster, and I struggled to open my eyes and come back to reality. I didn't want to make this decision. I *hated* making hard decisions. I'd much rather just go back to drinking beer and sucking his dick like before I'd started actually considering the moral implications of being with a human.

“So, um...”

When I finally opened my eyes, Ricky was giving me a shy smile, his cheeks flushed and gaze a little heavier than before.

“Did you bring beer again?” he asked teasingly, fingers fidgeting with the hem of my T-shirt.

I managed a tiny chuckle. “Not today.”

“Oh.” He stepped back with a slightly embarrassed laugh, blush deepening and spreading down his neck. “Sorry, I didn’t mean... Um, sorry. I’m not, like, saying you have to hang out with me again. Or, um, always bring beer.”

“What? No.” Before I could stop myself, I was reaching out to snag his hand. “I want to hang out. I *really* want to.”

Ricky stared down at our hands for a second, then slowly threaded his fingers through mine as he smiled up at me. “Me too.”

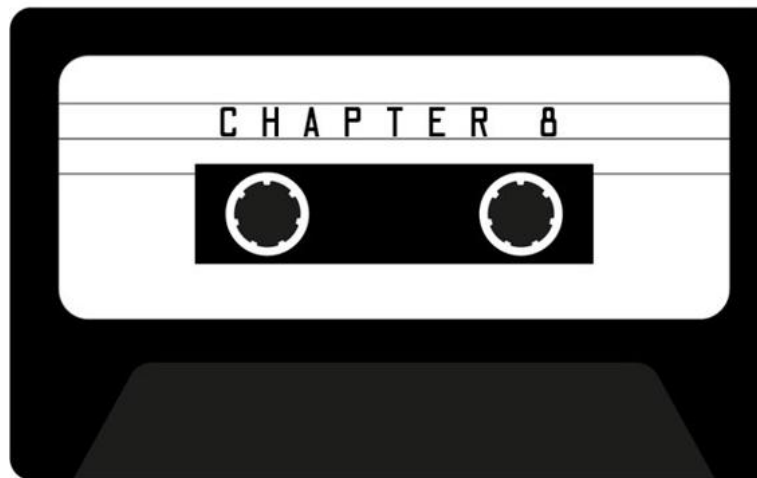
God, I just wanted to *devour* him. And not even in the literal sense anymore. Kind of. But way more in the sexy sense. At this point, I was ninety percent horny, five percent hungry, and the remaining five percent was still agonizing over what to do.

Then Ricky swallowed, tightening his grip on my hand, and softly said, “Sorry if I’m... you know. Kind of nervous. I just... I like you so much, Elliot.”

My heart pounded as I stared at him. My scalp tingled and my skin prickled with pure pleasure at hearing him say that. My dick was still eagerly expressing its interest.

Fuck being noble.

“I like you so much too, Ricky,” I croaked, reaching up to cup his cheek with my free hand. “Do you want to come back to my place?”



RICKY

ELLIOT LIVED IN A SMALL APARTMENT ON THE TOP FLOOR OF an early twentieth century building about twenty minutes from the mall. It was bitchin'. The moment we stepped inside after he unlocked the door and held it open for me, I felt myself relax.

There was a living area and tiny kitchen to our right, and against the far wall, tucked into a little alcove with a sloped ceiling and a big window, was his bed. My eyes snagged on it and held for a long moment, stomach twisting into knots with breathless anticipation.

“Thirsty?” Elliot dumped his backpack by the door and kicked off his shoes, then made his way into the kitchen to open the fridge, turning on various lamps along the way.

“Um, sure.” I set down my bag and toed off my sneakers, leaving them beside his. Tugging nervously on the hem of my

T-shirt, I padded over to join him.

“Beer or orange soda?” He was already pulling a big bottle of off-brand orange soda out of the fridge.

“Soda would be great.” I watched as he opened a cupboard to grab two glasses. He seemed kind of... tense, which was weird. Elliot never seemed tense. Rubbing one socked foot over the other, I awkwardly said, “Hey, if you’re... Um, I can go—”

“No.” He shook his head and flashed me a smile over his shoulder before looking back at the counter. Over the glug and hiss of soda pouring into a glass, he added, “I just, uh, want to talk to you about something.”

“Oh.” Nerves shot through me, a million terrible things he might want to tell me crowding my brain. He didn’t really like me. He regretted what we did together. I was fired. I was a terrible kisser. My cum tasted weird. “O-okay.”

He handed me my glass, then took my hand and led me over to the couch. I perched anxiously on the edge, running my gaze over everything as I took a tiny sip of soda. There was a game console next to the TV and a neat stack of cartridges on the shelf below. VHS tapes lined a small bookcase by the window, mostly kung fu and other action movies, and a healthy spider plant trailed down from the top shelf. Everything was neat and clean. The folded throw over the back of the couch smelled like him. My gut cramped up with longing as I imagined us snuggled underneath it together, watching movies or playing video games.

Elliot drained half his glass before putting it down on the coffee table. I took another anxious sip before setting mine beside his, then rubbed my clammy palms down my thighs.

“Ricky...” Elliot exhaled sharply and twisted to face me on the couch, crossing his long legs. He kept his head lowered as he picked at the hem of his pants. “Um, I have to tell you something. About me. But... it’s really private. It’s kind of, like, a huge secret.”

“Okay.” I tried to make my tone comforting as I gave him a tiny smile when he finally looked at me, forehead creased with worry. “I promise I won’t tell anyone. I mean... you already know my biggest secret.”

He smiled and reached out to take my hand, lifting it to kiss my knuckles. “I’m honored to know it. I... I really, really like you, Ricky. So much.”

I licked my lips and squeezed his hand. “Me too.”

“Okay.” He took a deep breath, then let go of my hand to grip his knees. His voice was unsteady with nerves. “Okay, so... you know my... medical condition?”

I nodded, wondering what he could be about to tell me. Did it mean we couldn’t be together? Oh god, had my cum given him an allergic reaction? How freaking embarrassing and awful.

“Well, it’s not... it’s not actually a medical condition. It’s... something else. It’s...” He scrubbed a hand over his face, exhaled sharply, then looked me dead in the eyes. “I’m not human.”

I went still, trying to figure out what he meant. “Huh?”

“I’m not actually human,” he rushed out. “Try not to freak out. Please. It’s nothing bad.” He cringed. “Well, kinda.”

“I’m not freaking out,” I said faintly, and it was true, mainly because I was too confused.

“I’m a, um, ghouL.” He cringed again, shoulders hunching. “We’re not actually that different to humans, we just need— Uh... we just have... slightly different dietary requirements.”

“A... ghoul?” I echoed blankly. “Like... like a... ghost?”

“Not a ghost. I’m alive. I’m just...” He shrugged self-consciously, keeping his head bent, and mumbled, “I’m what you’d consider a monster, I guess.”

“You’re not a monster,” I said automatically with a frown.

He huffed and looked up at me with a sad smile. “Technically, I am. To humans, anyway. Especially because... because of what I have to eat. To stay alive.”

“Um...” I shifted on the couch, fingers curling into the fabric of my pants. “What... what do you have to eat?”

Elliot cringed and looked away sharply. “Do you know anything about ghouls? Like, the folktales and stuff?”

“Um...” I didn’t think my brain was working fully. Was this a prank? I didn’t think so. Elliot seemed so uncomfortable and nervous, which wasn’t like him.

Which meant... he was telling the truth. He wasn’t human.

He wasn’t human?

“I... don’t think so,” I told him faintly.

He sighed and scrubbed his face, reaching over to grab his glass and gulp down the rest of his soda. Then he mumbled, “We have to eat people to survive.”

I stared at him in silence. He set his glass back down and licked his lips, then hunched in on himself on the couch, wrapping his arms around his knees.

“Like a zombie?” I eventually asked blankly. A grimace twisted his mouth.

“No,” he said with mild offense. “I’m not *dead*. Or undead. I’m a living person. I’m not, like... mindless or whatever. I’m just not human.”

“Sorry,” I blurted, heat flooding my face. Belly cramping with guilt, I reached out to take his hand, then hesitated.

Elliot looked at my hand hovering uncertainly in the air and exhaled a miserable sigh, pulling his knees tighter to his chest and tipping his forehead onto them. He suddenly looked defeated. Like he thought I was disgusted by him now.

A sharp ache pierced my chest. I hated seeing him sad. Elliot wasn’t supposed to be sad. He was always grinning and cracking jokes and laughing.

“I’m a living person.”

He was. If he wasn’t... human, that didn’t make him less of a person. He was a person sitting right in front of me, alive and breathing and... amazing. He was amazing.

He was still the same person. He was still Elliot.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled as I remained silent. “I just... I like you so much, and I didn’t want to keep lying to you. I’ve never done this with a human before, and it felt... wrong to keep it from you.”

“Elliot,” I croaked, then finally moved, shifting closer on the couch and tugging on his knees until he reluctantly lowered them. Then I launched myself into his arms, hugging him tight.

He shuddered against me, fingers clutching at my back. “Ricky...”

“Thank you for telling me your secret.” I buried my face against his neck, eyes sliding shut as I breathed in his sweet scent. “I promise I won’t ever tell anyone.”

Slowly, he pulled back and stared at me in disbelief. “I just... I just told you I have to eat people.”

“I—I know, but... you said you have to do it to survive.” I frowned. “So how is that your fault?”

He still looked stunned. “Ricky... I have to *eat people*. As in humans.”

I licked my lips and sat back. “As in... alive people?”

He shook his head quickly. “No. No, I would never... That’s why I work at Broth with a Bite. It’s, um, it’s actually a restaurant for ghouls. That’s why we have the special kitchen. Because we... cater to ghouls.”

Realization thudded into the pit of my stomach. “We serve *people meat* at work?”

A shaky snort left him. “Yeah. *You* don’t,” he rushed to add. “You just serve normal food. For the human customers.”

“Oh my gosh.” I scrubbed a hand through my hair, mind racing. When I finally figured it out, a triumphant grin stretched my mouth despite that unsettling piece of news. I wasn’t all that smart, so I was pretty pleased with myself for putting it together. “Oh my gosh, so the medical condition thing is just a front so you can make the food for ghouls without risking any humans accidentally eating it. That’s pretty smart, honestly.”

Elliot was still staring at me in disbelief. “Ricky... you’re taking this, like, *really* well.”

I shrugged sheepishly. “I mean, I’ve always kinda believed in supernatural stuff.” After a pause, I told him, “I saw a ghost once.”

He went still, then snuffled out a tiny laugh. “You did not.”

“Yes, I did!” I insisted. “I used to work at this chicken place, and one night when I was driving home after my shift, I was on this stretch of road with no other cars...”

“Yeah...?” He was watching me with curious intrigue.

“And this woman was standing in the middle of the road with her back to me.” I shuddered remembering it. “Wearing this long white dress that was kinda torn and stuff. So I started slowing down to see if she was okay, and then she just, like, vanished.”

Elliot snorted, grinning at me fondly. After a moment of hesitation, he reached down and lightly traced my knuckles with a fingertip. “No way.”

“She did! And that’s not even the worst part. I was, like, totally confused and just sat there for a few minutes, then started driving again. I looked in the rearview mirror to see if she’d... I dunno, jumped to the side of the road or something, and she was *there*.”

He cocked his head. “Where?”

“Sitting in the freaking backseat of my car.” I shivered. “Just for a split second. I saw her sitting there, staring back at me, and then she was gone.”

Elliot chuckled, gently threading his fingers through mine. “No shit?”

“I’m still too scared to look in the rearview when I’m driving alone at night,” I told him sheepishly.

He cracked up, some of the tension leaving his face as he grinned at me. “You’re so cute.”

I flushed, looking down at our linked hands. My thumb rubbed a slow circle over Elliot’s pale skin. So this was why he was so pale, and slightly cool to the touch. He was a ghoul. Not human.

That was gnarly.

As if he knew the direction of my thoughts, Elliot cleared his throat and gently disentangled our hands.

“Thank you for being so chill about this,” he said awkwardly. “I, um, I totally understand if you don’t wanna keep... seeing me. In that way.”

“What?” My brow furrowed. “Why would I not want to?”

He snorted and shook his head, gazing at me with incredulous affection. “God, Ricky, you’re just... so sweet.”

I flushed with pleasure, then defiantly grabbed his hand again and squeezed it tight. “None of this changes how I feel about you.”

His head cocked, eyes widening. “It... doesn’t?”

“No. So you’re not a... *human* person. You’re still a person. A really”—I blushed and licked my lips self-consciously—“really awesome person who I still really, *really* like. So you have to eat, um, certain things to survive. That’s not your fault. Blaming you for it would be like... blaming a bear or a mountain lion for the same thing.”

His shoulders sagged. For a split second, his mouth trembled. He brought my hand to his face and pressed my palm to his cheek, eyes sliding shut as he mumbled, “Thank you.”

I stroked his sharp cheekbone with my thumb and croaked, “I like you so much, Elliot. I feel like I can just... be myself with you. I’ve never had that before. But you’re also...”

When I trailed off, he smiled and turned his cheek to nuzzle my palm, pressing a soft kiss to it. “Yeah?”

“You’re like... the hottest guy I’ve ever seen,” I blurted, face flaming red. “And you’re funny and amazing and I love talking to you. And your apartment’s really clean. And nice.”

He snorted with an uncharacteristically shy smile, long fingers trailing down my forearm as he nuzzled my inner wrist. I shivered from the touch, chest aching with the urge to kiss him.

“I don’t care about anything else,” I told him hoarsely. “I mean, I have, like, a million questions, but I know none of the answers will change how I feel about you.”

He shuddered, clutching my arm tighter to draw me into a hug, pressing his lips to my neck. “God, Ricky.”

I rubbed my nose in his hair, drawing in a deep breath. “Is that why you smell so good? Is it a ghoulish thing?”

He chuckled, kissing my neck again. “The sweet smell? Yeah, it’s a ghoulish thing.”

Drawing back, I told him with an embarrassed grin, “You smell like cherry pie.”

His pale eyes grew heavier, fingers creeping under the hem of my T-shirt to trail over my lower back. “You like cherry pie?”

I licked my lips, gaze lowering to his mouth as I breathlessly answered, “Y-yeah. I love it.”

His hands rucked up my shirt as he slid them higher up my back. I shivered, then hesitantly closed the distance between us

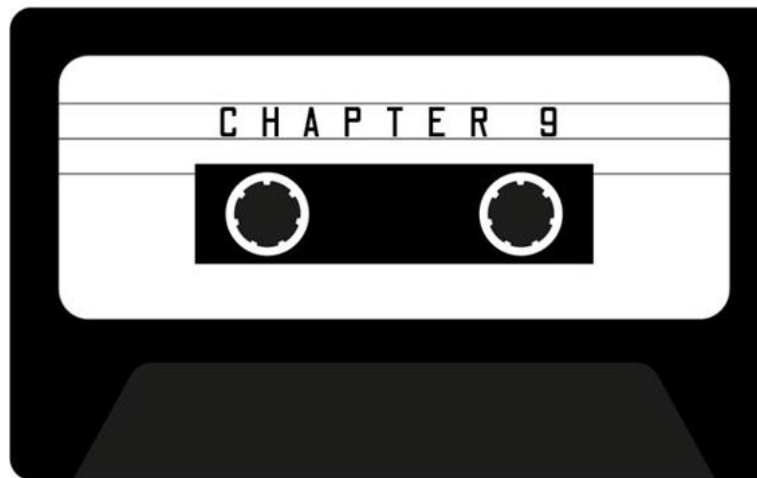
to press my lips softly to his. Elliot sighed into the kiss, fingers tightening on my back. Our lips parted, tongues meeting in a slow glide. The taste of him made me shudder with pleasure. Cherry pie and orange soda.

When we finally broke the kiss, Elliot looked lighter. Joyful. He grinned at me, trailing his fingers down the side of my face before smushing my cheeks. “You’re just the sweetest, Ricky. My cute little sugar muffin. I just wanna eat you up.”

I flushed, shooting him a teasing grin. “But not literally, right?”

His mouth stretched into a wicked smile. “Kinda.” Then he cringed. “Sorry. Bad joke.”

I laughed, pressing a kiss to his cheek before shooting him a sly grin of my own. “It’s okay. I kind of wanna eat you too.”



RICKY

ELLIOT'S THROAT BOBBED AS HE STARED AT ME.

“God, that’s hot,” he breathed, then yanked my head closer to crush his lips to mine.

I sucked in an unsteady breath, which let him thrust his tongue into my mouth with a low groan. Melting into him, I clutched at his back, wishing we weren't in such an awkward position so I could feel his body pressed against mine.

My dick was stiffening in a rush. The soft slickness of his tongue in my mouth was making me remember the feel of it sliding all over my length. Lapping at the tip. Warm suction enveloping me until I had the most intense orgasm of my life.

I wanted to feel that again. I wanted to know what it was like to suck a dick myself. Specifically Elliot's dick. I wanted to

show him I didn't care about any of that other stuff. That I still wanted him just as much.

Still kissing him desperately, I awkwardly shifted us around until Elliot's feet hit the floor and I could get on my knees between them. My thighs were quaking with nerves and excitement, and as I slid my hands onto his lap and fiddled with the button of his pants, he broke the kiss and stared down at me.

"Ricky..."

"Can I?" I licked my lips and fumbled with his fly, popping the button. "I really want to."

"God." His cock jerked against my wrist, making my gut bottom out with nervous lust. Still hunched over me, he cupped my face and smoothed his thumbs over my cheeks. "Only if you want to."

"I *really* want to," I reiterated, lunging up for another firm kiss, trying to ignore the fire in my cheeks. "But I might... I might not be good at it."

His pale eyes grew heavy and hooded. "You'll be good at it. But it doesn't matter anyway."

"It totally does." I shot him a teasing frown, which made his mouth quirk into a tiny smile. "I want to make you feel good."

His gaze softened as he stroked the corner of my mouth with his thumb.

"You already do, Ricky." After a pause, he slowly sat back, the couch creaking under his shifting weight. His fingers joined mine on his fly, pulling down the zipper, and his voice was lower and huskier when he spoke again. "You want to eat me up, huh?"

My dick jerked in my pants, gaze shooting down to watch as he took my hand and slid it into his underwear. “Y-yeah.”

“You want to suck my dick?” His narrow features tightened with lust as my trembling fingers curled around his cock. Together, we pulled it free, and Elliot shifted his hips to tug his pants and underwear down just a little. “Want to feel how hard you make me, Ricky?”

I could already feel it. And I could see it. I stared in stupefied lust at his long, slender cock, pale and veiny and crazy stiff in my hand. I was touching another guy’s dick. I was touching Elliot’s dick. It was *amazing*.

He let go of my hand and smoothed both of his over my shoulders, the comforting touch leaching some tension from my frame.

“Just do whatever you want,” he said softly, giving me a tiny smile when I glanced up at him anxiously. “Whatever feels natural. I’ll enjoy it. Trust me.”

“Okay,” I whispered, returning my gaze to his dick. Slowly, I slid my fist up and down, biting my lip at the feel of him in my hand. It felt right.

Elliot let out a tiny groan, hips twitching against the couch. My pulse leaped at the sound, a flare of pure excitement shooting through my belly. Hesitantly, I leaned in and gave the head of his cock a timid lick.

Elliot’s breath caught. I could feel him watching intently as I licked again, then circled the head with my tongue. Just like he’d said, it felt natural to draw the tip into my mouth and kind of, like, French-kiss it.

“Oh fuck.” His breath escaped him in a rush as his head fell back against the couch. “Your mouth is s-so hot.”

I quickly drew back, flustered. “Sorry. Is it bad?”

“No,” he barked, lifting his head to stare down at me, breathing faster. His hands slid up from my shoulders to thread through my hair, and I could feel him resisting the desire to plunge my mouth back onto his cock.

Which meant it had to feel okay, I realized. Good, even. Especially when he squirmed restlessly and his cockhead bumped against my lips, and a strained sound left him as he gazed down at me pleadingly.

Geez, I’d never felt so fricking powerful. I found myself grinning up at him before leaning back in to smooth my tongue over the little V on the underside of his cock. Elliot choked, his dick throbbing in my hand, so I flicked my tongue there a few times. A shuddery groan left him as he slouched deeper into the couch, fingers tightening in my hair.

Oh my god, I was actually doing okay. His reactions gave me the confidence to sink my mouth back over the head, shuddering with pleasure at the warm, clean taste of him. Then I slid my mouth lower, feeling all those veins gliding over my tongue, and started to suck.

“Sh-shit.” Elliot’s voice was tight, fingers fidgeting in my hair. “Fuuuck.”

I began to bob my head, trying to concentrate so it felt as good as possible. Suction. Keep the tongue involved. No teeth. Stroke the bottom half of his cock in time with my mouth. Once I got a rhythm going, the last of the nerves faded, and I was nothing but a ball of trembling lust on my knees between Elliot’s legs.

I’d always thought I’d be too nervous to really enjoy it the first time I did this—if I ever *got* to do this. But it all felt so natural.

Knowing it was Elliot made it feel so totally right.

Whatever he was, human or not, he was mine.

I moaned around his length, getting into it. *Really* into it. My scalp was tingling, cock throbbing insistently in my pants, and I couldn't stop myself from reaching down and rubbing it through the fabric. A muffled whimper vibrated around his dick, and Elliot moaned raggedly.

"F-fuck," he panted, the fingers in my hair starting to gently guide my mouth up and down his stiff length. It only made me hornier, more desperate, and I sucked harder with a plaintive moan.

His hips jerked as he cried out. "*Fuck*. Your m-mouth feels so good, Ricky. God, it's so fucking *hot*."

I could hear his breaths sawing out of him as he helped plunge my mouth over his cock. When I reached the tip, he tightened his fingers and held me in place, so I lapped frantically at his cockhead, desperately licking up the hint of pre-cum spilling from the tip.

"Jesus." He gritted his teeth, hips straining. "You're doing s-so good."

I moaned at the praise, fighting his grip to suck him back into my mouth. But I was a little too hasty this time—my teeth scraped lightly over his length as I hurried to take as much of him as possible. Before I could pull back and apologize, Elliot was crying out as a shudder racked his frame.

Oh my god. I was mortified. Until I realized... he definitely wasn't in pain. His cock pulsed in my mouth, another shot of pre-cum spurting onto my tongue.

"F-fuck, do that again," he begged breathlessly. "Please. Y-your teeth."

He *liked* it? Was that a ghoulish thing? I decided I didn't overly care. Gently, I grazed my teeth over his length again and glanced up to gauge his reaction. He shuddered hard, his stretched throat bobbing with a ragged moan as his head ground into the back of the couch.

"I'm gonna come." He lifted his head and stared down at me with wild eyes, his chest heaving. "Fuck. Ricky. I'm gonna come."

Well, that was kinda the idea. I upped the ante, sucking harder and faster, pumping his dick in time, tiny, muffled moans escaping me with every hectic breath because I was *desperate* to make him come, to feel his cock flex against my tongue as he spurted into my mouth.

Elliot shuddered hard, hips bucking in tiny, erratic thrusts to meet every downward plunge of my mouth. His cock grew even stiffer as he started to shake, but then he fisted my hair tight and drew my mouth off him.

"W-wait." His cock jerked in the air as he yanked my head up and lunged forward to thrust his tongue into my mouth. He seemed a little out of control, the kiss messy and frantic as he sucked on my tongue before grazing my lower lip with his teeth.

I shivered with excited pleasure at the feel of it, and my hand automatically began to shuttle over his achingly stiff cock as we kissed feverishly. Elliot moaned hoarsely into my mouth, but reached down and grabbed my wrist.

"Wait, wait." His pupils were enormous as he broke the kiss and stared at me, breathing hard. "I want you to fuck me. Do you wanna fuck me, Ricky?"

Oh my god. I stared at him in stunned silence. Then, like a total loser, I croaked, “Yes, please.”

He was already kissing me again, tugging me to my feet as he scrambled up off the couch. Our lips parted briefly as he tore my shirt over my head, then his own, then wriggled out of his pants and underwear, leaving them in a pile as we stumbled toward the bed. Frantic fingers undid my pants before he crouched to tug them down my legs, giving my leaking cockhead a wet kiss at the same time. My hips jerked, but before I could thread my fingers through his hair, he was standing back up and clambering onto the mattress.

“Oh my god,” I croaked as he settled on his widespread knees and rested his cheek on the pillow, reaching over to yank open the nightstand drawer. His hands were trembling as he popped the cap on the lube he produced and coated his fingers, then reached back.

He was all long, lean limbs and pale skin that I wanted to lick all over, but I was frozen in place with overwhelming lust as I watched him smooth slick fingers over his hole.

When he slid one inside with a tiny grunt, I finally launched into action, scrambling onto the bed to join him. Settling between his spread legs, I tentatively placed my hands on his ass. His pale, perfect ass. I kind of wanted to bite it.

And I kind of thought he’d like that.

Breath hitching, I leaned down and pressed a soft kiss to his ass cheek. He moaned, hips jerking as he added a second finger and plunged them as deep as he could. When I gently grazed with my teeth, he cried out and shuddered hard.

“Ricky.” His voice was gravelly. In a rush, he slid his fingers free and reached for the nightstand again, before flipping over

and sitting up as he tore open a condom packet.

Kissing me messily, he rolled the condom onto my dick without even looking, then squirted more lube into his palm and slicked my entire length. I shuddered, biting down on his lip as I fought the urge to come already. Elliot seemed to like that, because he grew even more frantic.

“Fuck, now.” He lay back and yanked me on top of him, lifting his knees to his chest until his calves hugged my sides. “Now, Ricky. Fuck me.”

I fumbled with my dick, trying not to hyperventilate with lust as I lined it up. There was a moment of resistance before he relaxed enough for the head to pop inside in a rush. I choked on a breath, going completely still as I started to shake. Slick, tight warmth squeezed my dick. Elliot’s frantic fingers fisted my hair as he trembled beneath me, breathing hard and fast.

“Ricky.” He lunged up and crushed his mouth to mine, moaning into the kiss. My hips arched forward instinctively, and we both gasped as my dick sank fully inside him until we were pressed tightly together.

“Oh my god.” Elliot almost sounded on the brink of tears. “It’s so f-fucking hot. Oh my god, Ricky.”

“Is it okay?” I whispered unsteadily, my eyes wanting to squeeze shut as I pulled my hips back before sliding deep again. Oh god, nothing had ever felt this good.

“It’s s-so good.” Elliot flung his arms around my neck and kissed me again with a desperate moan. “Holy shit. Keep going. Faster.”

That was no problem at all, because I was already desperate to start thrusting uncontrollably, the pleasure too intense. We kissed feverishly as my hips began to move, speeding up more

and more until we could do nothing but pant against each other's mouths.

Elliot clutched my nape, gazing up at me with heavy, lust-glazed eyes as his body jerked beneath me with every thrust. My face was warm with self-consciousness, but I couldn't look away. Not when it let me see the pleased anguish painted over his features, increasingly loud moans escaping him with every panting breath.

I was honestly surprised I'd lasted this long. It felt unreal. He was warm and tight, and I still couldn't believe I was *inside* him. I was actually fucking him. Without all that much finesse, but it didn't seem to matter. I could feel his throbbing cock rubbing against my belly, and in a rush, Elliot stiffened up, his limbs shaking as his fingers dug hard into the back of my neck.

His eyes scrunched shut as a strained shout tore from his parted lips. Wet heat spurted against my skin, drawing a desperate moan from me as he clenched up around my dick, his hips twitching wildly beneath me. My lower back tightened, jerking my hips forward and holding my cock as deep inside him as possible.

"Oh m-my... Elliot, I'm—" I choked, then cried out as my orgasm hit in a blinding rush, burying my face in his neck, my arms snapping around him to yank him closer.

He moaned loudly, releasing my nape to thread his fingers through my hair in a soothing touch as I gasped into his neck. I was shaking like a leaf when my orgasm ended, and I sagged on top of him, trying to catch my breath.

His chest heaved against mine, our stomachs slick with his release. Not wanting him to be uncomfortable, I carefully slid

my dick free and rose on trembling limbs so I wasn't crushing him.

"W-was that okay?" I asked worriedly.

Elliot's eyes softened. Cupping my cheeks, he drew me back down for a soft kiss.

"My little sugar muffin," he mumbled against my lips. "That was amazing, Ricky. You made me nut so freaking hard."

I snuffled out a laugh, licking my lips as I grinned down at him shyly. "I did too."

He smirked at me. "I know."

Flushing, I kissed him again before sitting up to carefully peel the condom off my dick. Elliot stretched out his long limbs with a contented sigh, letting his calves flop onto my thighs. Idly, he dragged his fingertips through the cum smeared over his pale stomach as he watched me with sated eyes.

"Hey," I began curiously as I tied a knot in the condom with unsteady fingers. "Can you *eat* muffins?"

After a pause, he let out a husky laugh and smirked at me again. "Sure. Let me prove it. Again."

Laughing, I shook my head and passed him the condom when he held out his hand for it. He dumped it on the nightstand before tugging me back on top of him.

"Oh, you mean *real* muffins, not cute human guys called Ricky." He buried his face in my neck and inhaled deeply. "Yeah, I can eat whatever. I just have to eat... you know, to get the nutrients and stuff I need."

I nodded, glancing over at the kitchen. Specifically the fridge. "So... do you have, um, you know, here?"

“Um.” He squirmed uncomfortably beneath me, letting his head rest back on the pillow. “Yeah, some. In the freezer. But I eat my main meals at work.” Fingers trailing lightly over my arms, he gave me a nervous smile. “Does it freak you out? Which would be totally understandable, by the way.”

“I don’t think so,” I told him honestly. “Maybe that’s weird of me. But it’s not the same as, like, humans eating other humans, right?”

“Yeah.” He relaxed a little, smiling up at me. “You’re perfect, Ricky. I knew it the moment I saw you.”

I snorted. “You did not.”

“I so did. And I was totally right.” He gave me a firm kiss, moaning into my mouth, before murmuring, “Wanna sleep over? We could do that again. And again. And some other stuff too.”

What other stuff? I wanted other stuff. And I *definitely* wanted to do *that* again. But...

“I wish I could,” I told him ruefully, meaning it with every fiber of my body. “But my parents will ask questions if I stay out all night and, um, I’m a really bad liar.”

He pouted, fingers tracing idle patterns over my shoulder blades.

“We gotta get you out of there so you can stay over as much as you want.” He paused, then shrugged. “Or you could just move in here. You’re already saving up to find your own place, right?”

I froze in surprise, then burst out laughing. “I think my parents might have some questions if they visit and see there’s only one bed.”

He gave me a sly smile. “There’s not, though.”

Wriggling out from under me, he grabbed my hand and tugged me off the bed to lead me over to one of the two doors on the far wall. I could already see that one led to a tiny bathroom, its door ajar, but he opened the over to reveal a minuscule room with a washer-dryer shoved into a corner and a twin bed pushed up against the wall under a mound of clothes and boxes.

“I’m not saying you’d actually sleep in here.” Elliot snorted as if the idea was ludicrous. “But we could clear it out and make it look like your bedroom. Just in case.”

I grinned, looking around. “So *this* is why the rest of the place is spotless. You just hide everything in here.”

He gave my stomach a weak shove. “Shut up, it’s just clean laundry I haven’t put away yet. And, um, yeah, some other junk. But it wouldn’t take long to sort out.”

I licked my lips, pulse speeding up as I realized... I was actually considering this.

“Are... are you seriously offering?” I asked shyly, heat flooding my face. Especially when I realized I was still buck naked. But so was Elliot, so I wasn’t going to complain.

He chuckled. “Yeah, I’m seriously offering. You want to move out. You already figured you’d need to find somewhere with a roommate.” Turning, he wrapped his arms around my neck and pressed his nude body to mine with a sly grin. “This’d just be... more than roommates.”

I settled my hands on his hips, trying not to get distracted by his dick brushing against mine. It would be crazy impulsive, and I wasn’t an impulsive guy. I’d never done anything risky in my life. At least, not until I met Elliot.

Maybe it was way too fast, but... eff it. I was done playing it safe. It was time for me to actually live.

Live with a... boyfriend. Who was a ghoul. Not a human. Wow, apparently when I threw caution to the wind, I threw it really, really far.

“Okay,” I said shyly, my heart pounding with nervous excitement. I grinned at him. “If you’re sure.”

His eyes flared before he beamed at me. “Fuck yes, I’m sure.”

Tugging me closer, he crushed my lips to his in a deep kiss, but it didn’t last long because we were both grinning like idiots. He licked his lips as he pulled back, pressing harder against me as his fingers played with my hair. I ran my palms up his bare back, my dick twitching with renewed interest as it brushed against his.

“Promise I’m a good roommate.” He grinned at me wickedly. “I keep everything super clean. And I will clearly mark all my *special* food in the fridge and freezer. I’ll even be super nice and waive the deposit. Which means... maybe you could move in pretty soon.”

“Yeah,” I breathed, already imagining it. Waking up with Elliot. Getting to see him all sleepy and grouchy in the mornings. Going to work with him, then coming home and curling up on the couch together.

Getting to be with him every night, doing all the sex and relationship stuff I’d never been able to do before, with the one person I wanted to do it with.

I snapped back to the present when Elliot’s hand shifted to my neck. He gave me a tiny smile as he softly stroked my earlobe, then leaned in to kiss me.

“You’re special, Ricky,” he mumbled against my mouth.

I didn't feel like anyone special, but... I was special to *him*. And he was special to me too. He already felt important.

He'd shared his biggest secret with me, not knowing how I'd react, expecting me to react badly. But he'd done it because I meant something to him. He wanted me to know all of him.

Chest aching, I deepened the kiss, shivering at the cool, sweet taste of his mouth. It quickly grew feverish, our tongues tangling as our dicks flared to life, rubbing together.

"Do you have to go yet?" Elliot murmured. He was already tugging me out of the room, back toward his bed.

I really should go. My mom would start interrogating me in the morning if she heard me get home really late, asking questions I wasn't ready to answer. But suddenly, that didn't feel so worrisome. My life was stretching out in front of me now, free and full of possibilities I never thought I'd have.

"Fuck it," I mumbled against Elliot's mouth. "I can stay a bit longer."

He broke the kiss to stare at me, mouth stretching into an evil grin. "I think that's the first time I've heard you say 'fuck.'"

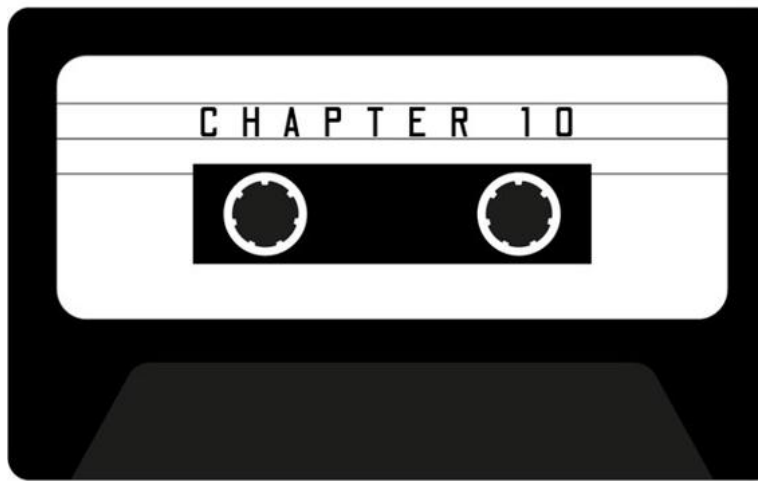
I flushed with a sheepish chuckle. "I know, I know. I'm a dork."

"You're perfect." He kissed me again, then smirked. "Say it again."

I burst out laughing, feeling lighter than I ever had. "Fuck."

"Mmm." Elliot pushed me back onto the bed and climbed on top of me, all smooth pale skin and lean limbs and frisky hands. "Now say it while your dick is inside me."

So I did. Repeatedly.



ELLIOT

“WHAT’S GOT YOU SO FREAKING HAPPY?” JOHNNY ASKED AS I whistled tunelessly while ladling broth into containers.

I grinned to myself. “Knowing your shift’s about to end, dipshit.”

That wasn’t the real reason, but it did help. No, the real reason was that Ricky had moved in yesterday, which meant we’d finally gotten to have our first official night together. The *whole* night. As ‘roommates.’ Who shared a bed.

And fucked a lot. Like, all the time.

Rather than shutting up, Johnny appeared in my periphery as he leaned his hip on the counter, arms crossed. “Paul said he saw you coming into work this morning with that human dude in the other kitchen. The new one.”

I shot him an unimpressed glance as I reached for the lids. “Yeah, and? We’re roommates.”

Johnny’s eyes bugged out of his head. “What? For real? You’re roommates with a *human*? Grody, dude. *Why?*”

“He needed to find a place, and I had a spare room.” I snapped the lids onto the containers. “Why’re you wiggling out? Not like it’s any of your fuckin’ business.”

“Uh, because it’s *weird*, dude.” He paused, head cocking. “Don’t you, like, get the urge to go in there and eat him while he’s sleeping?”

I snorted, a wide grin stretching my mouth. Oh, I got the urge all right, and I indulged in it as often as possible, just not while Ricky was sleeping. The other night, I’d introduced him to the wonders of rimming. He was already addicted.

I glanced at Johnny as I scooped several handfuls of croutons into a separate container. Ghouls liked ’em to still be crunchy when they ate their broth. “Maybe you shouldn’t work in a mall filled with humans if you lack that much self-control, dude.”

He scowled. “I have a ton of self-control, asshole. I’m just saying. Plus, doesn’t he see your food in the fridge? What if he accidentally *eats* it?”

“He doesn’t eat my food because he’s not an asshole.” I slid all the containers into a bag and turned, holding it out to him. “Take this out, then get lost. Your shift’s over.”

Huffing, Johnny took the bag and turned to leave. “Dick. Later, Paul.”

“Um, yeah,” Paul said hesitantly while chopping carrots. “Later.”

Once Johnny was gone, I felt Paul look over at me as I stabbed the receipt onto the spike and moved on to the next order.

“Um, hey, sorry,” he said awkwardly. “I wasn’t, like, snarking or anything. I just mentioned seeing you and, uh...”

“Ricky.”

“Yeah. I just mentioned seeing you.”

I shrugged, setting out three new containers. “No prob.”

We lapsed into silence. Through the wall, I could hear sounds from the other kitchen. Utensils clattering on the metal counters, the muffled guffaw of Brett’s obnoxious laugh. Casually, I glanced up at the clock over the door and grinned when I saw the time.

Making sure Paul was still busy chopping carrots, I reached for the big container of croutons and set it down precariously on the edge of the counter. When it didn’t tip, I frowned and nudged it with my elbow.

Croutons showered onto the linoleum before the bucket hit with a crash. Paul jumped and looked over.

“Whoops.” I made a show of putting my hands on my hips and shaking my head with a self-deprecating laugh. “I’ll go get the broom.”

Uninterested, he turned back to the chopping board. “Kay.”

“Might take a dump too,” I added casually as I headed for the door.

“Grody, dude.”

“Back in, like, ten minutes. Maybe fifteen.”

“Fifteen? You need more human in your diet.”

Snickering, I pushed through the door and strode to the supply closet at the very end of the corridor. When I slipped inside, Ricky was already waiting for me, fidgeting among the cleaning products.

Ignoring the scent of mildew and lemon disinfectant, I grinned and wrapped my arms around his neck, immediately yanking him in for a deep kiss.

He chuckled against my mouth. “You know, we don’t really have to do this anymore now I’ve moved in.”

I pouted, fiddling with his hair. “But I like seeing you during the day too.”

He gave me a shy grin. “Me too.”

“I *really* like seeing you at night though.” I kissed across his cheek and down his neck, gently nibbling his warm skin. “All naked and sweaty and moaning my name while I ride your dick. Or you ride mine.”

“Oh my *god*, Elliot.” He gave my stomach a weak nudge, and when I lifted my head to grin at him, his face was bright red.

“Your sweat tastes so good.” I was getting a boner, so I pushed my hips firmly against his. “And I wanna drink orange soda out of your bellybutton again.”

He snuffled out a laugh. “We got all sticky though.”

My eyes hooded with arousal. “Yeah, it was rad. You tasted awesome.”

Ricky grinned at me, his cheeks still sweetly flushed. “No eating your human boyfriend, remember?”

Solemnly, I raised three fingers right in front of his face. “Ghoul’s honor.”

He laughed, curling his fingers around mine and lowering our hands. “Isn’t that the Scouts?”

“Same diff.” Cupping his nape, I dragged him closer and smiled into our kiss. “Promise I won’t eat you, muffin. I want to keep you around for as long as possible.”

About the Author

Lily Mayne writes what she loves to read: achingly sweet yet gritty romances against unusual backdrops—dark, futuristic, dystopian and more. She enjoys reading and writing (duh), baking, watching terrible horror movies and many other hobbies that would have potentially made her an ideal Victorian maid. Just a really lazy one.

She currently lives in the UK with her husband and several fluffballs, who like to make a lot of noise while she's writing.

Follow Lily on [Instagram](#), [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#), and sign up to the newsletter to receive teasers, hear about new releases, and other stuff!

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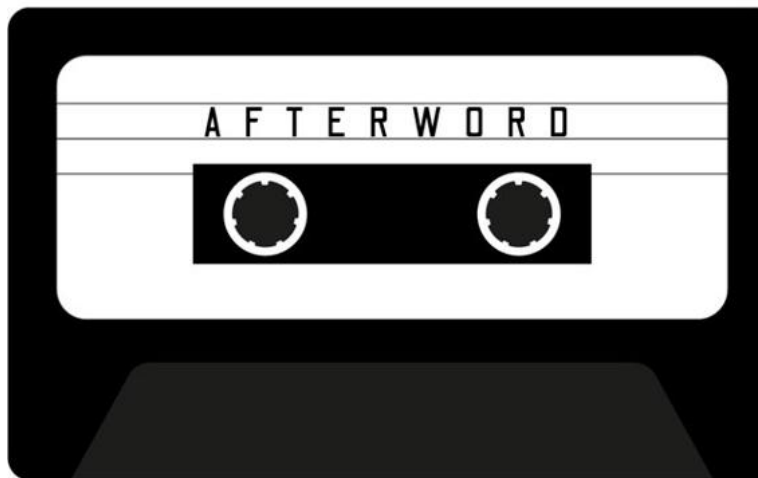
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