

I

A hundred stinking freaks had already filtered past, each like the one before. Loose-fleshed and damp, in dire need of a soak. I'm not here to make judgments. I'm part of this crowd, too. It's just, comes a time you get old enough you oughta learn how to operate a shower.

Hey, but what's a furry con without a little musk? It's what elevates the place. Makes it an institution.

Some sorry mop was eyeing me from afar. He'd been giving me eyes for the better part of the longest minute of my life. I uncapped my flask and gave it a sly nip. Thought I might need it when the mop headed my way. Which he promptly began to do.

The first thing I noticed was his hair, or lack of it. What remained clung to his scalp by the thinnest strings of sweat. His general physique was what you'd expect of a thirty-five year old with a sedentary lifestyle—that is to say, nonexistent. He might have been athletic, once, or might have had the capacity for athletics. Now he looked like a tired old dog. His T-shirt seemed about ten years too old and two sizes too small, with a cracked and peeling Talespin logo leering at me. Capping off the whole ensemble was a pink fanny pack, pooched out just above his crotch. It was dotted with garish paw prints.

Fuck me, but I wanted that fanny pack for myself.

"Ursula?" he asked.

It's easy enough to ignore someone when you're drinking with friends. Harder when you're drinking alone. Still, I gave it my damndest shot. I looked away and pretended I didn't hear him, took another slug of my hidden drink.

He didn't give up. Christ, but they don't ever.

"Er—it *is* Ursula, isn't it?"

For half a second I thought about telling him to pack up and piss off. Just because you recognize someone doesn't mean you have the right to approach them. Boundaries. I swear to God, the furies need to have a seminar about boundaries.

"No one calls me Ursula but my Dad." My eyes shimmied up and down his frame. "You're not my Dad."

"It *is* you, then. Oh, thank God."

"Call me Sully," I said.

"Sully?"

"That's right."

I took an extra-long sip of my drink, let the silence grind. Of my many God-given talents, chief among them is my handle on that substance called time. I can turn five seconds into a week, five weeks into a year. It comes in handy. Believe me.

I gave him six long months then flicked my chin over his shoulder. Anything but making further eye contact, which had been my first mistake. That had given him the courage to mosey on over, act like we were old school chums.

It's always a gamble, getting snippy with folks like him. Half the time they'll roll over and present their soft, sweaty assholes, just aching to get plugged. Half the time they'll clam up and hurl slurs your way. Never know what you're gonna get with an incel, and a furry one to boot. Even after weighing my options I settled on stiffing him good.

"Speak up, Fanny Pack, and make it snappy. I've got places to be without wasting my time on the likes of you."

Bitch rolled over, ass to the angels.

"I heard you're the person to come to when you need to find something."

"Something?"

"You know. Something *missing*."

I drained my flask, squinted my eyes, gave him the rest of the year. His brow sprouted fresh sweat. Hands shook.

"Well? Is it true?"

"Ain't decided yet."

See, here's how things were going. I'd developed a sorta... *reputation*, you could say, over the past few years. Entirely unintentionally. As these things go. First Trina had her suit's head stolen. An easy enough case. These cons are dens of iniquity, and I knew it and Trina knew it and that was part of why we loved them. By the time the weekend was over she might well have drunk Lake Michigan dry. Con security hadn't seen it, Lost and Found had no clue. After a desperate scramble I found the head at the nearby CTA station, one of the agents holding onto it. Thank Furry Jesus it was still there. I guess after a few years of this sort of thing, they've probably gotten used to us.

My second case had been even easier. My old pal Kai spent the day panicking about her missing book. (A signed, first edition of *Redwall*. Apparently a gift from her parents when she got her creative writing MFA. Sentimental, like. I didn't give her my thoughts on that British asshole's reductivist morality.) It took me ten minutes to track down Kellin—her ex—and a half-hour in his bed to get him to give it back.

You'd be amazed how many of these things you can solve with sex.

After that, I'd become the girl you came to when you needed a bit of sleuthing done. I've never even watched *Sherlock*, but sure enough I was the furry fandom's new favorite detective. The title tagged along like a scared puppy. Couldn't shake it.

"Can you help me or not?"

I gotta admit, I was a bit impressed with how direct the bitch was getting.

"Depends," I said. "But first, dish. What's given you the slip?"

"My character."

I blinked, blinked again. "You need me to find—a character?"

"That's right."

“Babe, I don’t think characters just vanish. What’s your deal?”

“Her name is Skittles and she belongs to me. Ferny stole her. She’s mine and Ferny *stole* her. I need you to get her back.”

“Ferny? Hell, I’ve heard of her. Probably follow her on a few sites.”

“You can go ahead and block her. That fucking bitch.”

“Okay, clearly there’s a lot here you aren’t letting me in on.”

“What else do you need to know? She stole my character.”

“You want my help, you gotta help me, first.”

“I’m sorry. I—I’m sorry.”

“Waste of fuckin’ time,” I muttered. “All right, pal. Best of luck to ya.”

I made as if to leave.

“W-Wait!”

“You’re pushing it, pal. Gimme one good reason why I shouldn’t walk away.”

“Icanpayyou.” Soft, under his breath, barely a whisper.

I began walking.

“I said, *I can pay you!*”

“Aww, puppy *can* dig, can’t he?”

He ignored that comment, then gave me a number that would set any tail wagging. I was a little short on trust these days. Even shorter on cash.

“No joke?”

“Not ever.”

“If you’ve got this kind of dough, why don’t you just give it to Ferny?”

“You think I haven’t tried that?”

“So what you’re telling me is that she’ll already be on the defensive. Boy you really made a mess of things for me, didn’t you?”

“I’m sorry, okay? Just clear this up for me. You’re the only one who can.”

“I’ll need half the payment up front. Cash. Got it?”

“There’s no way I can get that to you. Send me your Paypal info and I’ll—”

“I said *cash*. Meet me at the hotel bar in two hours.”

I left him quaking in a puddle of his own piss. God, but I don’t have time for this kind of nonsense. I stepped outside to feel the December sun on my face. Then I thought about the money, all that money, and what I could buy with it. But it didn’t make me feel much better. Somehow, I had a feeling this was going to be more trouble than it was worth.