

What You Get Is What You See

A schedule had awaited Alisha when he finally arrived in the ritzy penthouse hotel suite that Gabriel had organized for him. It gave the fox the whole remainder of the night (such as it was), and the entirety of the next day. It wouldn't be until late in the afternoon when Alisha would be expected to show up at the meeting with Gabriel's new crew to learn what his role in the lion's con would be.

He didn't sleep that night. Instead, he spent the entire night feverishly looking into Vincent's affairs. The raccoon had obviously done something considerable indeed to warrant Gabriel being sicced on him. It couldn't be something as simple as a new political challenger, either; there were plenty of unscrupulous ways to deal with such a threat to a criminal organization's operation.

Unfortunately, nothing Alisha was able to dig up on his once-partner gave him a clearer idea of why the stakes were so high. When a year earlier he'd encountered Vince by chance and taken his best shot, the fox had done his homework. He'd spent more time than a single night back then digging into Vince's affairs, in the hopes of finding something to use against him. Vainly. *Fortunately*, as it had turned out.

That was not to say that Alisha didn't sleep, eventually. He'd had to take something to help him pass comfortably out in the almost-too-plush bed, but had awoken in the very late morning refreshed in body again. His mind was a whole other matter. A night of dreamless sleep snapped right back into worry, and Alisha only gave himself the luxury of a shower and a coffee before he launched right back into the investigation.

Not into Vincent, but Gabriel. The master grifter's trail ran across the whole world, and had done so for decades. He never went for the showy marks, though. Gabriel was insidious. Ruthless. He was methodical and patient, and Alisha knew from experience that so many of the thefts that had been attributed to Gabriel were not his doing. If there was a trail that led to his name, it was likely not something he was involved in.

But Alisha knew where to look. Specifically, he knew to look for the lion's absence. Where he was unseen, Gabriel was usually behind the scenes to some extent. It was his modest targets, combined with the fact that Alisha knew he really *was* that good, that kept him out of jail. All too often, the same could not be said of his crew; sometimes they crossed him, or got themselves caught, or were just expendable =. Those were the parts of Gabriel's history that Alisha could track reliably.

Museum heists in Prague, Helsinki, Milan, Melbourne and Boston. Private collections relieved in Birmingham, Moscow, Christchurch, Lindos, Marseille and Belfast. Blackmail discovered after the fact in Bucharest and Port Elizabeth. All of them bore Gabriel's mark; elements to cons that only someone who knew him intimately would be able to piece together.

Alisha absorbed it all. He knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that whatever he did in that hotel room would be seen by Gabriel, but that was fine. Researching a mark was something he'd taught the fox, and researching the person at the head of a crew before jumping in bed with them, be it metaphorically or literally in Alisha's case, went along with it. The irony of using Gabriel's teachings against him wasn't lost on the fox. Normally he would have reveled in such a twist incorporated into a con of his.

In this case however, it only filled Alisha with dread. He had to take care. He had to take *great* care, lest Gabriel catch onto what he was doing. He had to have plans, back-up plans, and back-up plans for his back-up plans. Considerations for those took up the whole time he allocated himself to get ready for whatever Gabriel had in mind. Bathing, selecting jewelery and clothes from Gabriel's options, applying pheromone-masking perfumes,

grooming and the like were all taken care of on autopilot, as Alisha's mind worked the problem of what exactly the fuck he'd gotten himself tangled up in.

When finally word had come from the lobby that his limousine had arrived — and knowing Gabriel, of *course* he couldn't help but splurge on his fox — Alisha was as ready as he was going to be. The dress, sheer blood-red silk. In place of shoes, delicate and soft black wraps. A similarly ebon shawl wrapped over his shoulders, the fox's long hair allowed to cascade over his left shoulder. Feminine grace in a single image.

Everything Gabriel had made him.

The limo was exactly as top-shelf as everything Gabriel did. The moment Alisha sat back in the car and took in the top-of-the-line multimedia setup before him, he knew he only had to wait. He was on his way to wherever Gabriel wanted to drop him off, and he'd be brief en route, not at the warehouse. How like the lion, to take every precaution. How terrifying to go up against him; it made Alisha wonder why again he was doing what he was doing.

He didn't owe Vincent anything. Not a single damn thing. The fox still wasn't sure he completely forgave his old boyfriend for what he'd done. All he knew was that he'd decided to not use his position and abilities to ruin the raccoon's political career. It had seemed the only option at the time. Now, though?

Now, Alisha was faced with a much more personal threat. The decision to warn Vincent had been an emotional one; an impulse decision that the fox wasn't sure he'd still do if he could go back and have a do-over. If Gabriel decided to undertake his original plan to assassinate Vince — not something Alisha was sure Gabriel couldn't pull off, admittedly — there was likely very little that Alisha could do to stop him. And then, he'd move on to the fox for the betrayal. Gabriel was big on loyalty, and to say that he had a vindictive streak would be an understatement.

When the media systems turned themselves on, Alisha wasn't surprised. When the screen before him lit up to only show Gabriel's features, he was a little taken aback. His eyebrows lifted before he could stop them, but the fox quickly adopted a wry little smile as he tilted his head and perked his ears. "Ciao, Gabriel," he said as the lion smiled back at him. "What's wrong? Don't want me to meet this crew you built to help me take some much-needed revenge?"

The smile on Gabriel's face became a hearty laugh as he waved a paw. "Mio cara, you know how it is. I introduce you and poor Emma, benedicila, would be liable to claw your pretty eyes out of your skull. Best introduce you to them on the job itself, no? Then she would have to break her cover to express her jealousy."

Emma. That was a first step. "You took on a new girl?" Alisha said as he clutched at his chest in dramatic fashion. "Gabriel, you wound me! I thought after me, all others would seem so insufficient."

"And so they do, which is precisely why I need *you*, tesoro." His smile broadened. "Your task this evening will be simple. Mister Terrel will be the star of the show at this little fundraiser. You will approach him as Catherine Miller, directly under Rodney Anderson of Mercer Pharmaceuticals. They're a shell corporation for one of our benefactors... they're quite happy to burn it, I assure you."

The name rung a bell, and another little piece of the puzzle fell into place for Alisha. "That's the same guy I seduced to get the thumb drive from, isn't it?"

"The very same, and you *were* directly under him for a time if Mister Davidson tells the tale correctly. Once you're inside, I expect you on comms with the lovely little earbud that Mister Davidson has organized for the event." The image of Gabriel nodded to Alisha's left, and the fox followed his gaze to a small envelope.

The fox opened it and retrieved not just the little earpiece inside, but also the USB drive he'd stolen as the lion continued, "From there, I can advise you of all you'll need to

take control of Mister Terrel's night and twist him as we require. You will, of course, be required to drop that drive into Mister Terrel's coat during proceedings. All part of the plan, you see."

Alisha rolled the earbud between two fingers as she gave the little thumb drive a thoughtful stare. Even for Gabriel, this was being played unusually close to the vest. Did he mistrust Alisha already? Had the fox misstepped somewhere? No, he told himself as he smiled at Gabriel's image. Even if he had, he couldn't dwell. Gabriel would notice and then he'd definitely know something was wrong. Alisha was just lucky that the hacker he'd tapped to help his attempted con on Vince last year hadn't been Lyle. "Is that all I get?" he asked with a smirk. "You always did like to tease, Gabriel."

"It's all you need, mio cara. For a lesser thief, it would be too little." He tilted his head up and gave his best rogue's grin. "For you, my Alisha? Oh, you could do so much even with less. I know you'll not let me down. Ciao, bella." His smile broadened for a second, before the video cut out and the screen went blank.

Alisha's eyes fell back to the earbud. It was the same design that Lyle had him use whenever they worked together, so Alisha could at least be reasonably sure that the young wolf would be listening in on the con. He sighed as he placed the device into his left ear and drew his hair back down over it. They were hard to spot in a fox's ears, but better safe than sorry. "You there, wolfie?" Alisha said as he twisted the tiny knob on the earpiece with a clawtip. His other paw tucked the USB drive away in his purse.

"On site and standing by, gorgeous," he replied, his voice peppier than Alisha had expected. "How far out are you?"

Alisha smiled as he leaned back, though smiling was the last thing on his mind. It was all in case Gabriel was watching or listening still. The fox couldn't take chances. "I don't even know where I'm going, hon," he replied and folded his arms. "You haven't been hitting those energy drinks again, have you?"

No! No, no... well, yes." He chuckled. "Just gimme a sec... ah, there you are. Tracking in the earpiece's up. Looks like you're about ten minutes away. Everything good on your end?"

The fox fought the urge to roll his eyes. Nothing about what was happening was good. "I'd feel better if I knew who else I was working with tonight,"

Again there was a little laugh from Lyle. "It's just gonna be me and the big guy, Ally. The other guys are across town, and... well, I'm not really meant to say anything about their target." There was fear in his voice as he spoke, and Alisha wasn't surprised. Gabriel commanded respect when he could, but he wasn't above commanding fear when he couldn't. That he had Lyle spooked wasn't surprising.

"And what about them?" asked the fox with a smirk. "Gabriel say that I wasn't allowed to know the rest of the crew?"

There was a moment of hesitation from Lyle. It made Alisha worry that the wolf had shut down entirely; if Gabriel wanted to tell him nothing, this was likely his only chance to learn more about what he'd gotten himself into. "Well, I was supposed to fill you in on the cover story, but... I s'pose you've got time for that too," Lyle said at last, and Alisha almost sighed with relief. "Sit back, foxy lady. You ain't gonna believe who he's got running with us..."

The Alisha that stepped out of the limo a few minutes later devoted a not insignificant amount of self control to ensuring that his unease and fear didn't show. Lyle's rundown on the rest of Gabriel's crew had certainly put the fox in a foul mood, and the knowledge that

he'd have to hide *that* fear as well just ratcheted it up. More and more, Alisha found himself resenting the call he'd made to warn Vincent.

It didn't help that as Lyle began to explain the con to him — at least as best he could with the limited information that Gabriel had provided — Alisha had become more and more unnerved. Everything about his chosen vocation was deception personified, but the core of it was that he appear, and seduce, as a female. He'd take his mark for everything they have, but they had to expect a female.

Vincent Terrel was as gay as they came.

Straight-gay, to be sure; he wasn't the least bit camp or effeminate, and he wasn't the sort of raccoon that would set off anyone's gaydar to look at him. He played the consummate straight male as well as Alisha played the slinky vixen. If Gabriel intended Alisha to seduce Vince, then why was he all gussied up as a female? It didn't fit. That combined with the absolute secrecy with which Gabriel was running the con? It was unsettling.

And the more he thought about it, the worse that feeling grew. "This is nuts," he muttered to himself as he ascended the steps out the front of the pavilion that had been repurposed for Vince's function.

"Be calm, tesoro," whispered back Gabriel's voice in Alisha's ear. "I know what bringing down this raccoon means to you, but you cannot let your emotions rule you. Remember?"

"Catherine Miller, Mercer Pharmaceuticals," he said instead, not to Gabriel but the burly-looking dog at the front door as he presented the presumably-forged invitation that had been left in the limo for him. The fox smiled and waited until the dog waved him inside, and the fox swept through the doors before he said, "I remember, Gabriel. You taught me well."

"I'm tapped into the security system," Lyle added, his voice a little louder than Gabriel's had been. "Got eyes *all* through this place. I remember when 'secure' surveillance systems were a tough nut to crack. This is insulting."

"And is there any sign of our dear senator-to-be?" Alisha asked. He snagged a glass of champagne from the tray of a passing waiter and brought it to his muzzle as he looked around the room. On any other night, the sight of so many wealthy and connected men all too eager to flaunt that wealth and power might have made him giddy... or at least in more recently years professionally curious.

But as the fox waded into the sea of people, there was nothing. Just fear. Just concern. Who knew how many of them were on the side of Gabriel's mysterious benefactors? Had Gabriel decided his first instinct had been right, and a bullet served Vince better? Alisha felt his heart began to race.

He forced himself to push those ideas out of his head. Stressing would only make things worse. The fox forced himself to calm as he took a sip of the champagne and smiled at an older bear in a suit who'd begun to size him up. No sign of Vince, though.

It wasn't for another few seconds that Lyle finally replied, "Got him. Sorry, there's a *lot* of bodies in that room. Near the stage, east side. Look for the big horse, brownish fur? Can't miss him."

Alisha nodded slowly for the benefit of Lyle's camera feed and began to head toward the stage set up in the back of the pavilion. From his vantage point, he still couldn't see any sign of Vincent. Lyle had been correct, though; the place *was* packed. It seemed as though Vince had attracted a great number of interested parties, looking to hitch themselves to the popular young candidate.

There *was* sign of the horse that Lyle had mentioned, however. He towered over the crowd for the most part, and he seemed to be in the direction that Lyle had suggested. Alisha took a deep breath and forced himself to calm. Moment of truth. There would be no going back; he had to hope that Vince had seen the message he'd sent and was ready.

As he approached though, it seems that the crowd had given Vince and the horse a wide berth. The equine was laughing, a glass of champagne in one large hand and the other fondly squeezing the raccoon's shoulder. The two seemed to be on very friendly terms; Vince actually looked relaxed around him. As Alisha approached, he began to make out their conversation. "... really coming along, thanks to you."

"I just put in the good word, James; you did the rest yourself." Vincent chuckled to himself, but paused as he caught sight of Alisha. The fox felt the breath catch in his throat. "But you might have to excuse me for a moment. Looks like trouble's come to see me."

The horse followed Vince's gaze and fixed on Alisha, and he sized the vulpine up with a smirk. "Trouble's right," he said, before he knocked back the glass of champagne. "No one looking at you like *that* is ever good news. You take care, congressman. You ever find yourself in Bridgeport, you give me a call. Drinks on me and the mister."

Vince laughed as he shook the horse's hand, though the sideways glance he threw Alisha was all confusion. For a second the fox was worried that the security cameras would catch it and tip Gabriel off. Or, worse, that the words to come out of Vince's muzzle would do the job better than any expression. As the equine wandered back into the crowd though, it seemed the fears were unfounded. "You seem unusually fixated on me," he said as Alisha stepped up before him, an eyebrow perked. He'd definitely been recognized. "Practically pushed through the crowd to come say hello, miss...?"

"Missus," the fox corrected him as he sank into a soft, English accent. "Catherine Miller of Mercer Pharmaceuticals." Alisha dipped a paw into his purse and — after he carefully palmed the thumb drive — flashed an immaculate business card. Lyle had really prepared every aspect of the cover. "And what can I say, Mister Terrel? You sure seem to be worth the effort. Certainly enough to capture the attention of my boss and I."

Vince ran an appraising eye up and down the fox, as if he were hunting for something as he accepted the business card. At least he hadn't given away Alisha's identity, though that might only be a matter of time. It seemed he had got the message after all. "If your intention is to make a business proposal, Missus Miller—"

"Catherine, *please*." Alisha made a dismissive wave of his empty paw as he smiled. "I'm not big on formality, Mister Terrel... Vincent, if you would allow me. My boss, and Mercer as a whole, would be most intrigued to get to know you better. I think we could do a lot of good together."

"Nice, nice work, babe," Lyle whispered in his ear.

Vince didn't seem to be enticed by the offer, which was all according to the fox's plan. His warning had sunk in, too. "I'm not familiar with Mercer, I'll admit," he replied, and his tone became a little suspicious. "London-based?"

Gabriel's voice quietly broke over the comms. "Testing the cover story. You want Liverpool."

Alisha smiled back at the raccoon. "We have offices there, certainly, but Mercer Pharmaceuticals primarily manufactures and operates out of Liverpool. It affords us certain latitudes that you don't find in old London town."

The raccoon's eyebrows lifted. "That doesn't sound like a northern accent, though."

"I was born just outside Brentwood and Oxford educated," Alisha countered with a smirk. "And don't worry, Vincent; I've no intention of asking you to point either out on a map. I know how you Americans are, and geography isn't why I'm here. Business, as you ascertained, is."

"Very nicely done," Gabriel said.

It must have been the disarmed smile on Vince's face that sold Gabriel on the somewhat insulting line, but Alisha was just glad to have his acceptance. "Unfortunately, as a

foreign national, I'm certain that you know certain questions would be posed to me if I were to enter into any arrangements with you," Vince said, as he began to step back.

Alisha quickly held up his hand. Two fingers waved back and forth as he chuckled. He couldn't lose the raccoon yet; he had to put on a good show for Gabriel first. "Vincent, please. I'm not asking you to enter into any arrangements with me here and now. Such things are *entirely* premature, don't you think?" He reached out with the paw that hid the thumb drive and gently brushed down a crease in Vince's suit. "I'm just here on behalf of my employer to... savor the moment, as it were." As he trailed his paw down and off the raccoon's chest, he released the drive and watch it slide down into Vince's suit pocket. That part of the con was done.

The reaction to his words was minuscule; Alisha only caught it because he was looking for it. Whenever it had been time for him to leave after visiting Vince's home, Vince would always hold him back a minute or two longer than he was allowed to, as he'd just said, savor the moment. "And what moment exactly are we savoring here, Catherine?" he asked, as he stepped forward again.

Alisha would have smiled wider if it wouldn't have been out of place. Vince had done exactly what he'd hoped; he'd picked up on the little verbal cue. Now he just had to hope that others worked. "Why, your imminent rise to the senate, of course," he replied. "Certainly the votes haven't been cast yet, but you *are* a clear favorite. And who could argue with your platform?"

"You would be surprised, Catherine." The raccoon looked around the room for a moment, as though he were looking for something or someone before he fixed his eyes on Alisha again. "Let's cut to the chase, shall we? You're here because you want something from me."

"He seems concerned, tesoro," whispered Gabriel through the earpiece. "Relax him."

"Everyone's here because they want something from you," Alisha countered with a light chuckle. He had to get in contact with Vince after this, but how? Where could they go where they wouldn't be followed or bugged? "And so it is with us. My boss, Rodney? He has already seen the way you stand up for the health and well-being of those in your constituency. Your focus on public health is inspiring. He believes that Mercer can be of aid to you, should you win this election."

Vince offered a smile, though it faltered somewhat as he was jostled toward Alisha for a second. "In my experience, large corporate entities have little time for the political process unless they can use it to influence policy that directly affects their bottom line," Vince pointed out as his smile turned cooler.

Gabriel was silent, but Alisha knew what he would say if he were to speak up. The mark was turning hostile. Reassure him. Unfortunately, everything about Vince's campaign hit back to how he was as a kid and how he wanted to help people. Wait... as a kid. Yes. Yes, that could work if he could find a way to slot it into conversation. "You should trust that experience, Vincent," Alisha replied with a sly smile. "But that truth doesn't have to be an absolute one. Medicine in this country is inflated in price massively. We at Mercer are looking into ways to address that problem."

"And you want to ship your medicines over here?" Vince asked, his tone skeptical.

The fox chuckled. "Now how would that help you, congressman?" he replied with a warm smile. "No. No, if we can clear the red tape, we'd like to organize production locally. Mercer is looking to expand, and we figure that a public-minded new senator-to-be might be interested in the prospect of creating jobs for his constituents, while also helping to lower the cost of their prescription drugs." The fox lifted a paw and began to tally off his fingers. "Everything from insulin and paracetamol right through to chemotherapy drugs, all produced local and sold... well, not *at* cost, but close to."

The raccoon lifted his eyebrows as he stared hard at Alisha, and the fox felt bad for a moment. What he was offering sounded good so far, even to him. If he'd not tipped Vince off, he might even be intrigued enough to learn more. "That seems awfully generous," he admitted.

"Generosity is only one side of the coin," Alisha said with a shrug. Yes. This was how he could work it in... assuming Vince was paying attention and understood. "Good press for any corporation is a fine thing, and there's still a lot of money to be made even when one doesn't flog one's sick consumers for every cent. Profit and charity might seem to be at opposite ends of the spectrum, but I believe you and I might be able to... well, meet in the *middle* ground somewhere to our mutual benefit."

Again there was the briefest flash of recognition, and Alisha chuckled to cover up his sigh of relief. Good. Vince had caught the hint. "And about how long do you think that would take us, Catherine?" he asked as he lifted his eyebrows and glanced around the room again. "I've got a lot of people who need my attention, and I don't think that I want to get involved with a corporation I've never heard of regardless of how tempting their offer sounds."

The fox allowed his smile to broaden. Vince was listening; he was looking for a timeframe for their meeting, now that he knew the place Alisha had hinted at. "Oh, Vincent. You misunderstand. We're prepared to finance your campaign to very generous extents. Proof of our good intentions, you understand. If you have the time, I could be here... well, right through to *midnight* with you, answering any questions you might have." He threw the raccoon a little wink. "If, that is, I've piqued your interest."

"Alright, tesoro," Gabriel said in Alisha's ear. "Close him up. We have what we need for now."

Those words somewhat surprised Alisha. He wasn't even close to luring Vince into any deals with Mercer Pharmaceuticals, even if he wanted to. Fortunately, Vince seemed to agree that time was up; he smiled at Catherine and offered his paw. "I'm sorry, Missus Miller," he said as Alisha gently took the offered paw and shook it. "But I'm going to have to cut this short. I have other people I need to speak to tonight, and I just can't involve myself with anyone without knowing their intentions ahead of time... no matter what contributions they're looking to make. You understand."

"Of course, Vincent. I wouldn't want to dominate your time without you at least doing your research on us." He nodded to the business card in the raccoon's paw. "Keep a hold of that. Once you've looked into us, perhaps you'll want to give my office a call."

"Perhaps I will. Thank you for your time, Missus Miller." He flashed her a perfect politician's smile — one Alisha could see right through to the confusion that lay under the surface — before he turned away and waved over a young tiger who had to be an aide of some variety. Any details of their conversation was lost to Alisha as he started back into the crowd, and the noise of the gathered people drowned Vince out.

And as he snagged a glass of champagne of his own off a passing server's tray, Alisha cast another glance around. People still seemed to be arriving to the event. "What do you need now, Gabriel?" he asked.

But it was Lyle who responded, his voice a little breathy. "Big guy's busy at the moment, sweet-cheeks. You're stuck with me while he runs the others through their paces. Boss wants you to stick around for at least a little while longer, though. Put in a good appearance. But when you're done, meet me just around the corner. Big black van; can't miss her."

Alisha scowled as he glanced back over his shoulder, ears flat. Gabriel was satisfied. But why? He'd barely done anything. An introduction in-character and planting the USB drive... that couldn't be all that he wanted the fox for. Certainly not with Alisha's set of skills, or with the level of pay he'd been offered. Something more was at play.

“I’ll give it half an hour,” he muttered as he glanced around again and continued to wade into the crowd. Vince was due to address everyone shortly, anyway. Maybe a look around and a listen to the raccoon’s words would give him a better idea of what Gabriel was really after.

The rest of the function was an exercise in nothing more than frustration for Alisha. Lyle nattered in his ear incessantly about the people that Vince was with and what Vince was doing and what deals Vince had going on and all of it was just so much *noise*. Eventually the fox began to simply tune Lyle out, and the wolf continued on his merry way with the surety that he was being listened to.

Alisha instead turned himself inwards as he allowed himself to flit about the function on autopilot. Nothing about the con made any sense to him so far. Beyond even the lack of information and the lack of any chance to meet the rest of the crew Gabriel had assembled, the night’s festivities had gone off without a hitch. All that Alisha had really done was to introduce himself, be rebuffed, and plant the thumb drive on Vince. That was it.

That little USB drive couldn’t have been everything. There was no way Gabriel had been willing to pay Alisha three million dollars just to make sure Vince took a thumb drive home with him. Alisha’s involvement alone made the whole thing all the more confusing. This was a target who would be in no way vulnerable to the fox’s seductions. Seduction was all that Alisha did. It was his whole schtick.

It wasn’t until he’d left the function an hour after meeting with Vince — a rather charming fellow who apparently worked for the Department of Defense had sidled up and said hello at length and simply wouldn’t let the fox out of his sight — where Alisha finally admitted to himself that there was every possibility that somehow Gabriel had caught onto him. It couldn’t be ignored. The level of paranoia and care with which Gabriel was enacting his plan was too great for Alisha to discount the possibility.

There was nothing for it but to continue on his own way though, and so Alisha had headed out into the night. The seeds had at least been planted in Vince’s mind. He knew there was a game afoot, with himself at the heart of it. He knew that his old flame was involved, and on his side. He knew that there was danger, and that he’d learn more later that night... if Alisha could get himself away from ‘work’ long enough.

When he made it at last to the van Lyle had mentioned earlier in the night, he knocked on the door and folded his arms. It took the wolf a longer time than Alisha would have thought to unlock the back door of the van and let him inside, and once there Alisha found himself almost bowled over by the smell. It stank inside of wolf musk, old pizza and unwashed clothes, with only the tang of plastic and metal under it all to begin to mask it.

Those latter scents could be attributed to the electronics that lined the walls, save for the little desk that Lyle sat in. The wolf grinned as he dropped down onto the milk crate he was using as a chair and shrugged. “Welcome to the fun cave, babe!”

“Well, the fun cave could use an air freshener, Lyle,” Alisha replied with a wince. He took a second to look Lyle over; it seemed he hadn’t been in the van all night, at least. He was wearing a white shirt with black slacks, and the fox caught sight of an apron in the front right corner of the van. He’d been masquerading as wait staff, it seemed. “It smells like something died in here.”

“Aww, that’s just the smell of hard work, girl! Should be used to it by now!” Again the wolf chuckled as he stretched his legs out and looked Alisha up and down in turn. “Damn. You look *good*.”

Alisha smirked, though that was all for Lyle's benefit. Honestly, he just wanted to get out and prepare for his meeting with Vince. Being stuck in the wolf's van didn't appeal. "It's my job to, honey. A bit of a shame, though. Usually after a night of working a mark, I get *something* out of it."

Lyle looked confused for a second, before his eyes lit up and he nodded. "Ooh. Yeah. Man, this must be really grinding you up, huh? No real outlet for it on this job now, right?"

It was actually the last thing on Alisha's mind if the fox was frank with himself. "Yeah, but I'll deal," he replied, though he winced again. "Given the mark, and given the work... you'd be surprised how *not* up for it I really feel."

"Well that doesn't sound like my Alisha at all, does it?" Gabriel's voice broke through and into the fox's ear. "Are you alright, tesoro?"

Alisha chuckled as much to assuage the lion's concerns as to give his muzzle something other to do than curse. Gabriel knew him better than anyone. The Alisha he knew was a raging nymphomaniac, interested in the con as much as the cock he got stuffed with during it. He'd come across as chaste since the lion had entered the equation. "Maybe it's partly Vincent, and maybe I'm just getting old," he replied, and hoped the smile he forced to his muzzle carried in his voice. "Besides, it's not like I can scratch that itch right now."

Gabriel laughed quietly back into Alisha's ear. "Oh, I give you absolute leave to, mio caro," he said. "I'm sure Lyle there would be more than happy to accommodate any needs you might have."

"Shit, in a *heartbeat*," the wolf enthusiastically replied. He even set to work immediately on his belt.

Alisha though simply frowned at him. For once, this was the *last* thing he wanted. He felt no interest; no desire. The fire that usually burned in him and ached to be filled seemed to be out, at least for the moment. "Don't you have a job to do, Lyle?" he asked. The smile and quirk of an eyebrow was entirely for him. Inwardly, Alisha felt something unusual at the prospect looming before him. He felt disgust.

This, too, was new.

Again came the quiet chuckle in Alisha's ear from Gabriel. At least someone was amused by the circumstance. "Oh, Mister Davidson has done fine work this evening, my dear... davvero *molto* buono. I have things on this end, so feel free to blow off some steam. Find some satisfaction, that you may be level-headed when we begin the next step."

The fox looked down as Lyle fished his sheath out from the unbuttoned and unzipped front of his slacks. The wolf was far from the least impressively endowed partners Alisha had ever had, but the prospect of servicing the shaft that had begun to peek out from within it had never felt more like a chore. "You always know just what to do to make a girl happy, Gabriel," he replied as he stuck a finger into the ear where Gabriel's voice came from. "I'm going to drop comms until we get back, if that's all the same."

"By all means, dear boy; have fun." Anything further that Gabriel was going to say was replaced by a brief mechanical squeal, and then silence as Alisha twisted the minuscule knob on the earbud back the correct way to turn it off. Fun, unfortunately, was not on the cards for Alisha.

But there was no other choice. To do anything else would be to give away enough unease and misgivings to make Gabriel properly suspicious. The irony that Alisha — the fox who had turned his whole life into a quest for sex and money in equal measure — suddenly didn't want either and had to pretend that he did was not lost on him.

Careful to draw up his dress so that it wouldn't be messed too badly by whatever he was sure would be on the floor of the van, Alisha knelt down and in front of Lyle. The wolf seemed excited and amused in almost equal measure, and it made Alisha frown as he cocked

his head. "What's funny?" he asked, even as he reached out to the wolf's shaft and gave it a gentle squeeze.

"Just weird, seein' you almost ready to turn down a fuck," the wolf replied as his shaft continued to push up and free of his sheath. "Known you for what... four years? Five? You've never even given it a second thought before."

"We all get old sometime, Lyle," Alisha replied, and he allowed some of his annoyance to enter his tone. Better the wolf be reminded of a muzzle full of sharp teeth that Alisha had at his disposal. Unfortunately, he was right. Any sort of sexual reluctance was so far removed from his normal self. If he wanted to pass off himself as still the happy little con-artist slut he'd always been, he had to act like it.

It was for that reason alone that the fox leaned forward and closed his eyes as he took Lyle's tip between his lips. There was another little chuckle above him, but Alisha forced it out of his mind. His tongue lifted to trace up and across the definition of the tip of Lyle's shaft as that chuckle turned into a soft sigh of pleasure. If there was one thing Alisha knew how to do, it was to shut a guy up.

His muzzle wound downward as his tongue slid along the underside of the wolf's malehood. The taste of Lyle's shaft wasn't unfamiliar, but it was on some level a pleasant rediscovery. The part of Alisha that was eager for what he was getting might have been the quietest part of him at that moment, but the fox tapped it as his tongue slid down into the wolf's sheath.

That little, electric thrill of feeling the other male's length throb as it grew and slid up along his tongue and into his muzzle was what Alisha forced himself to focus on. That part of himself that wanted nothing more than sexual satisfaction drove the moan that slipped out around Lyle's shaft. That was the part that gripped the wolf's hips and pull himself up harder into Lyle's lap.

It was the part of Alisha that was all eagerness and need, but for the first time it took actual effort to channel it. All that flashed through the fox's mind was Vince and the whole mess he'd been thrown into the middle of. The musk of the wolf whose cock was buried in his mouth didn't entice him in totality as it once would have. It wasn't enough to claim all of his focus. Things were too different.

But from the way Lyle's paw came to rest on the top of Alisha's head, his automatic responses were more than sufficient. That paw rode between his ears as Alisha's muzzle rode that knotted length of flesh, Lyle's bulbous base already filling out as it too spilled out of his sheath. Watery pre jetted up into the roof of Alisha's muzzle as he bobbed himself up and down, each offering gulped away to make room for the next. All automatic. All practice.

If Lyle suspected anything was wrong, he wasn't showing it. Not that Alisha was surprised; once a guy got his cock in someone's muzzle, that was usually the end of rational thought processes. Indeed, from the pulse of his heart through that sensitive, tongue-stroked flesh to the soft pants of pleasure from above, it seemed that Lyle's entire focus was one the fox servicing him.

As Alisha dug his fingers into Lyle's hips, his nostrils flared to take in a deep breath. The part of him eager for the sex thrilled as he drove forward until his lips pressed against that growing knot. That tapered lupine tip nudged its way into Alisha throat, just barely long enough to have triggered a gag reflex... if that hadn't been trained out of him years ago. There he held, swallowing hard around the head of the wolf's shaft as Lyle moaned above him. Expletives spilled from his tongue like pre down Alisha's throat.

The words were blocked out. Lyle was blocked out. Everything but the shaft that Alisha serviced was blocked out of the fox's mind. His whole reality was narrowed to one twitching bit of flesh as he lifted his head enough to give one of his paws room to wrap

around the wolf's knot. He gave it a gentle, warm squeeze as he resumed his bobbing again, his muzzle slurping up and down as loudly as possible. Lyle had a thing for the sound of it.

And the more aggressively the fox worked along his shaft, the faster he was able to bring Lyle toward his finish. His eagerness transformed into the sloppy sounds of a hungry blowjob, filling the van and echoing off the walls. While his body worked on its own, his mind focused on every twitch and every squirm of the male whose pleasure was his responsibility. When something earned a positive response, it was filed away. When something gave Lyle a chance to catch his breath, it was discarded. This wasn't meant to be something long and romantic to be savored, or to be used in the deception of a mark. This was all about getting Lyle to blow.

While part of him was eager for it, awakened as it was by the act of working another male up enough to blow his load in the fox's mouth, the rest of Alisha was just... tired. Where once the curl of his tongue around the middle of Lyle's shaft might have excited him, now it was just an act. Where once the fingers that clutched at his hair and tugged him up and down might have sent a submissive thrill through him, now it just irritated him. Where once this would have been a pleasant diversion from a tough con, now it was just... nothing. Less than nothing.

But nothing he could do would pierce Lyle's pleasure-addled state. Alisha was too good at what he did. Every purse of his lips and stroke of his tongue teased the wolf's malehood in ways that only decades of sexual experience could. The bob of his head, driven up and down so desperately, gave away no sign of his misgivings. Alisha was the consummate fox slut. The perfect image of vulpine service.

He knew the signs; he could feel it when Lyle was getting close. Alisha only redoubled his efforts in response. Unlike Rodney where he'd hoped to get something enjoyable out of his work, this was *only* work. The wolf panting and moaning and thrusting his way into Alisha's throat wasn't holding anything back, and the illusion required that Alisha hold nothing back either. He turned his head as he worked his way down, tongue coiled around the hacker's length before he twisted the other way on his rise up again.

One paw on Lyle's hips coaxed him on, helping to draw his thrusts up into the fox's muzzle. The other squeezed around his knot, each little tug sending a new spurt of pre across Alisha's tongue. A breathy warning sounded above; a desperate plea. His paw tried to pull Alisha off him. Instead the fox only doubled down, moaning heatedly around the wolf's shaft as he pushed all the way down. Lyle's tip once more sank into Alisha's throat, and he closed his fingers around the back of that canine knot and *squeezed*.

The effect was instantaneous and explosive. Lyle almost fell off his improvised chair as he hunched forward and over Alisha, his whole body locked in pleasurable convulsions as he bit his lip to keep himself silent. It reduced his cries of pleasure to mere whimpers as he emptied himself, his shaft twitching and jumping between Alisha's lips as the wolf's lust was gulped again and again down the fox's throat.

There Alisha held, his grip tight and his muzzle mashed down almost as far as it could go. He swallowed in time with each of the wolf's spurts; every surge of hot seed swiftly vanished as Lyle emptied himself into the eagerly suckling muzzle of the fox beneath him.

It went for longer than Alisha had expected, and part of him was more than pleased with this. Just how quiet that side of himself was came as a surprise. It was equally surprising how quickly that side of himself faded into the background again as he felt the power of Lyle's climax taper down and trail off. He allowed his muzzle to ever so slowly lift up along the length of the wolf's malehood, even as it continued to twitch and throb in the air. "Mmm," he said as he lifted a finger to wipe at the corner of his muzzle. "Thanks for that, sweetie."

The words felt wrong. Disgusting.

That they felt wrong felt just as wrong.

“Yeah,” Lyle panted with a shake of his head. He managed to straighten up, his eyes somewhat glazed as he shook his head. “Hot damn, girl. You... pull that sorta stuff out for every guy?”

“Only when I need it and I’m not getting it,” Alisha replied with a forced smirk. “That should tide me over for a bit... especially since I know you won’t be able to go again tonight.”

Lyle snorted as he blinked and shook his head. “Yeah, but... fuck, man. If I could, *damn.*”

Small favors, Alisha thought to himself as he continued to smile. At least this was one crisis averted. After a performance like that, there was no way Lyle or Gabriel would suspect his true feelings on the matter. “So sweet of you,” he replied, and tossed the wolf a little wink as he slowly stood back up. “But hey, next time clean the damn van before you get me in it for this sort of thing, yeah?”

“You suck me off like that again, and I’ll have the place *spotless.*” Lyle coughed and cleared his throat as he glanced over at his monitors. “God *damn.* I... fuck. Back to work, or something?”

“Don’t let me distract you,” replied the fox, and he smiled until Lyle’s full attention returned to his computers. Then it slipped as he stepped up and behind the wolf. Nothing that he could see made any sense to him; just various security system controls, schematics for different buildings that Alisha didn’t recognize and a bunch of numbers for local police precincts. Those kept Alisha’s gaze for a moment before he dismissed them.

For all he’d done to keep himself clear of discovery by Gabriel, Alisha wasn’t any closer to figuring out what he had planned for Vince. A tinge of guilt, of all things, crept into Alisha’s heart at the thought of the raccoon. He quickly crushed that down. He didn’t owe Vince anything. He was trying to prevent the raccoon from getting killed. If he didn’t do whatever it took or take every precaution, Vince would be dead and Alisha knew he’d soon follow.

As he sighed and leaned against the van’s opposite wall — or rather the bank of computer equipment that rested there — he tried to turn his mind forward. He’d have to wait for the other part of the con with the rest of the crew to finish, and then they’d all probably meet at the warehouse again. That would take some time, and maybe Alisha could learn something new there. Maybe it would even be something valuable he could give to Vince. He’d have to head to their meet almost immediately after, if he was going to make the midnight timeframe that he’d dropped into their conversation.

The fox closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the wall. This night wasn’t over yet.