

The macaque licked his lips with anticipation, making the leap from the mansion's wall to the tree right next to it; the only indication of his night prowling being the tree shivering ever so gently, as if shifted by a small breeze. So far so good. Whoever owned this estate wasn't paranoid enough to splurge on security around the walls surrounding his home, and Keith was the kind of thief who would gladly take advantage of that. A quick survey of the outside showed that a few lights were still on in the house, but it seemed to be empty, save for what appeared to be the owner curled up in the study with the evening paper. Looked like some kind of reptile. A snake, perhaps? But even with the owner still awake the primate did not hesitate or feel nervousness for even a moment. He'd gotten three other houses in this neighborhood over the course of a week, and even after bumping up security at the "Treasure Hills Housing Community" they couldn't lay a finger on him. One night owl of a snake would be no problem, of that he was sure. He was the best there was, after all--at least, he thought so.

"Go in through the second floor bathroom window, hit up the bedroom, search for any trophy rooms, ransack closets for safes, exit through kitchen in the back. Ten minutes, max." He smiled at the wonderful efficiency of his own plan, proud of himself. This would be like taking candy from an over-sized scaled baby. The monkey stood up as straight as he could on the branch, adjusted his turtleneck, and bounded from the branch to the roof, silent as a ghost as he touched down upon shingled exterior. A perfect landing.

"Now to go in through bathroom and ack-!" He almost fell backwards off the roof as a sudden force yanked him backwards by his scarf, but as often as he over exaggerated his ability, he certainly was a dexterous monkey, and he caught himself and his small duffel bag from a painful tumble two stories down into a rosebush below.

"Fucking gutters," he mumbled, giving his large, black silk scarf some slack to unhook it from the hanging and twisted piece of metal that jutted out from the house' gutters. Oh, how that vain thing had been the bane of his existence many times in the past. However, despite how often it got him into trouble, he absolutely refused to get rid of it. Or even be less of a fool and just cut it down to more manageable muffler size. That would not help his image as a modern day Robin Hood though! He was no mere burglar, you see. He was Keith the Thief (working title), greatest rogue of his time! He stole from the rich, and gave to the poor--the "poor" being himself, of course. And as he muttered to himself so often after his scarf got him into some brand of trouble, "A hero like me needs to have a sense of style." Ironical, considering that anyone actually getting a good look at him ever would almost certainly ensure that he would be a modern day Robin Hood no longer.

With his scarf readjusted, pants de-creased, turtleneck tucked in to said pants to fit perfectly to his lithe form, and wool cap readjusted to ensure that only the barest amount of his fluffy furred peach self was visible, the macaque picked up his duffel bag and continued his crawl along the roof. "Thank goodness for rich weirdos," was all he could think as he sat down his bag next to the bathroom skylight, looking into the room, searching for signs of *any* security feature within--cameras, motion sensors, bumps in the floor that indicated pressure sensitive pads--and finding nothing. This snake must be some senile old loon; heck, Keith was doing him a favor! Better he get some good use out of the stuff he was about to steal rather than have the poor guy constantly hounded by relatives, trying to get a piece of this caviar pie. Keith nodded to himself, looking thoughtful as he pulled out his crowbar and broke the border of the skylight. He truly was doing the lord's work.

Keith learned long ago after the Witcherson Estate Incident how to properly push off windows and the like with his trusty crowbar (good “Ol’ Bluey”) without making a sound, and this time was no different. Making less noise than a mouse in a wall, he created a gap no more than three inches wide between the skylight and the house and poured through like liquid, making a soft landing on the tiled floor. He was in.

Despite training his body and mind over the course of a decade (though he *insisted* he wasn’t a day older than twenty) to keep calm and collected, Keith couldn’t help bouncing with excitement. He was rubbing his strong hands together, licking his chops, and surveying the bathroom he occupied with the kind of excitement a child on Christmas would have. It was his, all his for the taking. Fuck deeds, this mansion was his, and he was rifling through the medicine cabinet as if there was no other possibility.

“Hmmm, nothing good,” he said under his breath, gently closing the cabinet and bending back over to retrieve his bag. Ms. Molley’s house taught him to always, *always* check the medicine cabinets of someone well off. That woman had enough tranquilizers in her bathroom to down every elephant in Africa. He actually managed to make more money from going to whizz on that burglary run than from going through her safety deposit safe in the basement. But this reptile resident only had some aspirin and cough syrup; Keith figured he was loopy enough without the aid of medication, or something.

Keith pulled himself up from the tiled floor as he pulled his small dentist’s mirror instrument out from under the crack beneath the door. No sign of movement in any direction, and he didn’t hear a thing. Keith, if he had not been Keith and had been someone who was capable of guilt or any sort of negative emotion in reference to his own actions, would have actually felt bad for how stupidly easy this heist was turning out to be, as he now just casually strolled out of the bathroom and made his way towards the bedroom. But as he ducked his head in and made sure that room was empty too, the only thing on his mind was whether or not this old codger was weird enough to have a jewelry box.

“Jackpot,” the monkey smiled to himself as he made his way over to the dresser, finding an ebony box with gold inlaid in the design, sitting next to a very large mirror. That’s what he said when he saw the box itself. When he opened it up, he had to refrain from squealing in giddiness. His prediction was right; this old weirdo was fucking loaded. Keith had no idea how or why he had some of this stuff, but great gold chains, rings, and even a headdress (What were those things called, circlets? That sounded about right.) just sat haphazardly piled inside the box, as if the guy didn’t even care about the stuff. Which is why Keith had to instantly put it to better use, at least in his mind, and began adorning the valuable baubles. He took off his hat and scarf, and began weighing himself down with the stuff, soon looking like he was a time-traveling medieval pimp. The only thing he was lacking was a gold scepter. Which he looked around for, confident that the odd owner must have one lying around somewhere around here. As he searched the rest of the room though, he found none, and he reluctantly put the jewelry back in the box, which he then slipped into his bag. A fantasy for another time, perhaps.

The thief wouldn’t even need to ransack the rest of the house after this--hell, he could live comfortably for at least a year with just half the contents of that box! But there was a huge difference between “not needing to” and “being greedy to the point of psychological dysfunction.” That probably explained why he snagged the snake’s mouthwash as he was leaving the bathroom earlier. And also why he made his way over to the snake’s closet, once

again exercising caution by tiptoeing. He had to make sure his steps were silent with all that gold now weighing him down. Upon opening the closet up, the macaque was not disappointed. There were no nice clothes or anything he could pocket for himself (Seems that the snake only wore jackets, but on further reflection, could he even finagle anything else?), but off in the corner sat a lovely little safe, old dial style and everything, just *begging* to be cracked.

That took all of a minute or so, the monkey affixing his stethoscope to the safe, snickering to himself as the tumblers within revealed themselves with the clarity of an incoming rock slide. When he opened this box, he was on the verge of tears. It was absolutely beautiful. A few deeds to properties he'd never heard of, old stock slips, tons of personal documents for the owner himself, and even a few spare credit cards. This was like some sort of Bastard Birthday for Keith. He started shoving every last bit of paper into the bag, only stopping for a moment as he looked over the snake's name and roll his eyes. "Salazar?" Talk about stereotypical.

Keith did one last sweep of the bedroom, finding nothing worth taking. He then slid through the crack in the door, confident that unless the snake was someone who constantly checked on his jewel and safe, it would be days before he'd be any the wiser. As Keith quietly walked down the hall he peeked his head in every door he came across, just to make sure the snake didn't have an "Obscure and Priceless Artifact" room sitting somewhere around here. And he didn't, which was a little disappointing, but the monkey was set for months, so he wasn't complaining.

"Down the stairs, out the kitchen, and home freeeeffffff!" Keith yelled as he began to fall down what he thought was a staircase, turning out to be a carpeted ramp instead. He caught himself on the banister easily enough, but in the tumbling his bag began to fall free, about to clammer loudly down the ramp. Oh goodness, with as heavy as it was that was gonna make a lot of noise-!

"Thank goodness for prehensile tails," was a thought that crossed the thief's mind several times before, and especially so now as he pulled the heavy bag up close to his body with his fifth arm. He clutched the bag filled with ill-gotten goods close, and looked down to the first floor, now noticing that light poured from a crack in a slightly ajar door just inches from the end of the ramp. Seems that while Keith was working the upstairs, the snake decided to use the restroom. Oh man, he was so fucking lucky he was born a macaque and not a hamster or something.

Keith listened for a moment to hear what was going on in the bathroom below him, and hearing very little movement, knew that this was the time to skedaddle. He slowly slid down the ramp rather than risk walking down it, and touched down right as he heard scaled shifting slightly, and the sink turn on. Keith wasted no time, and slunk as quickly as he could past the light, pushing open the door and sitting in the kitchen to take a breather.

That was a close one. Not as close as that time at the Peterson place, but still pretty close. But there was the backdoor, then the backyard, and from there he could just fence hop onto different people's properties until he was out of Treasure Hills, not having to look back on these sterilized grounds for a loooong time. Keith was just about to strut his way out the door when a little sparkle caught his eye, his inner ferret causing him to stop and turn. It was the moonlight reflecting off of a glass of half-drunk wine, the bottle only inches away. Well, this might explain things a bit better. Apparently the snake was a drunk. Keith listened for any

movement outside, heard the barely audible shifting of scales moving back towards the study, and looked over the label.

"Man, I don't even know what this says. Must be expensive," Keith thought to himself, trying to decipher the French gibberish on the label. He looked back at the wine, then the glass, smiling and shrugging to himself. There wasn't anywhere near enough in there to get him tipsy, and when would he have the opportunity to taste something like this again? He certainly couldn't take it with him, if it broke it would ruin all those nice documents he just pilfered. Aww, what the hell; he picked up the glass by the stem like a honest to goodness wasp, and downed the rest of the glass, swishing it about in his mouth for a second before smacking his lips and nodding again. Full flavor, not bad--it was that really expensive stuff where you could taste each individual fruit. Not his thing, but hey, nobody could say he wasn't high class.

He set the glass back down, picked up his duffel bag, and reached for the doorknob, his hand missing by a mile. He blinked, staring at the knob for a moment, the metal thing continuing to move far away from his hand as he tried to reach for it. What was going on, was this some kind of weirdo security system? Wait a minute, his hand, it felt so weird, like it was only responding to half of his attempts to move it about. He gripped the counter very hard, his brain finally realizing what his body was already well aware of: something was very very wong.

He was starting to lose his balance, the floor shifting beneath him as if he was on a tilt-a-whirl. The walls took on a new geometry of a non-Euclidean sort, and even the counter he held fast to seemed reluctant to stay in one place. His shoulders went slack without him noticing, for he was too focused on trying to keep his vision steady, trying blink the black stars covering his vision away. His body went numb, when did that happen? His mouth was hot, felt damp within, almost like he could taste blood, but it was just his nerves trying desperately to reestablish connection. Through his partial deafness he heard a very loud, partially metallic thud near him, but there was more important things to worry about right now. He couldn't even muster the focus to panic, he had to stay awake, had to stay standing, he wasn't sinking to his knees no, no he wasn't blind yet. He was still awake he knew it, he had to be...

His senses didn't come back all at once, nor did any particular one prevail over the others. Everything started to come back by degrees, the macaque's vision becoming less dark and more focused, while his ears registered a crackling behind him, and his body feeling warmth on his back, through the hard wood of the chair he sat on. He rolled his head around, though it wasn't completely under his control just yet, and so his head just lolled to the left and turned the world 90 degrees to the groggy monkey. Colors, many colors, danced in front of his vision, though one very large splotch of yellow and brown sat still before him, an anchor in this sea of sensory stimulation. It took him a moment to recognize it, but he heard a deep chuckle come from the direction of the splash of yellow, barely more audible than the fireplace directly behind him. Something was said, but unable to decipher it, Keith grunted, and the yellow and brown splotch finally shifted, moving closer. He recognized this splotch before, but it seemed like from so long ago.

"I said, finally waking up are you? You have kept me waiting for about two hours." The voice spoke slow, purposefully; it had no need to rush itself. Keith's vision continued to slowly reorient himself, and he finally recognized the snake before him. It was the owner of the house he robbed, the owner of the house he was currently in. He never left, and was now trapped, tied to a chair, between the snake and a hot place.

"Come now, a snake does not have your tongue anymore," he said with a very ominous hiss, leaning forward, grasping Keith's chin with a claw, and forcing the monkey to look him in the eye. "You can speak, can you not?"

"What happened? Where am I? Who're you?" Keith said, though it was difficult, his tongue still a bit numb. He knew the answers to most of those questions, sure. He was in this Salazar man's study, tied to a chair. But he still wasn't completely sure what happened, and that ignorance sure made his feigning ignorance sound a lot more convincing.

"You took the bait little thief. I knew you would drink the glass I left out for you. Though even if you did not I had other means of stopping your escape. Tranquilizer darts aren't as expensive as most people would have you believe." He chuckled again; the snake sure liked laughing to himself. But considering his position, he had every right to be pretty mirthful.

"I'm really really sorry sir, I just... It's my mother sir, she needs an operation, and I work all day but we don't make enough, so if I don't steal a little bit every so often, she'll, she'll..." He closed his eyes and tried to pull his head away from the hand that grasped it, sniffing to himself. Not a bad attempt really, but the snake smirked in an entirely unconvinced matter.

"Oh, this little monkey thinks I'm stupid, as I have not heard that a thief has stolen from several houses around here already. Or that some mysterious thief has been terrorizing this entire city for the past year or so. How many types of cancer does she have little monkey? Quite a few if millions in stolen goods cannot help her." His tone was annoyed, Keith seeing that the snake didn't like his intelligence being insulted.

"Okay, you caught me, I'm just a thief, and I tried to steal from you man, but can't you dig deep and find it in your heart to let me go? I swear I'll never steal from you or this neighborhood again. Hell, I'll even give you a share of some of the stuff I've stolen, or give it back to its owners. It's up to you man, whatever you want!" This one usually worked on the more stupid or greedy people (like himself). The macaque promising to come back the next night after they get a fake name and address out of him, and then of course, Keith never coming back. But the snake just shook his head, looking unimpressed. For the first time in a long time, Keith was afraid.

"Do not worry little monkey, I will not turn you in," Keith's heart jumped into his throat, a huge gasp escaping his open mouth as he finally started breathing again. It didn't take long for his breath to stop again though, caught by the snake's evil smile.

"However, I do have a proposition for you little monkey. One that shall benefit us both." He drew back from the primate, and slithered around him, always keeping his large eyes on the small mammal.

"I will let you go, and you shall continue to steal from this neighborhood and several other places I can help you get access to. In exchange, you shall give me all of your profits, and will relocate yourself to my home." He stopped himself in front of Keith again, and stared into his eyes, the serpent's gaze piercing the helpless macaque for a moment.

"Man, that sounds like a good idea to me. I mean, what could be better?" Keith said with as much fake sincerity as he could muster, even managing a smile. This guy was a nutjob. He didn't know why the snake thought he'd actually go along with this, but all he needed was to be set loose. From there he could make a break for it and get the hell out of here before dawn broke. Maybe if he was lucky he could find his bag on the way out to boot. All he needed

was the snake to believe him, and with the way Salazar smiled back, he was sure the snake bought it. Until he spoke, that is.

"It seems you have more of a serpent tongue than myself little monkey," the snake chuckled, and Keith's face fell, "so we shall see later if you know how to use it properly." He slid himself towards the bookshelf, fiddling with what looked like a small, locked wooden box. He pulled out a velvet pouch, and then slithered over to the opposite wall, turning on a stereo system. An odd, vibrating hum and bump started to play from the speakers in the room, reverberating all around him. It didn't seem so much a sound, but rhythm that pushed itself through his body. A sound that he was already starting to forget, the hypnotic cadence successfully worming itself into his brain and blood.

"Some of your kind say that snakes like myself can hypnotize mammals, as I am sure you heard at one time or another. That all we must do is look you mammals in the eye, and you fall under our spell." Keith had no idea what the snake was getting at, just that the rhythm continued to pound in his brain, getting softer with every second, syncing up with the serpent's own slow, methodical speech.

"But this is just an old mammal tale. I cannot just lean down, look you in the eye," which, as the snake slithered back in front of Keith, he did, pulling on the macaque's fluffy chin. Keith resisted of course, getting weirded out by whatever this snake was getting at, but it was impossible. His body wanted to move to the rhythm all around him, and that didn't include yanking himself away.

"And take you as my own. No, the truth is that we have just always been skilled in art of manipulation, and we have had a long time to perfect this art. From the old days when we would coax your kind out of the trees and into our strong, inviting coils, to... Well, things are not *too* different these days." He slithered behind the monkey, out of his vision, and suddenly Keith heard the fire roar up with new strength behind him. But it did not seem to get hotter in the room at all. The fire behind him now cast a greenish glow throughout the room, and a scent, strong and stuffy, washed over him like a tidal wave. He tried shaking it off, but all he accomplished was swaying back and forth to the rhythm his mind no longer consciously registered.

"You are no smarter, no more skilled, no more evolved than you once were. Still below more intelligent creatures, like myself." Keith didn't know what the snake was trying to do, this was all so odd. But the macaque didn't raise his voice or object; he figured if he still played along maybe the snake would still let him go. All he had to do was nod and smile at this psycho, act like everything he was saying made sense. It wasn't too hard to do anyway. Even if what this snake was saying was weird, he did feel very good, very warm. That smell was impossible to recognize. It didn't remind him of food or something similar, it instead reminded him of laying down for a nap. Like he was lying in bed, blanket wrapped up around him. In a nice warm bed just smiling and nodding. Nodding was easy, his head did it naturally, up and down, up and down, nodding and smiling at the snake as he continued to speak.

"Look at you, even now. I untied you over a minute ago, and the door over there is unlocked. You could have escaped from here by now, without me raising a hand to stop you. And yet there you sit, nodding and smiling as your superior speaks to you."

Keith blinked, this revelation breaking his stupor for a moment. He was free? When, how? He tentatively tested his arms and legs, shifting them up and down, up and down. He was

free, he could escape! He thought he pushed himself up quickly, preparing to escape, but his real movements were much less dexterous and confident. In reality, he rose to his feet, swaying drunkenly as he stood before the serpent, his smile never leaving him for a moment. But it didn't matter, he was free!

He began to stumble slowly towards the door, waving back and forth, each step in 4/4 time. But with only a few steps between him and the door, he heard the voice of the serpent again behind him, and he wheeled around to see him only inches away.

"Look at you, still thinking that escape is possible, even preferable. Just as I said, you are still a foolish monkey, and you need a creature greater than yourself to control you. Someone who knows you better than you know yourself. Me. You do not even realize how tired you are."

Keith was still trying to move towards the door, but he had great difficulty even lifting his foot. He could only focus on one thing at a time, and now he had the serpent's speech constricting his thoughts. The statement confused him, and pondering it opened his mind to more of that warm, sweet smelling fog that filled his body and mind. He was tired, yes, very tired, but not too tired. He could still escape. He had to tell the snake that, it was very important; it felt as important as the act itself. Unfortunately moving his mouth was so hard, speaking a word against the snake felt nigh impossible. But eventually his willpower pushed his mouth open, the word "No" more so tumbling out of Keith's mouth than being spoken in defiance.

"Oh really? Look at how you sway, how heavy your body is. You clearly do not even know yourself, so how can you expect to survive out there, without me? What do you even do for a living?" The snake looked genuinely concerned, and though he was not about to give up on leaving, the snake's worry heartened him. Though their bodies did not touch even once, as the snake's large form slid in lazy circles around Keith, it was starting to feel as if it was not just the sweet smelling fog that hugged him.

"I... I am a thief," Keith mumbled with no small amount of trouble, the word escaping him for the longer time. Yes, he was a thief, Keith the Thief, that's what he was and that was his job... So why was that important? He was having the hardest time remembering, and the snake's laugh wasn't making it any easier. Odd how he was just now noticing how wonderful that laugh was. It resonated throughout his entire body, made him shiver from his snout down to his limp tail. He liked hearing it, he liked hearing the snake speak so soothingly to him.

"A thief? Why, I have never heard of such a thing. And whatever does a thief do little monkey?" Keith's vision felt obscured again, but not because he's losing consciousness. No it was just the way that snake, that Salazar moved. It looked like he was swaying to some unheard beat, the wonderful brown pattern on his scales shifting and melting into the yellow. It took him quite awhile to even register the question, and when he did, he furrowed his brow. A thief? He was that, wasn't he? But what was a thief, what was a thief? He wasn't sure, and started to think that perhaps he just being foolish. But then his eyes strayed from the snake's body for just a moment, and caught the shiny velvet of his own long scarf. A thief...

"A thief steals things and sells them. I was stealing, I steal, was going to steal from y... y-yoouhooohoooo..." Whimpering that last word drained him of his strength, and his knees began to buckle beneath him. Thankfully Salazar's tail moved up from behind, cradling him gently. So thoughtful that snake was, even if he was laughing at his answer. Keith just let his body sag,

sitting against the coil that pushed under his rear and the other against his back, eyelids drooping gently.

“Steal from me? Even you must realize how silly you sound right now. How could you steal from me? You are so sleepy, so tired, simply relaxing here with my coils. You could never steal from your master.”

Keith’s head fell to his chest, his eyelids starting to close. Salazar was right, of course he was right. How could he steal from him, he was a powerful, strong, and smart snake, while he was a dumb little monkey. He couldn’t muster the strength to stand, let alone work against his master. He was sure there was something else, something that needed to be said. Something itched at the back of his brain, and he thought he could feel it on his tongue. It felt like it needed to be said, but it was so hard to say, made him feel uncomfortable to even think about it. It started with an “n?” He could feel his vocal chords shifting, ready to say it...

...But thankfully, with a single swift stroke, Master ended this uncomfortable feeling. The tip of his strong tail closed his mouth, and lifted up his head, the monkey gazing into the eyes of his master with what little strength he had to open them. Something was said, but it seemed muffled to him. All he knew was that his eyes were closing, it was time for sleep. But even after his eyes closed, he could still see those beautiful green snake eyes. They’d be the last thing that a thief named Keith would ever see, and the first thing to greet Salazar’s new pet monkey.