

Sour and Sweet

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Content Warning: Implied mature concepts, mild horror, implied vore

Koki couldn't stop his stomach from rumbling as he slipped through the veil between dreams and reality. He'd been scouting the subject of his yearly personal Halloween feast for days, drawing in all the little details and feeling the vibrant emotions she'd carried. Now, the night before that spooky day of festivities, the spook was ready to *indulge* and to design a plan for ravenously consuming *even more* delicious fear and excitement on the day proper.

The Gengar pictured his "victim" in his mind as he floated through the hazy unreal environment: incredibly short, he'd confused her for a child at first and almost passed her by. It almost looked like a child's sense of fashion too; a strange white mask, weird layered clothes that looked terribly pedestrian on the outside but filled with colorful patches and patterns on the inside, loose flip-flops...it didn't sing of anyone attempting to be taken seriously. But that double striped tail waved, and he'd heard her confirming her age to a bartender and freely talking about her distinctly adult...*interests*. And a little more eavesdropping assured Koki the skunk was certainly of age: of age, with significant experience, and incredibly open to experimentation.

Her attitude gave Koki all the confidence he needed, upon finding what might be called solid ground, to turn visible, corporeal, and fully his plump-bellied ghostly self. There was no need for subtlety with this one: she wanted *bluntness*, she wanted *forwardness*, and she wanted *dominance*. He leaned his head back, smirked, and manifested his newest accessory: a new bowtie for the occasion, black and orange with little bats, courtesy of one of his other "victims". "Heh, looking sharp, huh?" he chuckled to himself. "Just another girl's dream guy, *kekeke!*~"

The subconscious mists shoved away as he took his first step, as if parted by the impact of a giant's footfall. Slowly, they let the powerful ghost slip into his target's mind. Koki began to see the vague image of a forest as if looking through clouded glass. "Sorry, ego; you've another guest, whether you want it or not," he snickered before gaping his mouth wide and rolling out the tongue many knew to fear. A single long slurp against that mental wall was all it took to shudder and weaken, leaving it vulnerable to a thin line of purple smoke slipping through and reforming into the dream eating spectre on the other side.

Dreams never were as big as they seemed; once someone made it in, finding the dreamer was as simple as walking from a door to the middle of a moderately-sized living room. Koki straightened his tie, leaned his head back, and strode confidently forward, his ghostly belly jiggling with ethereal pudge. "Well, well, well..." he boasted, walking between the trees unerringly towards his target, "...if it isn't a naughty skunk girl, all alone in a scary, haunted forest. Well, if it wasn't haunted before, it is now, *kekeke-*"

snff...s-snff

"...ke?" Koki turned the trunk and stopped dead in his tracks. He'd been trailing this girl for long enough that he was confident he could've gotten her every measurement down to the millimeter. There should've been at *least* four feet of masked mischief present. And he was also certain of one thing: he'd never, not even once, seen a single tear in his target's eyes.

There, sitting against the trunk, was a tiny girl full of fiery red hair, maybe three feet or so tall, whose cheek fur was damp from fresh tears. Big amber eyes welled with moisture, her arms clutching her knees into her unclothed body. *A nightmare from her childhood?* Koki thought. Perhaps the only reason the chocolate-furred skunk stopped crying was from clear fear at his approach. Even breathing in, he could taste an incredible well of delectable sadness and fear that sat on his tongue like the most tantalizing sour candy there was. Almost any smart Gengar would have begun to devour their fill instantly from the scent of an immense pool of belly-filling feelings like those.

Koki wasn't any Gengar. "Hey...h-hey, it's okay," he assured the girl, face of glee falling quickly into a reserved expression of concern. "Hey, missy...what's the matter?"

The girl gulped, gaze locked on his piercing red eyes. "P...please do not concern yourself for me," she whimpered.

He knelt down. "...is that what you really want?" he asked, voice quiet and gentle. "I will leave if you want me to."

Those big amber eyes blinked. "You would? ...but...aren't you here to haunt me?"

"Well, yeah." He put on his silliest smile and wiggled his fingers. "...boo!" The exclamation was quiet and playful, and quickly followed by a tilt of his head. "...how was that?"

A slight smile flickered on the girl's face. "Um...it was good."

Koki stuck the tip of his tongue out at the lie. "Come on! Be honest with me."

The skunk took a deep breath. "...okay, it was...pretty bad," she admitted.

"Excellent! I do love being bad," he retorted, letting a slight bit of mischief back into his eyes. He instantly noticed the increased tension in the dreamer's shoulders; he offered a wink instead, as if to assure her of the joke. He was rewarded with another slight twitch upwards at the corner of the girl's mouth.

"Now that the requisite haunting's out of the way...do you want me to leave?"

“...no. If that’s okay with you, sir.”

The honorary might’ve been encouraging from some of his playmates, but the address from her made him feel uneasy. “No no, no need for formalities,” he assured. “I’d like to be someone you can relax around. Be yourself, you know? Hey, what if I were a little less evolved?” The dark purple ghost took a deep inhale, seemingly sucking his purple form inwards, denser and denser into a black core of smoke. The red in his eyes drained to white, and two little fangs peeked from his ghastly mouth. “This better?”

The skunk took a moment to watch the small black ball bob in the air, small little figure eights entrancing amidst the dark woods. “Um...if I can keep being honest?” The ball nodded, and the girl turned her feet back and forth against the ground. “...a little, but...it also doesn’t feel right. Shouldn’t you be able to be yourself too?”

“Not if it hurts you.”

The comment was quick, and the girl felt a genuine gentleness despite the speed and firmness with which it was delivered. “...I think I can be okay if you’re you.”

“Are you sure?”

“...I am sure.”

The ghostly ball groaned, unrolling himself back into the tubby Gengar he was. “Ooof, good, ‘cuz it’s one thing to suck in a gut...but multiply that by ten when it’s your entire body.” He sat back down on the ground, red eyes still as piercing as ever but now far softer in their look. “...I’m Koki. What’s your name?”

The girl shifted, looking over the strange specter’s shape as if drawing it in her mind. “...I didn’t have one at this point,” she said, lightly chewing on her lip. “But...it’s Helena now. Helena Troi.”

“...like the myth?”

She blushed. “Y-yeah. Pretty arrogant, isn’t it?”

“I wouldn’t know.” He shrugged. “You had a mask on most of the time. But you’ve the presence of someone like that.”

Helena nodded, a slightly more adult smirk stretching on her muzzle. “So...you’ve been watching me.”

The ghost flinched, feeling that familiar awkward sensation whenever this point was brought up. "Y-yeah. Kinda a...family tradition," he said, wincing at his own excuse. "...even still, pretty rude without letting you know, I know. Could you forgive me for doing it?"

"Would you stop doing it if I said either way?"

"No."

She snickered at the lack of hesitancy in the response. "Well, you are the nicest ghost I've ever heard of so far...so I think I can forgive that. Looks like you've already had a couple not forgive you before, anyhow."

Seeing the skunk's two-stripe tail waving against the tree trunk made Koki sigh with mild satisfaction and relief. "Yeah. Still, it's a pretty solid method for doing what I do, and I get far stronger good responses than I do bad responses."

Helena loosened the grip on her legs, letting her knees fall to lay her legs straight out in front of her. "...I prefer things like that. Doing what you believe in without hesitancy or apology. Personally, I mean. I think."

The dream guest tilted his head. "You think?"

She rested her hands in her lap and looked off to the side. "Yeah. ...you told me to 'be myself', right?" she asked, looking off into the glimpses of pure darkness between the densely packed trees. "...well, I...I don't really know what that is."

"So...that's what this dream's about, then?"

Helena nodded without looking. "Yeah. ...you've...seen me with my mask, right? I'm...pretty confident, right? And open. And kind of in control, even when I'm giving it up. That's...that's a powerful person, right?"

Koki's stomach growled. He tisked and slapped his belly with a stern, whispered "Behave!". "Uh, yeah. It's why I wanted to meet you," he acknowledged.

Helena had looked back, a knowing glint in her amber eye as it locked in on that belly. But she let it drift back to the woods without. "Right, but...that's with the mask. Because it's all just a performance," she sighed, wiping away some lingering tears from the inside corners of her eyes. "It's the best way to avoid hurt...I can deal with things like that, I can enjoy things like that without feeling like...like I'm contributing nothing...like I *am* nothing. But...if I'm not that strong person, if I'm not making the world safer for me, then...I sort of am."

She turned back to her guest. Koki's hands were folded, his mouth was closed, and he was quiet. "...I bet I ruined the mood, too," she said, swiping away a stray lock of red hair from her face. "You came here to eat me or something, didn't you? With a big entrance and everything."

Koki rubbed the back of his neck. "Gengars like me, we actually only need to feed off strong emotions," he explained. "But...given what I'd heard you talking with others about? It seemed like you might've really enjoyed on some level having your very dreams eaten....and yourself, too. And with how strong you were, I thought you'd be a veritable feast. I like having a feast for Halloween."

"Why bother with the dream at all?"

"...to make sure you would've liked it," he said, resting his hands on his belly. "I like letting the conscious mind in on the fun back in reality, too. Nothing's more exciting than giving someone a new experience! But they won't be surprised and think it's real if I talk it out before-hand in the daylight. The richest emotions come out when they think it's just...*happening*. So...I tease out the interests here, where I can try them out as far as they're willing to divulge in what they think is just a dream without consequences, and then...I plant a safe word in their subconscious. When they wake up, I make it so they don't remember the dream, and the real thing will seem just that: real. But they also still have the safeword locked away: if they're genuinely not enjoying something, it'll flip and we can stop the whole thing."

"...subconscious safe words so your prey can be safe while unknowingly enjoying some horrific and twisted scenario of your design?"

"Yeah...*heh heh*, a lot of extra work compared to what my kind normally does, I guess. But...I think emotions always taste better when there's at least a little sweet happiness in the flavor profile. ...feels better, too." That self-certain grin stretched on one side of his ghostly face. "What can I say? I have a sweet tooth. Convenient, huh?"

He caught himself staring into the darkness and looked back to the tree. There she was, over four feet of richly brown-furred skunk; the skunk had reclaimed control of her self within the dream, and already the forest seemed a little less oppressive. With such lucidity, she could have clearly ejected him, but...she'd made sure the forest stayed quite haunted. *That's a good sign.*

Without her mask, the eyes still looked soft and meek, even if Koki could see flickers of that Hellenistic smile every so often. "...you're just my style," the skunk observed, voice holding back the reflex to say it with power and seduction. She stood up, brushing the dirt from her rump, and, with only a second of hesitation, began to stride forward.

"...wait, Helena." Koki's short arm was raised, hand out.

The skunk stopped. "...what is it?"

"...I don't think this would be the best meal for me anymore."

Her ears flattened, eyes sinking to the ground as if her gaze had been dragged down by a hundred ton weight. "...I-I knew I'd ruined the mood. ...d-dang it..."

A hand rested on her shoulder, warm in its touch yet cold and evoking a strong shiver down her spine. "Helena. I still want you tonight. And tomorrow, too," he assured, snatching the skunk's attention back to his eyes, now that he stood imposingly before her, his belly practically brushing the rich brown fur of her chest. "But...this isn't what you would feel strongest for. That's not what this dream is telling me."

"It's not?"

The Gengar smiled. Grinned, even. It was a look of mischief, but one drained of any evil at all. "How'd you like to come with me to the Halloween carnival I run?" Koki asked. "We can meet up at the entrance at noona! In case you hadn't already heard, my little pop-up festivities are set up just outside of town, full of events I've planned to appeal to my friend, the spontaneous explorers, and my 'prey' alike. Do you like caramel? I think I remember where I hid the biggest apple I saved for dipping..."

Helena blinked. "Huh? I guess it'd be fun."

"There might even be some events I organized relating to your...*interests*."

The skunk's eyes grew wide with hope. "Really? But...I thought..."

"With one condition," Koki stated firmly, a tiny finger raised between their two faces. "When you wake up? Leave the mask."

Helena stopped breathing for a moment. "But...I won't be-"

"I don't care. I want *you* there," he said firmly. "I'm not saying the mask isn't you. It absolutely is, whether you think it's a performance or not. But you're still you without it too, even if you're different without it. And you need a day to leave the debate behind and just...exist. Not as nothing, but as you. And if you don't know what that is, we'll find it out together."

She was staring into those piercing red eyes. They didn't waver a bit. She gulped. "...are you sure? ...I could..."

"I'll even pick you out a costume that clashes with your mask and not let you in unless you're wearing it! Don't try me!" Koki blew a wet raspberry at the skunk, ghost drool flecking across her body and dampening her almost as much as her timeless cry in the dreamspace did.

"Eep! O-okay! Okay," she agreed with a giggle. "You win! I'll...try it."

"Good." The Gengar released his "victim", a big grin plastered across his face. "And if it really does get too painful without the mask? The safeword for you is Achilles. And you *will* use it in that case. Say it back to me."

"The safeword for me is Achilles."

Koki clapped giddily, floating around the short skunk in a blissful spiral and letting her feel the waves of warmth and chill that tantalized her in a way only the supernatural could. "Hehehehe, our Halloween contract is sealed, then~!" he exclaimed, landing at her side and wrapping an arm over the girl's shoulders. He walked her through the dark woods towards a growing gentle daylight. "Besides, you need the sunlight anyway. You've probably got some severe Vitamin D deficiencies with all those clothes and mask and stuff!"

Helena laughed. "What, are you a doctor?"

Koki laughed with her, fading away as the foggy walls closed in and shrunk the dream out of existence just as the skunk stepped into the bright clearing. "No, I just play one occasionally!

...

Helena's eyes opened. Her tiny studio apartment's ceiling stretched above her, and the morning sun streaked through the blinds. Her alarm clock read 9:12 AM; she'd never used it for the alarm function. Foggily, she sat up against her nest of pillows and stretched. Then, she paused, reached for a small notebook and pen, and flipped to the first unmarked page.

"Dream Journal, 10/30/21," she hummed as she wrote, her conscious brain once more slowly getting used to the feeling of reality. "The escape nightmare again, but this time it was interrupted by...by...ugh, I can't remember. Someday this is going to work reliably."

Something slipped out of the pages of her journal, falling onto her naked lap. Putting the pen aside, she lifted the strange, notched paper ticket to the new sunlight filtering in.

ADMIT ONE: Koki's Creepy Carnival!

A celebration of that most horrific of days!

Will you fall prey to my whims?

(Costumes can be provided)

The name struck Helena as if she'd stood herself in front of an open freezer door. Recollection tore through her mind. Hesitantly she reached for her mask, eyes scanning every corner of the room for a wisp of purple smoke or a strangely shifting shadow. Then, she stopped. Instead, she flipped the ticket over. There, printed on the paper, was her mask inside a circle with a line through it. Next to it was a picture of a foot, an arrow pointed at the tendon at its back.

Helena took a deep breath, shuffled her butt out of bed, and headed for a shower. Once she was finished, she walked out the door in a far simpler blouse and skirt than her normal attire and found a cab. "...do...you happen to know where the Halloween carnival is set up?" a maskless skunk asked her driver.

The similarly-sized driver turned its head and flopped to one side. Slowly, a zipper began to slide, tooth by tooth, across the curve of the black creature's mouth, eyes wide and pupils thin and soul-piercing. A hissing noise escaped, vapour pouring from the smallest opening and rolling down across the cup holders and down to the floor of the back seats. Helena's heart raced in terror, fingers digging dents into the seat cushions.

Then, the zipper suddenly *fwwwwp*'d back closed, leaving that ghostly smile on the neck-snapped doll. The mist that tickled her feet carried a gentle whisper.
"Hhh...yes...welcome...Dorthy~"

As the cab sped off, Helena genuinely wondered whether she should've left her mask behind. If she'd worn it, at least then she could have a permanent smile just like her driver. She was too scared and timid to even correct the name.

There were numerous real horrors that afternoon and night. The spontaneous ghostly carnival on the city's edge had been flooded with intrigued costumed visitors, not an insignificant number of which had tucked deep in their thoughts a word or two of true safety. There were screams from the roller coasters, many who entered the haunted house never seemed to come back out the exit door, and the escape rooms didn't have too much higher a percentage of returns either. The carnival games were predictably rigged, yet somehow just the right people walked away with a prize that lifted their spirits precisely how they needed. Spooky music filled the scene, hearable even over the more stimulating rides' machinery and their riders' squeals. The scent of caramel, hot food, and fresh treats wafted through the air, drawing folk of festive appetites to the various haunted food and drink booths.

Yet, for those who had found the carnival at least once before, there was a conspicuous lack of the mastermind Pokémon behind it all from his usual positions at the forefront of one of

the main attractions or greeting folk in one secluded area or another. They couldn't find him anywhere...until they bothered to look amongst their own.

From attraction to attraction walked a small skunk girl dressed like a lost girl from Kansas; she understood the driver's comment once Koki had showed her the costume and slipped her into those ruby slippers. She walked meekly and spoke softly amongst the crowded environment, but her eyes never seemed to grow tired or any less amazed. There, walking hand-in-hand with her, was a bow-tied Gengar with a pleasant belly and a small Eevee with curious plastic fangs, and just to his side trotted a fancy feral-shaped dress that looked as if made from black silk cobwebs.

In this particular moment, Koki and Helena were sharing a particularly massive caramel apple almost the size of either of their heads, each taking turns to gnaw through the thick brown sugary layer and take a small bite out of the tart green fruit below. "See? Well worth the search," he proudly proclaimed. "Pity Vail got soured out by the sour candy challenge, *kekeke~*"

"Veeeeeee..." their smallest companion agreed with a groan through puckered lips, still a little dizzy from the potent warheads overdose.

Helena couldn't help but agree with a nod, humming a "Mhm~" through a bite that was trying to stick her teeth together, a fierce battle occurring between the thick candy coating and her jaw.

"So! Once we finish this, where to?"

The skunk's lack of answer wasn't due to having a full mouth, having just barely won that particular fight against the sticky treat. "I, um...w-whatever you'd like, really?"

Koki tilted his head. "You sure? I won't complain if you've got *weak heels* and need to sit down, or if you *really* want to go back to the photo booth."

"Ve-ve veee veeeeeeeeeee?"

The ghost cocked a thumb over his shoulder to the vampire queen normal type. "Vail says she could go for a relaxing ride on The Lazy Lethe tubes again. Hehe, guess it helps she forgot what the ride's like after getting a little splashed. Wonder who could've done that...~"

As Vail glared with a friendly accusatory look to the now innocently whistling holiday event planner, Helena's face softened appreciatively from both the clear invitation to use her safeword and her new Eevee friend's suggestions. "...well, I think...maybe we could get a fourth for an escape room? If that's okay."

Koki glanced down and to his left. The vampire lady nodded. He looked back at the timid skunk and beamed. "Sure! I know just the Warturtle who might be up for an adventure," he said, giant tongue and mouth cleaving off all but a little bit of the caramel apple to noisily monch down and gulp away. A big slurp over his sticky lips later, and his eyes were filled with tricky glee. "Let's go get you introduced to Percy, huh?"

Most knew better than to interrupt Koki when he was with guests. Those who didn't, watching the three new friends walking away to adventure, were quickly given a reason not to. Amidst the carnival lights, a cruelly smiling shadow wolfed down the shadow of an innocent Eevee girl and gulped it down into an already bulging, squirming gut. Afterwards, observers and passerbys could barely catch the sounds of multiple muffled screams of terror seeming to emanate from Koki's darkness. His two guests' shadows—regardless of the location of the closest and brightest lights—appeared to always cross and vanish into his own. The shadow rubbed its writhing belly and glared at every single person who dared to look, chasing them off with an evil chuckle.

Koki licked his lips again. His belly complained a bit, but what was Halloween if not enjoying a scare and filling yourself sick full of the sweetest treats there were? And, oh, happiness and gratitude were so, so very sweet.