

A REPTILIAN TOUCH

The way it was set up--the way she always requested it be set up--the audience was all headless shadows. Paxton motioned her to his side and hung his gray scaly arm across her shoulders. "So it's our two-year anniversary today." Clapping, two hoots. "Yeah. Two years for us. One and a half years since we moobed here from Hawthorne and I opened up this place. You know I met her on the phone, when I was working my bank job."

She stifled a cackle. Raffi exploded a discordant riff behind them.

"Mineral Sabings and Loan. Just answering phone calls all day, until you start to feel dead, sometimes filling out spreadsheets. The instant I hear those angelic sounds ubb hers I get her number off the caller ID and write it down."

"He fucking asked permission first," she said, and people laughed.

"Yeah. Permission, and her name. It sounded so cool, so... Old West. Audrey." He looked her way, but she watched the ground.

"Anyway, sorry to ramble. I just thought I'd say a few words before these guys started their set tonight." He peered out into the darkness, black eyes glinting. "And to let you guys know that in honor ubb our anniversary, all beers are half off as long as you can hear the music playing."

The crowd erupted into white noise. Likely no one heard him introduce the band, and then a blast of drums and guitars and Audrey's wailing cawing voice drove him back to his place with all the liquids and glass.

His serving girl Jasmine started making the rounds immediately. She claimed she could smell their desire from across the room, so she would approach and lean in close and do that thing that only cats can do, that smile with just the eyes and yet somehow the whole body. And even if the night was lingering on that smile had a way of getting folks to buy one more, just one more, for the road. The

discount put on a little more fuel, and the night was early yet, still at that stage when everyone was leaning forward with their arms on the tables, the big receiver ears of those who had them tuned to catch the full signal. Two of the Original Bald Apes even, there, by the emergency exit, come with friends. They ordered three pitchers.

Jasmine slumped onto a stool when she found a break, and they both grabbed a moment to hear the band. Audrey's gray-pink tongue flailed, disappeared, flailed, the microphone dodged and dipped, black feathers flashed from all the bodies on stage, and then that minute-long solo where more than once Raffi had snapped a string, and so more than one group stopped talking to see if it would happen again. But not this time.

"He said," Jasmine told him, "that they've been asking around in Vegas." And her tail began to twitch.

"Yeah, I know."

She turned that cat smile on him. "He said they're good enough, and they deserve it."

"And he's right."

"He also said that they could use it as a springboard out of this flat wasteland, and then who knows what could happen after that."

"Yep."

She tilted her head. "Change your mind about this town? Or are we just being a grumpy bird?"

"Look... when she goes on the road, and I also think about what to do with this place. When it happens, okay? Then I'll deal with it." Talons clacked on the bar top. He tipped his beak toward a lonely, hulking komodo dragon. "You might go get that guy a refresher. Just him and an empty glass, poor bastard."

"That guy only asked for water. Said he's here just to listen to the music."

"Sure taking up a lot ubb space for someone who's just here to listen."

"Fine, geez. I'll see what I can do. Sorry for bringing it up."

The lizard never did end up buying anything. Paxton spent most of the rest of the set counting empty chairs. When it was over, one of the humans came to the bar to order a rum and Coke. He said, "This is a fine establishment you have, here. I mean it."

The lizard was still there by closing time.

It was otherwise just the band, clustered around one table and taking full advantage of their right to buy shitfaces with Paxton's money. Raffi was telling that story about the "wass-wurderer frun Beatty, who killed forty-five beebles with the sane coat-hanger." He was at the part where he reiterated, for the third time, that "he did it five years before any of us were even a twinkle in a test tube, and they still hadn't caught him."

Audrey sat at the bar, tipping a margarita into her throat and occasionally into Paxton's. The komodo dragon lumbered over to take a stool one away from her, placing both sets of too-thin fingers on the wood and staring into space. Audrey's sentence trailed off, and she tried finding it on the floor to her left.

"Eebbenning, sir. One more before you head out?"

"Actually, I wished to ask you something."

"Okay, shoot."

"I was wondering if I might perform here sometime. I am a musician."

Clack, clack. "Yeah? What kind of music?"

The lizard ruminated. "Perhaps... perhaps it could be described as folk music."

He caught Audrey's gaze, and also noticed Jasmine's ears turned their way while she gathered empty glasses. "Not something that gets played much around here."

"I will do it for free. I ask only to perform."

"That right?"

"Do you have a slow night? A night when you normally book no performers?"

"Well.... I mean, Tuesdays can be slow."

"If you might book me for a Tuesday night, then?"

The rest of the band watched now too.

"And you don't want money for it? You wouldn't change your mind about that?"

"No, sir."

That clacking scattered off all the corners of the room. "I got no one booked for next Tuesday. Early notice, so I might not advertise it much, but if you gibb me something, I could post it on the bulletin board and on the Facebook page."

The lizard stuck out a hand, which swallowed Paxton's. "I will bring a poster by tomorrow evening, then. Thank you very much, sir. Thank you." And he stood up and left.

No one said a thing. Paxton shrugged, and replied, "The fuck did you want me to do?"

#

Two former colleagues of his were in town that week. A local business wanted to open a branch in Hawthorne--they were opening them all over the state--and Mineral Savings and Loan owned the property they wanted to open it in. So they insisted on taking him out to lunch that day, to catch up, they said. And somewhere nice since it was on the bank's tab. Because he'd never been there before, he suggested the restaurant next to the winery. When they took their seats, they saw he had to tuck his tail feathers underneath him because the chair backs were solid, and they insisted on calling the waiter back to have him get Paxton a different chair. So Paxton stood there by the table while the waiter took his chair to some room and found another with an open back from who knew where to replace it. When it was over, they said they had a really good time, and they insisted that they all do this again the next time they were in town, but maybe at a different restaurant. And Paxton laughed.

"Me and the band want to help you open up tonight, Pax," Audrey told him. "And Jesse and

Craig were coming along too. That okay?"

It was, so they met him at his apartment. The lot of them walked to the bar together as a cluster of black feathers, beaks, and talons shooting their percussive syllables out into the blue and orange sky. But those syllables cut short when they arrived. He was already there, waiting by the door, dressed in some ethnic thing and holding a two-stringed wooden box on a stick nearly as tall as he was. Audrey cleared her throat first, and she said, "Folk music?"

"Well," the lizard replied, "it is... inspired by traditional Mongolian song. So it is folk music in that sense."

Eyes tried to catch other eyes. Paxton got the place open, and they all shuffled inside. "Belieb it or not," he eventually told the lizard, "there's a warm-up room in the back. Not the best acoustics, but it's pry-bet." He pointed to a thin door, and the lizard nodded and shambled in that direction.

Wood scratched across wood, glass clinked, floorboards creaked, water poured and sloshed. Some twanging noises penetrated on occasion. Then finally someone changed the subject, which stayed put until the chairs and stools began to fill in earnest.

He called Jasmine to him when she arrived. "I'm in trouble."

"It's Tuesday, isn't it?"

"He's wearing a dress, Jasmine."

She placed her hand on her hip. Her ears pointed straight toward him, and her tail swayed behind her.

"I don't know what to do. Maybe there's nothing I can do. Can you just tell me that we're not going to lose any customers ober this?"

"Okay, Pax. We're not going to lose any customers over this."

"I don't belieb you."

She threw her hands up and went to find an apron, leaving Paxton to alternate between watching

the thin door and watching the glowing hands of the clock on the opposite wall. It took so long for those hands to reach the scheduled configuration that he no longer remembered any of the waiting.

A few new faces out there. Three unaccompanied humans. "Almost showtime, sir," he said through the door. "Didn't run out on me, did you?"

It cracked open. "No, no. I was just meditating to calm myself. I get nervous."

"No problem. Just head out on stage whenever you're ready, and I'll introduce you and you can get started."

Paxton watched the bar top very closely when the lizard eventually followed his instructions. Jasmine took a tray full of dirty glasses to the back.

They were not headless shadows tonight, at the lizard's request. Only ambient light, he'd said, from the fixtures that were always on, because it was the sound, not the picture, that was important. So Paxton directly addressed all their animal faces.

"Eebening, folks. We'b got a, uh, bit ubb a different act tonight, if you all saw the poster on the board. It's so new, in fact, that I myself habbn't eben heard it yet, so I'll be honest and say I don't quite know what we're in for. But I'm sure it'll be interesting. So, without further ado, I gibb you Mr. Kenneth Irawan."

He heard his every step back. The lizard cleared his throat a few times, thumbed a string once or twice, and then he began to play and to sing.

#

That weekend, Paxton and Audrey threw a tent in the car and drove to Death Valley. The intention was to find some secluded corner and soak in the silence, but when they arrived they saw that cultural activities were scheduled for that night, and Audrey insisted they attend. They joined a small group that sat around an old storyteller, who told them about an ancient queen in the Valley who insisted on having the largest, most beautiful palace. The queen worked her people and even her own

family to starvation in order to build this palace, and only after her daughter fell dead to the ground before her did the queen come to understand the terror of her own vanity. But by then the land was cursed, and it all fell to ruin around her, and that was why the Valley was now so hot and desolate and dry. But though many had perished, the people who were left--the storyteller's ancestors--found a way to make it work, to make it theirs. On the way to their campsite, Audrey told Paxton that she loved to hear stories like that, even if they always made her feel lonely. They ate cricket tacos and drank beer until they fell asleep under the Milky Way.

On Monday, a woman pressed her face against the glass until she caught Paxton's eye and waved. "We're not open until six, ma'am," he told her when he opened the door.

"Oh, I know, I know. But I saw you standing in there, so I thought I would get your attention. I heard something about a... about someone who plays here?"

"You're talking about the dragon."

"Ah, yes, yes I believe so. But I heard he played some very interesting music, and was wondering if he was perhaps playing anything tonight?"

"Not tonight, ma'am."

"Oh. Well, do you know when he will be back?"

"Not too sure. You got Facebook?" She smiled with just the corner of her mouth and nodded. "Gibb our page a friend, then, and you'll get updated. Else just swing by ebry now and then when we're open and check the bulletin board."

"Ah... okay, will do. Thank you, sir, and have a pleasant evening."

Audrey's beak was making infinity symbols. "There it is," she said, and pointed that beak. "I can't see in the windows. Gaggle or pair?"

"Gaggle."

"Giggling gaggle of goofy girls."

For some reason, Paxton laughed.

"Come here, Pax. Let's do that monkey thing. You look like you need it."

"I don't know why," he said from over her shoulder. "I mean shit, nebber had so few empty seats around the place."

She patted his back, rubbed rough the feathers on his neck. "Jazz told me that old couple last week came from California. I mean, they were on their way back from Vegas, I guess."

"Yeah. How'd your thing go, by the way? Guess I nebber asked."

"Aw, you know."

"Gibb you a call?"

"We'll see."

"They don't know what they're missing."

She gripped a bit tighter, then let go. "Such a sweetie, Pax. I can always count on you to say things you only half mean just to make me feel better."

"Well, music business is just tough. You know it's more about who you know than how good you are. Same's true of ebrything, I think."

"So I guess we just have to keep trying until the right person notices."

"Ebber think ubb heading west instead?"

She stared off into space. The car started and lingered.

"I don't mind if you take a week or so and go try."

"Yeah. California's just... I don't know." She pushed at his chest. "Anyway, I start to miss this place if we're gone too long."

"Yeah. Ebryone's excited about Thursday, by the way. Most ubb 'em aren't so much into this guy. A bit too... well." The car finally drove off. "Maybe not the new clientele either. Gives the place a whole different feel."

"A bit too what?"

He shrugged. "I was gonna' say 'weird for weirdness' sake', but maybe that's a bit unfair."

"Unfair my ass. That's exactly what I was thinking."

"Yeah, well... anyway."

"Heard you had to start a wait-list last night."

"Fucking hell."

"Think Jazz would be annoyed if you got her a partner?"

"Well, we'll see what happens. I was looking at places in Begas a little this morning."

She tilted her head.

"I just... you know. It was tough here, probably be tough ober there. But I was just thinking, you know, in case your thing pans out."

She spread her arms, and they embraced again.

#

Coffee, black: preserves the antioxidants. Coffee with a dash of cream: keeps the acid from damaging the stomach lining. Coffee with cream and sugar: need something to get me home tonight, and I hate the stuff. He had bought a second machine and a bigger supply to take the load off the one in the employee lounge, which only their high-school dishwasher boy had ever used, as he was the only ape working there and everybody else grew up with mothers who told them all these things about caffeine. One of Paxton's friends from high school had spent a year or two on a spiritual journey, trying out as many religions as he had the time for, and eventually he discovered Mormonism. They sent him to Iceland on mission as a kind of half-joke, but it only resulted in him falling out of it when he came to fully understand that he was also not allowed to drink alcohol. When last he and Paxton had spoken, Paxton had recommended he just start his own religion. But instead he'd settled on a lazy, non-ritualistic form of Shinto, and he said that it served him fine.

"Thank you," the man said, and took a sip. "I know it's late, but my hotel is a twenty minute drive from here and I went a little overboard on the wine. I'd probably be fine, since traffic here is so light compared to what I'm used to, but you know what they say." Another sip, and he tipped his cup toward the lizard. "So when did you hire him?"

"Nebber did."

"Sorry?"

"Doesn't take a dime. I offered a few times, but he said no."

"Interesting. He has such a peculiar style. It's a bit like Tuvan overtone singing, but with a... oh, I don't know. A bit more of a reptilian touch, I suppose you could say? The long hisses, mostly. Do you know what his inspiration was?"

"You'd want to ask him."

"Maybe I will, then. Maybe I will." Another sip. His brow furrowed, and he set the cup aside, half full. "Thank you, again. I'd better not have any more or I'll never get to sleep tonight. Things like this are why I've always got such bad crow's f--"

Panic. He looked at him askance.

"Ah...." His eyes crinkled. "Well, in any case, how much do I owe you for the coffee?"

"On the house tonight, sir."

He returned frazzled to his group of friends, shooting backward glances and smiles the whole way. When he sat, he leaned over the table and began to chat and shake his head, and every so often his friends would look toward Paxton. The man stood again only when the lizard was shambling out the door, instrument in hand, so that he could catch him and invite him to join them all at their table for a bit. Cheesy smiles worn by all; at some point the lizard had learned, and it was a pretty good mock-up.

"Audrey's on the phone." Jasmine gathered the glasses off the bar. "She said you must have

turned yours off. It sounds important, so I can keep the place going for a bit while you take it, yeah?"

He picked up the phone.

"We might have something, Pax. No shit."

"You could sound more excited."

"I guess so. I am excited. There's just this one catch, and it sort of bugs me. I don't know why it bugs me, but it sort of does."

"Mmkay?"

"Well, they want us to change our name. Their marketing guys don't think it's up to snuff."

"I could'b told them that."

"Yeah, thanks asshole."

"What do they recommend?"

He heard her breath escape, though she evidently turned away from the phone. "Something with 'murder' in it. Because we're a metal band."

"Because you're a metal band."

"Yeah."

"And their marketing guys think that having the word 'murder' in your name will sell you better. Because you're a metal band."

"I know. Fuck me, they'b made it tough, Pax." She swallowed. "They've." Another breath. "I thought it'd be an easy choice."

"When did they drop this on you?"

"Five minutes ago or so."

"How long did they gibb you to make up your minds?"

"Til next week. Next Tuesday."

"So maybe sleep on it for a while? And I can too, and we can talk it ober?"

"I guess. Won't that make a bad impression?"

"Maybe the boat's already left, but you could always make it sound like you habb another offer to consider."

"That boat was never in the port, Pax."

"Then I don't know. Diplomacize. But I'd sleep on it."

A long silence passed between them. He heard laughter in the background, mostly Raffi's.

"Yeah, okay, let's sleep on it. Maybe I can try to negotiate a little more about the name later on."

"Gibb it a try. And hey, good luck."

After he hung up, he heard the lizard laugh. Whenever he did, his large shoulders would bounce up and down and he would close his eyes. Jasmine brought him and his new friends a round of Manhattans once Paxton replaced her at the bar. One of those friends frequently touched his scaly forearm, and when it came time to close, they all left as a group, shaking up the still night air.

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That week was the Battle of the Bands, so that week it was only the old clientele and throngs of in-town or out-of-town boyfriends and girlfriends come to see their partners make their big breakout debuts on Paxton's little stage. Bodies every night, packed together, crammed against tables, feathers and fur and scales and hair, filling the place with musty musky animal smells while they rammed fists into the air and swayed hips and tails and sloshed gallons of beer and liquor down their throats, sang along, hooted, clapped, howled. Late Wednesday a brown bear asked him for something called Tentacle and walked him through making some half in the bag approximation of it, and late Thursday Paxton ran completely out of spiced rum and got Jasmine to take a few fistfuls of bills from the register to go get more from the gas station down the street. Friday started when a couple no one really knew busted onto the stage, grabbed two microphones, and announced that as of that moment they were

engaged. People cheered them for three minutes. The last act was going to be Audrey's, but a few hours before they were set to play, she called Paxton and let him know that, no, she was going to stay home. So Paxton had Raffi fill in on bass for another group with scheduling problems, and they played the set instead.

They spent that weekend restocking and cleaning, and just as the last vestiges of the renewed energy sparkled out the open doors on Monday night, Kenneth returned. But he was there only to say goodbye.

"LA, huh? Color me impressed."

"I am terribly sorry, sir."

"Nothing at all to apologize for. Place has nebber been so full as when you showed up, so I think I was just lucky to habb you at all." He thrust his hand out, and they shook, claws pressing into scales.

Kenneth smiled. "You are kind. I wished to thank you for giving me the opportunity to play here these many months. It was very difficult to find a venue that would take the chance I offered them, and even more difficult to find one that would not tell me to get out after hearing my first performance. So I cannot exaggerate how much you have helped advance my career."

"Of course, Ken. Of course. And hey, we'll miss you."

Paxton, Jasmine, and Audrey watched him walk out the door and step into a shining black limo, the kind of car that could cause accidents in certain parts of the country just by being in sight on the highways. The rest of the band paid no mind and continued to drain the taps.

Every so often throughout the night some of the Original Bald Apes would show up, peer at the posters in the lobby, and then walk back out, muttering to each other through tight smiles and shrugs. Some of them did come all the way in to confirm, and some of those stayed for a drink or two so as not to seem rude. The band again filled the air, laughing and patting backs when they were asked if they

were going to look for any more gigs in Vegas.

Eventually Audrey spoke. "Kenneth. I mean... so what, then. Is that what it takes?"

Jasmine shrugged.

Paxton did too. "Maybe. Or else this, I guess."

Audrey looked around the place, at all those animal faces, and turned her gaze toward the middle distance.

END