

Tabitha Crane: Ferret-Girl at Large

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I.

Intervention

Who's gonna throw the very first stone?
Oh! Who's gonna reset the bone?
(Arcade Fire)

"I can't believe we're having this conversation again, Tabitha," my father grumbled. "It's been, what, a week since your last write-up? This can't continue!"

I was too busy working on avoiding eye contact to muster a response. My father paced back and forth in front of me, arms folded across his chest. He came to a stop at one end of his circuit, staring me down. I focused on the floor. Had that stain been there before?

"Look, Tab,"

Fuck. He was doing the tone shift. Time for some soggy rag shit.

"Hon, we know you've been through a lot of late. Your mom and I are so proud of you and how strong and brave you've been,"

He really needed to switch up the speech once in a while. I could practically recite it along with him at this point.

"But this needs to stop. Your record certainly isn't going to be winning you any citizenship awards any time soon, and, well, we can't afford to pick up and move again,"

I opted to roll theatrically onto my back, sprawled on my bed with my eyes fixed at one point on the ceiling. I could hear my father's exasperated sigh. There. Cracked through the façade.

"Okay. I can see this won't be going anywhere any time soon. We're going to have a sit-down tomorrow. You, me, and your mother," I could hear his tone wavering. "And—and no dinner for you tonight,"

I'd almost forgotten about that last bit. It was his final flourish. The final, utterly devastating blow. Dad stalked out of my room. Deciding suddenly that I needed to get in the last word, I rolled off the bed.

Leaning my head around the edge of the door, I snapped, “Yeah, well... whatever,” Okay. I will admit, not my finest comeback.

I slammed the door, cringing slightly as I heard the faint tinkle of glass. Shit. Needed to stop being so forceful with that. I flopped down on the bed, groaning inwardly. Vicious cycle. It was all a vicious fucking cycle.

Oh! I almost forgot to introduce myself. How rude. I’m Tabitha Crane. But most folks call me Tab. Short and sweet. Granted, it was probably just about the only sweet thing about me. Or short, for that matter.

See, up until about four months ago, I’d been your average ferret gal. My primary concerns had been getting the fuck out of high school (only two quarters to go until graduation) and making sure that nobody broke my discus record in track and field (50.24 meters, suckers).

Unfortunately, life did not remain predictable like that. If high school taught me one thing besides how to take a definite integral, it was that nothing could be taken for granted. Not even the most mundane things. My body’s ability to maintain a height of five foot eight, for instance.

Crazy, right? Well, that’s basically the only term I can use to describe it. For reasons that I can’t really explain (much less any medical doctor that was consulted), I suddenly grew to the height of 90 feet (91’4” if you want to be a stickler for details and want even more numbers slung your way) in the middle of my gym class.

I don’t remember much about the whole incident. Just a few minutes of searing, blinding pain and blurred vision, followed by the completely unexpected (and wholly undesired) experience of being totally nude and standing awkwardly in the center of a playfield surrounded by my suddenly minuscule peers. Confused as fuck and humiliated out of my mind, I high-tailed it into the woods next to campus. I spent the remainder of the day just sitting there, rocking back and forth and trying to mentally force myself back to normal size, to little avail.

The whole thing should have been impossible. Nobody should technically be able to be so enormous. It was explained to me some time later that according to this thing called the Rhombus-Pyramid Law or something like that, my body basically should’ve collapsed in on itself and turned into jelly. But it didn’t. Hooray for physical impossibilities!

This whole giant thing was a fucking drag. I was impossibly heavy (I’m technically supposed to avoid walking around on concrete and asphalt if possible—no easy task in a town) and insanely strong (Well, compared with your run-of-the-mill person. Proportionally, I’m still kind of a lightweight). Physical contact with anyone was basically impossible unless I wanted to unintentionally injure them or something of that nature. Everything was just so *breakable*. I half-expected to start sounding like I’d inhaled a shit ton of sulfur hexafluoride or whatever. Didn’t happen. My voice got a damn lot louder and more, well, resonant. But not lower. Thank gods. The *one* thing I had going for me.

If that was a low point in the Great Saga of Me, the following weeks were no improvement. Suffice it to say, remaining enrolled at Grainger High School, much less maintaining residency in Colville, wouldn't be much of an option.

Everyone was convinced that I was some sort of gigantic fucking monster or something. Gigantic? Sure. But last I checked, I wasn't rampaging around town, smashing buildings and eating cars or something like that. That didn't stop the parents. Nobody wanted their dear little Timmy or Sally going to class with a girl taller than the school building. I also had a super awesome police motorcade escort me to and from campus for those first few weeks. Closest I'd ever get to feeling like the president. The security detail that accompanied me from class to class got a little irritating, though. I guess they wanted to make sure I didn't get into any mischief or something, I dunno. But nothing happened. I was wholly innocent.

Er, well, maybe not *wholly*. There was always the matter of the stuff I *did* do. Let's just say there were a few minor injuries to students (in my defense, only six of them could *actually* be considered my fault in any way), damage to some school and city property, and one very... impactful... argument with my parental units.

After a few months, it was clear that the downward spiral that was my life wouldn't be going in any other direction. Not that I gave a damn. After such a long time being furious with my situation, I could no longer bring myself to really care. Everyone in town would see me as nothing other than some sort of gigantic monstrosity. I wouldn't be able to do anything to fix that. They'd already made up their stupid little minds. There was no space in town for a giantess.

Eventually, the white flag came out. My parents decided that a scene change would be the best choice for the family and opted to pack up and ship out to scenic Winthrop.

'Shipping out' was a lot easier when your daughter could serve as the moving van. With all the money they'd saved on the move, perhaps it would be feasible to purchase said daughter an outfit that didn't consist of strips of cloth she'd found and wrapped around her more personal regions. Fun fact: they had to rewrite the Grainger High dress code to accommodate me. How's that for a legacy?

My gigantic transformation hadn't been easy at all on my parents. Aside from all the obvious emotional/psychological/whatever issues that arose, there was the Big Green Money Monster to battle. Having a daughter wasn't cheap to begin with. Having a daughter who was nine stories tall was a damn large expense. Didn't mean that pun to be in there.

I mean, look. I still needed food, a place to sleep at night, and all the other necessities of life, just on a much larger scale. Both my parents worked their fingers to the bone day in and day out to make ends meet. And that was *before* their daughter needed an entire case of pasta from Costmart for a square meal.

The financial nightmare was only just *beginning* with the move. Winthrop offered homes on larger lots—perfect for a girl of my stature. A home of sorts was built for me in the backyard of my parent's new ranch house. As my father made it abundantly

clear, building materials alone were an arm and a leg, to say nothing of the lighting and plumbing costs. Nothing pissed me off more than when my dad guilt-tripped me about that shit. It wasn't like I had any control over the change in living arrangements.

But you know what? Regardless of everything that I'd done and all the shit that had happened because of my new circumstances, Mom and Dad had stuck up for me. They'd really been great. Oh gods, when I thought about it, I'd been such a terrible daughter—sullen and irresponsible and terse.

I needed to make it up to them. Maybe I could convince them I didn't need to transfer schools. I could set things right.

Scratch that last.

"We just think you'll be able to get off on a better foot at Riverbank. It'll be a better environment for you," Mom's tone was saccharine.

"Or you could stop acting like a delinquent and let us do parent-type things that don't involve bailing our daughter out of yet *another* school," Dad interjected, his tone heated.

"But—but... I wanted to try to make *this* school work," I muttered. "You've always said yourself, 'don't just run away from your problems; try to solve them',"

"Yes. But that was before you... *this*," Dad spluttered, gesturing at me. Smooth going.

I rolled my eyes. "Oh. So *this* is okay for an excuse when it's convenient for *you*. Got it,"

"It's not that way... I... this will just be better. For all of us,"

"Cool. Whatever's best. Until I get on Riverbank's nerves. Then we'll take it from there, right?"

"Tab, honey, that's not what we mean!"

"When do we meet with the principal or whatever?"

Mom and Dad exchanged glances. Dad ran a hand through his hair. "We already took care of that. You can start tomorrow,"

"I went with you guys last time,"

"Well, last time, you threatened to eat the principal if he pissed you off. You need to work on your manner, Tab. And your first impressions," Mom was a bit snappy, a rarity for her. Ferrets have something of a nasty reputation for being snippy, but

Mama Crane was one of the sweetest people I knew. Apparently, even she had her limits.

“Hey. If the guy couldn’t take a joke...”

“You should probably work on how you introduce your, uh, brand of ‘humor’ too, hon,” Dad added. “Or save it for other, more appropriate venues,”

I supposed he had a point. People should never shout ‘fire’ in a crowded theatre, and giants should never yell ‘rampage’ in the middle of a city. Shrugging noncommittally, I studied my hands, which were folded primly in my lap.

“At least try to make a friend. *Talk* to someone,” my father sighed. “It’ll do you some good,”

“Really, sweetie. We want this to work for you so badly. But you have to work for it, too,”

I mumbled something unintelligible.

“Okay. Good talk,” Dad sighed.

Well, I guess *that* was over. I rolled over on my bed as my parents clambered down from the platform bolted to the wall and made their way out of my room. It was a pattern I was quite used to by that point. But maybe it was time to break the vicious cycle.

Over the past few months, I had honed my sense of general apathy towards the world to complete and utter perfection. It was easier to deal with my problems by just not caring about anything, or at least pretending I didn’t. If I tried to give a damn, I felt I would lose my mind. All the same, I couldn’t fight the surprisingly large fraction of myself that actually gave a fuck, or at least part of one.

That part of me actually gave a shit about my first-day wardrobe (Sackcloth tank top or sailcloth blouse? Decisions, decisions...), forced me to smile and wave a little when my first period teacher introduced me, and even dragged me into volunteering an answer in Chemistry (nailed it). Maybe Riverbank High wouldn’t be so terrible, after all.

What *would* be terrible was having every single class outdoors. Seeing as I was taller than the school, the classes I was enrolled in were shifted to locations more conducive to my participation. Something told me I would get to know the school football field and baseball diamond quite well.

The day breezed by at a sprightly clip. Was I having a good time? Damn. Maybe I could get used to this whole settling thing. Before I knew it, it was already time to eat. Classmates glanced nervously up at me as my stomach rumbled.

Lunchtime meant sandwich salad. It was one of my strokes of genius. Making a me-sized loaf of bread was a bit too labor-intensive to be worth the effort. So what was I to do? Naturally, the only thing that made sense was to combine several loaves of sliced bread, a swirl of peanut butter, and (obviously) a healthy-sized dab of Nutella. It wasn't quite the same as the real thing, but I had to make do. Making do was something of a theme in my life anymore.

I found a corner of the courtyard that wasn't too occupied by others. Plopping myself down, I pulled out my lunch pail, a repurposed shipping drum. While I chewed in silence, I glanced down to notice a black-furred mink sitting in the grass near my hip, munching on an apple and staring intently at me.

"What do *you* want?" I grumbled, looking away.

"Well, for one thing, this area is usually *my* designated 'eating alone' spot," he replied.

I shifted over a few feet. "If you're trying to get me to shove you down my shirt, walk away now," I snapped.

Some guys at my old school had found it totally hilarious to dare each other to ask me to do that. Pervs. I didn't even have all that much to speak of in the chest department. But high school boys are stupid and gross, and I suppose that I had more than any of the other girls by simple virtue of my size.

The tips of the mink's ears tinged red. "Er, no. That would be a bit more *forward* than my style. Granted, my 'style' tends towards *totally stationary*. I think this is the most I've said to a girl in one go in awhile...

"But really. I saw you were new here, and I wanted to see if I could have a little chat with the reason my third period Chem class got moved to the stands by the baseball field. Figure out if my abject hatred is justified or not.

"That was a joke," he added hastily, shifting nervously.

I shot the mink a look, trying to control the grin that was forming at the corners of my mouth.

"Might want to watch what you say to a gal who's like fifteen times your size,"

All the same, I rolled over, stretching out on my stomach and resting my chin on the backs of my hands. A couple of dogs complained loudly as my feet invaded their area. Bitches would just have to deal with it.

Might as well see where the conversation went, I figured. Then I wouldn't have to lie when my parents asked me if I'd been sociable that day.

I could've just picked him up, but I really had a thing against holding other people. It just seemed odd having this little living thing in my hand. Established a weird

dynamic between myself and the other person. Besides, if anything went wrong, I didn't want to get my oversized tail sued.

"My name's Tab, by the way. Tabitha," I said.

"Ciaran. That's my name," the mink fumbled.

He extended a hand, realized a handshake wasn't really a physical possibility, and passed the hand through his hair in an attempt to conceal his gesture. I snorted, ruffling Ciaran's fur slightly with the gust of air.

"So, have you always been... like this?" Ciaran asked, hands shoved firmly in his pockets.

My tail twitched. "Labor was a real bitch for my mom," I snorted derisively. "You honestly mean you *didn't* hear about me? I was *the* news story a while back,"

Word of a ferretess the size of a small apartment building had spread like wildfire when I'd had my big post-puberty growth spurt. Guess it had been a slow news week or something. My personal favorite headline? "Ninety Story Ferret Girl Lays Waste to Downtown Colville, PC." An utter lie and gross exaggeration on every level. And that's coming from a giantess.

"I guess I saw something on the evening news. But I didn't know you'd moved here," Ciaran shrugged.

"So you missed both the massive building project *and* the weeks of me attending North Winthrop before I transferred here? Damn. Maybe you should get your eyes checked, dude," I smirked in reply.

"I *do* wear contacts..." Ciaran shrugged good-naturedly.

I was about to come up with a snappy retort, but the bell rang. Ciaran nearly fell over as I got to my feet. "Well, gotta get to class. But I guess I'll see you tomorrow,"

A small grin crept across my face as I strode off. When they asked about my day, I could even tell Mom and Dad I'd maybe made a friend.

II.

Rumour Has It

All these words whispered in my ear
Tell a story that I cannot bear to hear
(Adele)

The television was blasting *Cops* when I got home. Huh. They must have been showing women's basketball or something like that on SportsNet. Then again, maybe Dad had just realized that variety is the spice of life and that he should change up his viewing habits from time to time. But I was inclined to doubt that—the only spice *that* raccoon knew about was barbecue sauce. And that wasn't even really a spice.

"Home," I announced half-heartedly, dropping my backpack on the floor next to the door.

Shuffling into the kitchen, I stuck my head in the fridge, trying to find something to eat. Dinner would probably be late again and I needed something to tide me over in the meanwhile.

Apple in hand, I wandered into the living room where my parents were sitting. Dad was engrossed by whatever idiot was getting arrested on the screen, barely noticing when I sat down beside him. He hardly shifted over at all. Not that he ever did. He had been marinating in his own juices (and a healthy-sized dash of Doritos) there for what seemed like ages.

"Today was pretty good," I said at length.

"That's nice," Mom replied flatly.

Wait a second. Were my eyes deceiving me, or had she glanced up from her copy of that damned tabloid rag for a millisecond as she'd addressed me? Damn. Gotta get that one down in the record books. It was a constant battle between that damned magazine and myself for attention, a fight I typically lost.

"Yeah, I met . She's pretty nice, in an odd way. I think we might be friends," I persisted. "Well, not yet, maybe. But we could be,"

“Do you want a gold star or something? Keep it down. I’m in the middle of the story,” Dad grunted.

Either he didn’t know that ‘stories’ traditionally came in print format, or *Cops* had become his middle-aged dude version of some old woman’s soap opera.

“Oh, shut up, Keith,” the slightly dumpy mink grumbled. She turned back to me. “That’s nice, honey. I know how hard talking to other folks is for you.”

I could never tell if Mom was being *super* passive-aggressive all the time, or whether she was just really bad at saying things nicely and tactfully. Yet another mystery that plagued my family.

“Don’t you tell me to shut up, Monica,” Dad was really getting revved up. “If I had a dime for every time you crossed the line, we wouldn’t have to live in this shithole of a house any more,”

Mom scoffed, tossing her magazine onto the coffee table, sending the day’s mail scattering across the floor. Using the term ‘floor’ was being kind, frankly—you could only see a few square feet of it under the mat of assorted crap that had accumulated there over the past few days and weeks.

“*Cross the line?* Is that what this is? I’m not your fucking slave. And if you got off your ass and went back to work, we could maybe afford to move out of this shithole of a house,” Mom snapped in reply.

I shrank against the back of the threadbare couch, trying to make myself as inconspicuous as possible. Not that it really mattered; they were raring to get at each other’s throats. I hardly existed to them. Why wasn’t I moving?

“You know full well I can’t work with my bad back. And I don’t see *you* trying to get a job,”

“I don’t try because you don’t *let* me. And I *know* you’re just lying to collect a fucking disability check. Your back is just fine,”

“Those fucking disability checks are paying for the roof over your head, you stupid bitch,”

The television snapped off and I beat it to my room as quickly as I could. The TV turning off was the event horizon in the black hole of my parents’ relationship. No going back from there. Just an endless sucking void of fighting. I snatched some sandwich fixings on the way. It would be a long, loud night.

I turned on my laptop and pulled out the next DVD in the season of *Doctor Hoot* I was making my way through. It was something of a tradition to watch another

episode every time I didn't want to deal with my parents' shit. Or a godsdamn coping mechanism. I didn't know, and even more so, I didn't give a shit.

This couldn't be real life, could it? This was fake. It had to be fake. I mean, shit like this doesn't exist outside *Lifetime* channel reality shows or some bullshit like that, right? This wasn't real. It couldn't be. I pounded my fist on my desk, hot tears stinging my eyes.

The bombastic symphony of bellowing and smashing continued off and on well into the night, lulling me off to sleep. Who needs a fucking white noise machine? Not this mink.

My morning routine was the same as usual. After inhaling a bowl of dry cereal (the milk had expired a few days ago and I hadn't had a chance to pick up any more), I did my best to make a dent in the mess that was consuming the living room.

The pile of yesterday's mail scattered by Mom's magazine included a couple bills. Shit. That time of the month again. I stacked them on the island, including a couple of sticky notes with arrows on them to draw my mother's attention to them.

Giving up on making the living room look any more habitable, I packed lunch and headed out. Much as I hated standing around in the school hallway for half an hour or whatever, it definitely beat hanging around the building I lived in. Try as I might to make it livable, my parents' constant fights ensured that my efforts were erased by the end of each day.

Leaning against the wall next to the drinking fountain, I waited aimlessly for people to start showing up and the school bell to ring. From my nondescript vantage point, it was possible to pick up on snippets of conversations as folks passed. Nobody gave me a second glance most times, and I heard some pretty, uh, interesting things most days. High school was a really stupid place.

"And then I ate the whole pizza. In like ten minutes. I'm gonna weigh like 900 pounds the second my metabolism slows down,"

"I swear Miss Schrödinger nearly coughed up a hairball yesterday,"

"Wait! I haven't seen that episode yet! You can't spoil *anything* for me,"

"If my parents find out I stole their last forty of Old Düsseldorf... I just don't even know,"

"Yeah. She's like some sort of genetic experiment or something,"

Wait, what? My ears perked up.

“No. I heard that her parents sold her to some sort of drug company for testing. Growth hormones or whatever,”

Okay, something was really amiss. I stepped away from my not-much-of-a-hiding spot and began to follow after the pair in question. The husky and hyena were still engrossed in conversation. I kept a short distance away, waiting for the opportune moment to interject. That wasn’t creepy and stalker-ish at all. Nope.

“Whatever. Fucking huge-ass bitch,” Doug, the hyena, muttered.

“Fucking huge-ass *hot* bitch,” Shane, the husky, corrected.

“I dunno, maybe. Kinda. But she’s still a freak,”

“Hey, guys. I couldn’t help but overhear your little chat,” I squeezed between the pair in a moment of sheer insanity. “You seem to know an awful lot about Tabitha. Had a nice long heart-to-heart with her, eh?”

Doug brushed me aside. “What’s it to you?”

“I just think that maybe you ought to get to know her before you start making up a bunch of shit about her and telling everyone else. Because she’s actually nice,” I shrugged. Why was I still talking?

Shane snorted. “Are you her godsdamn counselor or something?”

“No, he’s hot on her,” Doug ribbed Shane, snickering. “Heh. Ciaran can’t even get with any normal girl. Probably thinks he’s got more of a shot with a chick whose cunt you can fucking *walk into*,”

“How would you even fuck a chick like that?” Shane replied derisively.

Now they were acting like I wasn’t even there. Marginally better than acting as if I *were* and beating the snot out of me, I supposed.

The tips of my ears tinged red. “No! That’s not—I don’t—just stop being... mean,”

nominate me for an eloquence award. My defense was crumbling, if it even existed to begin with. The husky leveled a smirk of thuggish derision at me before heading off in the opposite direction.

“Whatever, Shitface,”

Wordsmithing at its finest. Somehow, it still managed to sting.

Ciaran was sitting in the back row of the bleachers when I got to Chem class. He glanced over his shoulder as I sat down.

“Morning, Tab,” Ciaran said.

“Guess I better work on my stealth. Sneaking up on you didn’t work out so hot,” I replied.

Ciaran smiled thinly, barely making eye contact.

“Hey, is everything alright?” I asked, a frown creasing my brow.

“Peachy,” the mink replied, turning away. He was a pretty terrible liar.

I made to brush a reassuring finger against the little guy’s head, but immediately cursed myself inwardly. What was I thinking? I could do that if I wanted to break his fucking *neck* or something. Besides, I hardly knew the guy. Didn’t want to make him feel uncomfortable.

Class was interesting enough, but I found that I spent most of the time staring at Ciaran. He had this habit of twitching his tail whenever the teacher asked a question that he knew but didn’t want to raise his hand and venture the answer. Was it cute? I guess that could be a word that could be used to describe the action.

As class ended, Ciaran stayed behind, leaning over the back of the bleachers as I got ready to head to my next class over at the football stadium.

“Oh, hey!” he called up. “This Saturday, they’re showing *Prognosis Negative* at the Landmark. I was wondering if you wanted to go. Just for fun,”

My brow furrowed. “Really funny,” Maybe I’d judged him poorly. Dick.

“Er... the Landmark is a drive-in,” Ciaran replied, cocking his head to the side. “You can... fit in it,”

“Oh. Oh!” Okay, perhaps he wasn’t a total dick after all. “Yeah. Sure. I think that would be cool,”

“Great! Meet me at Haverford Park at 7 tomorrow, then. We can head out from there,” Ciaran beamed.

Grinning over my shoulder at Ciaran as I headed out, I made my way to the next class, a bit of a spring in my step. Unfortunately, that proved disastrous for everyone trying to walk nearby and maintain a reasonable degree of balance.

“Watch it!” an otter snapped at me, falling flat on his ass as I flounced past.

“Sorry!” I replied hastily, lightening my stride.

Careful had to be my mantra anymore. *Careful, careful, careful.* No excessive celebrating for this girl.

Sitting in what was now commonly accepted as my personal corner of the courtyard at lunchtime, I dug into another round of sandwich salad, hoping Ciaran would show up. No such luck.

I didn't know why I expected anything otherwise. After being so different for so long, I was accustomed to solitude. You know all those pictures in ads for colleges and stuff, the ones with the bear, the dovess, the frog, and the little mouse girl in the wheelchair all getting along super well, laughing and having fun together? Yeah, it doesn't really work that way. And even if it did, there was never a giantess in the picture. Except for when I saw Ciaran, the only one around who seemed willing to talk, I went about my day more or less alone. I ate alone, sat by myself in classes, walked around alone... You get the picture. Maybe I could write some emo-ass poems about it.

Despite the thick shell of indifference I'd been working on, it sort of ate away at me sometimes. Especially now that I was starting off at a new school, trying to find my place, should such a thing exist. Was I being paranoid, or was everyone sitting around the perimeter of the courtyard talking about me, staring at me? I felt so exposed. I just wanted to shrink away to nothing, but I was stuck a gigantic monstrosity.

A vixen made the mistake of pointing at me in the most painfully indiscrete way possible. Welp, I was going to get to the bottom of this. Crossing the no-man's land that existed between myself and all of the others in two strides, I plopped down with a dull thud.

"What's up?" I asked sweetly, shifting onto my stomach and resting my chin on the backs of my hands, my face only a few feet away from the startled vixen and her friend. "What were you talking about just now?"

"N-nothing," the vixen stammered.

"My name's Tabitha, not Nothing," my grin broadened. She'd been gossiping about me, I just knew it. "And you are?"

"I have to go," the vixen replied, exchanging glances with the panda she was sitting next to.

She made to leave, but found my outstretched hand to be blocking her path. Hey, much as I hated the whole giantess thing, it still had its perks.

"Aw, don't leave. I'm just trying to get to know more people," I pouted as she turned back towards me. "I'm new here, in case you didn't know,"

“Oh, we knew that,” the vixen replied shortly. She tried to walk around my hand, but I walked my fingers in pace with her, not letting her pass.

“So is sitting across the courtyard and whispering about her your way of greeting the new girl? Here I am, just trying to fit in,” I sighed dramatically.

The vixen and panda couldn’t find the words, but a hyena stepped in, posturing and squaring off cockily. Like he could take me in a fight. I snorted slightly at the thought of it.

“You *don’t* fit. We don’t want you around here,” he barked. Well, he was a direct one. Did not mince words, that much was for sure. “What’s the big deal, anyway?”

I arched a brow in bemusement. “I’m going to ignore the horrible pun. And the blatant rudeness. But that’s not really a good question. Care to elaborate?”

“What the hell are you doing here? Why are you so fucking big?” the hyena snapped. “Well, I have to learn just as much as you all. Not that education has done all that much for *you*, it would seem. As for my, er, excessive proportions, beats the hell out of me. Your guess is as good as mine,” I replied brusquely.

“Right. So you aren’t going to own up to all the freaky science experiments,” a husky chipped in, stepping up beside the hyena.

“The only freaky science experiment I’ve ever been involved in was back in freshman chemistry, when my partner nearly burned a hole in my foot with flaming magnesium,” I said, more than a little confused. “What are you talking—”

“Or the growth hormones,” else cut me off.

“No. None of... why am I even *listening* to this bullshit?” my eyes narrowed. I *really* didn’t like being ganged up on. The whole situation was backfiring in just about as many ways conceivable.

“What about all of the weird genetic—”

“**SHUT UP!** Just shut *up!* All of you,” I bellowed, getting thunderously to my feet. The circle that had been forming around me drew rapidly outward. Standing at my full height, I was seething, hands balled into fists. “It’s none of your fucking business how I got so big. I don’t know how it happened. Nobody knows. But that doesn’t matter. Just... just leave me alone,”

Dead silence. Then the whispering started again. If they had hated me unreasonably, well, now I’d given them an excuse. Fuck me. Fuck high school. Fuck the stupid, vicious, petty rumor mill. If other people got mad, it wasn’t given much of a second thought. But if *I* got angry, it was suddenly a huge deal. My ears were flat against my head and I was shaking slightly. To my horror, I found I even briefly entertained thoughts of squashing one or two of the fuckers, just to vent my frustration. That was unacceptable—*evil*. I wasn’t a monster. Screwing my eyes shut, I pressed my hands to my temples and tried to clear my head. Taking a deep breath, I scowled down at the group, lip curled in disdain.

“Tell your stupid student government you guys have a pretty shitty welcoming committee,” I snapped with a stamp of my foot, just to prove that I could knock over some of the stupid little bullies.

I stepped over the ring of people, crossing the space in a few strides. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of Ciaran hurrying into the courtyard toward me, but I ignored him. All I wanted to do was go home.

“Honey, can I come in?”

“Sure. Fine. Whatever,”

I glanced up from the squiggles I’d been busy tracing on the surface of the table with my finger to see my father standing near my left hand.

“You know, you should probably think of something to say other than ‘can I come in’ if you’re already in the damn room,” I commented.

Dad shrugged, smiling. “I just wanted to let you know that you got a call. from school. Kyr... Keen...”

“Ciaran?” my ears perked up.

“Yeah, that sounds about right,” Dad nodded. “He just said to tell you he heard what had happened and was sorry about today. Also wanted to know if you were still on for tomorrow night,”

“He didn’t need to apologize. Nothing was his fault,” I said. “But yeah,” I added, “Tell him yeah, we’re still on,”

“On for *what*, anyway?”

“A crazy meth-fueled orgy. With lots of booze. And guns. And cheating on all our exams,”

“I remember those when I was in high school. Always good fun,”

Dad sat down on the end of the street lamp I’d shortened and turned into a sort of stylus. I could write with it when I dipped it in ink, not that we could afford much me-sized paper. My parents looked like dolls whenever they were around my room and me. Everything looked like doll stuff around me.

“We’re going to a movie at the drive-in. Just to hang out. He’s that mink I was telling you about yesterday,”

“Oh, yeah. Keenan,”

“Ciaran,”

“But what was he apologizing for? Tab, did something happen at school? Are we going to be getting a call from the principal later?”

“No, it was nothing. Everything’s okay,”

Dad nodded again, but I knew he saw right through me. “If there’s anything you want to talk about, just say it. It’s part of the whole ‘parent’ gig,”

“It’s okay,”

“You know I mean it. I’m here for you. Your mom and I both,” Dad said, his tone gentle.

“I know,”

Getting to his feet, Dad reached over and rubbed me on the knuckle. “If you need anything, just let me know,”

“Oh, and can you tell Ciaran I’m looking forward to it?” I called after Dad as he opened the small door to leave.

He leaned around the door, beaming. “Sure thing. Should I be setting the date for your wedding or something?”

“I’m gonna punch you,”

“You’d better not do that. I value my life,” Dad laughed. He blinked, looking straight at me. “I love you, Tabitha,”

He was so plain and simple and sincere, I felt a single fat tear escape the corner of my eye. But I brushed it off, smiling warmly.

“I know,”

I did know, though.

III.

Neighborhood #2 (Laïka)

When daddy comes home, you always start a fight
So the neighbors can dance in the police disco lights
(Arcade Fire)

I saw the little mink leaning against a tree, running a hand through his hair nervously as I arrived in Haverford Park a little bit after our scheduled meeting time. He grinned up at me as I kneeled down.

“Hey there,” I smiled. “Sorry I’m late,”

Ciaran shrugged, walking over to the bike he had propped against a nearby drinking fountain. “No worries. The drive-in is only a couple blocks away,”

I walked slowly next to the sidewalk as Ciaran peddled away, trying to keep pace with me. While I’d briefly entertained the thought of offering to carry him, I didn’t want to run the risk of injuring Ciaran on a first date. No. This wasn’t a date. What the fuck was I thinking? Not a date. Just a chance to get to know Ciaran better. Hang out.

The Landmark was a pretty nice theatre (for a drive-in, at least), and I really enjoyed the film as well (a Cliff MacKay action flick—I had made a solemn vow to marry that raccoon several years ago, and I wasn’t about to let being several orders of magnitude larger than him get in the way of that). I had to sit way in the back so as to not block anyone’s field of view and couldn’t steal any of Ciaran’s popcorn, but that didn’t stop me from really having a great time.

As we passed the park on the way back home, Ciaran came to a halt. He looked up at me, getting off his bike propping it against a tree.

“I think we should go our separate ways from here,” he said.

“It’s really no trouble for me to walk you home,” I offered. “No hassle at all,”

Taking a leaf from my book, Ciaran was doing his best to avoid looking at me—no small task, given how large I was.

“I’d hate to inconvenience you,” he mumbled. “Besides... it’s just... my parents... I don’t think they’d...”

The poor mink was floundering. I dropped gently to my knees, trying not to create too much of an impact.

“Hey, guy. No worries,” I murmured, smiling sympathetically. “I had a great time. I liked hanging out,”

Ciaran looked relieved. “I’m just really glad you could come. It’s been awhile since I’ve just, you know, spent time with ,”

“Me too,” I replied. “Thanks for inviting me to that. I’ve had a pretty hard time meeting folks since... this,” I gestured at myself.

“It was fun,” Ciaran replied. “Hey—would you want to hang out again sometime soon?”

“I’d like that,” I said, smiling. I shifted slightly. “I should probably get going. Parents burning the midnight oil, most likely,”

The mink looked up at me for a moment, seeming conflicted about something. Then he nodded and smiled before turning on his heels and cutting through the park towards his house. Getting back to my feet, I started the final leg of the trip home. I was grinning uncontrollably. Hell, I even felt like whistling a bit.

“Oi! Keep it down up there!” some irritable person bellowed from a house as I passed.

Oops, totally didn’t mean to kick that topiary off its plot. Damn. A bit hard to see those sorts of things in the dark, asshole. If a gal wants to whistle while she walks, let her whistle.

I breathed a sigh of relief as I rounded my house to the backyard. My bedroom window was still open a crack; I wouldn’t have to risk sneaking in through the front door. Sliding the pane up, I was excruciatingly aware of each and every squeak and squeal from the glass. A steady stream of booze and shitty food had dulled many of Dad’s senses, but his hearing remained terrifyingly acute. If he caught me violating curfew, I was a goner.

With the window open just enough to accommodate me, I squeezed through and slipped into bed, peeling off my clothes as I went. Nestled under the covers, I slowly closed my eyes. My bed felt secure. I didn’t know if I could say I felt ‘safe’ anywhere in the house, but my bed was a warm, soft island of security in the midst of a roiling sea of chaos. Being there gave me a chance to think about my day, plan for the future... whatever struck my fancy.

As I tried to drift off to sleep, Tabitha consumed my every thought. Granted, given her gigantic proportions, it wasn't that hard to fill up every last nook and cranny of my brain. So big. Good gods. It would have been terrifying to be around anyone else if they were so enormous.

To be perfectly honest, even Tabitha still scared me maybe just a little bit. I always had to be careful around her unless I wanted to get accidentally squished underfoot. But she was so *nice*. Tabitha had an odd manner: that was for sure. But it was an odd manner that nevertheless managed to be somehow endearing. And the ferretess had the cutest smile...

Gods, was this infatuation? I couldn't. She was massive—there was no way *dating* could work like that, right? And the feeling couldn't possibly be mutual. Besides. Mom and Dad would never approve of me dating a girl who was larger than our house. Life was just easier if I kept my parents 'happy'. Not that 'happy' was a term that could ever really apply to them.

Doing my best to cast my mind elsewhere, I willed myself to sleep, floating away into sleep as I felt enveloped by the warmth of my bed.

The weeks that followed were actually pretty nice. You could even say that they were really great. I was doing *well* in school for the first time in months. Hell, I even aced my last Chem oral (Given my stature, I had to take all of my exams orally—it would take a hell of a lot of 8 ½ x 11 papers taped together for me to answer anything in writing, after all.).

My social life was beginning to look like a real social life again, or at least some semblance of one. It was completely obvious that I would never be the most popular girl in school, or even *liked* by most of my classmates. The whispers still followed me everywhere, and I still had to deal with the whole giantess stigma. But I had Ciaran to talk with at lunch and sit through classes with. He was only one person in a student body of nearly two thousand, but he made a difference. The little guy even talked me down from an altercation or two when things got rough with the others. Rougher than usual, that is.

For his supposed lack of social graces, Ciaran turned out to be quite the fount of activity ideas. Weekends soon came to be the highlight of my week (granted, that's probably something of a universal truth), as that little mink always had something fun up his sleeve.

He showed me nice outdoor spaces, we had some fun picnics, and one time we even went to an outdoor concert. Ciaran had even gone through all the trouble of working with the concert coordinators to make sure that they knew I'd be there and that an area was cordoned off for me to hang out. It wasn't exactly normal for a 90-foot ferretess to just show up. Didn't want to cause a panic or something.

After everything that he'd done for me, I wanted to do something to return the favor. Besides, my parents had been pestering to meet this mysterious mink boy who had been spiriting their daughter away on such a regular basis.

"You doing anything tonight?" I asked Ciaran one Friday afternoon at lunch.

The mink shook his head. "Nope. Just hanging out around the house, I guess,"

I grinned. "Great! Would you like to come over to my place for dinner? Mom's gonna be making her coconut curry, which is absolutely to die for. And my parents are *dying* to meet you,"

"They are?" Ciaran blinked in confusion.

"Absolutely. They're so weird," I snorted. "So, you in?"

Ciaran nodded fervently. "When should I get there?"

Finding Tabitha's house was probably the easiest thing I'd done in weeks. There was only one house in town with a ten-story high one-story structure in its backyard, after all. As I approached the front door, I brushed aside the lingering aftertaste of Mom accusing me of hating her cooking as I'd left and put on a happy face for Tabitha's parents.

A svelte, nicely dressed ferretess answered the doorbell. She had the warmest, most motherly smile I'd ever seen.

"Ciaran, I presume?" she asked, accepting the salad I offered.

"Yeah," I replied.

"Nice to meet you," Mama Crane smiled. "Come right this way,"

Tabitha (or rather her parents, I supposed) had a nice house. It wasn't excessively large or fancy or anything, but it felt cozy and inviting. I even briefly debated taking photos to show Mom.

Dinner was set up in the backyard. The kitchen table had been dragged out onto the lawn, situated on a low wooden platform. A burly wolverine in shirtsleeves was setting out utensils and checking on the steaming pot of curry while Tabitha looked on, sitting cross-legged next to the whole set-up. I'd grown accustomed to seeing Tabitha at school, but seeing her dwarfing everything around in this new domestic setting took me aback for a moment. I mean, I supposed she was a giantess 24/7, not just during class. She looked so cute dressed in her pink-and-cream polo and blue jeans. Given her proportions, she didn't have that diverse a wardrobe, but that outfit was my personal favorite of hers.

Tabitha grinned broadly when she noticed me. “Glad you could make it!”

The wolverine strode over to me, giving me a firm handshake. “Good to meet you, Ciaran. Nice to finally meet the person responsible for my daughter’s sudden interest in behaving like a normal teenager again,”

“Uh, thanks,” I laughed softly as I sat down at the table.

Dinner was exquisite. Tabitha hadn’t exaggerated the deliciousness of her mother’s curry in the slightest, and everything else was just as mouth-watering.

“This salad is really good, Ciaran,” Tabitha’s mother commented as I bit into another piece of naan. “Did your mom make it?”

“I did, actually. Thanks, Mrs. Crane,” I replied.

“Please. It says ‘Asha’ on my birth certificate,” the ferretess smiled.

“And I’m Ed,” the wolverine chipped in. “But you’re also welcome to call me Your Worship or Sir. I’m fine with those, too,”

Tabitha rolled her eyes, tossing naan by the dozen into her mouth. “Good gods, Dad. Calm it down,”

“Do you always do this? For dinner, I mean?” I asked, gesturing at the setup.

“Well, there isn’t *always* delicious food,” Tabitha said, licking her fingers. “In fact, I’d even go so far as to say sometimes it’s pretty terrible. When Dad’s in charge of it, at least,”

“I’ll have you know that barbecue we had last weekend was *very* good by some accounts. And I’ll also have you know it took me the better part of the afternoon to grill up enough food for you, Tab,” Ed protested.

“Tell that to the fire department,” Tabitha snorted in reply.

“More help for me,” Ed chuckled. “We ought to hire a bunch of fucking line cooks to prep your meals,”

“Better than eating innocent townsfolk,” grinned maliciously.

Asha rolled her eyes. “We built this platform as soon as Tabitha’s room was completed,” she said, leaning over to me. “Ed and I wanted her to still feel like a part of the family, despite... the circumstances,”

“Unless it’s raining,” the wolverine corrected, scooping up some more curry. “Then it’s just every man for himself. Tab can eat on her own,”

“Good thing we don’t live in Saaduuts, then. I’d never see you guys. Pours every damn day over there, from what I hear,” Tabitha laughed. “But I mostly only stick around for dinners because I don’t have to do anyone’s dishes,”

I blinked, nodding in numb understanding. I hadn’t had a family dinner in longer than I could remember. What can I say? We were more of a ‘go eat your TV dinner in your room before I wring your fucking neck’ sort of family. There wasn’t even a *TV* aspect to the TV dinner. A damn shame, if you asked me.

“So, how long have you lived here? I think we owe you big-time for getting Tab acquainted and showing her around town,” Asha said, interrupting my melancholy reverie.

“I’ve lived here basically my whole life,” I responded. “My parents moved here when I was 3 or 4, I think. So I’m pretty familiar with the area, I guess. Not that there’s all that much going on in Winthrop,”

“Plan on getting out of the small town after high school? College in the big city?” Ed asked.

There was no way my parents would be able to afford college, and even less of a chance they would co-sign on a loan for me. I’d recently applied to College-on-the-Hill over in Saaduuts, but it was mostly just to get my high school counselor to give me a break and stop nagging me.

“Yeah, maybe,” I shrugged. “Hard to think of life after high school, though. Take it as it comes, I guess,”

“And what do your folks do?” Asha asked, passing me the bowl of rice.

This time, I had a prepared answer ready. I was used to fielding that question.

“Dad works in construction. I think he even worked on Tab’s house thingy,” I gestured over at the large structure behind us.

He hadn’t. Hell, he hadn’t worked on a project in at least a year and a half. Ever since he’d had an issue with a herniated disc, Dad had been placed on disability leave. Well, the condition had been dealt with, but he remained “injured,” preferring to collect a check than to actually do some work.

“Tell your dad thanks, then. You would not *believe* the amount of whining that one did when she had to sleep outside in the rain. What a baby,” Ed rolled his eyes theatrically.

I grinned slightly as I saw Tabitha mimed smashing her father into the ground over his shoulder.

"You should've invited Ciaran's whole family," Asha commented to Tabitha. "Now we're going to have to go through this *all over again* to meet them,"

"The horror," Tabitha gasped dramatically.

The trio laughed and I suddenly felt overwhelmed. My head was spinning. Tabitha's parents were so nice and kind... so *normal*. Their daughter could carry them around in her pockets if she liked, but they still cared *for* her and cared *about* her. And they thought my parents were the same way. It was all...

"I'm sorry, but where is your restroom?" I asked.

"Second door on the left," Ed gestured toward the sliding glass door at the back of the house.

Nodding my thanks, I pushed back from the table and headed into the home. I found myself walking past the bathroom and straight out the front door. Sitting on the stoop, I hugged my knees to my chest, staring out across the front lawn.

"What's up?"

I looked up in shock to see Tabitha crouched next to me, a look of gentle concern on her face. For being so enormous, she could move really quietly when she wanted. She was sitting on her haunches, hand resting on the rooftop.

"Oh, it's nothing. Just getting fresh air," I sighed.

"The air *is* a lot nicer in the front yard," the ferretess commented sardonically. Her expression softened and she sat down on the lawn next to me. "But really. Is everything okay? Ciaran... you're the best friend I've ever had. I really mean that. And I hope that I've been a good friend to you. If there's anything you want to talk about—*anything*—I'm here for you. Honest,"

Massaging my temples, I stared down at the pavement between my feet. I wanted to tell Tabitha everything—how much I hated every moment I spent at my house, how scared I was of Dad, how much I despised Mom, how glad I was that she had come into my life—but my body just responded by crying. I buried my face in my hands, my entire body shaking violently.

"Ciaran..." Tabitha murmured. "I'm sorry,"

Regaining a modicum of self-control, I gasped for air, wiping my eyes with my sleeve. I looked up at the concerned ferretess, unsure of what to say.

"I wish my family was more like yours," I mumbled at length. "My dad scares me sometimes. A lot of the time. And it's just..."

Tabitha frowned as I trailed off again. “You shouldn’t have to deal with that. It’s not fair. We should talk to someone about it. Maybe my folks could talk with your parents. Or have you seen—”

I jumped to my feet in a panic. “No! No, I can’t do that. I’m sorry. Do you know how they’d *react*? They’d *kill* me!”

Tabitha’s brow furrowed even further. “We really should talk to someone. There are resources for this sort of thing, I’m sure. Please. Let me help you fix it,”

“Let me take care of it. I want to do it myself. Take charge for once,” I said.

I had no intent of actually going through with it—been there, tried that. But I figured it would be the kind of thing that would get Tabitha to back off. The ferretess nodded, getting to her feet, and I knew it had worked.

“Let’s get back to dinner. I think we’ll be just in time for dessert,” Tabitha smiled.

I followed after Tabitha around the back of the house and back to the table. The apple pie was delicious, and I went through the motions of making conversation and finishing things up.

Politely refusing Asha’s offer for a ride home, I made my way back across town, hands shoved into pockets. Much as I’d enjoyed spending more time with Tabitha and meeting her parents, it had further nurtured the seeds of resentment in my breast. But there they would remain—I’d never actually act on it. Are you kidding me? No way I could do that.

But I could get back at them. They couldn’t fucking control every last second of my life. I could exact my passive aggressive revenge on them. And I think I knew just how to do it.

Staring at myself in the reflection of the repurposed skyscraper windowpane that served as my mirror, I shook my head. How had I let Ciaran talk me into this? I was dressed utterly ridiculously in a clingy, revealing silk blouse that to this day I still had no idea how my parents had been remotely okay with me getting. Brushing a stray thread off the knee of my jeans, I adjusted my top one last time, running my fingers through my hair before heading out the door.

Hands shoved into pockets, I strode through the brisk night towards my usual meeting place with Ciaran at Haverford Park. For once in my life, I was actually early, beating even the always unreasonably punctual mink to the park. Sitting with my back against one of the sturdier trees, I listened for the familiar sound of Ciaran wheeling his bike up next to me.

My ears perked up and I grinned down at Ciaran as he arrived, coming to a dead halt a dozen feet or so away from me. He was slightly goggle-eyed.

“Holy wow. You look amazing,” he gaped.

I giggled. “You look pretty good yourself. Let’s get going! You *do* know where it is we’re supposed to be going, right?”

“Of course I do!” Ciaran insisted. “Just follow me. It’s basically just a few miles north of town right off the road. Can’t miss it,”

Ciaran was a pretty fast pedaler, especially with almost no traffic on the street, but I still had to walk very slowly to keep pace with him. I made a few more attempts at getting any details from the mink, but his lips were sealed. All I knew was that it was supposed to be some sort of “fun event.” Whatever that meant.

It didn’t appear to be exactly the most *legal* event, either. Ciaran had provided no address for the “fun event,” but I quickly learned that it probably didn’t even have one to begin with. No, it fell more along the lines of ‘warehouse in the middle of the fucking woods’.

“Ciaran, how did you find this?” I asked, looking around at the spectacle.

“Oh, I overheard something at lunch the other day. Figured it would be interesting to change things up,” Ciaran shrugged.

“You sure you want to do this?” I asked as we approached the building.

On second thought, I wasn’t too sure if the term ‘building’ could be used with that thing. ‘Burnt-out shell’ was probably more accurate. There was no roof to be accounted for, and two of the walls were only partially there anymore. Most of the building was crowded with people getting wasted and dancing to their heart’s content, spilling out onto the surrounding grass.

“Of course I want to!” he responded. “I want to have some fun! Don’t you?”

“Sure thing,” I shrugged.

I caused something of a commotion as I approached to the party. Not that I should have expected any other sort of response; I’d gotten used to that sort of thing. There were a few screams and a ‘what the fuck?’ or two, but fortunately, most of them were already too drunk to worry too much about a gigantic ferret girl showing up and sitting down.

“I want some beer!” I enthused as Ciaran walked his bike over to the side of the structure. Leaning over one of the walls, I grabbed up a couple of large metal kegs. I shrugged inwardly. They were perfectly proportioned for me.

Ciaran approached my knee, clutching onto a red cup. He’d already downed half of its contents.

“Cheers,” I laughed, tearing the top off one of the kegs.

I took a sip, grimacing slightly. To be honest, I hadn’t ever had a beer, besides the occasional sip I’d stolen from one of my parents’ mugs if they’d had some at dinner. It really tasted awful.

Ciaran wandered off to go refill his now-emptied cup and I got back to my feet. Damn. He was really pounding those things back.

The dull throb of bass from the DJ booth drifted up to my ears, and the tip of my tail began to twitch. As I polished off the pair of kegs (and replenished with another two... or four... uh, maybe six), dancing became more and more easy. Necessary, even.

Soon, I was flailing about with reckless abandon, sending folks scattering with each erratic step. My foot collided with a lone truck that had been foolishly parked in the middle of the field and I tripped, falling backward.

I crashed to the ground, crushing a smaller tree or two into matchwood under my back and giggling uncontrollably. The force of my collapse knocked a couple of people flat on their asses, provoking some loud complaints. Oh, well. Whatever. Bitches could deal.

But wait a moment. Where was Ciaran? Rolling over onto all fours, I crawled past the pancaked truck toward the building. The mink was there, face flushed and walking unsteadily as he weaved through the crowd back towards the entrance, giggling uncontrollably to himself. He came to a halt as he noticed me peering in through the large burned-out hole in the roof.

“Look out! Tabzilla!” he slurred.

“More like Queen Tab. Tab Kong. I’m not *that* big,” I snorted in response. “I’m bored,”

“Already?”

“Let’s go home,”

“Home?”

“My place!” I urged, beckoning impatiently. “Let’s get *out* of here,”

Ciaran found his way erratically towards his bike, leaned against a tree, and we turned our backs on the busy party.

IV.

Mystery Dance

Well, I remember when the lights went out
And I was tryin' to make it look like it was never in doubt
She thought that I knew, and I thought that she knew
So both of us were willing, but we didn't know what to do
(Elvis Costello)

Ciaran careened through the streets with reckless abandon, weaving wildly between the lanes. It was a good thing it was so late (Early? Did it even matter?), or else he'd have collided with at least a half dozen cars by that point. Not that I was in much better state. A couple of times, I caught myself nearly putting a foot through the front of a house as I passed. Oops. *That* wouldn't have been the most pleasant wake-up call for the sleeping occupants.

I smirked to myself as the little mink let out a wild whoop, flying over a bump in the pavement. Couldn't say as I blamed him. My body was buzzing. Being at the dance (and downing all that booze) had electrified me. I'd never felt more exhilarated, more alive.

I plopped down cross-legged on an open patch of grass as Ciaran came to a halt in a cul-de-sac, wheeling around to face me. The process of dismounting the bike proved to be a bit challenging and he nearly fell off. I giggled in amusement, propping up my chin on my hand.

"Damn, you're big," Ciaran mumbled, staring up at me.

"Just noticed that?" my brow arched as I smirked.

"Well... it's just... I dunno. You're so *powerful*. You could do things if you wanted. Take care of my dad," he muttered, more to himself than anything else.

I frowned, unsure whether I liked the darker turn Ciaran was taking. "Er..."

"I bet you couldn't smash that gazebo over there,"

My gaze followed Ciaran's unsteadily pointing finger. Sure enough, there was a rather dilapidated-looking gazebo a dozen feet or so away from my hip.

“I dunno...”

“Wimp,”

“Hey!”

I mean, I probably could. I was pretty strong, and that silly little wooden structure looked pretty flimsy. Guess you could expect that from the local Parks and Rec department. They weren’t exactly diligent with the upkeep of their parks.

Almost without thinking, I extended my arm, my hand hovering palm-down over the hapless gazebo. I brought it down hard. Ciaran laughed aloud as the structure crumpled, snapping like matchwood. I found myself smiling a bit—another rush of exhilaration.

“Let’s get out of here!” I laughed, getting to my feet.

I almost crouched down and scooped up the mink, bike and all, but the small remaining fraction of Sober Me managed to talk Drunk Me down from that. Little pat on the back there.

“Race you home!” I giggled, taking off down the street.

I sat on the edge of the bed as Ciaran wandered unsteadily around the surface of the nightstand, staring about himself in bewilderment. How much had the little guy *had*? He was majorly out of it. Granted, I wasn’t in much of a better position.

“Everything’s so... big,” he mumbled.

“That pretty much hits the nail on the head,” I grinned.

I swung my legs up onto the bed and reclined so that my face was level with Ciaran, who had sat down on the edge of the nightstand. All of a sudden, Drunk Me got super touchy-feely.

“I really enjoy the time we’ve been spending together. But, you know... I think we need to talk about what we *have* together,”

The mink looked confused and a little bit apprehensive. “What do you mean?”

“I mean... well, are we *dating*?” I asked.

Ciaran gulped visibly. Not exactly the response I’d been hoping for.

“We don’t have to if you don’t want,” I added hastily. “I really value our friendship, if that’s what you want,”

Shouldn't have been surprised. I mean, who would *really* want to date someone who was over a dozen times bigger than him? No relationship should have a liability clause.

Ciaran finally managed to get over his silence. "That's not what I meant..."

Then I got stupid. Blame it on the a-a-a-a-a-alcohol, I guess.

"Ciaran?" I mumbled. "Can I... pick you up?"

The mink blinked. "Huh?" he hesitated.

I cringed inwardly. Shit. There went everything.

"Uh, sure," Ciaran nodded.

Sitting up again, I placed my slightly shaking hand palm-up on the nightstand beside Ciaran. He looked at it a moment, then clambered on, grabbing onto the tip of my thumb for support. His feet tickled the surface of my palm a bit. Ciaran sat down cross-legged in the center of my hand, resting in the groove of my palm.

Curling my fingers inward a little, I lifted him gingerly off the surface of the nightstand. I focused as best I could on being careful and gentle. The last time I'd tried to pick someone up, my poor mom (the unintended victim) had gotten motion sickness. The fact that I was more than a little unsteady at the moment only made matters that much more difficult.

I smiled warmly as I held Ciaran at face-level. I couldn't believe it. I was holding his tiny little life in the palm of my hand. He was so warm. I could feel his body on my hand. I could really *feel* him.

"I think I'm in love with you," Ciaran blurted suddenly.

My heart was racing a million miles an hour. I opened my mouth, but only a couple of nonsense sounds came out.

Ciaran's eyes were downcast. "I understand. I'm sorry I—"

"I want to kiss you so bad," I gasped.

Ciaran fell quiet. He shifted onto his knees, leaning toward me. "Just do it, then,"

I couldn't help but smile. Bringing the mink closer to my face, I closed my eyes. I brushed my lips gently against Ciaran. I could feel the contours of his body, smell the subtle cinnamon-y scent of his fur. Ciaran did his best to kiss me back, resting his hand against my lower lip.

It was all a bit awkward, to be perfectly honest. But it was nice. *Very* nice. That was an understatement. Extending the tip of my tongue a little, I caressed his body.

"I love you, Ciaran. I love you so much," I murmured. I paused a moment, staring at Ciaran. "I want you so badly,"

I found myself lying back on the bed, practically dangling Ciaran over my face. Giggling uncontrollably, I tore his shirt away with my teeth. Ciaran gasped in surprise and pleasure, groping my upper lip.

Dropping the mink onto my pillow, I fumbled with my own top. I rolled onto my stomach, trying to simultaneously unclasp the hooks that closed my silken blouse and make out with Ciaran.

"You smell like beer," Ciaran giggled, unbuckling his pants.

"You do too," I retorted.

"Well, you're a lot bigger than me. So the magnitude..."

"Touché," I rolled my eyes.

I closed my eyes in ecstasy, dragging my tongue along the mink's body. When I opened them again, Ciaran was sprawled on his stomach on my pillow, down to his boxers.

Oh, *shit*. Ciaran behaved like he was some sort of 9-on-the-Richter-Scale social disaster. But at no point had he informed his body to comply with his rigorous standards. His svelte figure was absolutely impeccable, with sleek fur and finely toned slim musculature.

"Gods, you're amazing," I gasped. Then I balked. "But we probably shouldn't. Don't want to do anything we'll regret,"

Even as I spoke, my hands busied themselves peeling off my jeans and tossing them aside. I just needed to take more clothes off.

Ciaran reached out to brush a hand against the tip of my nose. "Why not? I think we both want this,"

"I don't want to hurt you," I whispered. Much as I wanted it, I was scared.

"We kissed and you didn't accidentally swallow me or something, right? Tab, I *love* you,"

"But I'm... you know... gigantic. I might crush you when I, er, come," I blushed deeply, the tips of my ears turning bright red. "Besides. I haven't ever... *been* with a boy. Ever. I'm... self-conscious,"

You know, considering how inebriated I was at the time, Drunk Me was exerting a surprising amount of self-control. Damn. Pat on the back right there.

Ciaran blushed almost as violently as I. “You’re beautiful, Tab. Take off your clothes,”

Self-control gone.

I wasn’t used to Ciaran being so assertive. But being bossed around by someone a fraction my size was kinda sexy, for some reason. I found myself unwrapping the strips of cloth that composed my bra and boyshorts, grinning seductively down at Ciaran. Really needed to figure out a better underwear situation. Ciaran grinned eagerly, pulling off his own underwear. I giggled, caressing his nude body with my tongue.

Cupping the mink gently in my palm, I shifted around on the bed. I lay out fully on my back, my breathing shallow. I couldn’t believe this was happening. Then again, I wasn’t even sure *how* this was going to be happening.

“How does this even *work*?” I asked.

Ciaran arched a brow. “You’ve been a giantess for *months* now, and you haven’t given *any* thought to how you’d, you know, *do it*?”

I shrugged. “I didn’t think anyone would want to *associate* with me, much less *sleep* with me,”

“Got *that* wrong, didn’t you?”

“I guess so,”

“Umm... Put me on your—your stomach, I guess,” Ciaran mumbled. He was incredibly fidgety, shifting nervously on my hand.

“We don’t have to do this,” I said for probably the billionth time that evening.

“I want to. You want to. Gods. Let’s not debate it any more,”

I laid Ciaran on my stomach, feeling his warmth against mine. I closed my eyes gently, sensing his every movement. He moved slowly through the dense fur of my stomach.

Part of me was absolutely petrified—what if I crushed Ciaran in the throes of my passion? Shaking my head, I refused to think about that or let it happen. I wanted this. I wanted to feel happy. Shuddering in anticipation, I bucked as he slipped into me feet-first.

My breathing grew ragged as I felt Ciaran fumbling around inside me. He made the best decision possible and grabbed onto my clitoris for support, drawing a small shriek from me. Cupping my breast, I arched my back, relishing Ciaran’s every movement. As the sensations heightened to the bursting point, I reached over my head with my arms, gripping the headboard with my hands. A long, slow moan escaped through my lips.

I couldn't handle it anymore. I reached down, caressing Ciaran with my fingertips. I guided his movements gently, closing my eyes.

Still reeling in pleasure, I took Ciaran in my hand, bearing my miniature lover to my face. I had to reciprocate, didn't I? Holding Ciaran up to my lips, I extended my tongue, dragging it along his body, slowly at first, but with ever-increasing intensity. Ciaran let out a little squeak as I began to focus on his waist region. He braced his hands against my upper lip, struggling against my assaults. Feeling devious, I gripped him a bit more firmly, not letting him escape. It only took him a couple minutes to come. Boys are so easy.

Swinging my legs over the side of the bed, I strode towards the cabinet on the other side of the room. Still making out furiously with Ciaran, I reached up and pulled out my vat of Nutella with my free hand.

Dipping a startled Ciaran up to the midriff in the chocolaty, hazelnutty deliciousness, I licked it all off him.

"What's going on?" Ciaran gasped as I went in for seconds.

"A girl gets hungry after sex," I commented through a mouthful of chocolate-coated Ciaran. "I'm just glad I have a guy who can double as a dipping stick,"

"Glad I could be of service," the mink snorted as he found himself dragged through the Nutella once again. "Nutella. Sexy,"

"Sex?"

I couldn't get back to the bed fast enough.

Afterwards, Tabitha lay sprawled on the bed, breathing deeply. Draped across her breast, I lay buried in her warm cream fur. I ran my hand absentmindedly through her dense fur, drawing an appreciative rumble from the giantess.

It was all so overwhelming. I'd been around Tabitha a lot the past weeks. But I hadn't ever thought I'd be *on* her, and I certainly hadn't thought I'd ever be *in* her. It had all been so intense—the scent of her arousal, the sensations of her fur, the force of her contractions. The ferretess' orgasm was a godsdamn hurricane, and that was *before* her fingers had rescued me. And her *tongue*. Holy mother of fuck.

To be perfectly honest, I was stunned it had turned out so well. I was playing it totally by ear. They hadn't ever taught us much about actually having sex to *begin* with back in sex ed classes, much less sex with a girl who could probably swallow you whole if she really wanted to. Fortunately, she seemed to have been satisfied by all of my random fumbling and flailing, and her reciprocal fumbling had been pretty damn enjoyable, too.

Shifting slightly, I drew my legs up to my chest. Tabitha's hand cupped gently over me, rubbing me gently on the back with a fingertip.

"Does this mean we're officially dating?" I murmured.

My entire body shook as Tabitha laughed. "I'd guess so. Gimme another kiss, boyfriend,"

Grumbling theatrically, I began my lazy way up towards the ferretess' face, dragging my way through the jungle of her fur. Her fingertips hurried me onward as she giggled.

"Try not to make it seem like such a chore," she teased.

"Hey, I hope you appreciate how much I do for you. Most boys don't have a girlfriend whose body is a fucking *landscape*," I snarked good-naturedly.

"I'd prefer 'wonderland' to 'landscape', thank you very much," Tabitha snorted.

"Well, I figured you'd eat me if I used shitty song lyrics to describe you," I replied, stroking her collarbone.

The giantess' final prod sent me toppling against her waiting lips, which attacked me voraciously. I cried out in pleasure, though I have to say there might have been a bit of fear in there too.

"Careful!" I cautioned. "You're so strong!"

We got back to making out, but an insistent murmur at the back of my mind kept me from fully enjoying myself. I'd had a lot of fun, and I really did love Tabitha. But why did she have to be so big? It was dangerous, what I was doing.

Oh, shut up, I chided myself, stroking Tabitha's upper lip. *Just go with it.*

My heart skipped a beat as Tabitha's mouth suddenly opened widely and she let out a jaw-cracking yawn. I fell down against her neck as beer-laden breath washed over me.

"Someone's sleepy," I commented, following up my statement with an involuntary yawn.

"Let's call it a night, okay, little guy?" Tabitha smiled, allowing me to clamber to a more comfortable portion of her body. The gentle rise and fall of the ferretess' chest lulled me off to a peaceful sleep.

The next morning, Ciaran was sitting on the edge of my pillow. I grinned as I turned over to face him, giving him a good-morning peck on the... well, body. I'm not exactly one for finesse.

"Fuck, you're hot," Ciaran murmured, brushing his hand against the tip of my nose. "Just in case I haven't emphasized that enough yet,"

Blushing violently, I laughed softly. "Let's not do anything today. No schedule, no worries, no clothes," I replied. "Let's just be you and me. Together. All day,"

I rolled out of bed—or, rather, I *tried* to. As soon as my feet hit the ground, a powerful wave of nausea sent me toppling back onto the bed. Ciaran squeaked loudly in surprise, barely getting out of the way in time.

"Oop! Steady goes it, not so much, I guess," I said. Why'd I have so much to drink last night?

"You nearly *squished* me!" Ciaran squawked.

"Sorry, Ciaran. I owe you one," I breathed.

"I want you to kiss me again, then," he replied petulantly.

Who was I to deny that?

My second attempt at a cross-room journey was much more successful, if a bit wobbly. I made a stop at the sink, sticking my head under the stream of water and drinking deeply from the water. Switching the faucet off, I wandered unevenly towards the cupboard.

"Choco Puffs?" I asked, pulling out the huge burlap sack of cereal and a bowl as I looked over my shoulder towards the bed.

Ciaran nodded his agreement, and I poured a little extra into my hand for him. Sitting down on the edge of the bed, I set the mink on my leg and offered him the cereal.

"I hope you don't mind it dry," I said. I kinda hated cereal. I couldn't afford to have milk with it, and now it basically had the consistency of couscous. So tiny. Besides, I was a bit too queasy to try eating anything much.

I glanced down at the mink on my thigh, who was eating out of my hand. Infuriatingly, he appeared to be nowhere near as hung-over as I was feeling at the moment.

"Want anything more?" I asked.

"Well, *you*..."

The cereal bowl clattered to the floor and I was clutching Ciaran to my face, kissing him passionately. There was always time for round two. Well, three, technically. For those keeping score at home. Fucking creepers.

A knock at the door startled me out of my ecstasy. Blind panic gripping me, I plucked my new boyfriend off my stomach and swiftly hid him under my pillow, apologizing fervently under my breath. Pulling on my pajamas, I groaned loudly, letting the knocker know I'd heard.

Tabitha's hand withdrew, leaving me alone in a warm, soft, dark cave of sorts between her pillow and the surface of the bed. It was spacious enough; all I could do was sit tight and hope she didn't mash herself against the pillow or something like that. Being crushed to death was not on my agenda for the day.

Leaning against the headboard with my legs hugged to my chest and tail curled around my feet, I tried to listen in on what was happening in the rest of the room. No dice. Aside from some muffled phrases and Tabitha's louder rumblings, it all just sounded like a convention of trombone-parents from one of those *Charlie Brown Bear* holiday specials.

With nothing else to do, I tried to sort through the whirlwind of activity that had comprised the previous evening in a slightly more conscious and much more sober light. It had all been so fun, so invigorating. Tabitha had been a really good friend, and now I had so much *more* with her. We'd shared things that I'd never shared with anybody else before, and it really meant something. It had been so long since I'd just been *happy* like that. The drinking hadn't been too bad, either.

Hold the phone. Our night of fun had been tainted, and tainted mostly by me. Why the fuck had I encouraged her to smash that gazebo? I'd been all systems go with all of that alcohol coursing through me, and it just seemed like something fun to do. But that was no excuse to be stupid and irresponsible and destructive.

I'd nearly gotten *myself* killed, too! Tabitha had put me in her mouth and I hadn't said a thing—what if she'd accidentally bitten me in half? And the stupid had just gone on from there. I'd spent the night sleeping on her godsdamn *boob*, for fuck's sake. What would have happened if she'd rolled over in her sleep? The ferretess was so interesting and fun and sexy, but I couldn't be so complacent. She was over a dozen times my size; it wasn't some sort of game.

Just as I finished dressing and slumped on the bed, the small door at the base of my own opened and my father walked in, followed by a rather attractive red fox dressed in a dark suit. I really hoped they couldn't smell all the sex that had been going on. Or see how fucking hung-over I was, for that matter. Awkward.

“Tab, This is Mr. Smith, and he’s here to talk with you,” Dad said. He turned to the fox on his way out. “If you need anything, just let me know,”

Mr. Smith? Who the fuck was that? I leaned down over the edge of the bed, staring hazily at the little fox. He looked up at me for a moment before stiffening oddly.

“What?” I asked, arching an eyebrow. “Never seen a 90-foot ferretess?”

“Quite the contrary. You’re downright short compared to what I usually deal with. I was just anticipating you reaching down and grabbing me up like some sort of ragdoll,” the fox replied a bit snappily.

My brow arched further. “Don’t you think that would be a bit rude? I mean, I *could* if you want,” I dropped my arm over the side of the bed, my hand landing a few feet away from the fox. “But there’s a ladder up to the nightstand over there. That’s what people usually use,”

The fox relaxed visibly, smiling a bit. “Let me tell you, *that* is a sentence I don’t hear often. Thank the gods. You could teach a lesson or two to the folks I, er... work with,”

“What do you even want?” I asked as the fox made his way up the ladder.

All of the implication and attitude was making my head spin. Or was that the hangover? I summoned up the energy to prop my cheek up on my hand to look blearily at the nightstand, getting a better look at my guest. The fox had a slim frame and sharp facial features. Deep green eyes peered intently at me from under a mop of silvery-white hair.

“Hey, you’re kinda cute,” I giggled.

“Come back when you’re a boy and about six years older, and then we might chat,” he replied flatly.

“I’ll get working on it,”

“Almost forgot to introduce myself! Now *I’m* the rude one. I’m Roger Smith with MACRO,” the fox said, standing on the surface of the nightstand.

Wait, was he implying that I had ever been the rude one in this situation? What was going on? Who *was* this Roger character?

“MACRO? Is that some sort of tax firm or something?” I snorted.

“Government agency, actually,” Roger clarified, adjusting his tie knot. “I don’t know how up with current events or whatever you are, but we have a bit of a deal with folks such as yourself back in Saaduuts. I’m a field agent, something of a specialist in those sorts of relations,”

“I’m big,” I shrugged. “What’s there to be a specialist about?”

Seeing this silly little serious fox pacing back and forth so earnestly on my nightstand made me snort in derision. I mean, he was barely as tall as my *alarm clock*, for fuck's sake. Had I forgotten to put him back with the rest of my action figures?

"Could you... stop moving so much?" I rubbed my eyes. He was making me dizzy again.

The fox scowled, but stopped, sitting down on the edge of the nightstand, legs dangling over the side.

"Well, you see, you're something of an enigma," Roger fixed me with his piercing emerald gaze. "How long have you been that large? A few months, right?"

I shrugged again.

"Exactly. See, back in the Saad', we get giants. Which is weird. But we only get 'em for about a day at a time, tops. Then they shrink back down to normal. That clearly isn't the case *here*," he gestured at me.

I shrugged slightly. "Yeah, you're telling *me*. Look. Are you here to fix me or what?"

The fox looked downcast. "I wish I was. I really do. But no. We have no idea how to do that sort of thing. Believe me. It's the subject of intense research, but we have nothing right now,"

I rolled so I was facing away from Roger, expelling my breath forcefully as I stared at the ceiling. "Well, that's just fucking great. More useless bullshit,"

"Trust me. We want to help you, and we're doing everything we can. In fact, one of the researchers working on it is sort of like you. Every time she gets too pissed or... you know, gets intimate with her boyfriend, she suddenly shoots up to ten stories tall for the span of a few hours. All tied to emotions, far as we can tell. Ferretess, too, now that I think about it. What is it *with* you guys?" Roger asked as I turned back to face him.

"Well, at least she can be the same size as everyone else most of the time. I met an amazing guy who I love so much. But I can't *be with* him in the same way as everyone else. I want to be normal. I want things to be normal for Ciaran," I glanced toward the pillow. "You can come out now. Roger won't say anything to my dad," I shot the fox a look as I finished.

"Where the fuck are my clothes?" came Ciaran's muffled reply.

The tips of my ears turned pink and Roger rolled his eyes at me. I fumbled with the sheets, but couldn't find anything. I apologetically shoved a bit of tissue under the pillow with which Ciaran could improvise. Several moments later, a sullen mink slunk out from under the pillow, draped in a makeshift toga-type thing. I noticed Roger smirk slightly and shot him a dirty look.

“What are you doing here, then? Just come to crush my hopes?” I sighed.

“Well, I need a blood sample for research to try and help you. Oh. And I’m mostly here about your... activities last night,”

Ciaran and I quickly turned every possible shade of red in unison. Roger covered his face in exasperation.

“Not *those* activities. Gods. MACRO isn’t some sort of Prudery Board. I meant what went on beforehand. The property damage and public inebriation,” he added, noticing my blank stare.

I shrugged slightly. “I was having *fun*. You gonna slap me on the wrist or something?”

The fox looked irritably up at me. He really had quite the repertoire of those snippy expressions.

“You don’t get it, do you?” he snapped. “You could have *killed* someone. And you nearly *did* several times,”

“But I didn’t, did I? All fine,” all this sternness was making my headache worse.

“You can’t be so careless. You’re a godsdamn giantess. You can’t just ‘oops’ your way through life. It sucks, but that’s how it goes,”

I sat up stiffly, arms folded across my chest and tapping my toe. My demeanor towards the little twerp was quickly becoming quite chilly. Not taking the hint, he continued to pontificate.

“Someday, if you aren’t careful, someone you care about is going to be hurt by you. Or *worse*,”

“Look, if you’re just here to lecture me, I get plenty enough of that from my dad. Sorry you wasted a trip all the way out here,”

“I’m not going to be pushed out by a *teenage girl*. You need to take this more seriously. This isn’t all some godsdamn joke,” Roger snapped.

“If you can’t find the door, I’m about to ‘pick you up like a ragdoll’ and ‘push you out’ myself. See how you like *that*,”

“Tab,” Ciaran interjected, patting my shoulder. “Just agree to be more careful. He has a point,”

“What do you mean?” I narrowed my eyes, craning my neck to look at the mink, perched on my shoulder like some sort of godsdamn Jiminy Cricket.

“Well... you’re great. You know I love you. But you’re... really big. You’re a lot stronger than you think you are. And sometimes, when you get pissed, it’s kind of... scary,” Ciaran finished, barely audible.

It surprised me how much the words stung. I pursed my lips, but nodded tersely at Roger. “Okay. Sure, fine, whatever. Door’s over there,”

“I’ll just discuss payment of the fine with your parents, then,”

I balked. “Waitwaitwait. What’s that about?”

Roger appeared smug. “Well, your ‘fun’ wasn’t cheap. Unless you have a spare gazebo just sitting around,”

“Don’t talk to them about it,” I dropped my face down to the level of the nightstand, worried. They would kill em. Moreover, they would kill themselves over it. I couldn’t make them work even harder because of me. “I—I can find the money somewhere,”

Roger was smirking broadly. He had me wrapped around his pinkie. I wanted to literally do that to him. Might teach the little shit something.

“How about this,” he said. “You swear you’re going to be more careful from now on, we’ll forget about the whole incident. Just this once,”

“I’ll be a good little ferretess. Promise,” I intoned, just eager to get him out of here. Maybe Ciaran would be game for more. Fuck, I was so horny.

Roger nodded vaguely in understanding. Pulling out a kit of some sort from his bag, he pricked my fingertip and procured the blood sample he’d been looking for and headed out the door.

As Roger left, I rolled back onto my stomach, resting my chin on my hands as I grinned down at my boyfriend on my bedspread. “Whaddaya say? Up for some more?”

Ciaran seemed a bit hesitant, focusing instead on searching for his clothes. “You know... I should probably get home. My parents are probably freaking out right now,”

“Aw, really?” I pouted, starting to unhook my blouse. “Fuck *that*. Let’s be a bit reckless,”

“That was last night,” Ciaran replied shortly, an edge creeping into his voice. “Did you hear *nothing* that guy just said? I love you, but you need to be more careful. You can’t just *do* things like that,”

Way to be a buzz-kill, Ciaran. “Thanks, Mom. Hey. At least let me carry you home,”

“I—I—don’t want to be an inconvenience. Besides, I’ve got my bike,” Ciaran had managed to find his clothes by then and dressed himself quickly. He slid down the edge of the blanket and hurried toward the door.

I tried to muster a response, but couldn’t think of anything that didn’t seem bitchy. “Is it true, what you said? Am I *scary*?”

Ciaran froze. Fuck. Not a good sign. “Well... well, to be honest, yeah. Sometimes. It’s just... you’re so big. And if you got really angry and snapped or something some day... I have to go,”

I was crushed. I stared blankly at the back of Ciaran’s head as he walked hurriedly toward the little door.

Rolling off the bed, I beat him to the door, stooping to find his bike. I made to move it over to him, but was so worried about how things stood with Ciaran that I forgot to be careful. The metal frame of the bicycle bent in my hand.

Crying out in frustrated anguish, I sat down heavily on the floor, trying to bend it back into shape. The effort quickly proved useless.

“Oh, gods. I’m so sorry,” I moaned, dropping the twisted frame beside me. “So, so sorry,”

Ciaran barely reacted, expression mercurial. How could he maintain that façade? It was always there—almost. Except for last night. Things had been so perfect last night. I’d seen Ciaran without any sort of guard up, and I’d loved that. Where was the life remote rewind button when you really needed it?

“I’m so sorry,” I mumbled again dejectedly.

Ciaran nodded, turning to leave. “Uh huh. I know,”

“I’ll see you at school Monday, okay?” he said over his shoulder as he exited the door.

As my boyfriend headed home, I curled up on my bed, staring at the wall. Way to fuck a perfectly good thing up. Was I capable of doing *anything* without just turning everything into a huge mess? And what was all that about me *snapping*? I intimidated everyone, even my own *boyfriend*. Fuck.

V.

All These Things That I've Done

I got soul but I'm not a soldier
(*The Killers*)

Why did my house have the loudest front door in the history of ever? Try as I might to be stealthy, the relentless *squeeeeee* of the flimsy door hindered my efforts. It probably didn't matter anyway—Dad would be in a drunken stupor after a busy Saturday night of saturating himself with distilled ethanol of all varieties.

"Get over here, boy," came a growl from the living room.

Shit. How had I forgotten about my father and his terrifyingly accurate hearing? I shuffled into the living room, flicking on the light as I entered. My father recoiled in the light like a godsdamn vampire.

"Turn that *off*,"

I complied hastily, mostly because I didn't want to have to look at him in the full light any longer. His eyes were bloodshot and he was still wearing the same ratty, stained wife-beater and jeans he'd put on at the beginning of the week. I was struck by the sudden urge to laugh derisively at the fact that my father was following every part of the Trailer Trash Bible so religiously, but was too terrified to act on it.

"Where were you last night?" Dad's tone was gravelly and guttural.

"Out,"

"Come here,"

I took another step, now standing halfway across the room from the couch and raccoon. He glared blearily over at me as I stood still, arms folded across my chest.

"Don't bullshit me, son. I said come *here*,"

I shook my head very slightly. The raccoon suddenly launched into action, hurtling towards me. Before I could react, he had me by the ear, gripping and twisting as he

dragged me back to the couch. Jerking my head down next to his face, Dad didn't let go.

"Ow! Stop! That *hurts!*" I squawked, trying and failing to pry my father's hand free of my sensitive ear.

"I ought to *skin* you. You don't just walk out for an entire night. Your mother would not shut *up* about it," his breath washed over me, rank with stale beer.

I cried out as he rammed my head into the wooden frame that composed the back of the couch. Lashing back desperately, I slashed my hand across Dad's face. He grunted as I scratched him viciously, loosening his grip enough for me to scramble free.

I bolted toward the door, but the raccoon was too fast. For a fat, lazy sack of shit, he could *move* when he really wanted.

I saw stars as my father grabbed me by the neck, slamming me headfirst into the wall. His foot came down hard on the tip of my tail. My poor, tender tail. Letting out a strangled cry, I wrenched my father's hand away, holding him back with every fiber of my being.

"Stop! Please, stop," I sobbed, sinking to the floor and nursing my throbbing tail. "I'm sorry I went out,"

I flinched, half expecting to be struck again. But nothing happened. I looked up, shrinking against the wall. Dad was just standing there, breathing heavily and glowering.

"You had better be sorry, boy,"

I blinked, panting as I sat there, crumpled.

Wait a minute. I wasn't sorry. I didn't deserve any of this. I never had. My blind fear was hastily replaced with seething rage. Getting to my feet, I jabbed my forefinger into the center of the raccoon's chest.

"Actually, I'm not sorry. Not at all. I went out. I had fun with a person I really enjoy spending time with. And yeah, I was gone all night. I'm sorry I broke curfew, but I can take care of myself,"

A strangled growling sound came out of my father's throat, but I wasn't done. Hell, I was on a roll. Everything that had been building up inside me, all the rage, all the frustration, came bursting out—he had *dared* to take the best day of my life and utterly ruin it. I was done taking it.

"I got drunk. Probably had a bit too much. Which *you* have plenty of experience with, Dad. But it was fun.

“And you know what? I had sex. And I don’t give a fuck. It was an amazing thing to share with a person I love dearly. A bit awkward. But amazing. She’s 90 godsdamn feet tall, but I don’t care. I love her so much anyway. More than anything. More than *you*,”

It was true. I’d realized that on the way home—it was a really long trip without a bike, so I’d had plenty of time to think. Sure, Tabitha had scared me with some of the stuff she’d done. I wasn’t exactly thrilled about the broken bike, either. But I certainly couldn’t bring myself to hate her for it. If I were that large, trying to learn how to live in a doll-sized world, I’d probably mess things up on occasion, too. Most of the things that had happened were honest mistakes. It wasn’t like I was entirely innocent, either—I’d encouraged her to smash that gazebo, after all.

To my surprise, Dad hadn’t reacted yet. He just stood there, eyes bulging, making gurgling noises. I’d half-expected to receive at least a minor concussion by this point in my rant. Seizing the chance, I barreled recklessly onward.

“Last night was more fun than anything I’ve ever experienced in a long time. That’s what being a teenager is *really* about. Building relationships with others and starting to grow up and maybe even making some mistakes. I haven’t gotten to do any of that. No. I’ve been cleaning up after *you* and putting up with to *your* shit and getting hurt by *you*. I hate you,”

Shaking violently, I drew back my hand from my father’s chest. I couldn’t decide whether I felt vindicated or horribly empty. Without anything else to say, I turned around and strode out of the room and out of the house. No looking back. I needed to be alone.

My legs carried me almost subconsciously to Haverford Park. I loved that collection of trees, playground equipment, and park benches more dearly than anything. It was somewhere to get away from everything when the going got rough and try to put things into perspective.

I sat on my favorite bench in the shade of an old oak, studying my hands intently. There was no way in hell I could go back. Dad had hurt me before and I’d walked out my fair share of times. Nothing new to that. But I’d always gone groveling back after an afternoon or so. I’d never held out more than a day. No more of that. I was done. I only had a few months left before graduation *and* I was 18 years old. I was so fucking done.

But what could I do? It wasn’t like I could just go rent an apartment or stay in a motel. No cash flow. Maybe Tabitha’s parents would take me in. Just a temporary thing for the last few months of high school. I could help out around the house; I was good at chores and cooking and stuff.

Wiping my eyes on my sleeve, I contemplated how to go about my next steps. I was really terrible at asking for things (I didn’t deserve anything, so why should I ask for

it?), much less something so large. They already had a 90-foot daughter to provide for, after all. That couldn't be easy in and of itself. I didn't want to be the straw that broke the camel's back.

"What's up, shithead?"

My heart skipped a beat. I had been so absorbed in my thoughts that I had barely noticed Shane walk up beside me.

Ignoring my parents' offers of lunch, I stayed in my room all day. I lay in bed as the hours dragged by, memorizing every detail of the ceiling and tormenting myself with mental replays of Ciaran walking out. I'd handled it all so badly. Things had been going really well with him. But could I keep it that way? Of course not!

By mid-afternoon, lying there like a sack of potatoes was too unbearable. Wanting to make good with Ciaran and not able to wait until Monday to do so, I slunk away from my house and headed out. I could usually find Ciaran at Haverford Park if I wanted to see him; he seemed to spend more time there than anywhere else.

When I came around behind the playground to find Ciaran, he was there, all right. But he certainly wasn't alone. A burly husky and somewhat chunky-looking hyena had my boyfriend pressed up against the bench. While the husky restrained Ciaran, the hyena appeared to be rifling through his wallet. Doug and Shane. You couldn't get away from that pair.

"What do we have here?" I asked, squatting down.

The duo noticed my presence and tried to beat it, but it was too late for those poor saps. I snatched one up in each fist, lifting them rapidly up toward my face. Doug appeared a little green around the gills. I grinned wickedly, squeezing them slightly. By that point, I'd, er, handled Ciaran enough I knew more or less how much their stupid little bodies could take before I broke anything. This drew a couple of pained grunts from the bullies.

"Is that how you treat others?" I hissed. "Does it make you feel good? Powerful?"

"We'll give him back the wallet! Honest! Just stop!" Shane replied, panicked.

My thumb pressed against the center of his chest, drawing a yelp out of the bastard.

"That's not enough," I continued, my tone venomous. "See, I *am* more powerful than you. Bet you don't like being on the other side of the situation, do you? I could just keep squeezing until you popped like grapes. Douchy, abusive grapes. Mm. Speaking of grapes, I didn't have lunch. Hmm, I wonder if you'd give me indigestion,"

The duo clutched in my fists was petrified in fear. The hyena was sobbing and the husky was just staring vacantly into space. But I wasn't done yet. I was furious. How *dare* someone treat my dear Ciaran like that?

"A girl has other needs, too, you know. I could just have my way with you, your every struggle just fueling my pleasure more. Is that how beating up Ciaran feels for *you*?"

I felt a dull sensation in my ankle. Glancing down, I noticed Ciaran was standing by my foot, wailing away on my anklebone with his backpack.

"Stop that! Stop that *now*!" Ciaran shouted with his brow furrowed.

Pursing my lips slightly, I gave my captives a final parting squeeze before depositing them none-too-gently in the upper branches of the oak tree. They could have fun getting down from there on their own.

Standing again, I scooped up my boyfriend. I turned my back on the park and began to make my way towards Ciaran's house.

"You're welcome," I said. "What was going *on* with those two?"

"Excuse me? What the fuck has gotten into you?" Ciaran bellowed. He paced back and forth along the groove in my palm, stewing.

"They were about to beat the shit out of you! I wanted to help," I insisted.

"That wasn't *helping*, Tab. That was you acting like a monster,"

Taken aback, I came to a halt, staring the mink in my cupped palm. "You—what—what do you mean?"

"You know exactly what I mean. You threatened to *eat* them, Tab. That's not you. That's not... *normal*. Hell, you haven't been acting normally since that party. Since we—"

I blushed. "I was just trying to scare them. I didn't mean anything by it. I swear. It's just—"

Ciaran wasn't done. "Then you picked me up without asking permission first. I'm your *boyfriend*, not your *property*,"

"I'm sorry. I was just angry. It's not fair for you to be treated that way," I whimpered, shaking my head.

"And wait a moment. Wait just a moment. You threatened to use Sean and Blake as *sex toys*. Is that all I am to you? Some sort of walking, talking *vibrator*? Does it count as cheating if a giantess stops using *one* boy as some sort of glorified sex-toy and starts using a *different* one? I can't believe I'm even having this sort of conversation," Ciaran was livid. "Put me **DOWN**!"

“N-no! That’s not what I meant! I was... I don’t know what I was thinking. I shouldn’t have said that. I’m so sorry. I love you. Fuck, I love you,”

I leaned in to kiss Ciaran, but he bit my lower lip savagely. Stunned, I leaned over and set him on the ground. He stood there stiffly, staring up at me in barely-controlled rage.

“I was capable of dealing with those two myself,” he insisted. “Stop acting like I have no control over my own life. Because I have *so* much fucking control over my life. So much.

“If this is going to work, you need to treat me like an equal, not some sort of plaything. Where were you even taking me?”

“Is getting the snot beaten out of you your idea of ‘dealing with it’?” I folded my arms across my chest, regarding him dismissively from a height. “And I was taking you home. Figured that was where you’d want to go,”

Ciaran cried out in despair. “No! I can’t go there. Never. Tab, why would you *do* that? I need to get away... oh gods,”

What had happened at home? It didn’t take a degree in rocket science to know things weren’t exactly stellar for Ciaran there, but I hadn’t ever seen him that distraught about it. I tried to respond, but Ciaran scoffed bitterly.

“I love you. But sometimes, you just need to... piss off,”

I dropped heavily onto my knees, causing Ciaran to stagger backwards a pace or two. His eyes widened, jaw slightly agape. I leaned down, scowling at the mink.

“What was that again?” I asked.

“I think you heard me, Tab,” Ciaran replied, trying to control his wavering tone. “I just don’t want you to do that again,”

“I thought you wanted me to support you. But if you want me to just stand by and let you get the crap kicked out of you, fine,” I was on all fours by then, the tip of my nose inches away from Ciaran’s face.

“That wasn’t support, Tab. That was you being a sadistic, bitchy bully. You’re... unstable. And you’re scaring me. Maybe this whole relationship thing wasn’t such a good idea. Maybe we should—”

The tip of my index finger made contact with Ciaran’s torso, hard. The wind was knocked from his lungs and he flew a dozen feet or so through the air to collide with a low brick wall along the sidewalk. There was a dull *crack* and he slumped to the ground limply.

“Oh, shit. Oh, shitshitshit,” I gasped, coming out of the hazy fog of rage that had enveloped me moments before.

Fuck. I’d *flicked* him. What had I been thinking? Well, I hadn’t been; that was pretty obvious.

Reaching out, I cupped Ciaran’s limp body in my palm. His eyes were unfocused and he wasn’t moving. Shit. I *was* a monster. Ciaran needed help, fast.

My sprint to the hospital was a blur of angst and tears. I was vaguely aware of people diving out of the way and cars swerving into the wrong lanes to avoid me as I ran, but was too distracted and scared to really give a damn.

The ER entrance was a bustle of frenzied action when I arrived. Shoving aside a parked ambulance, I lay down on my stomach in the lot. Thrusting my arm through the automatic sliding doors, I brandished the unconscious Ciaran in front of a surprised front desk nurse.

“Please help him,” I gasped, tapping my finger against the desk emphatically. “I... flicked him. He’s barely breathing. Oh, gods. Please,”

“We’ll take it from here,” the still somewhat dazed raccoon replied. “Just, er, set him here,”

I let the mink’s body slide gently off my palm as a nurse wheeled over a stretcher. Ciaran was loaded onto it and hustled off further into the hospital.

Withdrawing my arm, I sat down, leaning my back up against the building. I hugged my knees to my chest, sobbing softly. My eyes screwed tightly shut, I rocked back and forth.

Please let him be okay, I thought. I don’t care if he hates me forever and never wants to see me again. Just don’t let him be hurt too badly.

The hours dragged by at the pace of a snail trying to navigate a floor covered in molasses. The sun slowly set and the streetlamps flickered on one by one. I remained rooted in place, unwilling to go anywhere until I knew Ciaran would be okay. Shit, I really hoped he would be fine. What if he wasn’t? What if I was a murderer? How would I live with myself—

“Miss?” came a voice from down by my hip.

Sniffing slightly, I looked down to see the nurse from earlier standing next to me. I rubbed my eyes.

“Is everything okay with Ciaran?” I mumbled.

“He’s got a few broken ribs and sustained moderate pulmonary contusion, but managed to avoid anything too serious and is in stable condition. He’s resting now,” the raccoon said.

“Can I see him?” I asked, sighing in relief. An enormous weight lifted off my chest.

“Well, I don’t know if that would work out... Logistics, you know,”

I giggled softly. “Yeah, I guess you’re right,”

“He’s on the fourth floor. Second window from the left. Over there,” the nurse pointed out.

I smiled appreciatively, turning around so I was kneeling before the hospital. I peered through the proper window, a wave of relief passing over me as I saw the mink lying in the bed, which was facing toward the window. He was awake, and his eyes widened when he noticed me.

I held up my hand to speak, but Ciaran motioned for the nurse to close the drapes.

“Wait—wait, I’m sorry,” I mumbled as the drapes were drawn. “Please, just let me apolo...gize,”

There was no movement on the other side of the drapes for a few minutes. I wanted to smash the window open, pull Ciaran out, and magically make his ribs better and undo all of the events of the past afternoon. I had no reason to expect Ciaran to give me the time of day, but I wasn’t prepared for it actually happening. *Trying to be in a relationship with someone I could seriously injure just by flicking was a mistake*, I thought glumly. *I should just go home. Mom and Dad couldn’t hate me. They’d know what to do.*

Getting to my feet, I turned away from the hospital and began to make my way home, hands thrust into pockets. It had been raining for the past while, but I had been too distracted to notice. Now uncomfortably aware of my sodden clothes, I picked up the pace.

Working in my division of MX4, I was pretty used to all sorts of stuff that might be considered ‘shady’ by some. Okay, by most. But *this* shit was seriously clandestine, even for me.

Taking another sip of my coffee, I glanced at my watch. If this ‘inside man’ didn’t show up in half an hour, I was leaving this godsforsaken alley behind forever. I was all for doing my twin brother Roger a favor now and again, but this was ridiculous. I mean, couldn’t this person he wanted me to meet show up to a coffee shop or something? And why couldn’t *he* do the meet-up? This guy had some ‘splaining to do.

“Warren Smith?”

I nearly dropped my coffee in surprise. A coyote of about my age stood under the flickering amber glow of the streetlamp, dressed in a dark trench coat. Damn. He'd officially checked off all the cloak-and-dagger boxes.

"Yeah... that's me," I didn't even know *his* name.

"I'm Ernest Dwyer," the coyote extended his hand, smiling thinly. "Gods, you look *just* like your brother,"

"It's part of that whole 'twin' thing. But he's the evil one, I assure you. Er, can you explain to me what I'm doing here?" I cut right to the chase.

Ernest nodded, producing a thick file from within his coat. It had all sorts of red stamps on it: *Confidential, Eyes Only...* The works. Damn. This wasn't Little League shit.

"I have something that might be of interest to you. No, it *will* be of interest to you," the coyote said.

I glanced through the file. Whatever this was all about, it looked juicy. "Okay, you have my attention. But why would you go to my brother?"

"Roger? Well, his boyfriend is my tailor. And a very chatty one at that. I heard about your occupation and figured you'd be the best person to go to,"

My brow furrowed. "For *what*?"

Ernest shifted nervously. "I've worked at the Bureau of Defense for the past six years. Recruited right out of college. But what my section has been working on... it's unethical. To say the least.

"I can't go to anyone in the Bureau. It's insane how many mindless yes-men there are there. No thinking. No questioning. Just following. But this has to stop,"

I frowned. "What makes you think *I* can do anything about anything? What's even happening?"

Ernest was getting antsy, hands in pockets. "I can't really say anything right now. But there's something that you *can* do right now. You need to. Please.

"A girl by the name of Tabitha Crane. She's in danger. You need to make sure nothing happens to her,"

The name sounded familiar. Roger had just mentioned some sort of trip over to eastern Pacifica to visit some sort of gigantic ferret-girl by that name, if memory served. What on earth was happening?

"What does the Bureau of Defense have to do with her?" I scratched my head. Someone needed to start connecting the dots. "I mean, if memory serves, she's *big*.

Like really big. Giant. Wouldn't that be more of a MACRO thing, rather than BoD's jurisdiction?"

I chuckled inwardly, just then realizing how unfortunate their acronym was. A bit slow on the uptake, I suppose.

"I can't go into too much detail right now, but suffice it to say, there are certain individuals at Bureau who have a vested interest in her. I've had my ear to the ground, and I know the gears are moving; they're about to act. We have a facility near Winthrop that makes me concerned. Please. I don't want anyone to be harmed because of what we're doing,"

I pursed my lips. "But what *are* you doing?"

"Just promise me you'll help her, and quick," Ernest was avoiding eye contact.

My eyes narrowed. That certainly wasn't an answer. Much as I didn't like sticking my neck out for someone I didn't know anything about, Ernest seemed very, well, earnest.

"Fine. I'll do it. But you owe me an explanation when this is all done,"

"We'll do lunch or something,"

"Beats the hell out of another meeting in the alley like this,"

Where do I get the tax write-off for being an all-around agreeable, awesome guy who puts everything on the line for other folks?

Ernest beamed, shaking my hand fervently. I shook my head, smiling thinly as he hurried back down the alley. Stuffing the file into my briefcase, I headed my own way back to my car. Looked like I'd be making a trip to scenic Winthrop. And I'd have some reading for the road, too, it seemed.

* * * * *

My mind raced a million miles a second as I hustled homeward. How could I make things right with Ciaran? Maybe Mom and Dad could let him stay with us if his situation wasn't too good for him back at his house. They were always talking about that extra room they had no purpose for, and we could just carve his food out of my daily allotment. Yeah, that was a good idea. I would talk with them as soon as I got back.

A confused frown crossed my brow as I came up to the front lawn of my house. There was a strange car parked in the driveway. I was just about to head around back to my room when a badger I'd never seen before exited the front door, pursued closely by my father. A burly wolverine, my dad could be quite formidable when angry.

“Get the hell off my property and *never* come anywhere near my daughter!” he snarled, following the badger to his van.

Confused, I came to a halt, looking down at my dad. “Wait, what? What’s going on? Who’s he?”

Dad glanced up at me, hurriedly waving me aside. “Honey, why don’t you go to your room? Mom has dinner ready if you want it,”

I arched my brow in confusion, but nodded numbly. My father was not to be fucked with when he was in one of those moods. And judging by his disposition, the badger was about to find that out. Not that it mattered all that much, as it turned out.

There was a flurry of movement around my ankles. I glanced down in confusion to see just as my Mom let out a cry and started to rush over toward me. There were a couple of people dressed in black, similar to the wolverine. I made to step free of them, whatever it was they were up to. Too late.

Suddenly, I became acutely aware of a sharp pain in my calf. Everything suddenly went out of focus and I staggered forward a step or two. I felt lightheaded and my extremities were starting to go numb.

“Fuck—” I slurred, trying to sit down. Unable to control my movements, I crashed forward as the world went black.

VI.

Some Boys

Some boys are singing, some boys are singing the blues
Joylessly flinging with the girls that they're bringing to their rooms
And then leave when they're through
(*Death Cab for Cutie*)

The cold, hard ground was the first thing I became aware of as I slowly came to. Blinking, I tried to clear my vision, but nothing worked. Why was everything so blurry? Why did my limbs feel so numb?

I tried to stand up, but bashed my head against the ceiling. Rubbing my head, I sat down heavily, leaning my shoulders against a wall just as cold and rough as the floor. Wait a moment. Someone had taken away my clothes. What was going on? Where *was* I?

Beginning to feel a distinct edge of panic, I tried to get a bead on where I had been taken. As far as I could tell, I was in a large empty warehouse or hangar of some sort. There were no windows or openings—what time of day, or even what *day* it was were total mysteries.

I'd thought I was alone, but I was able to focus my eyes enough to see several individuals pacing back and forth along the far wall. Trying to protect my modesty as best I could, I crawled unsteadily toward the closest one. I only made it a dozen feet or so before one of the individuals, a grey wolf, noticed, freezing and pointing a gun at me. I stopped hastily, eyes wide in shock.

"Don't move any closer! I'm warning you!" he barked.

"Wait—wait, don't do anything!" I held out a hand in caution. "Please. What's going on? Where am I? Where are my clothes? Where are my parents? What do you want with me?"

The wolf grunted. "We aren't supposed to be talking with the detainee. You won't be getting anything from me,"

The fear was beginning to subside, replaced by a dull rage. *Detainee?* Those fucking bastards had knocked me out, kidnapped me from my own *home*, drugged me, and stripped me. He was going to pay.

My hand darted out to grab up the wolf and give him a good shake, but a there was a loud *crack* and sharp pain arced across my knuckles. I yelped, withdrawing my hand.

“That fucking *stung!*” I whimpered, glowering over at the panda standing across the room who’d shot at me. He was dressed in a similar fashion to the wolf. How many of them *were* there? Clearly, there was some sort of organized effort here.

Returning my attention to the wolf, I snapped, “You need to give me answers. This isn’t okay by any stretch of the imagination. I want to—”

The rest of my rant was cut off by the metallic whir of one of the hangar doors opening. The thugs around me snapped to attention as a heavyset cougar strode into the room, flanked by yet more thugs. Were they private guards? Military? I had no clue. All I knew was that even though this guy wasn’t even as tall as my palm was wide, something about his presence scared the living daylights out of me.

“Against the wall,” the cougar snapped.

Wordlessly complying, I crouched against the wall, startled and intimidated. I watched slack-jawed as the cougar clambered up a set of stairs to a network of platforms and catwalks about shoulder-height to me as I sat. He stood beside my shoulder, absorbed in the clipboard he was carrying.

“Can I talk to my parents? Can I see Mom and Dad?” I asked hesitantly, looking over at him.

No response.

“Could you get me something to wear? Or at least to cover up? I feel really, er, exposed,”

No response.

“What’s going on? Who are you?”

The cougar looked over at someone who had come up to stand beside him. “Did you get her measurements? All of them? Good. Have them ready for Hawthorne when he arrives,”

“Are you even listening to me?” I rapped a finger on the guardrail, causing the nearest thug to bristle and tighten his grip on his firearm. “My *measurements*? What—what have you been doing to me?”

“Tests. Nothing much,” the cougar responded brusquely, not bothering to make eye contact. “We had to wait until consciousness to finish up,”

“You can’t *do* this! I never gave you permission,”

“This isn’t about permission. We don’t *need* permission. This is about fulfilling the mission,”

My lip curled and I drew away from the cougar in shock. “No... no... what do you mean...”

I would have kept going, but the cougar evidently decided it was time to leave. He clambered down from the scaffold and made his way toward the doors. My hand slammed down, blocking his way.

“I want some godsdamn answers,” I snarled.

“Shoot her if she doesn’t move her hand,” the cougar stated flatly. He sounded almost bored with the whole situation.

“What?” my hand drew back.

I wanted to cry. Any modicum of control I had over my life was gone. I was trapped here: no friends, no family, *nothing*.

“She’s clearly unstable. *Dangerous*, even,” the cougar said coolly. “Restrain her,”

I exclaimed in protest, but felt the all-too familiar jab in my ankle. Everything started going fuzzy. I tried to swipe at that motherfucking cougar, but I could no longer move my arms.

Once again, everything faded to black.

For the amount my hospital bill would probably come to, you’d think the personnel could find it in themselves to shell out for more than three incredibly boring channels on the television. I had to entertain myself by switching between a station showing some sort of golf tournament and another which was apparently nothing but a loop of boats coming and going from a harbor. The best. It hardly distracted me from the dull throbbing in my chest. Tab’s parents would be paying for my wonderful stay at Providence Medical Center, I would make damn sure of that.

The dovens who had been taking care of me walked into the room carrying a clipboard. “Good morning, Ciaran,” she said.

“Morning, Nurse Schirle,” I returned her smile. Would it be weird to ask if she could be my surrogate mother? She’d been so good to me. But then again, I supposed that was her job.

“Doc says you’re all good to go whenever you’re ready! Your guardian is waiting for you whenever you’re all set. Don’t worry, there’s no rush,” she said, rearranging the magazines on my bedside table.

Guardian? A confused frown flashed across my face, but I returned to a mask of neutrality before the nurse noticed. Whoever this ‘guardian’ was, he or she was bound

to be better than my biological parents. But I didn't want to raise any suspicions that I was leaving with someone I didn't really know.

"I think I'm ready to go now, thanks," I nodded.

Nurse Schirle nodded and helped me collect my things and find my way out of the ward and to the waiting room in the front portion of the hospital. Leaning against the wall was a handsome red fox in a dark suit. He smiled thinly, straightening up as I hobbled over to him.

"Roger!" I beamed before adding in a hushed tone, "I didn't think I'd see *you* again,"

Roger gave me a mercurial look before gesturing for me to follow him, nodding his acknowledgement to the nurse on our way out. I waved farewell to the doves, smiling at her as I left. Once we were out in the street, the fox pulled me aside.

"Okay, for one thing, I'm not Roger," he said. "My name's Warren. I'm Roger's twin brother,"

I blinked, numbly shaking the offered hand. "Roger has a *twin*?"

They looked terrifyingly similar. I get that whole twin shtick. But this was some seriously uncanny shit. Same piercing green eyes, same auburn fur, same perpetually tousled hair... *Exactly* identical. It was completely terrifying.

"I get that a lot. But I'm the better twin. Trust me," Warren grinned craftily. "Anyway, I'm here for a couple of reasons,"

"Can you take me away from my parents? Can you take me away from Tabitha?"

Warren smiled sympathetically. "I'm so sorry about all that. I know it doesn't really matter what I say, but I am. Nobody deserves that,"

I sank to the ground against the side of the hospital, hugging my knees to my sore chest. My rib twinged sharply, provoking a pained grunt. "I loved her—I *love* her. But she... she *hurt* me,"

Warren sat down next to me, draping an arm over my shoulder and pulling me against his side. "She did. But I'm sure she feels horrible about it. I know she does. She carried you all the way here and waited for hours until she got word about how you were doing,"

"Maybe she just shouldn't have *flicked* me. I keep telling her to be more careful. It's scary," I frowned. "Wait a sec. How do you know all that?"

Warren grinned in that crafty way again. "I work for MX₄. It's my job to know a disturbing amount of shit about everything and everyone," his face grew serious. "But that's also why I'm here. Sort of. Tangentially,"

For all of the suave secret agent vibes he was working so hard on exuding, Warren was pretty damn easy to read. And boy was he getting *fidgety*. Whatever he was building towards, he just needed to spit it out.

“How’s that?” I prodded.

“It has to do with Tab. See, she’s... gone missing,”

My brow furrowed. “What’s going on? Is she in danger?”

Furious as I was about Tab, I didn’t want anything bad to happen to her. But why was Warren approaching me about all of it?

“We need to get Tabitha out of there. And I can’t do it alone,” the red fox said.

“Well, you’ve clearly picked the right guy for the job,” I snorted, gesturing at my chest. “Don’t you have a bunch of... agents or operatives or whatever to do the job? I’m not exactly trained in rescue missions or whatever,”

Warren’s expression was deadly serious. “I need to be totally honest with you on this. So hear me out.

“What we are going to do isn’t exactly legal. Nope. Not at all. Not even my usual ‘marginally legal’ thing. We’re talking hardcore treason. And all as a favor for my bro. Good gods. I’m too nice.

“I have reason to believe that Tabitha is being held at a Bureau of Defense facility. There are some people in a group there who been working on some sort of project dealing with giants.

“I haven’t been able to learn all that much about what they’re doing or why—it’s all insanely classified, and I don’t have that many resources at the moment. What I *do* know is that it’s got something to do with big folks. And it isn’t anything all that positive, from what I can tell.

“Yesterday evening at 2100 hours, Tabitha was apprehended by a group of operatives and taken to an unknown location.

“My, er, inside source was able to get me the location of the facility, which is nearby. She should be there. I’m going to extract her tonight, and I need your help. It’s going to be dangerous. But my partner is otherwise occupied and I don’t have anyone else to talk to,”

It was all a lot to process. Conspiracies and extraction missions and... good *gods*. Too much to take in. It all sounded dangerous, and why would I want to risk my neck for someone who’d just put me in the hospital? Still, I loved Tabitha dearly. I truly did. Oh, gods...

"You probably shouldn't have told me it would be dangerous," I muttered.

Warren gave me a meaningful look. I cracked.

"Fine. I'll do it. I have no idea how I could *possibly* be of use, but I'll try," I said, kicking myself inwardly as I heard the words coming out of my mouth. Why did I have to be so obliging?

Warren got to his feet. "Thank you. Now, we've got a lot of preparations to take care of before the extraction,"

I was in so far over my head.

At first, I thought I was paralyzed. Blinking into a hazy consciousness, I tried to make my limbs obey, but to no avail. As my vision cleared, I looked down the length of my prone body. A frown creased my brow. Those little bastards had bound me to the ground with dozens of lengths of thick steel cable. I tried flexing and straining against the bonds, but to no avail. I couldn't budge. My captors were meticulous, I'd give them that much.

"I see the boys have made you comfortable," came a voice from the other side of the room. This wasn't the bored drawl of the cougar I'd had the distinct pleasure of meeting earlier. This was someone new. His voice was ice--harsh and cold and biting.

"Fuck you," I intoned, trying hard to maintain a façade of indifference. How did Ciaran do it? I needed that right at that moment.

The clicking of shoes against the cold concrete floor approached and I craned my neck to see the owner of that chilling voice. He was a red fox; for a split second, I thought it was Roger. But it couldn't be. His russet fur was a few shades darker than Roger's auburn pelt. This fox was powerfully built, with a cruel thrust to his jaw and fiery amber eyes. A scar tracing along his cheek only served to further harden his features. He smirked at me before glancing over his shoulder. The cougar intimidated me, but this newcomer filled me with a deep, unsettling terror.

"Why don't you all clear out. Give Gullivette here and me some peace and quiet. Todd needs his alone time,"

I'd almost rather that the thugs stayed. At least they were people other than this fox. Kept me from being alone with him. He was creepy as fuck *and* he referred to himself in the third person. That's two strikes right there.

"My, *my*. They'd told me you were pretty. But they didn't tell me you're actually quite beautiful," the fox commented, studying me impassively, that perpetual smirk planted firmly on his lips.

“Shut up,” I snapped.

“Feisty one, aren’t you?” he said. “Cramer told me to expect that. What a pity. I’d hoped to have our little tête-à-tête without all those bulky restraints. But now I’ve been told that in light of recent misbehavior on your part, I suppose I have to... tame you, too,”

“Untie me. Now,” I snapped.

If I asserted myself, I reasoned, maybe I could feel as if I had some semblance of control over the situation.

“You should’ve thought about that before you decided to harass my poor colleague,”

I pondered informing Todd that the situation had in fact been completely the opposite, but knew that would prove fruitless. That fox would do whatever he pleased regardless. Gods, I wanted to swat him. Put him in his place.

Todd stepped closer to my face. “You really *are* lovely. You know, I had a whole list of things we needed to go over, but can think of a few amendments that should be made,”

As he reached out to put a hand on my lip, I snarled and tried to bite his fucking arm off. Todd was too fast. He shook his head at me, arching a brow disapprovingly. I yelped in surprise and pain as a powerful current suddenly coursed through my body for a few moments.

“You have to admire the ingenuity of the work done here. See, my boys got you all secured nice and tight. But they also ensured your cooperation. It’s simple, really. You behave, everything’s fine. But if you do something... foolish, well...”

Another electric jolt surged through my body. There were tears in my eyes as I looked back at the insufferably smug fox.

“Who *are* you all?”

“Well, I collect my paychecks from the Bureau of Defense. But I’m here for a... personal call. See, the country is broken. Well, the world is, frankly, but you gotta start somewhere. Some, ah, like-minded individuals and I have a plan to change it all. A plan that happens to involve *you*. And if I can exploit my Bureau connections to further my mission—my *calling*—on the sly? Well, all the better,”

“What are you here for?”

“I get things done,” Todd said simply, shrugging off his jacket and rolling up his sleeves. “I can be very persuasive. I’ll have you know I’ve only *completely* broken five or six individuals. Let’s hope we don’t make seven today. You’d be no use to me as a gibbering imbecile. Full disclosure: I’ve never worked with a giantess before.

So don't worry too much if things are a little bumpy at first. All part of the learning curve,"

"What do you want?" I hissed.

Todd stroked his chin. "What do I want? What do I *want*?"

The fox approached my shoulder, clambering on brazenly. At first, I was too stunned to react. I tried to shake him off, but it was to no avail; the bonds were too tight. He was *on* me. He was climbing on my body. I fought back tears as I felt him walking around like he fucking owned me. Ciaran had clambered all over me, but that was with my permission. That had felt good. This was *violation*.

Todd made his lazy way across my shoulder, sitting down and making himself comfortable with his back leaning against my bosom and his feet resting on my collarbone. I craned my neck to look at him, glowering.

"Get off me," I spat, trying to sum up any menace remaining within me. It was difficult.

Still another surge coursed painfully through me.

"Don't interrupt. Now. What do I want. What does *everyone* want in life?" Todd sighed theatrically, resuming his musings. "A good job, a nice house..."

"You know what I fucking mean, you little sh—"

Jolt. Todd shrugged, raising a brow. My vision blurred with tears.

"You're really slow with the learning curve there," he sighed. "I really don't like being interrupted. But you know what, I can modify my approach. I'm a flexible guy. And I want you to feel... good,"

I didn't like his tone. And I liked what followed even less. Getting to his feet, Todd made the way to the top of my breast (Not exactly a major feat; I wasn't all that ample in the chest department). He kneeled down and began to massage my nipple, staring at me the whole time.

"That better?" he cooed. "You know, I don't really have any questions for you. I just wanted to bring you in for a little... check-up. See how things are progressing,"

Check-up? *Progress*? What was this fox going on about?

"Stop doing that,"

Todd laughed, stopping for a moment in his massage. "No,"

I blinked. "Stop *doing* that,"

Jolt. More insistent this time.

“I trust you heard me the first time. I need to make sure that everything is in working order. Ensure that we got our return on investment,”

Todd paused to lick my now-erect nipple, not once breaking eye contact. I couldn't look away. In a fucked-up way, it felt good, I supposed. Physically, at least. My body was receiving stimulus and responding with chemical signals. But it wasn't *good*. I struggled with every fiber of my being against my bonds, but I couldn't do anything.

“There are so many things I want to do to you. So many things I'm going to do to you. But I suppose I have all the stupid procedural things to figure out. But I have to motivate myself to get through all of that boring nonsense,” Todd slid down to the base of my neck. “I'm going to kiss you now. If you do anything, I *will* hurt you. Again. Heh,”

I was paralyzed. I knew he would. That bastard could do anything he wanted with me, and I was utterly powerless to do anything about it. All the same, I refused to let Todd know how scared and angry he made me as I felt him plant a kiss on my lower lip.

“Anyone ever tell you what a terrible kisser you are?” the fox scoffed, making his way back down along my chest. “That won't make playing with you any less fun. I mean, that wasn't our original intent for you, but side benefits don't hurt... ah, but I share too much,”

“I just want to go home. I want my Dad and Mom. I want Ciaran. Please, just let me go,” I exploded.

Todd turned around, a filthy grin on his evil, evil face. “I can be your Daddy,”

“You fucking bas—”

JOLT. A strong one. I cried out that time, unable to hold it back any longer. Todd's smirk deepened, if that was possible.

“Actually, I guess I lied earlier. I *do* have a few questions,” Todd sighed. “Just procedural stuff. You've been giant for half a year now. How's it going? Any side effects? Dizziness? Shortness of breath? Irregular menstrual cycles?”

I scowled defiantly, lips sealed. Todd sighed again, pulling out the remote that he'd used to inflict so much pain on me. He relished the instinctive flinch it caused before tucking it away unused.

“I'll play nice this time. Tell you what. You cooperate and I'll show you a world of pleasure unlike anything you could ever imagine. But don't cooperate and, well, let's just say that if you're into kinky electroshock stuff, you'll have a great time,”

“I already have a boyfriend,” I blurted stupidly.

Like that would change anything. Yeah, Todd would totally just go ‘Oh, really? Sorry!’ and back off. Ha. Todd looked at me blankly for a moment before continuing on his way down my chest and torso. Yeah, no effect.

“I’m still waiting for an answer to my question, you know. And as you’ve learned, I don’t value uncooperative people,” he sighed, bored.

I sure as hell wasn’t going to give him an answer to *any* question.

“What do you *want* with me?” I begged again.

“Well, *I* just want you. But *we* have other plans for you soon enough. Don’t worry about that just yet. Just... enjoy. I know I’m going to,”

I could feel him standing just under my navel, relishing the moment or something equally creepy and disgusting. I didn’t know what was going through his head, and I didn’t *want* to, either. Gritting my teeth, I squirmed as hard as I could, not that it made much of a difference. Tears welled in my eyes.

“Please... I don’t want this,” I whispered wretchedly.

The fox never had a chance to respond. An alarm and a flashing red light over a door in the corner of the room cut off his doubtlessly cruel response. Todd looked irritable, sliding off my stomach with a grumble and striding angrily towards the door.

“I’m going to cut the tail off the fool who pulled that alarm,” he snarled.

Just as Todd disappeared out of my field of vision, I felt a gentle pressure against my neck. My heart stopped. Gods. What horrible thing was going to happen?

“Tab! We need to go—now!” hissed a voice coming from somewhere near my ear.

VII.

To Build a Home

By the cracks of his skin I climbed to the top
I climbed the tree to see the world
When the gusts came around to blow me down
Held on as tightly as you held on me
(The Cinematic Orchestra)

I considered myself a pretty stealthy person. Years of sneaking around the house to avoid my father's wrath had taught me how to move silently and avoid notice. But nothing could have prepared me for the Bureau of Defense facility that Warren had somehow managed to talk me into entering with him. This place had the works—motion detectors, closed-circuit cameras, and basically every other security measure anyone had ever cooked up.

But with Warren's help, I managed to navigate my way through the winding corridors and confusing rooms that comprised the facility without so much as a couple near misses. It had been a crazy trip, but peeking around the doorway leading into one of the innermost rooms of the complex, nothing could have prepared me for everything that followed.

Tabitha was detained there, just as Warren had postulated. But she wasn't in good shape at all. Over a dozen lengths of thick cabling kept the gigantic ferretess secured in a prone position. Her body was stripped of clothing, her face was contorted in pain and fear. Worst of all, I could see a red fox making his casual, devious way down the length of her torso.

Any lingering resentment toward Tabitha dissipated in an instant. This wasn't right or fair in the least. I didn't want any of this to happen to my dear, sweet Tab. An intervention needed to happen, and *fast*. It took every fiber in my body not to just run out there and beat the shit out of the fox.

"What are we going to do?" I hissed to Warren. "How are we going to get him away from Tab?"

When I received no response, I glanced over my shoulder. My companion was gone. Moments later, every alarm in the place went off. The fox who had been tormenting

Tabitha disappeared through a door on the far side of the room. Well, there was the diversion we needed...

Taking what I supposed was my cue, I dashed toward my massive girlfriend. How on earth was I going to free her from those bonds? If a 90-foot ferretess couldn't break them, how could I stand a chance?

I craned my neck around, beaming broadly as I saw Ciaran standing anxiously next to me, dressed up like a cat burglar in a close-fitting black outfit. Relief couldn't even begin to describe my emotions. I wanted to kiss him so badly—I *needed* to.

As if sensing my desire, Ciaran approached my face, brushing his lips tenderly against my lower lip. A great sob escaped me, knocking Ciaran back a few steps. As much as I wanted to tell the mink everything that had happened to me, how scared I was, I knew we needed to get out of there. But how?

"Have you tried the cables?" Ciaran asked.

I nodded numbly. "No dice. I can't do anything. And they're electrified, too. He's been shocking me,"

"Oh, *Tab...*"

Ciaran was pacing back in forth, studying every detail of the room intently. I did the best I could to help, looking around as much as my limited locomotion would allow. The mink let out a whoop, sprinting across the room for a small panel in the wall that I hadn't noticed before. He studied it for a few moments before pushing a couple of buttons.

Almost instantaneously, I felt the force that had kept the cables so taut release. I sat up effortlessly, the slack bonds bursting across my chest. I tore away the remainder of the lengths of cable, sitting cross-legged in the center of the room with my head bowed, brushing the ceiling.

"That was kinda sexy, you know," Ciaran mumbled, making his way back toward me.

I grinned back at him, setting my hand down on the ground. No more just plucking Ciaran up like a cell phone or something. The mink clambered gladly on, hunkering down in my palm.

"How did you *get* here?" I breathed.

"I had help. It's a long story, and we have to get out of here. Now," Ciaran replied, glancing around nervously.

He perked up, pointing at something or someone to my left. My eyes followed Ciaran's hand, landing on a slender red fox dressed in similar fashion to my boyfriend.

“Roger!” I breathed.

Setting Ciaran back on the ground, I tried to make my way over to the fox, but was unsteady on my hands and knees. I yelped again as the fox jabbed me in the wrist with an obscenely large needle.

“What the fuck was *that* for, Roger?” I snapped, massaging my hand.

“It’s *Warren*, for one thing,” the fox replied shortly. “For another, they had you pumped full of sedatives. That shot’ll get you back in business in a few minutes here, but it’s not entirely painless. Sorry. Shoulda warned you,”

“*Warren*? Who are *you*? What the fuck is going on?” I couldn’t tell whether it was my muddled head or just a fucking weird situation. My life had too many of those.

“I’m Roger’s twin brother. But, unlike him, I actually get shit done on occasion,” I could tell he’d rehearsed and used that little speech countless times. “We need to get going. Now. The little diversion I arranged won’t keep our friends distracted for that long. Everything else can wait,”

“There are *more* of you?” I mumbled rubbing my head, still unable to get past the whole twin thing.

“The world needed me to cancel out my bro. He might tell you the opposite, but don’t believe him,” the red fox snorted in response.

Already beginning to feel a lot more alert (and angrier by the minute), I followed behind the fox and mink on all fours as they hurried toward the far side of the space. Warren gave the great sliding door that must have been my route of entry a shove, and I pushed it open the rest of the way.

“You look really cute in black, by the way,” I whispered to Ciaran as he scurried through the sliding door ahead of me. His gait was a little unsteady. I hoped the broken ribs weren’t paining him too much.

“Well, you look really hot in naked,” he giggled in response.

Warren offered no verbal input, but his entire body read ‘eye-roll’.

I don’t know what I’d been expecting, but the building—compound, whatever it was—didn’t end there. A long corridor stretched ahead of us, with numerous hallways and passages veering off in every direction.

“Where the fuck are we?” I muttered, but Warren seemed too busy to offer a response. He was checking every doorway he passed, clutching a pistol in his hand. As we approached what appeared to be a pretty major intersection, he held up a hand for Ciaran and I to stop.

“The door to the exterior is right around this corner,” he told us. “You two hold tight for a couple minutes while I go scope out the situation. This entire compound will be on full alert by now. That means operatives everywhere. Everywhere. All looking for you, Tab. If I don’t come back in five minutes... well, I will,”

As Warren darted around the corner, I scooped Ciaran up. Momentarily setting aside all reserve, I clutched the mink to my face. He didn’t have a chance to get a word in edgewise as I kissed him as passionately and aggressively as I could muster while not re-fracturing anything. I leaned against the wall, closing my eyes as I caressed his body with my lips.

“You came for me,” I smiled. “Oh, Ciaran. Ciaran...”

“Tab,” Ciaran was sobbing. “What have they *done* to you?”

“He... he tried to *rape* me. He *touched* me. I don’t know what’s happening. I don’t know why I’m here. I just want to go home,”

“That’s what we’re here for,” Ciaran smiled thinly.

I rubbed my boyfriend’s cheek with the tip of my thumb, unable to find any words. Big tears were welling in my eyes and I was beaming. In the back of my head, though, something seemed... off. Probably just me being stupid.

“Can we talk? I want to apologize for hurting you like I did,” I mumbled, suddenly feeling awkward. I couldn’t avoid it any longer.

Ciaran’s eyes promptly glazed over. Oh, shit. I didn’t want him to shut me out like he had been. I wanted to make things right, as right as I could, anyway.

A door slamming followed by the scuffle of hurried footsteps shook me from my thoughts. Leaning over Ciaran, I peeked around the corner. A single guard was sprinting down the hallway straight towards the pair of us, Warren in hot pursuit. The guard was pulling out a semiautomatic rifle.

“Smash him!” Warren bellowed, running after him. “You have to smash him! Do it *now!*”

I squeaked, but acted blindly, raising my free fist into the air before bringing it down on top of the thug, hard. Cringing as I felt his body crumple under my hand, I drove him into the ground. He was twitching slightly when I lifted my hand away. I smashed my fist into him several more times, wailing away on the poor sap until Ciaran cried out for me to stop. There was nothing but a pulpy mass left behind. My stomach lurched and I gagged.

“Good,” Warren said as I let Ciaran slip to the floor. “He’s taken care of,”

“I’m going to be sick,” I breathed, wiping a few final bits of guard off my hand onto the wall and feeling green, and by green, I mean the greenest shade of green you could possibly imagine. Like if the Jolly Green Giant got food poisoning or

something. I had just taken someone's life. I had crushed him under my hand. Shit. My body was starting to go numb.

When I looked back at Warren, he was staring up at me with the same unnerving emerald gaze as his brother. It was really kind of scary. "Remember what Roger told you about being a good little girl?"

"Yeah..." I responded tentatively. "Why?"

"Well, you're going to need to put that all aside for the time being,"

"What are you talking about?" I was starting to get worried. Warren wasn't doing anything to assuage my nausea.

"There are at least two dozen guys out there, all of them ready to kill us. We're going to have to make sure that doesn't happen. And there's no way in hell I can take all of them out myself,"

"I'm not going to—I can't—"

"There's no room for any of that. You're 90 feet tall. You could crush all of those buggers like insects without batting an eyelash. Extreme? Yes. But better than body bags for all of us. Just... clear a way,"

"I can't," I repeated hollowly, eyes wide.

I had been furious, but now that rage was mixed with a healthy dose of anxiety. I didn't want to die. I was 18 years old. I was too young to die.

"You can't be scared," Warren said softly. "Look, Tab. Rodge is right: you *do* need to be careful. But not all the time. Sometimes, you have to put all that aside for a bit. Sometimes, you just have to get your fee fi fo fum on,"

I gulped. Staring down at the fox, it was clear he wasn't budging on the issue. Oh fuck. There was no way I could get out of this.

"I hate you," I hissed.

"That's fine. But at least you'll live to do that," he replied shortly. "Let's get to that door. You'll head out first. Ciaran and I will be right behind you,"

It was only a short crawl to the door, but every yard felt like a mile. My heart was racing a million miles an hour and I could hardly breathe. What would it be like to die? Would it hurt? I just wished I'd had time to kiss Ciaran one last time. Or maybe have sex with him. Yeah, the latter would be nice. At the least, it would do something to get rid of those horrible lingering memories of Todd.

After taking a few deep breaths, I pushed open the door and surged out, getting to my feet. Standing up to my full height, I squinted and blinked in the harsh glare of the sun, trying to regain my bearings. Once I did, all hell broke loose.

A pissed-off ferret girl is something you don't want to encounter. A pissed-off 90-foot ferret girl is a force to be reckoned with. Two were dead before anyone could react, crushed underfoot as I stormed across the courtyard. There were shouts and I cried out in surprise as I felt shots being fired at me, but they did little more than irritate me. Nothing compared to Todd's electroshock wonderland.

Plucking a thug off the chest-high wall surrounding the courtyard, I squeezed him hard. He yelped loudly, but suddenly fell silent as I kept squeezing. Dropping his broken body to the ground, I swept my arm along the wall, knocking the few who had come up to reinforce off the edge.

They were swarming around my ankles by then. Fucking insects. I was too angry to notice my fear anymore. This needed to end. Now.

The group scattered as I dropped to my knees. It was so *easy* to crush them under my feet and palms. Didn't take any effort at all. Hell, I didn't even need to *think* all that much, just move. And they just... died.

By this point, the tide had turned—the thugs who had been so focused on subduing me were now more intent on saving their own pathetic hides. That wasn't going to happen. Not if I had anything to say about it. Well, *do*, I supposed.

I smiled darkly as I advanced slowly on them on all fours. Something inside me had snapped. This wasn't a necessary evil or even scary anymore; it was downright *pleasurable*. These insectile bastards had attempted to hold a girl almost as tall as the Statue of Liberty captive. Well, that was the biggest mistake they would ever make, in every sense of the term. I was going to kill them all, and I would be sure to have a good time doing it. They were all so deeply fucked it wasn't even funny. To them, at least. Personally, I found it pretty amusing. Hell, I wanted to drag this out a little. I waited until their backs were against the wall before I acted any further.

Snatching up two thugs, one in each hand, I sat back, resting on my haunches. Wordlessly, I stuffed one into my mouth, tearing him in half with my teeth and spitting him out.

I could feel the other thug quaking in my grip. He was trembling like a godsdamn leaf. Good. Raising him to face-level, I grinned broadly, licking my lips. That didn't seem to do much for his state of mind.

"Now. Unless you want me to do the same to you, you're going to tell me where Todd Hawthorne is," I hissed, my eyes flashing.

I didn't care if it meant more time before I got out of here. I wanted Todd in my hand, suffering, and then dead. There were things playing in the fringes of my subconscious. Dark things. Things that I wanted to do to that fox.

"I—I don't know where he is!" the bear in my grip gasped. "Please. I haven't seen him since..."

“Since when? Since when he tried to *rape* me? Since when he hurt me, over and over?”

I squeezed. I could hear bones cracking and the thug screamed. Maybe he’d be more amenable to sharing information. No? Too bad. What a shame. For him, at least. Ripping him limb from limb was kind of fun.

Wiping off the bear’s remains on the wall, I lay out on my stomach, kicking up my legs behind me. I smiled sweetly at the remaining thug, flat against the wall.

“Feel like sharing? Or do I get to come up with some fun new way of killing you, too?” I asked, my tone saccharine.

The guard, a burly fisher, let out a girlish scream as my hand roughly encircled his body. I laughed. What a fucking pussy.

Getting the sense that he wasn’t going to be forthcoming on Todd’s whereabouts, and because I wanted some more fun, I murmured, “You know, I’ve been 90 feet tall for *months* now. And I haven’t *once* eaten anyone. Wouldn’t it be a shame for me to do this whole angry-rampaging-giantess thing and *not* eat at least one person? And seeing as you’re the last one, well...” I trailed off ambiguously.

“Please don’t... I don’t know anything...” the fisher blubbered like a fucking baby.

“Take off your fucking clothes. I don’t want to have to deal with all that cotton and shit,” I ordered, opening my hand so that he was standing in the center of my palm.

Glancing idly over my shoulder, I noticed Ciaran, still over by the main doors. He was standing stock still next to a stony-faced Warren, glassy eyes wide and jaw slightly slack.

It all hit me at once. I’d just murdered two dozen people in cold blood. I was about to eat a person, just because I thought it would be fun. It was... oh gods. Oh gods. Everything that anyone had ever cautioned me against had happened. Oh gods. And the fisher—I was fucking *torturing* him. I was just as bad as Todd. I had to *go*.

The fisher slipped through my fingers to the ground as I stumbled unsteadily to my feet. Sick to my stomach, I vaulted over the chest-high perimeter fence and dashed clear through the chain link secondary fence, barely noticing it as it crumpled under my weight. Blinded by tears, I kept running until I was hip-deep in forest.

Stumbling upon a clearing, I sat down, hugging my knees to my chest and rocking back and forth gently. Oh gods. I needed to be alone. Not that I had much of a choice in the matter. I was going to be alone forever. I *needed* to be alone, if only to make sure I didn’t hurt someone else. I’d tried to be normal, but that wasn’t possible. I’d hurt Ciaran, killed dozens of people in a fit of rage, and planned—delighted in—doing even worse to Todd. Being a giantess had made me into a monster.

The force of Tabitha's flight knocked me clear off my feet. Fortunately, Warren was there to cushion my landing. Unfortunately for Warren, the concrete ground was there to cushion his. Apologizing fervently, I helped the fox back to his feet after I rolled off him.

"Dammit! Now she's going off gods know where... damage control all over again," Warren cursed to himself, massaging his ass.

My jaw dropped. Again. It had been slack for many of the prior minutes in light of Tabitha's turn for the darker.

"*That's* what you're calling this? Damage control? Tabitha... she..." I gestured emphatically at the carnage, not wanting to look at it. A frown creased my brow. "And it's all your fault,"

"How the fuck does *that* work?" Warren scoffed, already starting to make for the gates, which were of course no longer guarded. "Unless you had your eyes closed, it clearly wasn't *me* rampaging around and shit,"

"You were the one who told Tab to do this. She wouldn't have done it if you hadn't made her," I snapped, following after him.

"If you had opened your ears, I'd said she needed to *clear a way*, not *fucking murder everyone in the entire fucking courtyard*," Warren spat in return. "That's obviously not what I intended,"

"Why won't you own up to it? You've destroyed Tab's life,"

"Oh, is *that* what I did? You have no idea what I go through when I have to make hard decisions like that," Warren hissed, pointing a finger at me as we left the facility behind.

"Must be easier than actually *doing* the things,"

The muscles of Warren's face twitched, but his expression softened after a few moments of inner turmoil.

"We'll find her. Talk to her. Make sure she's all right,"

"Oh, is that when you're gonna tell her she can't go home?" I was hysterical. "It killed me to hide that from her,"

Warren kicked a tree stump by the road, grunting in frustration. "I really wish it could be different. But she can't go home. At least for a while. She's got a target on her back and these folks know where she lives. We need to—I need to—do something about that first. Until then, moving back would just put her and her parents in more danger,"

"I don't care about that. I just want everything to be better. Normal,"

"I know. But for now, let's just focus on finding Tab,"

"I'll go after her," I said. "I've got it from here. Don't worry,"

The fox looked over at me, shaking his head. "No, I'm coming with you. You'll need help, I'm sure,"

"I said I've got it. I don't need help. This is something I need to do. By myself. As you've made it abundantly clear, she can't go home. Well, I know something about that. I can't either. I want to help her. *Be* there for her. And sorry, but your manner... well, it's a little rough. Tab's fragile right now,"

Warren opened his mouth to argue, but the look I gave him was so full of stubborn determination that he rethought what he was going to say.

"Alright. Fine. I can't believe I'm saying this, but go ahead,"

"Good,"

As I made to leave, Warren held up a hand. "Be safe. Listen. If you need anything... just come to Saaduuts. We can figure something out from there. And I'm going to talk to my contact. Squeeze something out of him. Something about this whole operation here seems... off. I know BoD ops when I see them, and this isn't one of 'em. And we're going to make Tabitha better, I *swear*,"

I nodded fervently, smiling. "Thank you,"

Nodding again at the red fox, I took off away from the path towards the woods. It wasn't going to be all that challenging to track her down. The giantess had carved a swath of flattened underbrush and broken trees through the forest.

My mind roiled as I ran after Tabitha. Why was I following her? She was so scared, and I had nothing but pity and empathy for her. But she'd also managed to prove all of the stereotypes about ferrets being total psychopaths in a span of about five minutes. I'd watched her do horrible things to people who had made her angry, things that made my stomach turn. What if she wasn't done yet? What if she was still completely crazy? What if she lashed out at *me*? What if she killed me?

I had no idea how to even approach her. What was I supposed to do, go up, pat her on whatever body part I could reach, and tell her that I loved her despite her psychopathic rampage and oh by the way she couldn't go home, the one thing she wanted to do most? Oh, gods. I couldn't believe I was about to try and talk down my 90-foot psycho-killer girlfriend. What was my life? There was no way this would work out.

My ears perked up as I became aware of a rustling at the edge of the clearing. Instinctively, I tensed up. Wait, why was I so worried? Whatever it was, I'd probably be bigger than it. Gods knew I could probably just crush it if it tried to hurt me. All I was good at anymore was killing and maiming. I readied my fist nervously as something small and black tumbled out into the clearing. Wait. I recognized this small black something.

"It's me!" Ciaran called. "Please, don't do anything,"

"Ciaran!?" Calming down, I shifted so that I was sitting cross-legged in the center of the clearing.

"You're not exactly a hard ferretess to find, you know," Ciaran grinned slightly.

"There go my dreams of working undercover," I replied, rolling my eyes. I hesitated. "But look. Since you're here, I had something I wanted to tell you,"

I tried to make my apology, but Ciaran would hear nothing of it, waving his hand dismissively. "Don't worry about that. That's all in the past,"

"Ciaran... I just can't shake the past," I offered my hand and gently gathered the mink up in my palm, shifting so I was leaning against a sturdier tree. "So much has been going on... so much... I *killed* those people. I hurt *you*,"

"Tab..."

"Lemme just get this out," I said softly, eyes downcast. "I just want to plow through this. I am so sorry. So sorry. I can't really express in words how awful I feel right now.

"Sure, I was angry at you when you chewed me out like you did. Hell, I was fucking *furious*. But nothing could ever excuse how I lashed out like that and hurt you. I'm so glad you're okay. If you hadn't... made it... I just don't even know.

"But look. I understand if you don't want to be with me anymore. I shouldn't expect you to forgive me for what I did. Just know that I'm so happy you're okay. And I'm *really* happy you came to get me from that... place,"

Ciaran was silent for a few moments, mulling. Eventually, he looked straight up at me, eyes moist. "Don't beat yourself up about it,"

"Don't say that. Don't forgive me,"

Ciaran held up a hand. "Am I happy you *attacked* me? No. And am I shocked about what happened back there in the courtyard? To say the *least*! I can't even describe what happened there. But it's done. Unless you have some sort of magical time travel machine,"

I shook my head, smiling thinly. "Don't have one of those, last I checked,"

“Well, in that case, we just need to move forward. Somehow.

“One thing, though. Can we agree that that was our big fight? Back in the park? I suppose all couples needs to have one of those,” a thin smile played at the corners of his mouth.

I blinked, taken aback. I’d expected a whole slough of responses, but nothing so... not angry. A broad smile spread across my face. Even after everything I’d done, to him and to others, he still forgave me, still cared about me, still loved me.

“And also. Can we agree to keep the physical stuff to only *fun* things?” Ciaran asked. He narrowed his eyes. “Is there anything you want to talk about?”

I wasn’t usually one to blather on about myself or my feelings or any of that nonsense, but I could feel it all welling up in my chest.

“I can’t stand this, Ciaran. I’m only 18. I should only be worrying about what to wear to prom and which university to go to in the autumn. But I can’t go home and I can’t spend time with anyone and I’m so fucking big. And I’ve *killed* people. I can still *see* them, just lying there, dead. I hate this so much. I just want it all to end,”

I tried to say more, but couldn’t find the words. Instead, my body opted to just start sobbing uncontrollably, shaking violently, great tears spilling down my cheeks. “I’m so lonely, Ciaran. I have you, but I’m so *lonely*.”

“Let’s just go home and pretend none of this happened. Start over,”

Ciaran appeared more discouraged than I’d ever seen anyone look before. “Tab... We can’t,”

“*What?*” I wanted to go ballistic, but my energy was sapped. “But... but...”

“They know where you live, Tab. Those people,” Warren persisted. “If you go back, they’ll just hunt you down again,”

I fell silent. He was right, I supposed. I didn’t want my parents to suffer any more on my account. Maybe it was for the best.

“What am I supposed to do, then? Live in the woods?” I asked dumbly.

“I don’t know. But we’ll figure it out. I’d be a really shitty boyfriend if I couldn’t help you with that,”

Hugging my knees to my chest, I set Ciaran on one kneecap and rested my chin on the other, cocking my head to smile at him. “It must be hard to have a 90-foot ferretess as a girlfriend. I know that it’s difficult for me to have a pocket-sized boyfriend sometimes.

“You know, relationships are hard. It’s amazing being with someone you love so much, but it’s also really hard. But we have... additional problems. Guess we’re just overachievers that way. Heh. I want to make it work. I want to make it work so badly.

“But I don’t think it can. Not because of you. You deserve a normal life. But that isn’t going to work for me, clearly. I need to go somewhere else. I don’t know where, but I know I have to leave. If I don’t, they’re going to find me. It’s not fair of me to ask you to throw away everything else and—”

Ciaran was shaking his head fervently. He reached out and touched the tip of my nose with his hand. “Of *course* I’ll go with you. Wherever it is you go. I want to spend time with you. Hell, I want to spend my *life* with you. And fuck knows you need someone to make sure you don’t get into too much trouble,”

“But—but—,” I gasped.

“Shut up. Don’t make me rethink this stupid decision,” Ciaran grinned.

I tipped my face toward Ciaran, kissing him. I didn’t deserve him. But I was damn happy I had him. I had no idea what was going to happen in the future. I had no idea where I was going to go, where I would sleep at night, or what in the fuck I would eat. But two things were certain. For one thing, I was leaving the next day. For another, I had Ciaran with me. I wasn’t alone.

VIII.

The World at Large

I like songs about drifters, books about the same
They both seem to make me feel a little less insane
Walked on off to another spot
I still haven't gotten anymore that I want
(*Modest Mouse*)

"This is *not* ideal," I intoned.

The trio on the other side of the table was standing stock-still, trying to look straight at me but not make eye contact at the same time. Good. I had them right where I wanted. You could do a lot with someone once you've got him scared. Fear is an art, and I was fucking Michelangelo. No, maybe more of a Picasso; I like to think of myself as something of a modernist in aesthetic.

"This is really *not* ideal," I said again, slamming my fist on the table for effect. I'd already smashed one coffee mug. You have to change things up. Keep it unpredictable.

"No, it isn't," a short giraffe said (What a fucking oxymoron, no?). He was shaking visibly. I smirked. Excellent.

"Oh, you *think*? That's *all* you have to say? A gigantic ferret-girl gets loose and kills two dozen of our *best men*, and that's all you have to say?" I roared, spittle flying out of my mouth. "I need more than just that! I need things to happen! Track that bitch down. She's nine stories tall. It shouldn't be difficult, even for troglodytes such as yourselves,"

It was all in the crescendo. You had to start off low and subtle, and then slowly build into a frenzy as you piled on the anger and rage. After a minute or so, you seem out of your mind with anger. But you aren't. Oh no. It's all calculated. You're fully in charge every second of the rant.

"We'll get right on it, Hawthorne, sir," a ridiculously tall hamster nodded (Seriously, didn't we have anyone who had the common sense to grow normally?). He shot a dirty look at the giraffe.

“Just ‘sir’ is fine with me,” I sneered. “Leave. I’m getting sick of looking at your sorry faces,”

As the sorry trio made their way out of the room, I called for the as-yet silent squirrel to stay behind.

“Okay, Morrow. You’ve been moderately less inept than the other two. So I have a special task for you,” I said.

Morrow blinked. She looked nervous. Good. “What is it, sir?”

“Tabitha’s not the only one who needs to answer for the problems she caused. The two sorry bastards who broke her out: find out everything that can be known about them. I expect some solid progress by tomorrow, 1800. Report directly to me,”

Morrow nodded and silently left the room.

With those pains in my tail finally out of the room, I was finally able to get back to things that really mattered. Namely, I needed to get planning. These people needed to be found. More importantly, they needed to be dealt with. Taught a lesson. And I would be the one doing it. Self-therapy, my way.

Just because he was the size of a bug compared to me didn’t mean Ciaran needed to constantly play Jiminy Cricket. Good gods. Always getting on me about everything.

“Are you even sure we should *be* back here? I mean, after everything Warren was saying about the surveillance and all that...” Ciaran paced nervously on my nightstand.

“Calm down, dude,” I replied. “We need to get some supplies before heading out. I’m not about to go trekking through the mountains or whatever in the nude,”

“Coulda fooled me,” Ciaran scowled.

I shrugged, grinning coquettishly across the room at the little mink. Packing took priority; I could get dressed later.

Crossing over to my desk, I stooped down, pulling the lower drawer free. I set it on the stand beside Ciaran, offering him a hand up and into it.

“Take a look and see if there’s anything you want from there,” I said, resuming my own packing.

I didn’t want to look in the drawer, but I knew was there. After I’d grown, my parents had hung onto all my old stuff in the hopes that it would be of use to me again once I shrank back down. But it was obvious that wouldn’t be happening. I had no use for

any of it anymore, unless I wanted doll shit all of a sudden for some reason. Maybe Ciaran could find some stuff that would come in handy.

Closing up my rucksack and dressing hurriedly, I peered over the lip of the drawer at Ciaran. He'd strapped on a stuffed backpack and had stacked some items into one corner.

"What, you didn't want *any* of the dresses? I had so many super cute ones!" I teased, lifting him and his cargo out.

"Thanks for this, Tab," Ciaran said. "Now, are we heading out?"

"Patience, little guy. I mean, jeez. You made us wait until the dead of night to come back here and now you're all hell-bent on getting out as fast as possible," I grinned, plucking up Ciaran's extra cargo and dropping it into my pockets. See, one of the benefits of having all your clothes custom-made just for you is that you can request girl jeans with *real* pockets, not just the fake bullshit they usually have. Apparently girls don't need somewhere to store their cellphones.

My face grew serious. "I have something that I need to do first,"

Sitting down at my desk, I pulled out a piece of paper and one of my street lamps, dipping it in ink. I needed to write my parents a letter. I don't really want to share what I wrote; it's personal and private. But I needed to tell them how much I loved them and that they shouldn't worry. There was no question to it: I *would* see them again. I *needed* them. And I'd do my damndest to make sure it happened. But it would be awhile. Too long.

Satisfied with the note, I set down my pen, waved a hand over the paper to make sure the ink was dry, and folded up the paper as small as I could. Time to get out of there.

Ciaran had practically worn a furrow in the nightstand, he was pacing so much. He came to a stop at one end of the circuit as I walked over. I stooped down so that I was resting my chin on the surface of the stand.

"Let's go! We've spent too much time here as it is," he gestured emphatically.

"Calm down, Jiminy. I'm all ready," I smirked. A frown creased my brow. "But what are we going to do about you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, we need to move fast. And you aren't going to be able to keep up with me if you're walking,"

"I dunno... just put me in your pocket or something," Ciaran ran a hand through his tousled hair, his tone flustered.

“You’re my boyfriend, not my doll. I don’t want to carry you around like... I dunno, property,” I said. After all the terrible things I’d done, to him and others, I wanted to turn over a new leaf. “I don’t want you to feel belittled or whatever,”

“Well, I feel pretty damn small whenever I’m around you,” Ciaran snorted. He shrugged. “I dunno; would your shoulder work?”

“I don’t see why not,”

“Just don’t let me fall!”

Assuring Ciaran that he would be safe, I offered him my palm and transferred him onto my shoulder as I got back to my feet. Time to say goodbye to my house and everything else, for the time being, at least.

Dropping off my note was the hardest thing I’d ever done. Why couldn’t I stay? Why couldn’t Mom and Dad make everything back to normal? I wanted to tear off the roof and pluck them out of their bed and kiss them and hug them and... I already missed them so much.

“Tab, I’m so sorry,” Ciaran murmured in my ear, evidently sensing my inner turmoil. I smiled as he brushed a hand reassuringly against my neck.

I tucked the note up against the back door, wedging it as best I could between the wall and the support of the stoop. Standing up to my full height, I turned my back on the house and familiar things and made my slow way out of Winthrop.

My girlfriend stood underneath the waterfall, smiling as she let the cool water gush over her body. It had been a long trek and it looked like she certainly needed the relaxation. She’d taken us far from Winthrop, into the foothills of the mountains. We left any trace of civilization far behind, now surrounded by dense forest as far as the eye could see.

I supposed I should unpack my belongings and get to work pitching my tent. But I couldn’t tear my eyes away from Tabitha. She noticed me staring and grinned cheekily at me, giggling.

Blushing violently, I turned away, making my unsteady way towards the folded tent. Tabitha evidently had other plans, as I felt her fingers wrap gently around my waist, lifting me off the ground.

“Oy! Slow it down a bit,” I protested gently as my stomach did a somersault. I would never get used to the elevation changes associated with being around Tabitha.

“Slow? There’s nothing sexy about slow,” Tabitha teased.

“Well, there’s nothing sexy about me tossing my cookies all over you, either,” I replied.

Tabitha attempted a disgusted expression but couldn't stop grinning giddily.

"Looks like *someone's* happy," I laughed.

"Are you kidding me? I haven't had a real shower in *ages*. Had to just use a sponge to get clean back home. Not enough water," a suggestive grin flashed across Tabitha's face. "But I could still use a good sponge,"

I protested half-heartedly as Tabitha's massive fingers fumbled with my clothes.

"Hey, careful!" I called as the ferretess accidentally created a large tear in my pants. "I've only got a few pairs of those,"

"Let's just get rid of all your clothes, then," Tabitha giggled, but allowed me to pull off my shirt on my own.

Tabitha sank down, leaning against the cliff that the waterfall spilled over. Her lips played over my body and I could feel her warm breath on my fur. I giggled as she slowly dragged me down her chest, fingers gently pressed into my back.

"I have a feeling I'm a bit less useful than a washcloth," I mumbled through a mouthful of fur.

I was lifted faceward again, but this time Tab was more careful about her pace. And they say you can't teach teenaged ferrets new tricks.

"I guess we'll just have to settle for shower sex then," she laughed.

"Tabitha-style,"

Well... not so much. Our efforts quickly proved fruitless. Way too much cold water and wet fur and just plain unsexiness.

"I have to get my tent unpacked, anyway," I mumbled when Tabitha gave up and set me back down in defeat. I hurriedly got dressed in fresh clothes and pulled out my tent bag.

"Myself, I'll be enjoying sleeping under the stars. How I suffer," Tabitha groaned dramatically, wrapping a towel around her torso as she stepped out of the waterfall pool and onto solid ground.

"Speak for yourself. My entire tent smells like boob sweat now,"

Kneeling down, Tabitha poked one of the tent stakes into the ground with her fingertip. "Well, I was out of pants pocket space. And it was a long, hard walk. Say, if you're so critical, why don't *you* carry *me* tomorrow? Just so everything's fair,"

I tossed the sleeping bag into the tent, grinning up at Tabitha, who had spread herself out on the meadow.

"You know, you're almost sexier with the towel than without," I murmured, walking up to her elbow.

"Damn. If I'd known that, I would've just gone around in a towel all day, every day," Tabitha started pulling on her clothes. "So, what's the game plan? You got any sort of idea what we're doing, cap'n?"

I shrugged, mulling as I scratched my head. "I really don't know," I sighed, leaning up against my girlfriend's knee as she sat cross-legged. "We could spend a few days around here. But we probably shouldn't stick around too long. Gods only know how long it would take those guys to find us,"

"At least we've got a big mountain range to explore,"

Tabitha was smiling, but it was plastered on, false. She didn't want to be in the middle of the forest any more than I. Then I remembered.

"Or... we could start heading in the direction of Saaduuts," I said. "Warren told me that if we needed help, we could go there,"

"Saaduuts? You know, I've never been there before," Tabitha commented, pensively stripping a smaller pine of its branches. "But if Warren said he could help us..."

"It's a start. We can figure things out on the way,"

"Flying by the seat of our pants," the giantess grinned. "Just how we roll,"

Reynard was probably the best thing that had ever happened to my brother Roger, at least for the sake of his nutrition. Roger's idea of cooking a gourmet meal was having fancy crackers with his microwavable soup. Despite our identical genes, I'd somehow managed to inherit the only foodie aspects of our parents. And I was the *straight* one. Good gods.

"This is delicious," I commented to Reynard, helping myself to another round of pasta primavera. "Really sublime. Say, wanna just ditch that whole tailor thing and be my personal chef?"

"I'm glad *someone* appreciates my efforts," the arctic fox rolled his pale blue eyes playfully at Roger. "Unless you're planning some *other* way of showing your appreciation later on..."

Roger's ears tinged red as he took a swig of beer and I decided to pretend I'd temporarily gone deaf. For every ounce of prudishness in Roger's body was a pound

of unbridled horniness in Reynard's. It always made dinners with the pair... interesting. And very awkward.

"So you going to share why you invited yourself over to dinner?" Roger pressed, avoiding eye contact with Reynard.

I shifted uncomfortably in my chair, ears drooping slightly. "I... I just wanted to talk," I said at length.

"What's the matter?" Reynard asked, passing me the breadbasket.

"I think I fucked up. Monumentally fucked up. I mean, I've made a lot of mistakes. But this time, it's just a whole new level of fuck-uppage," I mumbled.

I instinctively braced for Roger's inevitable snappy retort. He loved to torment me endlessly, but this time even he stayed quiet.

"I did what you asked. Well, what Ernest asked," I said, glancing at Reynard. "But... I made a horrible call,"

"It can't have been too bad. You succeeded. You helped Tab out, right?" Reynard replied.

"But at what cost? I told her to *murder* someone. Several people. A lot of people. I ordered a scared girl to do something that she couldn't bear to do, just because it was the easiest way out.

"I've made a lot of tough calls on the job. Sometimes, someone wouldn't make it out alive. But that was with operatives who'd trained and worked for years. Not a terrified teenager who'd just had fuck knows what happen to her. But I didn't think about any of that. I just saw a 90-foot giantess who could stomp a convenient path for us.

"Tab told me over and over how much she didn't want to do it, but I just ignored her. I forced her into something horrible. It's inexcusable,"

"You were running on adrenaline," Reynard offered.

I shook my head at the arctic fox. "I'm always running on adrenaline. I shouldn't have made that call. And now I've basically abandoned two people in the middle of fucking nowhere,"

In an uncharacteristically warm gesture, Roger reached over, massaging my shoulder with his hand. "Warren..."

"I don't know. There really isn't anything we can say now to make things better," I sighed. "It's so easy for us to hem and haw in this nice, warm apartment while they're out who knows where.

"I told Ciaran to come to Saaduuts. All I can do is hope that he listens to me for once. Very stubborn, that mink. Not that I blame him, given his background. He's fought so hard for everything. He's so brave,"

"You told him to come to Saaduuts?" Roger frowned. "That's not going to end well,"

"What do you mean?" my eyes narrowed.

"Think about it. Tabitha's nine stories tall. Sure, we get giants in town. But none of them, far as I know, have hordes of pursuers on their oversized tails,"

My stomach lurched. "Shit," I whispered. How had I not thought about that? "I need to figure out where they are, and fast. I'll work something out,"

"Well, you *are* the intel guy," Roger said.

"The stars are so beautiful," Tabitha breathed. "I'd never known there were so *many*,"

I curled up against her neck, running a hand through her fur. "That's cause we're in the middle of East Bumblefuck. No light pollution around to wash out the sky here in the boonies,"

Tabitha's giggle gently shook my body. She reached up to brush her fingers against me, prompting a shiver.

"I miss my parents and my house a lot. But I'm really glad I get to be here with you. Especially somewhere so beautiful,"

"We'll get you home again. I promise,"

My heart sank. If—no, *when*—we got Tabitha back to normal size, or at least in a situation where there weren't operatives hot on her tail, she could go home. She could be with her family. But what would that mean for me? I couldn't go home. That wasn't an option.

"And when we do, you're moving in. You get no say in the matter. You'll just have to put up with my dad's cooking until you go off to college and become an eccentric billionaire with a shit ton of patents to your name and a gigantic fucking girlfriend," Tabitha poked me playfully.

"Sounds like torture," I smiled warmly. I really wanted nothing more. "I'd like that. Your parents would be okay with that?"

Tabitha blinked. "No shit, Watson,"

"Er, the expression is 'no shit, Sherlock', I believe,"

“No. I meant what I said. My parents are over the fucking *moon* about you. So obvious even Watson could catch it,”

I couldn't hold back the broad grin plastered stupidly across my face. Over the moon? Wow. I wanted that. “Your house,”

“Or, failing that, we could make a really kickass log cabin right here,”

“It would be like Lincoln Logs for you,”

“Those things were the fucking bomb when I was little,”

“Little. In every sense of the word,”

“I'm not even going to dignify that with a response. But first we need to resolve everything with those crazy fuckers,”

I couldn't see Tabitha's face, but I knew she was starting to frown.

“Don't worry about them,”

“But all those *thugs*,” Tabitha said. “Every night when I fall asleep, I see them. It's awful. And Todd...”

“I wanted to do so many terrible things to him. I wanted to do worse things to him than he did to me,” Tabitha's voice dropped even further. “And what *really* scares me is that part of me still wants to do that. I want him to suffer. I hate Todd so much,”

My stomach dropped. “You can't, though, Tab. That's not you. You're not a killer. There's been too much pain and death and sadness. I don't want any more of that,”

“I don't either. But if... if Todd finds me... I just don't know what's going to happen,”

“We'll never see Todd ever again,”

A sheaf of papers with several still images taken from a security camera clipped to the front dropped on my desk. I glanced up balefully from my mug of coffee at the squirrel who had so brazenly entered my office when the door was closed. Or should I say eager beaver?

“You know I don't like being interrupted when I'm having my coffee,” I said flatly.

“I thought that you would want to see this right away,” the squirrel piped up.

"Right away can wait until after coffee," I muttered, but set down the mug and disinterestedly perused the papers.

My eyes narrowed and I began to flip faster the more I read. Maybe I *had* been a bit wrong: right away was right away in this instance. Not that that squirrel would ever hear an admission of error coming from *me*.

"Is this all true?"

"Yes sir. The identities are verified. The younger one has family in Winthrop. But it doesn't look like he's been home in a few days. Not that 'home' is all that pleasant for him, from what I could glean. This other one, the red fox, lives in Saaduuts. Oh! And he has special plans for tomorrow evening. Dinner date with his spouse or boyfriend or something. It's all in the folder,"

Coffee forgotten, I pulled a key from my pocket and leaned over to unlock the bottom drawer of my desk. Glancing momentarily at the squirrel, I arched a brow.

"Why are you still here, Morrow? I need an exact address waiting for me in the vehicle by the time I get there,"

The squirrel nodded fervently and beat it out of the room fast as anything. I smirked to myself. The pieces were all beginning to fall together. The mink was clearly an accomplice of some sort. Small potatoes. I'd arrange for a home visit, see what trouble could be stirred up. But the fox... oh, I had something really *special* coming for him.

Pulling the instrument of my revenge from the drawer, I threw on my jacket and headed for the door. It had been awhile since I'd paid Saaduuts a visit. Maybe I should bring an umbrella.

IX.

Bloodbuzz Ohio

I still owe money to the money to the money I owe
The floors are falling out from everybody I know
(*The National*)

Reynard knew how to arrange a romantic evening; that much was certain. He'd managed to get reservations at TanakaSan, which was no small feat. See, in order to get there, you basically either had to be a socialite of some sort or *murder* one and take their reservation.

"Enjoying your sushi?" he asked.

"Everything is perfect," I enthused in response.

Reynard gave me one of those looks that said he wished he could just throw me across the table and have at it right then and there. I grinned back at him across the table, massaging his hand with my fingertips.

"So, you still up for that hike tomorrow morning?" Reynard asked, fiddling with his chopsticks as he looked around at the spare but elegant restaurant, replete with low tables and flickering votive candles floating in lacquer bowls.

"There isn't enough coffee in the world to get me up and going at the hour you wanted," I groaned.

"Some of us are just more adventurous than others," Reynard raised a brow, a grin on his lips.

"Some of us apparently don't need sleep," I shot back, mirroring his grin.

I glanced up as the sommelier, a handsome red fox dressed in a dark suit, appeared by the table, holding a bottle of white wine.

"A petite arvine, compliments of the house," he murmured, producing a glass and filling it.

"Thank you," I said, accepting the glass.

The sommelier filled Reynard's glass, already sitting on the table, before disappearing back towards the kitchen. I took a sip, relishing the light, fruity flavor of the wine.

"It's good!" I commented, smacking my lips. "Weird aftertaste though. Kinda acid,"

The arctic fox rolled his eyes. "You just have no palate. It's *fine*. Delicious body,"

Reynard fancied himself a sophisticated wine connoisseur. He was constantly dragging home bottles with bizarre, unpronounceable names. They all tasted more or less the same to me, but he was always going on about "hints of tangerine" and "oaky aromas" and other bullshit. Fucking pretentious-ass bastard. Yet somehow I still managed to love him.

"What I want to know is how he got that scar. You see that? It was on the side of his face. Badass sommelier there. Wonder if he got into an altercation with a corkscrew or something,"

I nodded numbly, offering up a half-hearted chuckle. Suddenly, I wasn't feeling so good. Reynard seemed a little out of focus and my head was throbbing.

"Hey, you okay?" Reynard frowned.

"I'm fine," I nodded, wiping my brow.

"You sure? You don't look so good," Reynard's brow furrowed in concern.

"I think I know how I feel," I addressed the vaguely Reynard-shaped blob across the table from me. "Just... just lemme... I'll be right back,"

Pushing back from the table, I made my increasingly unsteady way towards the restroom. I pushed through the door, leaning over the sink and turning on the water.

Dipping my hands in the stream, I bathed my face with cool water, trying to restore some sort of clarity to my

senses. It did absolutely nothing for the dull throbbing in my head.

My knees buckled and I toppled forward, gasping for breath as I clung to the porcelain lip of the sink for support. Everything was fading to darkness around me. I had to stay conscious. Had to stay conscious. Had to...

Black.

It was Friday night, which meant I had a hot date with my couch and the next few episodes of *Arrested Development* on streaming. If anyone says that the bachelor life is sad and pitiful, well, they're just plain wrong.

I mean, I basically had ultimate freedom. Order in and just hang out? Fine by me. Cook for myself? Eh, I guess. Find a girl who wasn't looking for anything long-term and just have fun? Sure thing. My brother thought he was so *great* because he was dating someone, but last I checked, that obligated him to all sorts of evenings out and all that crap. *Lame*.

A knock at the door distracted me from my setup. Good. My take-out must have arrived. Grinning broadly, I hurried for the apartment door, cash in hand.

My face fell as I answered the door. "You aren't the delivery guy,"

"Warren, we need to talk,"

It was Reynard. He looked pale (well, more than usual, considering his silver-furred complexion and all), drumming his fingers nervously on the wall by the doorframe. I welcomed him in, opening the door for him to come into my living room.

"Sorry about the state of things," I mumbled half-heartedly, clearing a space for him to sit on the couch. "What's up?"

"Roger. He's...well, he's gone missing," Reynard was busy fidgeting with the tip of his bushy tail.

"Did you check the pantry? He's usually somewhere gorging his face, if things have remained the same as when we were growing up," I shrugged.

"I'm not kidding. We were out for dinner. TanakaSan," Reynard began.

I nodded. It was pretty apparent they'd been *somewhere* swanky. Reynard was usually well-dressed, but this time he was done up to the nines, wearing an impeccably tailored grey jacket and pants with a thin ice blue tie that complemented his eyes nicely. Who am I kidding? I had to admit, Roger had a good taste in guys. Even I could see that.

"Go on," I prodded.

"Well, the restaurant's sommelier brought out some wine for us, on the house. Really classy move, I thought. But then Roger started feeling sick. But he never came back from the bathroom. When I went to check on him, nobody was in there," Reynard said. "It's not like Roger to just skip out like that. I'm really scared. He didn't say anything to you, did you? Call you or anything?"

I was frowning by the time Reynard finished his account. He was right. For all his faults, Roger wouldn't ever just bail on something like that.

"This is the first I'm hearing about this," I said. "He just randomly got sick? You don't remember anything odd at all?"

"Well... now that I think about it, we were given some free wine. But I didn't notice anything weird about it. Roger didn't seem to like it, though. He started feeling funny right after drinking it,"

I narrowed my eyes. Something was definitely off. I didn't like it one bit.

"I'm going to figure something out. Talk to that contact of yours," I said.

Maybe Ernest would have a thing or two to tell me. I had a very strong gut feeling about the whole thing. This situation had the grubby fingerprints of the cadre we'd encountered at the Bureau installation all over it, if my senses were correct. And my senses were rarely wrong.

The world swam back into focus as I blinked into a bleary semi-consciousness. Sitting upright, I massaged my throbbing head, looking around and trying to regain my bearings.

The task didn't prove to be all that difficult, as I appeared to be back at home. I was sprawled naked on my unmade bed, surrounded by the familiar sights of my apartment. Reynard, though he couldn't have been bothered to tuck me into bed, had evidently taken the liberty of pulling off my clothes for me. Wow. Pretty apparent where his priorities lay... Heh. I pun.

"Rey?" I called, but there was no response.

He must have left for work already. Shit. What *time* was it? I glanced over at the clock, but the display was blank. Had it run out of batteries again, already? Should have gotten one with a power cord.

Cursing to myself, I swung my legs over the edges of the bed and padded across the room towards the closet. I could worry about the clock later. We probably had batteries *somewhere*.

I began thinking up tardiness excuses as I pulled open the closet door to pick out an outfit to wear. My jaw dropped.

"This isn't funny at *all*, hon," I snapped loudly, staring at the back wall of a completely empty closet.

Every other drawer in the room was in exactly the same condition, just as empty as the day we'd moved in and unpacked all the furniture. The arctic fox probably thought the whole thing was terribly hilarious.

I stalked into the living room, fully expecting to see Reynard, wearing nothing but a few strategically=placed somethings and a suggestive grin on his lips, lounging on the couch.

No dice. The living room was just as eerily still and sterile as the bedroom. Everything was there all right, but it was, well, *wrong*. I couldn't quite put my finger on what the problem was, but it just didn't feel like the same apartment.

Then the room shook, provoking a rather unmanly squeak on my part. Being a Saaduutsite, I was used to the occasional temblor. They *had* been predicting that "the big one" would be on its way soon, after all. And in my job, I was more than accustomed to being knocked off my feet by a gigantic person stomping around like they fucking owned the place. But this was... more.

I was thrown into the armchair as my universe shook once again, this time accompanied by a resounding voice that penetrated my very being.

"Roger Smith. It's a pity we had to meet this way,"

Attempting to swallow my fear and utterly failing, I called out in a wavering tone, "Who the fuck are you?"

The entire roof came off my apartment. It wasn't ripped off in chunks (not that it would have made it any less bizarre and unnerving), but in one clean piece, like the lid of a box.

Staring down at me was a red fox of immense proportions. He must have been hundreds of feet tall, staring down at me through cold amber eyes. I would have said his gaze made me feel naked were it not for the fact that I was already in a state of undress. My tail whipped around my waist in a feeble attempt at protecting my modesty. My eyes widened as I noticed a thin scar along his jawline. Where had I seen that before? The sommelier from the night before. Oh, shit.

I gaped stupidly up at the grinning fox. I wasn't sure whether I wanted to scream or cry. For once in my life, I was speechless. My apartment, the final bastion of sanity and normalcy in my crazy, crazy life had been violated.

The gigantic fox laughed coldly. "Oh, gods. This is priceless. You think I'm a fucking *giant*, don't you? Between you and me, I'm a little bit shorter than your average person. Just a bit. Not that it matters to you, pipsqueak, seeing as you're barely more than an inch tall,"

Oh gods. He was right. When I tore my eyes away from his cruel visage, I saw that over the fox's head was not the open sky but a *ceiling*. He was in a *room*. Shit. I must have been minuscule.

"Who are you?" I stammered at length. "How do you know my name?"

"My name is Todd. Frankly, that's more than what matters to you. And you're Roger. How do I know? Any fool can read an ID card," the massive fox (To me, okay? Just bear with it...) snorted derisively. "Besides. We've had an eye on you for a little while now; witness your lovely accommodations.

"You like it? This baby took me a few solid days of hard work to put together. All the product of extensively analyzing your apartment so it could be replicated more or less perfectly. One of the more interesting projects I've undertaken of late. Definitely more fun than filing endless stacks of paperwork, let me tell you,"

"But... why?" I asked stupidly.

That cold laugh again. I sank lower into the armchair. As if that feeble effort brought me any farther from the fox.

"Confession time. We-I-didn't really mean for this to happen to you. No, no, no.

"I have some business to... *discuss* with your brother. But apparently twins are too challenging for some *fools* in my employ to understand. But don't worry. The imbecile responsible for this unfortunate setback was... *dealt with*," Todd said, unconsciously licking his lips.

I smiled nervously. "Then I'll just get out of your hair. You can let me go and I can leave and we can just forget about this silly mess,"

Todd didn't even pause for consideration. "No,"

"No? Why not?" I balked.

"Because then all the hard work we did to put this together would go to waste. Besides. I just don't want to," Todd's face was a mask of bored apathy.

"You can't just do whatever you want," I burst out.

In a flurry of motion, the fox knocked me out of the chair and pinned me to the ground, each limb under a different digit. Slowly applying pressure, he leaned down so that his muzzle was inside my ersatz apartment. His breath washed over my body, hot and acrid.

"Oh, it would appear that I *can* do whatever I want," he whispered menacingly.

His free middle finger traced its way along my torso. I inhaled sharply as the clawtip gashed my stomach.

"You know, working in my field has really led me to realize how fucking fragile people really are," Todd commented idly. "Especially, it would appear, when they're a lot smaller than you are. I wondered how Tabitha felt when she destroyed all my men with such ease and relish. I guess I get to find out now,"

Another gash, deeper this time. Tears sprang into my eyes.

"Please. Just let me go," I begged. It hurt too much. "If you can't grow me back, just let me stay here until it happens, then let me go,"

His smile froze my blood. "Where's the fun in that? I went through all that effort to make this dollhouse. I

might as well get to play with my doll, even if it's the wrong one,"

A loud sob escaped my throat, prompting Todd to smirk once again and dig his claws further into my limbs. My gashes was bleeding freely by that point.

"Fair warning," Todd hissed gleefully. "When I was young, I always broke my toys,"

Everyone should find some free time to just unwind and play on occasion. It keeps you young. Taps into all those pleasure centers and whatnot. Releases endorphins. Scientific proof everyone is *supposed* to have fun on occasion.

And let me just say, Roger was certainly helping me in that department. Little fucker could *run*. It took a little more than a minimal amount of effort for my hand to keep pace with him as he ran laps around his model living room. Maybe I should've snapped one of his little legs like a twig. Nah. That would have made things too boring. Could save that bit of fun for later, perhaps.

"I'm going to start charging you personal trainer fees if you keep up the pace like this," I commented wryly. "Ever thought about running a marathon? You might want to consider it,"

Roger spun around on his heels to shoot me a look of utter contempt, but tripped backwards over the coffee table. I guffawed deeply as he went sprawling on his back, grunting in pain.

"Watch out! You're gonna hurt yourself. I'm the only one who's going to be doing any injuring around here,"

Driving my point home, I slammed my fist into the little living room, reducing half the furniture to matchwood. I felt a pang of regret at smashing something I'd put so much effort into crafting, but seeing Roger's expression of pure, unadulterated fear made it all worthwhile. He was curled into a ball, trembling violently.

Sensing that he was about to begin yet another round of pitiful begging, I leaned into the model apartment again. It was time to ease off a bit, present Roger with the illusion of having a modicum of control over his pitiful life.

"This could all stop, you know," I murmured softly. "All you have to do is tell me where I can find Warren,"

Roger whimpered. "I couldn't do that. I wouldn't,"

My lower lip pouted out. "All I need is an address,"

“Why should I, you motherfucking bastard?” Roger retorted, managing to find an ounce of venom in himself. Impressive, given that he only weighed perhaps five ounces, tops.

“I’m going to let that insubordination slide this once. And it’s simple, really,” I sighed, starting to count off items on my fingers. “You tell me something, I grant you a merciful end. But if you remain tight-lipped, well, I’ll get to do everything to you that I’ve been itching to. And I doubt you’ll find those things all that comfortable.

“I mean, it’s a pity to waste a perfectly good toy, but there you go. I could always pick up where I left off on you with Warren,”

Roger was visibly shaken. After a few moments of silence, he managed to stammer out a barely audible “N-no,”

I massaged my temples dramatically with one hand, shaking my head. “There I go, trying to help you...”

Was I disappointed? Of course not! Then again, maybe I’d keep Roger alive long enough for a little reunion with his brother once I managed to locate him and cut him down to size. Have some fun with the two of them. Good *gods*, that would be hot. I toyed with the idea of letting Roger in on the idea, but decided against getting *too* monologue-y.

I leveled another smirk at my toy fox. He had gone full fetal by this point. Gods, fear was such a delicious thing.

“I’m going to give you a two-second head-start before I destroy the entire living room,” I leered, raising my hand. “One-one thousand...”

Because I had control over the meeting place, we met in a coffee shop rather than a dank alley in the middle of the Hesquiaht District. Much more civilized. *And* I could get a nice cappuccino. Bonus.

I nodded as Ernest approached my table in the back of the café, sitting down nervously.

“I really don’t like this,” the coyote muttered, casting a glance over his shoulder. “Too public,”

“Relax,” I replied. “Nobody will expect us to meet here for exactly that reason. It’s fucking genius. Besides. Do any of these folks look like MX4? I dunno about you, but that hipster with the gauge and the stupid-looking tail loop looks pretty fucking shift-y to me,”

"This isn't a joke. I'm risking my career—my *life*—to meet with you," Ernest frowned fiercely.

I nodded, hurriedly shifting into serious mode. "I fully understand. Sorry if I didn't seem sincere. But look. I need your help. But before we go any further, I need you to promise me that you won't hold anything back this time. No more tiptoeing around the truth. Please,"

The coyote shifted nervously, pondering for a few moments before nodding silently.

Taking it as consent, I pressed on. "My brother. I don't know where he is,"

Ernest didn't even blink. "Todd. That vindictive bastard,"

"Todd?" I stared blankly.

"Todd Hawthorne. He's with the Bureau of Defense too. But I've been doing some digging, and he's associated with... some other group on the side. *Evil* son of a bitch. I've known some bad eggs, in the Bureau and in civvie life. But he's the only one I'd call outright fucking evil. And you can be sure he's pissed as hell that you guys sprang his main subject,"

I nodded slightly. The fox I'd caught a glimpse of in the Bureau facility, the epicenter of Tabitha's fear, finally had a name to go with the face.

"But if that's the case, Todd shouldn't be targeting Roger," I pointed out. "By all rights, it should probably be *me* bound and gagged in some van or whatever. Unless he found out that Roger's the one who got you in touch with me,"

The coyote shook his head fervently. "No chance. The only way he could have done that is by connecting the dots through me. And, well, I'm still here. So he hasn't done that yet,"

"Good point," I sighed, templeing my hands in frustration. "Then why *him*?"

"Mistake?" Ernest shrugged, throwing up his hands. "You and Roger *do* look disturbingly alike. Like more than is reasonable for even twins,"

"Wow, I've never heard *that* before," I snapped. "But where is he? Where would Todd be keeping him detained?"

Ernest shifted nervously. "Er, just hear me out. This is going to sound crazy. But if it is Todd, then I think he's done something... more. Just hauling someone off and tying them up isn't good enough for that fox.

"Todd's one for a show. Flair for the dramatic. He likes to do things big. Well, maybe 'big' isn't the best term for it. Warren, I think he's been... *shrunk*," the coyote's voice was barely a whisper as he finished his sentence.

To say I was skeptical put it gently. I stared blankly at Ernest, certain he was insane. A small chuckle escaped my lips.

“So you’re saying that this *Todd* fellow got bad intelligence and somehow magically shrank my brother,”

“Magic isn’t *real*. But yes. He did. It all ties into his project. Todd has possession of a whole arsenal of... well, what he calls toys. They’re weapons, really. Chemical compounds. They fuck with your biochemistry in all sorts of ways.

“If he wanted to, he could grow you so big you could use a skyscraper as a toothpick. Or he could reduce you down so small that Roger now would seem the size of a skyscraper. The effects could last a few hours or for the entirety of your existence. None of this is officially sanctioned by the Bureau. I’m not certain how or where he gets his mitts on those compounds, but it’s a major issue. It’s evil. It’s *terrorism*,”

I’d gone into the meeting expecting something of a bombshell, but nothing on the caliber of the 100-megaton nuke Ernest had dropped on me. Ernest waited for me to collect my thoughts with a patient expression on his face.

“That—that’s—what?” I babbled incoherently. “Bullshit,”

“I know. It’s crazy,” Ernest shook his head. Reaching into his breast pocket, the coyote produced a nondescript vial filled with clear fluid. “I knew you’d have a hard time believing it. Who wouldn’t? So I managed to procure a sample. Obsessive as Todd may be, he still has his occasional slip-up. Too arrogant to admit it, though,”

Accepting the vial from Ernest, I studied the fluid carefully. Not that I could glean much from it just by staring at it.

“So this could—“

“—Render you big enough to play paddy-cakes with Tabitha if you so chose, for the span of a few hours,”

Wide-eyed, I shook my head numbly. It was all too much. I spent my career investigating shady shit, but this made my toughest case look like child’s play. But the pieces were starting to fit together. Todd, his crazy chemicals, the sommelier, the wine...

“What is Todd *doing* with all of this? What is this other group he’s involved with?” I asked, shaking my head.

Ernest shook his head. “I just don’t know. He covers his tracks, and he covers them well,”

“But if Roger *is* small, and that’s how he got shrunk... Can we grow him back?” my mind was whirling a million miles a minute as I fiddled with the vial. “Wait. But this

is really good. If he has that, we can find stuff to get Rodge back to normal. But we can also cut Tab down to size. Two birds, one stone,”

Ernest shifted nervously, pursing his lips worriedly at my hopeful smile. “Well... it’s not that simple,”

“If the issue is getting access to more of Todd’s stuff, don’t worry! If I can do one thing well, it’s breaking into places I shouldn’t be,” I grinned self-assuredly, brandishing the vial.

“It’s not even that,” Ernest sighed. “There’s a, well, *problem* with the serums. Once someone’s ingested it, there’s no going back. You can’t just ‘cancel out’ one with another, as much as that would seem logical.

“See, the serums fundamentally fuck up your biochemistry, altering basic processes—hormone release, metabolic pathways, you name it—at the most fundamental level. You’re mucking with something that’s in a really delicate balance to begin with. If we attempted to treat a person who’d taken one serum with another one, it would produce catastrophic results. Death. Mortal injury. Terrible things.

“The closest I’ve seen to a reversible serum is one with a very short half-life, sort of like the one you’ve got there in your hand. It’ll last for a few hours in the bloodstream before degrading, allowing normalcy to resume as the body evens itself out again. But again, if you mix one in while another is already in the system, it’s incredibly dangerous.

“Besides, with Tabitha, we don’t even know *how* she got so big. Giving her a serum in hopes of reducing her back to normal could put her at serious risk. We just don’t know enough about her... condition,”

I blinked. “That... that’s unacceptable,”

“I’m so sorry,”

“But there’s *got* to be a way to fix it, right? I mean, if you change something—metabolism, whatever—you can flip it back, right?”

“I’m not saying it’s impossible. I’m just saying that Todd’s the only one with the serums, and, well, he’s not exactly passing out manuals. He isn’t even supposed to have the things in the first place, you know,”

I wanted to pound my head on the table until I gave myself a concussion. Every time I took a step in the right direction, I was clusterfucked backwards a dozen paces. I just wanted to help Tab, Ciaran, and Roger.

“You know Todd. You know the Bureau. Where would Todd be... detaining Roger? He’s bound to be in Saaduuts somewhere, right?”

"We have a warehouse in the Hesquiaht District. Todd's rather fond of that warehouse, now that I think about it. Always disappearing off there. Seems as good a place to start as any," Ernest scrawled an address on a napkin and passed it to me. "What are you going to do?"

I shook my head, throwing a hand up in defeat. There was so much to deal with. Even after I got Roger out of hot water, there was still the whole situation with Ciaran and Tabitha to work out.

Then an idea hit me. A stupid, stupid idea. But an idea nonetheless. Maybe I *could* do a little something to help the whole situation. A smile flickered at the corners of my mouth as I held up the vial.

"Mind if I hang onto this?" I asked innocently. "No bad intentions. I swear,"

Ernest narrowed his eyes in suspicion, but nodded slowly. "Don't do anything dumb,"

I had to stay silent. I couldn't breathe. Lying flat on my stomach, I tried to catch a glimpse of anything that would help. Hand clapped over my mouth to keep myself quiet, I tried to control my breathing.

The living room wasn't an option. Todd had reduced the entire space to matchwood with zest and glee. Cowering under the bed, I watched and listened. I could hear Todd's slow and steady breathing everywhere around me.

"I know you're in there," Todd boomed. "Don't fuck with me, tiny,"

Maybe he would get bored. Please. Let him get bored. I wouldn't be able to survive much more of his attention. He'd nearly taken off my tail as I'd fled the living room, and I thought my ankle was sprained. Things would be much worse if Todd kept on.

I couldn't hold back a shriek as the entire apartment-box was suddenly lifted up into the air. A jarring shake hurled the bedroom furniture and me bodily into the wall. My world was once again thrown into flux as Todd upended the box, sending the contents, myself included, tumbling towards the ground.

A blinding pain lanced through my side as I slammed into the floor. I cried out, clutching at the jagged shard of bedframe that had gored me.

The massive Todd kneeled over me, arms folded across his chest as he sneered down at me. His knees framed me on either side. There was no escape.

"So there you are," he laughed. "Hiding with the monsters under the bed?"

"The only monster here is you," I grunted in defiance, edging slowly away from him on my back.

The fragment of bedframe that had pierced me sent pain arcing up my side with every movement, but I knew that pulling it out would only make things worse.

I backed further away from my captor, but found myself running into the rigid, furry wall of his extended hand. I went limp as his hand wrapped around me, enclosing me in oppressive darkness. I felt stomach-churning vertigo followed by cold, dull fear as Todd opened his hand again, leering down at me. His enormous face filled my field of view, a mask of unbridled evil glee. I had never felt more insignificant and helpless.

"I really don't appreciate uncooperative people," Todd hissed. "You need to learn how to act around someone who's just, well, *better* than you,"

He pressed a fingertip into my side, driving the splinter further into me. I cried out, twisting away from Todd's assault.

Withdrawing his finger, Todd reached into the breast pocket of his button-down shirt. He drew out a paperclip that had been partially straightened out, grinning wickedly at me. I made an attempt at scrambling backwards, but my limbs were suddenly made of lead, refusing to move. The fox's thumb came down on my legs, restraining me.

"I wonder if I could disembowel you with this," Todd cooed. The cold, hard metal scraped along my chest. "Probably. Who am I kidding?"

The paperclip came up and I screwed my eyes shut. I wish I'd said something better to Reynard in parting than just whining about feeling nasty.

"I have a boyfriend. He can give you money, anything. Please. I don't know what I've done to piss you off," I exclaimed desperately.

"I can't be bought. You think this is about *money*?
Heh,"

"Please... I just want to see my Reynard again. I love him so much. Do you have someone you love? Please, *please*,"

"Except..."

I unscrewed my eyes enough to see what was going on. The paperclip was still hovering inches overhead, but it wasn't going anywhere. His expression softer, Todd was staring intently at me.

"I'm prepared to do something I don't do very often," Todd said, returning the paperclip to his pocket. "You've touched me. So I'll make a deal with you. I'll let you go. Hell, I'll even keep you safe until the serum I gave you runs its course and you get back to normal,"

I felt a pressure lift off my legs as his thumb moved aside. Relieved, I sat upright. I needed to remember the boyfriend card for future hostage situations. Really brought things around.

"You promise?" I asked cautiously.

Todd smiled benevolently down at me. "Of course. All I want is for you to do one little, simple task,"

"Simple task?"

"Of course. Not difficult at all,"

Todd leaned down, letting me slip through his fingers onto the tiled floor. He got back to his feet, staring down at me from a height.

"Well, what is it?" I called.

"Oh, nothing much. All I want you to do is open the door," Todd pointed out, smiling.

I blinked. "But..." I gaped. "I can't."

"What's so difficult about it? Just open the door. Easy-peasy,"

Todd walked casually across the room, turning the knob and pushing the door open effortlessly in demonstration.

Closing it again, he leaned against the wall with arms folded across his chest, smirking.

"But if it's too hard, I suppose I get to play surgeon," Todd sighed dramatically.

I didn't even wait for Todd to reach for his paperclip. I ran.

Zigzagging erratically away from the comparatively gigantic Todd, I made a mad dash for the wall. Where else could I go? My only hope for survival would be some sort of nook or cranny that could accommodate me.

I could feel the thudding rhythm of Todd's lazy footsteps behind me as I ran. He wasn't moving terribly quickly; he didn't *have* to. No time to look back: I needed to get away.

I breathed a sigh of relief as I spotted a ventilation grate at the base of the wall no more than a half-dozen feet away. Finding it in me to run even faster, I powered forward wildly.

Reaching the wall, I squeezed through the grating, and not a moment too soon. I felt a rush of air accompanying Todd's stomping foot whoosh past my tail as I pulled it through after me in the nick of time.

"You little *shit*!" Todd bellowed as I sank to the cold metal floor of the ventilation shaft, exhausted. My side twinged sharply. I put my hand over the wound left by the splinter. I needed to bandage that up, the sooner the better.

Peering through the grating, I watched as the fox stormed off to the other side of the room, out of my field of view. I couldn't stay there for long. It was only a matter of time before he found a screwdriver or something and got the grate off the vent.

But things were looking up. I was safe for the time being. More importantly, if Todd wasn't lying, my predicament wasn't permanent. Hadn't he said whatever had caused me to shrink to minuscule size would wear off? There was still hope.

First off, I would have to get out of this hellhole. Getting slowly back to my feet, I made my way down the ventilation shaft. Darkness swallowed me. At least it wasn't Todd doing the swallowing.

* * * * *

“Fuck,” Reynard moaned softly.

I reached out and grabbed his hand reassuringly. It was all I could think to do in the moment. My partner was always so much better at this sort of thing, reassuring folks, when we were on field assignment. We sat in silence together on the couch, Reynard trying to process my bad news and me wishing that I’d found a better way to frame things for him.

“We’re going to work through this. This goes down one of three ways. Ideally, none of this came to pass. We just find Roger wherever he’s being held and drag him out of there. Or maybe Todd used a temporary serum on him,”

“But what if it’s permanent?” Reynard’s voice was barely a whisper.

“Then we get an antidote. Ernest said it wasn’t impossible. We’ll find one. Or we’ll make one, if we have to. I promise. We’ll get things back to normal,”

Reynard’s ears drooped even further, barely making eye contact. “Thank you. But I want to help. I don’t want to feel useless,”

I nodded. “Listen. I don’t want you to put yourself at risk for something that’s my fault and my fault alone,”

Reynard looked as if he wanted to protest, but I held up a hand for silence as I pressed on.

“Hear me out. I think you *can* help. Tabitha and Ciaran still have a stake in this. And I’m terrified about whatever Todd has planned for them. But right now, we just need to make sure they *don’t come to Saaduuts*. There’s nothing good for them here. Not with Todd at large,”

“What do you want me to do?” Reynard asked.

“Go find them. Talk to them. Explain what is going on with them, what they need to do for their own safety. I’ll put out some feelers, get an estimate on where they’re located as quickly as I can,”

Reynard nodded grimly.

I reached into my pocket. “And when meet with them, I want you do one more thing. Do this for me. Give this to Ciaran,”

The arctic fox accepted the vial and sheet of paper I gave him, brow furrowed in confusion. “Sure, but I don’t know why...”

“Trust me. I think he’ll find a use for it. Just explain this to him. It’s all in the instructions,”

Reynard nodded again, tucking the vial into his pocket. “Just get me an address and I’ll be there,”

“Thank you so much,” I smiled. “Look, Rey. We’re going to work this out. I swear. We’ll get Roger back to normal.

“And Todd. Todd, Todd, Todd. He’s going to learn it’s not okay by any stretch of the imagination to fuck with the ones I love and care about. And I’m going to teach him. Holy fuck, I’m going to make sure he never forgets that,”

And I fucking *meant* it.

X.

Such Great Heights

They will see us waving from such great heights
'Come down now', they'll say
But everything looks perfect from far away
'Come down now', but we'll stay
(*The Postal Service*)

Leschi was one of those little mountain pass towns that grew up alongside the railroad during the turn of the century. It might have flourished for awhile in its own dinky, small-potatoes sort of way, but then promptly started attracting nothing but old folks and antiques shops the second the railways stopped serving as the primary means of transport and shipping.

When I'd lived in Winthrop, this sort of town had always been the object of my derision. Why live in a hole in the wall like Leschi when you could live in a godsdamn *metropolis* like Winthrop? I mean look: we had a population of nearly 2,000 at last census *and* a five-story building in our downtown. Beat *that* shit.

Well, then a girl who could sit on that building like a barstool had shown up and I'd had to go and fall in love with her and then run away with her. Now, a silly little town such as Leschi was a fucking gods-send.

The cashier at the Leschi Corner Market (so named probably because there appeared to be only one corner in Leschi), a grizzled old beaver, raised his eyebrow at me as I unloaded the contents of my shopping basket onto the checkout counter. He rang everything up, managing to look more disapproving with each item. It really was quite a talent.

To be perfectly honest, I didn't understand why he was so unimpressed with my food choices. All I had was sandwich fixings, a couple loaves of bread, some juice, and some pasta. Oh, and I'd bought out his entire stock of Snickers bars.

What could I say? Tabitha *really* liked those things. And she usually gave me a hard time about buying "real food" unless I brought a peace offering back with me. It was going to be a long evening of unwrapping candy wrappers for her, that much was

certain. Better than her usual threats to be added to the menu whenever I whined about the nightly selection of game meat.

I'd come to expect at least one off-color joke a day from the giantess. If I wasn't going to be her dinner, I was alternately destined to be her toothbrush, Q-tip, or—gods forbid—a feminine hygiene product of some sort. Shudder. I just had to chalk it up to, well, Tab being Tab, I supposed.

In the weeks since we'd started our Grand Wilderness Adventure of Necessity, Tabitha had become quite the little (er, gigantic) huntress. Granted, it was probably a pretty easy task when all you had to do was grab a feral deer and snap its neck between your fingers. But that's just a guess. The ferretess always insisted that there was more finesse to it. I didn't really care, just so long as we had something to eat at the end of the day.

All the same, endless parades of burnt venison get old. There may come a day when I would learn how to roast things over a campfire, but it is not this day. Hence the trips into town whenever we're nearby and I can risk it. A ninety-foot ferretess might attract plenty of attention waltzing into town, but a nondescript five-foot-ten mink was a different thing entirely. Easy for me to be incognito, all things considered. I was good at blending in.

"Thirty-six forty,"

"Huh?"

"That'll be \$36.40, son," the beaver cleared his throat.

"Oh, yeah," I blinked, returning to reality and digging through my pockets.

I paid and left, stopping outside to transfer the paper bags into my rucksack. As I made my way toward the town limits, the ringing of an old pay phone by the side of the road caught my attention. For one thing, I hadn't known anyone still *used* payphones. Leschi is fucking weird that way. For another, I had no idea you could make calls *to* payphones.

Baffled, I hesitated before crossing over to the booth and picking up the phone.

"Er, hello?"

"Ciaran?"

"Speaking... Who is this?"

"It's Reynard!"

"Er, who?"

“Oh, yeah. Introductions. I’m Warren’s brother’s boyfriend. He’s asked me to come out and pay you a visit,”

“Okay...?”

Good gods. Was I going to be meeting Warren’s grandmother’s cousin’s masseuse any time soon? Seemed like I would eventually be granted the distinct, er, pleasure of meeting his entire extended family. And then some. And what the fuck kind of name was *Reynard*?

“Listen. Are you in Leschi? Of course you are. Why am I even asking that?”

“How... how did you know...”

“Warren’s in MX4, silly. He knows *everything*. No worries. Your secret is safe with me. Do you have the afternoon free? What do you say we meet up at Tiffany’s Waffle House in a half hour. Seems like the only place to get a bite to eat in this place. My treat,”

“Well...”

“Excellent. See you then,”

Even more confused than when I’d picked up the phone, I replaced the receiver. Scratching my head in bafflement, I shrugged. Guess I’d be having lunch at Tiffany’s. Wherever that was.

“You can slow down a bit, you know,” the arctic fox smiled good-naturedly across the table at me. “It’s not going to run away from you or anything,”

I glanced up from the omelet that I was busy inhaling. “Thanks Reynard. This is the best thing I’ve eaten in weeks,”

Reynard snorted. “Seeing as how much you’re running up the bill, you *better* be enjoying it,”

The tips of my ears tinged pink as I glanced at the building stack of dishes arrayed around my side of the table. “Sorry,”

“Hey, no worries, dude. Do what you gotta do. Now, down to business,”

I finished chewing, looking over at the arctic fox. His expression was completely unreadable. “Did you guys find out how to make Tab normal again?”

Reynard’s expression shifted immeasurably.

“Warren and Roger are working on that as hard as they can,” he said. “I swear. But nothing yet. *Yet*.”

“I have a very important message to relay. Warren’s busy and Roger, well...” Reynard’s ears drooped slightly. Shaking his head, he refocused on me. “But listen. I know Warren told you to come to Saaduuts. But it’s not safe there. If you and Tab show up there, we’re afraid your pursuers will be on her tail faster than you can blink,”

“But that’s our only hope for anything!” I burst out, dropping my fork with a clatter onto my plate. “We can’t just live out *there* in the wilderness forever!”

Reynard pursed his lips, thinking. “Okay. I see your point. Right. Once you get near Saaduuts, get in touch with me or Warren. Someone you can trust. We’ll work something out. But keep a low profile. Please,”

I nodded numbly. He was right. How could I have been so stupid? Of course Saaduuts wasn’t an option. Too obvious. Too crowded. How could I have not seen that before?

“Reynard, what am I supposed to do? I don’t know what I’m doing. I haven’t had a clue since Tab and I left Winthrop. It’s so scary,”

I refused to cry, but my eyes were watering nonetheless. Reynard smiled warmly, sliding around the booth so that he was sitting right next to me. His warm, comforting arm wrapped around my shoulders and he pulled me closer.

“I know. It’s okay. I know,”

I sniffled. No, he didn’t know. He didn’t know what it was like to love someone dearly but not be able to really show her how much you did. He didn’t know what it was like to be scared to go home at night because your father might hit you. He didn’t know what it was like to be barely an adult and thrust out into the world, utterly alone.

“But you don’t, really...” I whispered.

“Can I tell you a secret?” Reynard swallowed nervously before leaning forward to murmur in my ear. His tone was reassuring, so warm, so comforting. “Maybe I don’t fully know what it’s like to be in your shoes, Ciaran. But I can understand more than most.

“My home situation wasn’t all that peachy growing up, either. Dad wasn’t really there all that much. And when he was, it was only to get in a good row with Mom before he peaced out for somewhere else again. Mom lived in denial of everything. She had her little illusory perfect realm, and she did her damndest to try and force everything into that frame.

“To say that I didn’t fit in her perfect little world would be putting it lightly. For one thing, I had no desire to follow in my father’s footsteps and work as a godsdamn travelling salesman. Then there was the whole matter that I wasn’t entirely straight. Really didn’t gel with the whole framework Mom was trying so desperately to put together,”

Reynard leaned back, running his fingers through his hair and staring at the ceiling. When he looked back at me, his eyes were moist.

“It was spring and I was a junior in high school. We were at some shitty pasta place—Dad had made some big sale or other and Mom had decided it was time to celebrate his achievement. They’d even let me order a somewhat expensive dish.

“Being the stupid fucking idiot I am, I decided to take the opportunity to tell my parents that I liked girls, yeah, but I also liked boys. At the time, they seemed so happy. For once. *Genuinely* happy, not the pleasant façades they usually pasted on when in public. It would be all right.

“Except no, it wouldn’t be. As soon as the words had slipped out of my mouth, my mother started sobbing hysterically. Her ability to turn on the waterworks in an instant was mystifying.

“Dad opted for a more direct approach, hurling his plate across the table at me. In the middle of a godsdamn *restaurant*. In public. Before they left—without paying the bill, I might add—I was informed that the doors of my house were no longer open to me and that was that.

“Thinking it was all some sort of sick joke, I took the bus home and showed up at the front door like a godsdamn pet feral dog. I mean, publicly disowning your son just because he doesn’t discriminate what personal bits he likes seemed a bit extreme, right? I was ready to nervously laugh it all off and go back to my little room in the attic. Hell, a part of me even felt *guilty* for spilling the bisexual beans then: I’d ruined their evening. It was selfish of me, I figured.

“But Dad’s fist at the front door seemed just about as insistent as his words in the restaurant. I slunk away from home with a black eye and no idea what to do,”

I didn’t notice that I was crying a little until Reynard offered me a paper napkin, a gentle smile on his lips.

“What did you do?” I asked. “What do *I* do?”

“I found a way. It was hard, but I worked it out. Crashing at friends’ places, spending the occasional night under the stars... just going with the ebb and flow of it all.

“I know you can figure things out, and I’m going to help. I promise. Just get close to Saaduuts like I said. I would come with you, but I’ve got something pressing...

Roger... I'm really worried about him," he said. His ears were drooping again, eyes glazing over.

I nodded slowly.

Reynard smiled again. "But look at me being all Debbie Downer. I'm here for something *good*, too. Do you have anything planned for Tabitha's birthday?"

I blinked. "Her birthday?"

Reynard nodded slowly, staring blankly at me with those big blue eyes. "It's today, after all..."

"She... she never said anything about it,"

Reynard laughed. "All girls are the same. You're supposed to just *know* birthdays and anniversaries and all that shit psychically. Being ninety feet tall doesn't change any of that,"

I swirled the straw around my glass of orange juice. "Well, *fuck*. What in the hell am I going to get her? What do I do?"

Reynard was smirking again, fishing in his coat pocket for something. He produced a small glass vial with a nondescript fluid inside. "Don't worry about it. Reynard delivers,"

Taking the vial, I studied the contents. What a deliveryman. I should give her... a tiny glass of water. Good thinking there. Gift savior of the century.

"No need to rush to thank me," Reynard rolled his eyes. "Do I really need to spell everything out for you?"

"Well... what is it?"

"I figured that just because we can't make her like everyone else quite yet doesn't mean we couldn't make *you* like *her*. For a few hours, at least,"

I gaped. "What... what do you mean?"

Reynard was grinning that crafty grin of his. It seemed to be a universal fox thing, now that I thought about it.

"I have connections. What can I say? I happen to know a guy who has access to some, er, 'Giant Juice'. Crazy as *that* may sound. Then again, your girlfriend could carry you around in her pocket, so I suppose we need to recalibrate the whole 'crazy' scale a bit. Anyway, my associate also happens to be Warren's inside guy in helping to get your girlfriend back to a single story high. But that's beside the point,"

Shaking my head, I stared at the vial in my hand. “I... I don’t know how...”

“Don’t worry about that. Look. It’s only gonna last 12 hours, give or take, so make it worth it. Fair warning, though. I’ve been told it’s gonna hurt like hell when you get big. Sorry. Just how it works. At least that’s what I’m told.

“Oh, and you’ll probably want to take off your clothes before you drink it. They ain’t growing with you, believe me, and I’m assuming you don’t have that many outfits to spare,”

I blushed again.

“C’mon. You and I both know you wouldn’t be wearing clothes all that long even if they *did* grow with you,” Reynard ribbed me, grinning cheekily.

“Really. Thanks. This means a lot,” I smiled, unable to stop the blush creeping into my cheeks and the tips of my ears. “Reynard... You’ve been better to me than I deserve,”

“Look, Ciaran. I like you a lot. You seem like a pretty nice, well-rounded fellow. But you’ve gotta cut this whole ‘I don’t deserve it’ crap. Of course you do. I don’t know who or what made you think otherwise, but they’re fucking wrong,”

Probably sensing that I was about to say something incredibly sappy, Reynard got to his feet, tossing a couple bills on the table.

“Now, I’ve got to get back to Saaduuts. And you’ve got... stuff to do as well,” the arctic fox smiled. “And remember. Offer still stands. If and when you’re in Saaduuts, my door is always open. Figuratively, in Tabitha’s case,”

Smiling to myself, I followed Reynard out the door of the diner.

Just call me Artemis. Cause I could fucking *hunt*. After just over an hour of stalking the woods for prey, I had a few handfuls of the good stuff, more than enough for dinner. It was just a matter of cooking everything.

Returning to camp, I sat down, arraying the feral deer and elk in front of me. I’d tried to prep them in the past, but only ended up shredding them. Too much delicate work. More Ciaran’s end of things, something he complained endlessly about. Well, it would be an awesome present for him when he returned from his trip into Leschi. Even though it was *my* birthday.

A rustling in the trees at the edge of the clearing in which we’d set up camp startled me from my admiration of my catch. Shooting to my feet, I tensed up. It was *something* all right. Something big. Wait, why was I freaking out? Whatever it was,

I was probably bigger. Calm the fuck down, girl. It wouldn't be anything. Probably just a--holyshtCiaran.

It was Ciaran. Except he was fucking massive. Er, fucking me-sized, to be totally honest, but that observation just didn't have quite the same ring to it. The giant mink stood unsteadily at the edge of the clearing, looking more confused than anything else. His naked body towered over its surroundings, dozens of feet of sleek black fur and taut, svelte musculature. I mean, I'd known he was an attractive devil for a while, but *damn*. Now I had a chance to really admire him up close and personal. "Er... happy birthday," Ciaran mumbled bashfully, toeing the ground.

Not even bothering to wonder at how he'd become so huge, I dashed over to the mink. My arms were wrapped around him before he could react, pulling him close to myself. I was a bit shorter than him, the top of my head coming to about the base of his ear. Ciaran hugged me back, running a hand slowly down my back.

"Why are you crying, Tab?" Ciaran asked, lifting my chin with his finger and brushing away a few stray tears I hadn't even been aware I'd shed.

"I—I—it's been so long since I've looked *up* at someone," I sniffled.

I wanted to *touch* him. It had an eternity since I'd *touched* someone, really. My fingers memorized every detail of his body: his soft cheeks, his sloping shoulders, the dense fur of his chest and stomach, the gentle curve of his buttocks, his warm thighs...

Ciaran kissed me deeply. Don't get me wrong: I'd loved making out with the mink when he was a pocket-sized pipsqueak. But this was over the fucking moon. His warm lips and tongue... The sensation of his fur against my fingers as I stroked his back... This was what being a couple should feel like.

I smiled, nibbling on his lower lip playfully as I felt him unclasping my blouse. He wasn't going to get any resistance from me in that matter, *that* was for sure.

"I've always wanted to undress you myself," Ciaran giggled, kissing me down my neck and collarbone as I rolled my head back in pleasure.

"I wish I could do the same, but I guess you're a pre-naked giant," I replied, helping the mink undo my belt.

Down to my underwear, I grabbed Ciaran's ass, nipping his neck. His arousal was pressing into me; I grabbed it in my hand, leading him by it as I walked backwards toward the hot spring pool by which we'd made camp. We were both grinning manically.

Ciaran finished unwrapping me as I slid into the warm waters of the spring. I reclined on my back, pulling the mink down on top of me. Water sloshed everywhere as I rolled over on top of him, sitting triumphantly on his stomach. I leaned down to kiss him again, before pausing. A grin played on my lips as I looked down at the blissful mink before kissing him slowly down the length of his chest and torso.

“Be right back,” I murmured.

Reaching my destination, I extended my tongue, dragging it along Ciaran’s rigid length. This drew a whimper from the mink, and I grinned, closing my lips around him. Ciaran bucked as I massaged his length with my lips and tongue.

“Ouch!” he yelped as I playfully nipped at him.

“Sorry,” I hastily replied through a mouthful of Ciaran.

I still had to get used to playing with only a part of my mink, rather than all of him. But it was so great. He tasted so sweet, and only got sweeter as he reached a shuddering release. Not wanting to stop, I threw myself back on top of Ciaran, our lips locking as I guided him into me.

I never wanted it to stop. Ever. I’d been madly in love with Ciaran for some time, but I’d always had to go gentle on him. Even when I’d been having a really good time, the fear that I would somehow hurt my lover kept rattling its insistent way around the back of my mind. But not anymore. We were the same size now, on equal footing. He could take everything I dished out.

I wanted to keep going until we’d tried *everything* I could possibly think of. And I’d been playing softball for so long since the wonderful discovery of my sexuality—a *lot* of ideas had occurred to me. Countless dozens of trees splintered under the weight of our bodies and more than one rock face was smashed and crumbled as we hurled one another into them. I didn’t care if I had to smash the whole world under my body. I wanted to show Ciaran how fucking much I loved him.

Eventually, we collapsed into a heaving mass on the ground, reduced to merely stroking one another’s fur and cooing soft nonsense into one another’s ears. I buried my face in Ciaran’s chest fur, drinking in the cinnamon-y scent. I’d never been able to do that with my boyfriend before. Even more than feeling amazing, it was so deliciously *normal*. This was how everyone else felt when they were with the person they loved, and I finally got to experience that.

Holy shit, Tab had fucked me six ways from Sunday. No, at least eight. She’d invented another couple days of the week just to have at it even more. I supposed I was lucky—if she’d done any of that when I was normal-sized, I probably would have died instantly.

But things had calmed down for the time being. We lay curled together, just enjoying each other’s company. Not that *that* lasted long. Reaching over to brush a stray tree branch from my hair, Tabitha stroked my cheek with the back of her hand. Touching me seemed to be one of her new favorite pastimes since I’d shown up biggified. I supposed I didn’t blame her—after spending so much time surrounded by living dolls, she had someone she could really *touch*.

"I'm hungry," the ferretess grinned coyly at me. "You gonna take me out to dinner?"

"Dinner?"

"Yeah! I'm hungry,"

"But... but... we're *giants*," I explained. Gods, that sentence sounded weird coming out of my mouth.

Undaunted, Tabitha got to her feet, offering me a hand up. "I though they were all about equal rights and stuff in this country. They couldn't deny us service or whatever," she laughed.

"I think there would be a little bit of a panic if two teenagers taller than anything else in town just wander into Leschi," I offered, dusting off my back. "Besides... clothes..."

Tabitha cast a disinterested glance in the direction of her discarded blouse and jeans before grinning deviously back at me. "A girl isn't allowed to wear her birthday suit on her birthday? Besides, where are your clothes?"

I blushed violently. "I mean, I do... but they're just really, er, little," I explained. "I stashed all my stuff over there,"

Tabitha was practically gleeful. In the past couple of weeks, being naked seemed to be one of her favorite hobbies, for whatever reason. "I guess we'll just have to dine *au naturel*, then,"

Most of my body tinged a dull red. "I don't think I'm comfortable..."

Tabitha walked around behind me, draping her arms around my neck and breathing in my ear. "Aw, come on. You're really attractive. You really are. Gotta get out of that shell. This'll be good for you,"

As Tabitha took my hand and led me away from our campsite, I knew that I wouldn't be arguing.

We must have made quite the impression on Leschi: two massive mustelids, ass naked and easily taller than anything the town had to offer, making their casual way down main street. I hadn't been entirely certain how the general populace would react to our sudden arrival, but was certainly relieved to find that our greeting committee wasn't comprised entirely by cops and douchebags with rifles. Perhaps everyone was just too baffled to know how to react. We had the occasional runner to deal with (that was inevitable), but most of them just hid out in the nearest available building.

“We’re not here to hurt anyone!” Ciaran mumbled nervously, mincing (yes, mincing) his way after me. “Don’t worry! I promise!”

The trip to Leschi had been spent instructing the mink on basic etiquette. I tried to keep him calm and showed him how to deal with small things—how to avoid smashing up pavement and concrete too much, all that sort of thing.

I rolled my eyes, focusing instead on finding a restaurant that sounded good. It was kind of difficult when none of the buildings reached past my shins and all the signs were written for folks who measured their heights in the single digits.

Stooping down, I leaned over so that I was peering through the windows of a pasta place. I tapped my fingertip against the glass, trying my hardest not to break it. I cursed inwardly as it cracked a bit, but fortunately the window held.

After a few moments of silence, a lemur stumbled out the front door. He stood braced against the doorway, staring at me with wide eyes.

“C-can I help you with something, ma’am?” he stammered.

I smiled warmly. “Hey, no worries, dude. We aren’t going to do anything to you. Just wondering if we could trouble you with some dinner,”

The lemur blinked a few times before disappearing back into the restaurant. He re-emerged a few minutes later accompanied an older badger, who seemed equally baffled and dazed by the whole situation.

“I believe we have enough linguine to make something for the two of you, if that’s agreeable,” the badger said timidly.

I nodded eagerly.

“I can bring by money for everything tomorrow,” Ciaran chipped in, leaning over my shoulder.

There was a vacant lot behind the restaurant, the perfect dining room for guests of our stature. Ciaran picked his way slowly around the building, trying to squeeze through a shin-high alleyway that was barely wide enough to accommodate his feet. I opted for a much more direct approach, stepping clear over the building in a single stride. I was always a fan of shortcuts.

We were seated in the grassy field. After a surprisingly short interval of time, several heaping platters of steaming, saucy pasta were brought out to us. They’d lashed several packing pallets together as makeshift plates, piling mounds of pasta onto them.

“Cute,” I laughed as the plates were set down by several exhausted waiters. It wasn’t like I was expecting their finest china.

Leaning my back against Ciaran's side, I hauled the plate-pallet onto my knees. We supped in silence for a few minutes, shoveling the rich, delicious noodles into our mouths by the handful.

"I love you," Ciaran broke the silence.

"I do too!" I craned my neck backwards to give him a peck on the cheek.

"It's so different though. Now that we're the... the *same*. For awhile, at least," Ciaran murmured, setting aside his empty 'plate'. "This whole giant thing is so weird. Everything's all so little. We just got served dinner by a bunch of... action figures,"

I laughed aloud. "You really have a way with words, Ciaran. Ever considered a career in poetry or literature or anything?" I shifted again, hugging my knees to my chest as I rested against my boyfriend. "But it is. I don't think I've ever gotten used to it. I don't think I ever could. I mean, it's not *normal*. But you've helped me to feel normal, at least a little,"

Ciaran was smiling. He reached over, uprooting a sapling and stripping it of its branches before idly picking his teeth with trunk.

"I pretty much just wanted to see if I could do that," he mumbled bashfully. "But Tab. How did we get here? I mean, you've never really told me anything about *before*. Why did you come to Winthrop, of all places? I'm really glad you did, but it seems a bit, er, random,"

A million emotions bubbled up to my chest in an instant.

"It's... it's a lot," I sighed at length. "My family and I lived in Colville when I... got large. Have you ever been there? No? It's nice. Not much, but nice. Northeastern Pacifica, near the mountains and stuff. I was really happy. Mom and Dad... nice school... track meets... graduation in a few months and then college pretty soon thereafter... It was nice.

"But then I grew to be a giantess. There was no warning, no reason. It just... *happened* out of the blue. I don't remember what I was thinking when it happened, or much of the first few days, for that matter. It's all a blur of fear and confusion and anger now.

"When it was clear that my situation wasn't temporary, I tried to put my best oversized foot forward. Maybe all my peers could get over the fact that I was taller than the school building and just pick up where we'd left off.

"I'd never been super popular, but I suppose I was decently well enough liked, and I had some really nice friends. They'd be able to look past my stature. We could still hang out and talk and have fun. Maybe I could even save them gas money on occasion.

“I should have remembered that it was high school I was talking about. I was a freak. A gigantic, scary freak. And therefore I didn’t belong. Nobody would talk to me, and that was the *best* end of the spectrum. Do you have any idea how ridiculously surreal it is to be intimidated by someone not even the size of your palm?

“Mom and Dad tried their best. They really did. But I didn’t exactly make the best case for myself. Rather than being a demure little ferretess, I lashed out. Giantesses were supposed to be mean and stuff, right? So I tried to act the part and let my mouth run a lot more than it probably should.

“Incident after incident built up into an epic battle in the form of a PTA meeting dedicated solely to me and what to do. My parents fought it out, but in the end, I was expelled. We had no choice to close up shop and move elsewhere, somewhere they could wipe the slate clean. Tabula rasa and all that shit. Winthrop just happened to be convenient. And I’m really happy we went there.

“I am too,” Ciaran returned my smile. He glanced nervously around us. “But maybe we should go back to the campsite. I think we’re freaking everyone out,”

“They’re just jealous they aren’t half as sexy as you are,” I giggled, but got to my feet, pulling the mink up with me. “But fine. Let’s go,”

I cast a final glance around the immediate vicinity. “Oh, and if anyone spills the beans about the fact that we were here, I’m gonna come back and, I dunno, eat you or something,” I teased loudly.

Ciaran cast me a reproachful look. “Don’t joke like that. It isn’t funny,”

“C’mon! Lighten up a little, big guy,” I smacked Ciaran playfully on the shoulder.

Ciaran brushed my hand away. “No. Not about that. You can’t make jokes like that. Not after what you did at the compound... what happened,”

Oh, was that how things were going to be? No matter what happened, that dark cloud would be hanging over my head in Ciaran’s book. He’d always think of me as a murderess, at least in part. As if my own guilt wasn’t enough.

Unable to respond, I turned on my heels and stormed away from Ciaran and Leschi. I could hear his heavy footfalls as he rushed after me, but I paid him no heed. We were all the way back at the campsite before I spun around and confronted him.

“Is this what it’s always going to be like? Are we going to always walk on eggshells around that? I’ve already apologized a million times. I can’t ever make it un-happen. But we can move on. I thought you wanted to. Fuck knows I want to. I already had,”

“Could you please put the tree down? Fuck, that sounds weird,” Ciaran held out a hand.

I numbly dropped the small pine I’d been brandishing—funny, I couldn’t remember ever picking it up.

"I just don't think it's appropriate. You tease me all the time, but that's different. You just can't do that. You're not a monster. But you can't just act like that around people. Look at us: we're huge. We can't just do whatever we want. Being big isn't just some free pass. You have to think, be *responsible*,"

"Oh, that's really easy for you to say!" I snapped shrilly. "You aren't stuck like this. Nope. Tomorrow morning, you're going to be right back to normal. This is just a nice little diversion for you. This isn't your *life*. But by all means, keep on preaching. Here, I'll make you a soap box,"

I disdainfully kicked over a loose boulder, scowling at my boyfriend.

"Don't push me away. I'm just saying that you need to *think*, Tab. I want things to be better for you. But you have to want that, too,"

"And you know what's better for me because *what*? You've got some fucking PhD in psychology? Because you've been a giant for half a day? Fuck you! Go away. I hate you," I was sobbing openly.

"You don't hate me. And I don't hate you. Please. Don't push me away. I need you so much closer. I need you so much closer,"

I made a weak attempt at pushing Ciaran away, but his arms were around me, cradling me, stroking me.

Anger sex was more intense than anything I could have possibly imagined. Ciaran had always been a passionate lover, but now he was fucking *feral*.

Afterwards, I lay sprawled across Ciaran, stroking his chest fur. I wanted to be angry with him still, but I was reeling in too much pleasure to continue.

"If that's how our fights are gonna end, could we agree to have more?" I murmured.

"I shouldn't have been so hard on you like that," Ciaran sighed.

"Oh I don't mind you being hard on me at *all*," I teased.

"You know what I mean," the mink blustered. "But really. I didn't need to remind you of that. I guess it's just... I think I'm afraid of myself right now."

"I feel so powerful for the first time. At home, I was always so scared. My dad *hurt* me. Mom ignored me. They both resented me, I think. But when I took that vial, I felt like I could *do* something. Take charge. I felt like I could get back at my dad. Hurt him."

"And that scared me. I was scared of what I felt like I could do, what I *wanted* to do. I didn't mean to lash out at you like that. I'm sorry,"

I smiled tenderly, rubbing my cheek against his. “Don’t be. And you *are* strong. Not just because you’re big. Because you’re... you.

“Standing up for yourself and leaving like you did took courage. Coming with me even though I gave you no reason to take courage. You’re the bravest, strongest, most powerful guy I know. Even if you are a pipsqueak,”

“Me and everyone else,” Ciaran snorted, but he was smiling widely.

A wide yawn split his smile and I busted up laughing. “It must be 9 o’clock in the evening. *Way* past your bedtime, young man,”

“Shut up. It’s been a long day,”

“Damn right,”

We drifted off blissfully, cradled in each other’s arms. I was happy. Even if I was stuck a giantess forever, in some weird way, this day of bizarre ‘normalcy’ had made it all okay. Just a little bit. But enough.

XI.

Grapevine Fires

And the news reports on the radio said it was getting worse
As the ocean air fanned the flames
But I couldn't think of anywhere I'd rather be
To watch it all burn away
(Death Cab for Cutie)

Whoever designed the ventilation of whatever godsforsaken building I'd been detained in ought to be taken into custody and summarily shot by a firing squad. Okay, then again, they probably weren't anticipating it to be traversed by an inch-high vulpine at some point. But still. Endless labyrinthine metal passageways veered off at random, supplying the network of rooms with fresh air and heat. There was no rhyme or reason to the layout, much less a handy map or guide.

Was I in some sort of Bureau facility? Todd's house? Hell itself? Well, the latter two were probably one and the same, so it narrowed down my possibilities.

The heat was starting to get to me, great warm gusts that buffeted me about from time to time. The pain was nearly unbearable as well. My side was throbbing from the wounds inflicted by Todd and the splinter from the bed. I paused for a moment, leaning up against the metal wall and massaging the gash in my abdomen, grimacing. It stung at my slightest touch.

But it was not the time for dwelling on that sort of thing: I needed to get out of wherever the hell I was, and fast. I could hear *things* in the dark. Skittering,

crawling things. Things that would probably find a fox the size of a feral mouse quite appetizing.

And then there was Todd. I could hear him pacing the perimeter of room, dragging his fingers along the wall and murmuring menacing nothings loud enough for me to hear perfectly.

He was going to find me. Then he was going to kill me in the slowest, most wonderfully excruciating way possible or just devour me whole right then and there. He hadn't quite made up his mind. But I was going to die, tiny and insignificant and alone, that much was certain. And then he was going to find my brother. He was going to tell Warren exactly what he had done to me. Then he would shrink my dear, sweet, annoying, wonderful twin and do exactly the same thing to him. Poetry.

But this whole stalking game was getting boring. Could I please just come out and surrender? Or did he have to tear open the wall? What a waste of drywall for such a pathetic insect.

A crazy, virtually suicidal part of me wanted to sneak back to the ventilation grate I'd escaped through and try my luck out in the open. I was small. If I stayed close to the wall and other objects and if Todd was too blinded by his bloodlust to notice anything, I could make it under the door and out before he was any the wiser.

But I just *knew* that if I returned to the grate, Todd's foot or fist or open maw would be there, waiting eagerly for me. Or that damn *paperclip*. Gods.

Spurred onward by a fresh wave of fear (the latest of many in the past few hours), I padded forward with a new sense of purpose, not to mention a healthy desire for self-preservation. Trying to ignore the occasional creeping sounds closing in around me, I darted down the shaft, feeling my way along the metallic path with an outstretched arm.

Light in the distance. Thin slats of pale yellow illumination slanted through a ventilation grate, piercing the endless void that surrounded me. Was it the same grate I'd entered through? I paused to listen, focusing intently. Todd's voice was distant, barely audible. I must have found my way into a different area of the space.

Encouraged, I bolted towards the light with reckless abandon. I was smiling for the first time since I'd

found myself minuscule. Squeezing through the new grate, I tumbled forward into the blinding artificial light of a vast hallway.

But I wasn't alone. As I struggled to regain my bearings, wading through thigh-deep carpeting, I looked up to see a gigantic normal-sized person making his stealthy way down the hall, directly toward me.

In a flash I was pressed against the wall, trying to make myself as small as possible (admittedly, a fairly easy task). Please let him not notice me. Please let him not notice me.

Except it was *Warren*.

Please let him notice me. Please let him notice me.

Shouting and bellowing like an idiot, I ran towards the center of the hall, waving my arms about with reckless abandon. My body was still aching from the brutality Todd had subjected me to, but I tried to set that aside in the name of getting noticed by my massive twin.

Something must have worked, as Warren's determined stride faltered and he stopped, looking around in confusion. Not a moment too soon, either: if he'd taken even a couple more steps, I might have ended up on the underside of his shoe. And I can assure you that was *not* on my agenda for the day.

"Warren! I'm down here! It's Roger!" I bellowed through cupped hands.

"What the fuck is going on..." Warren muttered to himself, scanning the walls, ceiling... everything but the floor. Idiot.

Taking a risk, I hesitantly approached Warren's shoe. Raising a fist, I gave his ankle a good punch. The fox grunted in surprise, his attention snapping downward.

"...the *fuck*?" he breathed.

I stumbled backward as Warren dropped thunderously to one knee, crouching over me. Leaning down, he squinted, brow furrowing as he studied me.

Realizing who (or perhaps what) I was, he made to pick me up and then hesitated, instead resting his hand palm-up on the ground. At least he'd remembered all those rants

I'd treated him to about work and how people suddenly feel like they don't need permission to touch others when they happen to be bigger than you.

Clambering laboriously onto my brother's palm, I grabbed onto his uplifted thumb for support. Every millimeter of my body ached, and I had to fight every impulse not to just curl up and fall asleep on the reassuring, warm platform of his hand. My stomach lurched slightly as he lifted me upward, his hand a shaky, furry elevator.

"Where are we?" I breathed.

Warren pursed his lips. "Warehouse in Hesquiaht. Ernest said you'd probably be here. And he said you'd probably be like... *this*, too. But it's still really fucking weird. You're so..."

Todd trailed off, holding up his free hand with his thumb and forefinger spaced an inch or so apart in a helpful illustration of my height.

"He knew?"

"It's kind of a long story. I don't have time for that now," Warren's brow furrowed further. "Roger, you're bleeding. A lot,"

"I-I'll be fine," I slumped back, clutching my side. "I just need some bandages or something. Nothing too terrible,"

"What did he do to you?" Warren's voice was steely.

I tried to respond, but I was shaking too violently to speak. Instinctively, I curled into a tight ball, my tail wrapping tightly around myself. Warren scowled deeply.

"It's time for Todd to get his ass kicked," he snarled, fingers curling inward around me.

"Keep your voice down!" I hissed, sitting up slightly. "He'll hear you," I hesitated before adding, "Did Ernest say I would be like this forever?"

Shaking his head hastily, Warren smiled sympathetically down at me. "No. Oh gods, no. He seemed to be certain whatever Todd gave you was temporary. But I'm not sure how long it'll last,"

"Well, it needs to be over now. I hate this,"

The sound of a door opening caused Warren to jump into full alert. He stiffened, shoving me unceremoniously into the breast pocket of his jacket as he stood. I was plunged into darkness, surrounded by the cloth folds of the garment. Wow. Smooth going, bro.

I probably shouldn't have been surprised when I found myself surrounded by a dense forest of brown fur. Not to mention the cacophonous snoring my gigantic girlfriend was emitting. Any delusions I might have had about girls being quiet slumberers were abolished soundly the first time I slept with Tab. I was surprised there was any wildlife left in the forest thanks to her dull thunder.

Clambering upwards, I pondered awakening the ferretess with a barrage of kisses, but the veritable river of drool oozing its way out of the corner of her mouth deterred me. Gods. I had to be dating the most unattractive sleeper of all time.

Sliding off Tabitha's broad shoulder (Is it insulting to call a girl's shoulder 'broad'? I need to look into this. If it is, I'm going to call for an exception for myself on account of having a girlfriend 15-someodd times my size.), I padded my way to the edge of the clearing and retrieved my stash of groceries and clothes from the previous day.

Tabitha was stirring as I walked back into the clearing, fully-dressed and shouldering my satchel. She blinked blearily before looking down at herself, stiffening suddenly.

"Oh, sh—"

"No worries," I laughed. "I'm over here. Fully intact, too, as an added bonus!"

Looking visibly relieved, Tabitha grinned coquettishly at me as she looped a strand of hair behind her ear. "Had to go and get dressed already? *And* go get small again?"

"Call me a killjoy," I snorted, dropping the satchel to the ground and heading over to my unused tent, which had somehow survived the toll our previous day's activities had taken on the general area. "But I brought you Snickers, so it's all okay,"

Tabitha reached over, plucking my bag off the ground between thumb and forefinger. She made a half-hearted attempt at unzipping the satchel before grunting in defeat, placing it back on the grass.

"Guess what you're going to be doing tonight?"

"Unwrapping Snickers? Yeah, I've already resigned myself to that. Most of the day will be spent preparing myself for the inevitable emotional toll it will take," I finished rolling up my tent and packed it into the bag.

The ferretess finished dressing before stooping down, offered me her hand. I found myself once again in my typical station on her shoulder.

“Off to Saaduuts-ish!” Tabitha announced, shouldering her own massive bag. “But first, a side trip,” I prompted.

Tabitha arched a brow in confusion, but followed my directions back to Leschi. I wanted to get help in Saaduuts. But first we had to take care of the previous night, make things right. I needed to pay the poor restaurateur back for our pasta extravaganza. And Tabitha owed everyone a better apology for her off-color remarks. She was a little bit irritable about having to make such an admission, but eventually managed to swallow her pride. We were even able to get some directions on the best route across the mountain pass.

“See, it wasn’t *that* hard,” I murmured as Tabitha strode away from town. All I got was a grunt, but I took that as an admission.

“Thanks for yesterday,” Tabitha said as we cut our way through dense forest and mountains. “Really. I’ve never been so happy in so long,”

“I love you, Tab,” I replied.

Tabitha laughed as a jaw-cracking yawn split my face. “Gods. Do you do *anything* but yawn? Is sleep something that’s happened to you in the recent past?”

I shifted uncomfortably, rubbing a hand through my girlfriend’s fur. “I had a really bad dream last night. I was big. Really big. Like so big I could tote *you* around. And I liked it a lot.

“We were back in Winthrop, or rather what was left of Winthrop. I was merrily laying waste to it. You wanted me to stop, but I didn’t want to. And to show that you couldn’t boss me around... I—I killed your parents. Happily. Oh, Tab...”

I was rubbing more furiously, to the point where Tabitha gently patted me with a fingertip to stop me.

“I’m so sorry,” I muttered.

“Don’t worry about it, Ciaran! It was a stupid dream. That’s it. Don’t get all worked up over it,” the ferretess insisted gently. “Too bad you missed out on *my* dream. I was surrounded by ice cream. So much ice cream. Pure heaven,”

I nodded numbly, resting against Tabitha’s neck. It was just a stupid dream. But a terrifying one nonetheless. Having that much power was terrifying. And using it in such an awful way was even more horrifying.

Of all the crazy things that had happened in my life of late, cupping my tiny twin brother in my palm was probably at the top of that prestigious list. It was just so surreal, like holding a little doll version of myself. I debated pointing that out to him very briefly, but figured that Roger had already been through too much that day to have to put up with my crap too. My brotherly duty of irritating him endlessly could be put on a temporary hold. He looked utterly broken. I just wanted him to be safe and happy.

Tearing several strips from the tissue I always kept in my pocket just in case (get off my tail, it was a clean one), I offered it to Roger. The miniature fox gratefully accepted it, wrapping them around himself, binding his wounds and making himself a sort of makeshift toga sort of thing. He looked so pitiful, a curled-up heap in my hand.

"It's all going to be okay," I found myself cooing. "I promise. Don't worry,"

But Todd stood in the way of all that. He needed to be taken out of the picture, in one way or another, before we could move on. And speak of the devil...

The despicable fox stepped out of a room down the hall, prompting me to stuff Roger into my coat pocket. He probably wouldn't take too kindly to it, but that's just how things would have to go. C'est la fucking vie.

Todd didn't seem to have noticed me yet, so I took advantage of the moment. Slinking up towards the fox as he fiddled with something in his pocket, back turned, I prepared to strike. Todd let out a surprised shout as I reached around to grab him by the neck, slamming him into the wall.

"Hello, motherfucker," I hissed in his ear.

Todd squirmed, but I dug my hand into his throat.

"I've gotta say. You've really pissed off the wrong guys, Todd. You've made me angry. You've made my brother angry. And, most idiotically of all, you've pissed off Tabitha. I think you remember her, and I think you remember what she's capable of,"

In a whirl of motion, Todd struck my arm free of his throat, knocking me off balance. I fell forward into the wall, throwing out my arms to catch myself. Todd socked me in the gut, knocking the wind out of me. Oh, gods—Roger. Why hadn't I put him someplace safer?

I collapsed to the ground, staring up Todd in shock and disbelief. He stood with one foot on either side of my body, leering down at me with hands on hips.

"Oh, I know. Tabitha. It's really great, isn't it?" he said gleefully. "She's been a... pet project of mine for awhile now. Turning out better than I could have hoped. It's fucking awesome. Such potential,"

I scrambled backwards on my elbows, trying to get away and regroup. “Wait. What do you mean?”

Todd laughed, easily keeping pace with me as I flailed. “Are you really *that* stupid? Even with all of the information that godsdamn *mole* has been feeding you?”

I stumbled a bit as I tried to stand. Todd leaned over and lifted me up effortlessly by the collar of my shirt, dragging me into the room he’d emerged from and slamming the door behind him. Fuck, he was strong. Too shocked to resist, I collapsed limply to the ground as he let go.

“Oh yeah,” Todd continued. “The secret’s out. I’ve known about that for a while now. But it was too fun to watch you trying to figure everything out to stop it. Don’t worry, Ernest is going to get his comeuppance,”

Back on my feet, I glared fiercely at the smug fox, lip curling in a snarl. “That’s not going to happen,”

“*Right*. Too bad he’ll die knowing you couldn’t even do anything *useful* with the information he gave you. Just like your brother. Between you and me, he was really fun to kill,”

“*Rodge!?*”

Apparently, we could add lying to the long list of faults that made Todd a complete and utter psychopath. He was trying to wind me up, get me to do something stupid. But I wasn’t about to do that; better to play him for the fool. Allowing myself to seem overwhelmed with grief and anger, I let out a choked sob.

“Foxes taste delicious when you allow them to marinade in their own fear for hours on end,” he whispered to me, licking his lips.

“Get fucked,” I grunted, scrambling to my feet and backing against the wall, regarding Todd warily.

“We’ll see who’s slinging insults when this is all over. It probably won’t be you, and it *certainly* won’t be the Bureau of Defense. Oh, no. You know, they’ve been really great as an, ah, day job the past few years. Granted me access to anything I could ever want to help further the cause,”

My eyes narrowed. What cause? What was he talking about?

Todd laughed again, noticing my confusion. Anticipating my right hook, he leaped deftly aside. I tried to get dodge the fox’s wild kick, but was too slow. I grunted as it made contact with the back of my knee. I went sprawling across the floor once again.

Involuntarily, I threw out an arm. Todd’s heavy steel-toe boot came smashing down on top of my hand. Searing pain shot up my arm as I felt several fingers crunch under the weight. The fox leered as I cried out, twisting in agony on the floor. He

dropped to his knees, grabbing me by the collar and slamming the back of my head into the tiled floor in quick succession several times with as much force as possible. I let out a spluttering bellow as my vision went blurry.

“Can we take a break for a second?” Todd sighed theatrically. “It gets boring if you’re *too* out of it. Better to be fully conscious for everything. And there’s going to be a *lot*,”

Casting me aside like a ragdoll, Todd strode across the room. My head was spinning and I could barely make the fox out as he bustled around some sort of cabinet. I tried to—needed to—get my legs to cooperate, but my mind was too muddled to do anything. All I could do was sit on the floor like an idiot, nurse my hand, and try to collect my thoughts.

“For being MX4, you’re pretty shitty at connecting the dots,” Todd chuckled. “It was all so *obvious*, too. Let’s just say Tabitha suddenly becoming the size of an apartment tower wasn’t an accident. We’ve had that technology for, I don’t know, *years* now. Not that it was cheap, mind you. We’re talking millions of dollars and thousands of hours invested. But it was all on the BoD’s dime, so I wasn’t exactly breaking a sweat about that. And they were none the wiser! You’d think they’d hire better accountants, but it wasn’t all that difficult to bury the paper trail.

“But we had to make sure our technology was functional, right? No sense in getting things started for real if the whole thing wouldn’t function. Tabitha had the distinct honor of being our final... beta test, if you will.

“But why *her*?”

“We weren’t going to risk someone *useful* on a first try, right?”

“But why *Tabitha*? Of everyone in the world, why *her*?”

Todd just shot me a sly look, a smirk flickering across his lips.

I shifted painfully on the floor, trying to get to my feet. Why wasn’t my body behaving? I felt something stir in my pocket and breathed a sigh of relief. Roger was still okay.

“Rodge,” I whispered hoarsely as Todd started to speak again, his voice muffled by the haze of pain. “You need to get out of here. Now. I’ll keep him distracted. Just get out of the room and hole up somewhere until that serum wears off. Get *out* of here,”

Taking the frenzied movement in my pocket as an affirmative, I returned my attention to Todd. As Roger slipped out of my pocket, under my arm, and across the room, I stared blearily at the evil, evil red fox. He was still blathering on with no sign of stopping.

“The version of the serum we administered to Tabitha was obviously a success. She’s been that large for over half a year and still plugging along just fine. No sign of system failure or anything like that.

“But what was even *better* was finding out what she was capable of. That girl has a *mean* streak! Admirable. It was a shame we had to lose a couple dozen good operatives to coax that out, but damn, was it ever worth it. If *Tabitha* can do that much, imagine how much a *trained* killer could do with that size? Gods, it’s so exhilarating.

“Better yet, just imagine what we could do with *Tabitha*, given the right regimen? Quite convenient. I’m really irritated you had to show up and ruin the party back at the Winthrop satellite base. If I’d had just a few more days, maybe a week or two, she would be *mine*. Breaking her would have been a cakewalk. And using her afterward would have been downright beautiful. An exquisite ballet of death and destruction organized by yours truly,”

Satisfied with whatever he’d gotten out of the cabinet, Todd sauntered closer to me. He sat down on the ground, pulling his boots off one by one. Taking aim, he hurled one at my head. My jumbled senses prevented me from ducking in time and I yelped as the boot glanced sharply off my brow.

“You can’t even dodge a godsdamn shoe? Do they just let *anyone* into MX4 nowadays?” Todd guffawed.

I glowered back on him, nursing my brow and crushed fingers. And my aching side. And my gut. Basically my whole body by that point.

Back on his feet, Todd shrugged off his shirt, staring hungrily at me all the while. Wait, was he *stripping*? My muddled mind was only further discombobulated. Why wasn’t I moving? Todd undid his belt and tail-strap, dropping his trousers to the floor.

Shit. If Roger were still here and didn’t absolutely loathe Todd, he probably would have been drooling a little. The fox had an absolutely stunning body. His powerful figure and finely muscled physique would have made any Renaissance sculpture envious.

Wearing nothing but a smirk, Todd walked—no, strutted—over to where I lay collapsed, lifting me effortlessly up by the collar. I took a few feeble swings at him, but couldn’t land anything.

“Don’t wear yourself out,” the fox snorted. “I’ll give it to you and your brother. Persistent fuckers, you are. Too bad it’s all a waste,”

Holding me out at arms-length, Todd backed me effortlessly against a wall. Gods, he was so strong. Todd pressed up against my body, digging one hand into my throat while he caressed my cheek with the back of the other.

"I like girls a lot, but it's really fun to play with boys, too," he breathed, tracing a finger along the line of my jaw.

Unable to choke out a response, I spat in Todd's face. The fox didn't even flinch, smirking at me before bashing my head against the wall. I saw stars. Still gripping me by the neck, Todd dragged his tongue along my cheek.

"You really should be more cooperative," he breathed in my ear.

My vision was going white in the periphery and I attempted to choke something—anything—out. I gasped as the fox released my throat and sweet, sweet oxygen flooded once again into my lungs.

Todd threw both arms over my shoulders, kissing me savagely. He gripped my wrist, guiding my hand down so that I was unwillingly cupping his buttock. Finally regaining some command over my body, I bit the fox on the lip. He withdrew with a snarl, spitting out blood.

"Okay, playtime's over," he growled spitefully, wiping his lip on the dark fur of his forearm.

Todd hurled me bodily to the ground, sitting on my chest and looking down at me in wrathful triumph. He leaned over me, little drops of blood from his lip speckling my cheeks and collar.

"See, before I kill you, maybe there's something you can help me with," the fox said, inspecting his nails in boredom. Right. Like it would work that way. "I've been really making progress in the whole 'tying up loose ends' thing. But one piece eludes me: your little assistant in Tabitha's Great Escape. He needs to be punished for his indiscretion,"

"There's no way I'm telling you *shit*. You know that," I spat.

I grunted in pain as Todd's claws raked across my face.

"Care to change your statement?" he offered.

I remained silent.

"If you don't say anything, I'm going to gouge one of your eyes out,"

I tried to lash out with a fist, but Todd saw it coming and pinned each of my arms to the floor with a knee. He regarded me haughtily through downcast eyes, hands on hips.

"Because I'm nice, I'll fill you in on a little information. As we speak, several of my operatives are closing in on Tabitha. She's elusive, but a nine-story ferretess can only hide for so long. It's only a matter of time before they find her and capture her again.

“There’s no way Tab and Ciaran are going to—” I burst out before cutting myself off, cursing myself inwardly. How had I let slip that Tabitha had a companion so easily? I really was the shittiest MX4 agent of all time.

Todd was grinning wickedly—he had a broad repertoire of such expressions—and he lay down fully on top of me. He gripped my wrists in his hands and caressed my neck with his lips, leaving a trail of blood behind.

“Thank you,” he murmured softly. “See, wasn’t that easy? And you get to keep both eyes. For now, at least.

“Now. Who is this Ciaran fellow, exactly? Your little helper? Of course. But is he her friend? Her lover? No matter. You don’t need to say a word, my good man. Thank you for dealing me the upper hand,”

“Fuck off,” I muttered disdainfully.

I should have known it was coming, but Todd slapped me across the face, probably for my ‘insolence’ or something like that.

“You really need to watch your mouth,” he smirked. “But thanks, really. If Tabitha could be angered enough to kill two dozen of my best people just by little old me, just imagine the devastation we could persuade her to unleash if someone she really loved was... misplaced,”

I gaped stupidly. “You’re not going to touch Ciaran. You won’t harm a single strand of fur on his body. I won’t let you,”

Just when I thought Todd couldn’t smirk any wider, it did.

“Oh, here’s the thing. I can do anything I want. In case you haven’t noticed, this is sort of a theme with me. I get what I want, one way or another,”

I wasn’t even going to dignify his latest bout of utter insanity with a response. Whatever I said would fall on deaf ears. It was time to act. I began casting about the room for something I could use to incapacitate the fox. Maybe I couldn’t negotiate with him, but I could sure as hell muster up enough energy in myself to knock him out cold.

Casting one more disdainful look in my direction, Todd pushed to his feet and marched back toward the other side of the room. Picking up the vials he’d found earlier in the cabinet, the other fox studied their contents carefully.

“It’s time to get down to business,” Todd sighed dramatically.

Gods. He was going to drink it. Whatever would result, I was certain of one thing: it couldn’t happen. I sprang unevenly to my feet, lumbering towards the gleeful red fox. But I was too slow. Before I could make it ten paces, Todd had upended the contents of the flask into his mouth, swallowing zestfully.

Todd laughed as I froze, wide-eyed. Then he started to grow. Shit. Shit shit shit. Forget stopping Todd; that was out of the question for the time being. I needed to get out.

Turning my back on Todd's ever-growing body, I rushed toward the door in the back of the room. It was locked. Oh gods. I couldn't get away. The crouching Todd had filled much of the room by that point, his body effortlessly pushing aside furniture as it expanded. I pressed myself against the wall, scrabbling for my firearm, but my holster was empty. He was reaching towards me, his hand now larger than my entire body, grinning ferally. Oh gods. Oh gods.

"Taking a bath isn't going to get us any less fucking lost," Ciaran snapped, sitting down huffily on a tree stump.

I ignored him, splashing myself with water as I sat soaking in the alpine lake I'd stumbled upon. It had been a long few days' trudge since my last real break and I needed a bath. I needed to feel like a person again.

"Ignoring me isn't going to solve the problem, either," the mink added tersely as he folded his arms.

My hand "slipped" and a cascade of water sloshed in Ciaran's direction, drenching him to the bone. Hey, it was a response of *some* sort. I could tell that my façade of indifference was really starting to irk the mink, but he'd just have to deal.

I was just as fed up as Ciaran, believe me. I just did a better job of hiding it than him. We'd been wandering aimlessly through dense forest for how long now? Days? Weeks? I had no idea. All I knew is that we should have run into Saaduuts or *something* by now. There was nothing but forest.

I knew Ciaran wanted to find some town and ask someone for directions, but that just wasn't an option. We couldn't risk being seen again.

Just as I finished massaging the grime out of my hair, I sat bolt upright, ears perked up. Something was wrong.

Ciaran, noticing my sudden silence, looked up, confused. Getting to his feet, he skirted the pile of my discarded clothes, approaching the lakeshore.

"What's going—" Ciaran started, but I held up a finger.

"Shh. Do you hear that?" I whispered, cocking my head to the side.

Ciaran looked around, listening intently. It was quiet. Trees rustling in the wind, the gurgle of a stream, birdcalls... Nothing we hadn't heard endlessly in the past few weeks. But there was *something* more. I just *knew* it. Something or someone was out there, and we couldn't be found.

“Sorry about this,” I mumbled hastily.

Before Ciaran had a chance to protest, I snatched him up, stuffing him unceremoniously into my mouth as I took a deep breath. Diving under the surface of the water, I pressed my back flat against the lakebed, hoping that it was deep enough to conceal me.

Squinting upwards through the water, I studied the surface intently as I focused on making sure my gag reflex didn’t kick in. Nothing. Nothing. Maybe I’d been wrong. Probably just being paranoid. It was nothing. Oh, gods. I could taste Ciaran. It was so surreal. One more crazy thing in my completely insane life.

My lungs were screaming for oxygen and Ciaran was moving around too much. I had to risk it. Surfacing again, I sheepishly spat my boyfriend into my palm.

“Sorry about that, dude,” I muttered, placing him safely back on the lakeshore.

Ciaran hurried back to his satchel, trying to towel off the worst of the saliva.

“What was that for?” I grumbled. She wasn’t doing anything to improve my mood.

“There were people. I *heard* them. I was certain I did. But maybe I was wrong,” I replied shortly.

I turned away huffily, not wanting to deal with any more of Ciaran’s crap. He’d been increasingly intolerable over the past few days. Sure, we were lost. But we wouldn’t be lost forever. We’d figure it out, and just bitching endlessly about it wouldn’t do anything to make things better. I had a bath to finish.

A commotion punctuated by a strangled cry caused me to whip around. Ciaran stood there, surrounded by four or five individuals dressed in dark clothing. A pair of them was grabbing him and binding him, beginning to drag him towards the edge of the clearing.

With a shout, I rose dripping from the water, hurriedly splashing toward the shore. One of the group pulled a gun out and an arc of pain crossed my shins as he fired several shots. Grimacing in pain, I plowed forward, but they were already out of the clearing.

I couldn’t let them get away. I ran forward, cutting erratically through the forest. The kidnappers and Ciaran were nowhere to be seen and I couldn’t hear the mink’s cries anymore. I was alone again.

Trudging despondently back toward the clearing, I gathered my belongings. I was going to make those bastards didn’t hurt my Ciaran. But where would they take him? What would they want with him? There were a billion places he could be. I stamped my foot in frustration.

Saaduuts—I would go to Saaduuts. It was the only place of consequence anywhere nearby. If Ciaran wasn’t being *taken* there, Roger and Warren would be able to find

something. It would be good to have some sort of direction. That is, if I could find in what *direction* my sense of direction lay.

XII.

It's the End of the World As We Know It (And I Feel Fine)

The other night I dreamt of knives, continental drift divide
Mountains sit in a line
LEONARD BERNSTEIN!
(R.E.M.)

I found Roger, as was customary any more, sprawled on his stomach across the futon in the center of the living room. If you could even call it a 'living' room. Or a room, for that matter: it no longer had all four walls, as a good chunk of one had been torn away, exposing us to the elements. I really needed to find a better tarp to take care of that. Any floor space that wasn't taken up by dirty dishes or rumpled clothes was covered with a second carpet of papers and files, all courtesy of the fox who was currently studying one sheaf in particular. Maybe 'staring in the general direction of the papers' was a better descriptor. My boyfriend's eyes were glazed over and he didn't appear to making much progress at all.

Crossing over to the futon, I gave it a little kick to announce my presence. Roger jerked in surprise, looking over his shoulder at me. He smiled thinly, but his eyes were as vacant as ever.

"I brought you something from the commissary. Afternoon's rations," I said, setting down the tin bowl in offering. "And I'm sitting here until you've finished it. So scoot,"

The red fox stretched and grumbled to himself, but complied, shifting so that he was sitting crouched on the side of the futon. I plopped down next to him, leaning up against his side.

Roger poked the steaming contents of the bowl with his spoon, studying the stew dejectedly.

“Come on. Eat up,” I urged, nudging him. “It’s actually good. Well, decent. Acceptable,”

Roger stirred the contents once or twice more before placing the bowl back onto the floor, setting the spoon next to it.

“I’m not hungry,” Roger mumbled.

“You haven’t eaten anything in *days*,” I sighed.

“Yesterday,” Roger corrected me.

“That was a sleeve of crackers. Doesn’t count,”

Roger got to his feet, brushing nonexistent crumbs off his knees. I made a gentle grab for his hand, but he brushed me away.

“I can’t. I’m just not hungry,” he insisted.

“Please...”

“I have more important things to do than eat right now,”

I followed Roger across the room, where he was presently surveying the view through our new floor-to-ceiling window.

The rest of Saaduuts didn’t appear to be in much better shape than our apartment. Most buildings had sustained at least a degree of damage—windows smashed, superstructures folded like origami, some torn completely off their foundations. A thin curl of smoke drifted upwards from the mangled remains of the Harbor Narrows Bridge. Desolation.

“Rodge...” I placed a hand on Roger’s shoulder. “Come away from there,”

I wrapped my arms around Roger’s waist, resting my chin on his shoulder. Roger remained rigid.

“I can’t believe this,” he finally said. “I fucked up so badly. All of this is my fault,”

A big sob welled up involuntarily in my chest. I spun Roger around on his heels so that he was facing me, gripping him by the shoulders. His arms were raised, trying to brush me away again, but I held tight. Our noses were almost touching.

“You can’t keep doing this to yourself,” I breathed. “Eat. Or sleep. Both. Please. I need to take *care* of you. You need to let me do that for you. It makes me feel like I have at least a little control over all this,”

Roger succeeded in pushing me away, striding purposefully across the room, making for the door. Not again.

“I’m not tired,” Roger lied again. “I have to go *out*,”

“You aren’t going to see *him* again, are you?” I asked, aghast.

Standing in the front doorway, Roger glanced halfway over his slumped shoulder, tail limp.

“I have to. It’s my job,” he said softly.

I flew across the room, grabbing him by the wrist as he made to leave.

“No! Absolutely not. No fucking way. You can’t just go running out on me like that again,”

This struck a nerve with the fox. He spun around again, jabbing a finger into my chest, eyes wild with emerald fire.

“Do you not think I hate this?” he was practically hysterical. “Do you not think these have been the worst days in my life? Do you—”

I kissed Roger passionately, bringing him up against myself and holding him tight. I cupped the back of his head in my hand, closing my eyes. Roger hesitated a moment, then kissed me back. It had been so long since we’d kissed like that.

I felt Roger’s knees buckling and he slid slowly to the ground, burying his face in my sweater, sobbing uncontrollably. I touched his hair with my fingers.

“I’m so scared. I’m so scared,” Roger’s voice wavered.

“Rodge...”

Roger wiped his eyes with the hem of my sweater, looking up at me.

"I love you. I'm so sorry," he murmured as he got to his feet.

I stood there numbly as my boyfriend turned and left down the hallway, glancing over his shoulder as he turned the corner. All the way, he muttered how sorry he was. So sorry. So sorry. So very sorry...

I punched the wall, grunting in pain and rage as I felt the sensation shoot up my arm. Wandering aimlessly into the kitchen (stunningly still more or less intact), I sat stewing in silence. Did Roger really think yet another stupid little chat would accomplish *anything*? Was he really that stupid? Nothing would ever change. Not since *he* had appeared in Saaduuts.

After Roger's disappearance, I'd been scared out of my mind. What if he never returned? What if he died? That godsdamned fox had been an institution in my life for the past couple of years and the prospect of him no longer being a part of it terrified me.

But then he'd turned up at the door of our apartment several days later, wrapped in a tattered blanket and shaking. I don't think I'd ever hugged him that tightly before. I needed to touch him, to smell his fur. I was overwhelmed with joy.

But the story he told me filled me with terror and disgust. Roger had been shrunk and then tortured for hours by an evil, horrible bastard. Even after I'd clothed and fed him, he seemed vacant. Distant.

But then there was an attack. A red fox. Twelve stories tall.

He'd appeared in the Hesquiaht District barely hours after Roger's return and had promptly marched over to the packed football stadium. Hundreds were crushed in his onslaught, and just as many were devoured. The chaos only should have lasted the hours until his body returned to its normal size.

But he never shrank. And that's when things got *really* bad.

This was no mindless rampage. Everything was so calculated. Bridges destroyed. Ferries sunk. Airplanes crushed. There was no way out. No escape.

He called himself Todd. But he wasn't a person. He was a monster, a nightmare we couldn't wake up from. Roger seemed to believe that maybe, just maybe he would be able to reason with Todd. His job compelled him to think that, and for some reason he thought the time he spent as the fox-monster's captive would grant him some kind of advantage.

But we weren't equals in that monster's eyes. No. We were sustenance. Tiny things to terrorize and play with. Sex-toys to appease an insatiable libido. MACRO couldn't do anything about him, much less Roger all by himself.

I just wanted Roger home, out of danger. In my arms. Close to me.

"Rey. *Rey!* What are you *doing?*"

I blinked awake. Roger was crouched over me, a frown of concern furrowing his brow.

"I... must have dozed off," I mumbled, wiping a thin line of drool from the corner of my mouth.

"On the kitchen floor,"

I shrugged noncommittally. If Roger had retained one thing, it was that damnable judgmental air.

"I didn't *plan* on falling asleep," I grinned slightly, pulling Roger down so he was sitting next to me, leaning against the cabinet. "I want you to eat something. Now,"

"You aren't gonna let that drop, are you?"

"Nope,"

Roger scowled but took the plate I thrust at him. I would have reheated the stew, but the generators had failed again. Sandwiches would have to do; I tried to keep a stash of peanut butter and other fixings ready at a moment's notice.

"Want to talk?" I asked as Roger bit into the sandwich.

"Not really,"

"I think we should. Please,"

No response.

"This has to stop. You need to stop trying to reason with him. For your own sake,"

"It's my job. I *have* to. We've been over this a million times,"

"Jobs end. You clock out,"

Roger tore off a piece of crust with a vengeance. "I can't just let him walk all over this town. He's done plenty motherfucking enough of that as it is,"

"But you can't do it *all*,"

"Someone has to. I have to. I have to at least keep trying,"

"No you don't. And no you aren't. Hey. Wait..."

I'd been stroking Roger's chest absentmindedly, but something was off. Unbuttoning his shirt, I gasped in surprise as I noticed a deep gash arcing across my boyfriend's stomach. It had stopped bleeding, but certainly didn't seem to lack in the pain department.

"What did he do to you,"

It wasn't a question at all.

"Don't worry about it," Roger whimpered, swatting away my hand.

"Wait, why isn't your shirt cut too?"

"He—he made me take it off,"

My eyes flashed.

"We need to bandage this up now. Right now," I breathed, trying to keep my tone level.

I was already across the room, pulling gauze and bandages out of the drawer. Roger complained weakly, but offered no resistance as I patched him up. There was no fight in him anymore. What had Todd done to him over the past weeks? He wouldn't tell me anything. He was broken. I just wanted him to feel better.

Unbuttoning the fox's jeans, I leaned down, coaxing an erection out of his lifeless flesh with my lips, tongue, and fingertips. Roger let out a soft moan as I got to work, rocking back his head.

For all of his prudishness, I had no problem showing Roger a good time. It had just been a matter of figuring out which buttons to push, then I had Roger in the palm of my hand any time I wanted him in the sack. Or the kitchen floor, in this instance, I suppose. I could do without the constant batting Roger seemed to love doing whenever I sucked him off. I don't know if he thought it was affectionate or what, but it would be awfully embarrassing to have to go to the emergency room with a concussion sustained while pleasing my lover.

After Roger reached a bucking, jerking climax, I lay on top of the fox, murmuring in his ear as I reached down to gently massage him.

“Let’s not worry about anything tonight. Put everything else aside. We haven’t *been together* in so long,”

Roger tried to get in a response, but I kissed it out of him.

“Let’s just get these pesky clothes out of the way and have some fun,” I grinned mischievously, leading him over to the futon. It was going to be a long night.

It was going to be a long night. Clearing the rubble free of the stairwell in the back of my makeshift cell had proved fruitless. The stairs were trashed. I needed to find an alternate means of escape. Clambering all the way down the side of the building was absolutely out of the question. Todd had made sure to smash up the façade of the skyscraper that now served as my prison nice and good—not enough to compromise the structural integrity of the building, but quite enough to prevent any sort of escape. But I refused to accept that fact. Nobody could be flawless in their planning, not even Todd.

I’d had the dubious honor of a front-row (or, rather, right-shoulder) seat during Todd’s big debut in Saaduuts. After a shock-and-awe display of raw power at a crowded local sporting event, things had become quite boring, if I dared to use the term.

The gigantic vulpine monstrosity had wholly ignored the ‘juicier’ parts of Saaduuts, focusing on the bridges and general periphery of the city. It was only then that I realized the extent of my captor’s dark genius.

Saaduuts was surrounded on virtually all sides by water. A great lake named the Inland Sea stretched along the Eastern side of the city, and the vast expanse of the Pacifica Ocean lay to the West. A combination of natural riverways and channels connecting a series of smaller bodies of water bordered Saaduuts to the North and South. The only connections to the rest of land over these waterways were by a few bridges and the various ferries of Saaduuts Public Transport’s fleet.

The giant made short work of these and used the collective wreckage to construct an impenetrable if not fairly rough barrier spanning the width of Saaduuts’ thin, tenuous land connection. Todd did a damn good job of ensuring that nobody could get into or out of the city, at least without major difficulty and risk to personal life and limb.

Before he departed to carry out whatever the second stage in his depraved grand scheme was, Todd carved out a private prison for me in the side of a skyscraper, hurling me gleefully into the barren space.

“Let me make you a promise,” he’d hissed to me through the jagged gash in the wall, “After I’ve seen to everything else, I *will* eat you. But you’re still in charge here. If you’re uncooperative in any way, I’ll swallow you whole. But if you’re obedient, I’ll chew a couple times first. With any luck, I’ll crush your puny little skull and spare you the doubtlessly unimaginable agony of being slowly dissolved in my stomach acids,”

With a parting smirk, he left. I was alone. Aside from occasional visits from my captor to terrify me and occasionally to give me sustenance, I spent my days in solitude, trying to find an escape route and plotting my revenge on the towering vulpine monstrosity.

In a bizarre way, I almost felt safer than your average Saaduutsite. Most folks probably woke up each morning unsure whether that day would be their last, whether that was the day they would end up devoured, crushed underfoot, or something else even worse. But Todd was saving me for later. I was a special treat. Oh, goodie.

Not that I didn’t have my moments of fear. One day in particular, Todd discovered that even with all his power, the one thing his immense stature didn’t afford him protection from was the weather. When Saaduuts served him up a wonderful rainstorm, he’d vented his sodden frustration by going on a brief if impactful rampage, reducing a large swath of the Hesquiaht District to rubble. He’d stood panting in front of my prison tower, water streaming down his musculature, just staring at me. For a moment of sheer panic, I thought it was curtains then and there. But the giant managed to get a grip of himself, allowing me to return to my usual cycle of solitary escape attempts.

But, some weeks later, it appeared that I was no longer alone.

Todd’s rumbling approach startled me to attention, sending me scrambling to conceal the evidence of my latest escape attempt. Sure enough, Todd was there, clutching onto a white van. As he drew near, the giant cracked the vehicle in half like a nut, dumping its single passenger into his palm.

“Delivery,” he announced, slinging his new captive into the space.

He stepped closer to our prison, his muzzle practically invading the space. That perpetual smirk was on his lips and he looked damn hungry. Shit. I got to my feet, putting myself between Todd and my new companion.

“Just go away, Todd,” I snarled, summing up any courage left in me.

Without warning, the gigantic fox jerked his head to the side, craning his neck to look at something over his shoulder. When he looked back in my direction, his grin even filthier.

“Dinnertime will have to wait,” he remarked, winking at me. “I have something else to take care of,”

As Todd strode off, I rushed over to my new cellmate, dropping to my knees beside his limp body. Undoing the cables that bound his wrists, knees, and ankles, I pulled my fellow captive into a reclining position. The air left my lungs as I pulled the burlap sack off his head.

“*Ciaran?*”

The mink was sobbing feebly as I helped him remove his gag. Leaning against a lump of twisted metal, I pulled Ciaran against myself, massaging the blood back into his weary limbs.

“What’s going on? What’s going to happen to us?” the mink mumbled.

“Shh... shhh... nothing’s going to happen. You’re going to be alright,” I murmured soothingly in his ear.

“Tab and I were on our way to Saaduuts. But then... I don’t know. Some people took me. It was... I don’t know. I was tied up and scared and... well, I’m here now, wherever that is.

“I guess you still managed to get to Saaduuts,” I commented wryly. “What’s left of it, at least,”

Ciaran struggled to his feet, suddenly in a panic.

“Tabitha!” he said. “She’s out there alone! We’ve got to do something,”

“She’ll be fine, Ciaran. I’m sure of it. Let’s worry about getting out of here. You’re always so concerned about everyone else. It’s time you took some time for yourself. Fuck knows the fact that we’re the prisoners of a giant-ass fox would make this an opportune chance for such,” I said.

The mink made a noncommittal noise and nodded numbly. As Ciaran hunkered down in the back corner of the space while I stared out across the grey skyline, arms folded across my chest.

Why hadn’t I packed my raincoat? Hunkering under my miserable excuse for a blanket, I stared across the green expanse of forest. The rain had been steady for the past few days. I supposed that meant I was on the right side of the mountains, at least.

Fantasizing about dry fur and a warm cup of cocoa, I tried to divert a small rivulet that was dripping steadily off the blanket down my cheek. On the rare occasion that it had showered in the past few weeks, Ciaran had always been able to take refuge in his tent or a cave, should one exist nearby. I had yet to discover a cave that could accommodate a 90-foot ferretess, and today was no exception, unfortunately.

I couldn’t even have a fire for warmth—Ciaran had always been the one to do that, and I was pretty sure rubbing a few tree branches together wouldn’t accomplish

much. Besides, I didn't want to risk starting a forest fire or something with the bonfire it would take to warm me.

I curled up on the rocky ground, resigning myself to the umpteenth straight hour of being completely sodden. If Ciaran had been here, he would have been able to distract me from my misery. But he had been stolen away and I needed to find him. But my journey could wait a few hours. I needed to sleep.

The downpour had relented slightly when I awoke early the following morning. We're talking on an astronomical scale here. I was still soaking wet. But it was *something*. How could anyone bear to live in western Pacifica with such a drippingly awful climate? The instant I got Ciaran back from wherever he'd been taken, I would make out with him, and then I would take him the fuck back to the sunny, warm east side. I'd take crazy redneck hicks over liquid sunshine any day.

Picking my way alongside the river I'd been following for the past few days as it wended its way through the alpine landscape, I contemplated what I would do once I got to Saaduuts and, more importantly, what I would do to whoever had stolen away my Ciaran.

As the morning drew on, the trees thinned out, becoming smaller, wimpier (for lack of a better term), and less densely packed. I had to be nearing the edge of the forest. Good thing, too. It had been *weeks* since I'd entered it and I desperately needed to see some sort of scenery other than woods.

As the trees petered out, mostly young plants that barely reached my calves, a sight that filled me with relief and dread greeted me. The glittering skyline of Saaduuts lay in the distance, maybe a few dozen miles away across gently rolling hills dotted with smaller towns and communities. A highway took off where the river left off, cutting northwards across the landscape towards my destination.

Not even bothering to catch my breath, I hitched my satchel higher on my shoulder and strode towards the city. I paralleled the highway, trudging through what appeared to be farmland. Cars zipped along the highway beside me, the majority of them not seeming to pay me much heed.

I supposed I shouldn't have been too surprised: the only things I knew about Saaduuts were that it rained a lot there, they had really good coffee and seafood, and individuals of enormous stature such as myself were nothing out of the ordinary there. Seeing a gigantic ferretess striding determinedly along beside the road must be just the norm.

I remembered learning about the unusual phenomenon that plagued that city in school when I was little (in every sense of the word). Sitting there at my desk, I'd wondered idly what it would be like if I'd been one of those people, finding themselves suddenly huge for a span of time. Well, I guess I'd learned a thing or two about that since then.

My jaw dropped as I arrived at what must have been the outskirts of Saaduuts. I had arrived at a lakeshore, across which were the towering structures of downtown

Saaduuts. A long floating bridge spanned the water. Except it wasn't really a bridge anymore. The span had been... broken. Snapped like a twig.

A dull fear creeping into my gut, I took a closer look at Saaduuts proper. Squinting, I noticed that the 'towering structures' actually weren't all that towering on a lot of counts. Chunks had been carved out of some, and others were toppled entirely off their foundations. Something was definitely not right. And if Ciaran was caught in the midst of it all...

Pulling off my shoes, I waded hurriedly across the lake, determined to get into Saaduuts. The freezing water crept up to my chest, but I ignored the creeping chill and pressed onward.

Saaduuts was a warzone. I picked my way through the desolate streets of the city, trying to find out whoever or whatever had caused such destruction. Cars and other vehicles were parked haphazardly about streets strewn with shattered glass and all manner of refuse. It was the first time I'd been around buildings that were taller than I, an effect diminished by the fact that most of those structures had weathered all manner of damage. Where could I find Ciaran?

"Tab! *Tabitha!*"

Panicked, I whipped around. A pair stood on the roof of one of the few structures that hadn't been damaged to some extent. My jaw dropped and I felt tears springing to my eyes.

"Mom? Dad?"

XIII.

De profundis

De profundis clamavi ad te, Domine;
Domine, exaudi vocem meam. Fiant aures tuæ intendentes
In vocem deprecationis meæ

I beamed broadly as I rushed the few remaining paces over to the building my on which parents stood. It was a little bit shorter than I, and I rested a hand on my knees as I just looked at my mom and dad, grinning uncontrollably.

“Oh gods, I’ve missed you so much,” I gasped at long last. “I’m so sorry I left. So sorry,”

“Don’t worry, Tab,” Mom said. “We’re just happy you’re safe,”

“I love you so much. Oh, gods. I love you both,” I was starting to cry a little. “But how did you *get* here?”

Mom and Dad exchanged glances.

“Boat,” Dad shrugged, matter-of-fact as usual.

It was so ordinary I wanted to laugh. I would take them away and we could get back to normal life. After I got Ciaran. Then we could all be together, a normal, happy family. Well, if you count boyfriends as part of a family.

“We have to get out of here,” Mom added, glancing around nervously. “About a week ago, your father and I received a letter saying you would be here in Saaduuts soon. Well, that sort of struck us as a bit suspicious, but we decided to come. Make sure you were safe and sound. Maybe convince you to come home,”

“I only left because I was afraid they’d *hurt* you,”

“We know, hon,” Dad patted my fingertip, which was resting against the edge of the building.

“Ciaran!” I exclaimed. “We have to find him!”

Mom and Dad exchanged nervous glances.

“Okay...” Mom mumbled. “But it really isn’t safe here,”

“I don’t care. I love him. I love you two so much, but I can’t just abandon Ciaran,” I replied.

“We weren’t suggesting ‘abandoning’ Ciaran,” Dad replied hastily, holding up a hand. “Your Mom is just—”

Suddenly, there was a fist where my mother had been standing. I fell silent, gaping stupidly. Behind the building stood a gigantic fox even larger than I. For the first time in my career as a giantess, I felt small. Fuck that, I felt *helpless*. My eyes went wide and I let out a strangled cry.

Oh, gods. It was Todd. My nightmare had returned, enlarged to immense proportions.

I did the only thing I could. I fainted.

I was a god. A titan. A living skyscraper. I was *more* than a person. My true purpose in life had finally been realized. Saaduuts was mine, and soon enough the rest of the world would be kneeling before my unstoppable might.

Unfortunately, the whole ‘unstoppable might’ bit had a whole truckload of tiresome tasks and other things to deal with. There were curfews to institute, rations to control, possible cells of rebellion to quash... Fortunately, though, I had veritable legions of enforcers, courtesy of my, ah, extra-governmental affiliation. They made sure that order was maintained everywhere. Even a giant can only be in one place at a time.

The little people—my subjects—were so... quaint. Things had been almost boring following the destruction of the sporting arena. Panic in the streets, a sea of citizenry surging in a confused, seething crowd ahead of my lazy stride. I almost didn’t have to bother destroying all possible exits from the city: the mind-numbing stupidity of the masses probably would have been more than enough to keep them where I wanted.

Now they were my slaves, my playthings, and, three times a day, my meals. Devouring them was particularly enjoyable. Sometimes, I would take the time to acquaint myself with every morsel, savoring the diversity of flavors. There were

subtle differences that I came to appreciate, but they were all marinated in fear (and sometimes their own piss). When I was in a rush, though, I'd just shove them in by the fistful like screaming, writhing popcorn. Damn, I'm making my mouth water just *thinking* about it.

But at the moment, I was only concerned with one morsel. He was crouched over the body of his dearly departed wife, clutching onto her limp frame and sobbing wretchedly. I massaged the ball of my hand—perhaps I'd been too zealous in bringing the little ferretess the smack down. I was still a bit sore.

Reaching out, I snatched him up. I would never get tired of picking up and holding these insects. He was completely under my power, his life literally in the palm of my hand. If he irritated me, I could just crush the life out of him with ease. But for the time being I just wanted to scare him.

"Well, well, well. If it isn't the father of the girl of the hour," I commented, holding him at face level so that he could see my teeth.

The wolverine didn't offer a response, simply standing there in my palm and staring coldly back at me. He had balls. I'd give him that. But mine were bigger.

"Because you're clearly so receptive, I'll let you in on a little of the... master plan, as it were. First thing, I gotta thank you and the little lady for being so cooperative. I was a little worried my invite wouldn't reach you, but clearly it did," I flashed a bit of a smile as the wolverine flinched involuntarily. Cracks in the façade, cracks in the façade...

Popping the tiny ferretess' crumpled body into my mouth, I started to chew thoughtfully as I continued.

"See... I don't know how up to date you are on things, but as you may know, your daughter was under my care for a while. Not enough time. But we made a few pleasant discoveries. For one, she's quite lovely. Beautiful body. My compliments to the chef.

"But more importantly, your girl has a *temper*! Oh, you don't think she does? Well your demure little girl has quite the anger issues. Killed two dozen of my best men just because she didn't like my... approach.

"Did that piss me off? Of course! But then, I realized the possibilities. Imagine what we could do with her if we *really* struck a nerve?

"See, we're going to orchestrate a little breakdown. I'm going to kill everyone Tabitha loves. Then I'm going to *take* her. I almost got there before, but this time there's nobody to stop me. I'm getting a little aroused just *thinking* about it.

"Then she's going to destroy Saaduuts. Too bad you won't be there to watch, because it's going to be beautiful,"

"You underestimate Tabitha's resolve," the wolverine snarled, his voice thin and a little squeaky.

I laughed uproariously, rolling my toy wolverine between my fingers. "We seem to have very different opinions of that girl. Tell ya what. Let's wake her up and figure out who's right,"

I glanced up from my stack of the latest newswire transmissions as Becca loudly made her presence known, storming through the door of my office. The ferretess stood next to the file cabinet, arms folded across her chest.

"No," I stated shortly before the ferretess could even open her mouth.

"Let me go big," Becca snapped, shoving a hand into the pocket of her lab coat.

I tossed the wires aside. "One: 'go big' is the *stupidest* possible phrase to use. Gods. Find a better descriptor. Two: no. We've been over this a thousand times. Absolutely not,"

This had been a point of contention between Becca and I during the weeks of Todd's occupation of Saaduuts. After his disastrous debut, Becca had practically beaten down the door, excited to finally "be of actual use."

See, Becca had a rather unique condition. She worked in the Research and Development Division of MACRO, trying to pinpoint what it was that was causing the growth epidemic in Saaduuts.

A while back, she had been on the verge of a major breakthrough when something went terribly wrong. Cameron, the head of the research division, refused to disclose the details of the incident, stating it was "above my pays grade," but suffice it to say, the poor ferretess' pituitary gland was fucked to hell.

Any time she experienced intense emotions, her brain released a potent cocktail of hormones in addition to your run-of-the-mill adrenaline or endorphins or what have you. Every fit of rage, episode of depression, or

orgasm was accompanied by the ferretess enlarging to the towering height of 105 feet for the period of a few hours.

In the first few months of her condition, Becca was volatile, enlarging every time she did something as insignificant as kiss her boyfriend or encounter a point of frustration at work. This proved disastrous for any real estate the ferretess encountered, to say nothing of her wardrobe.

Fortunately, with a lot of effort and a little therapy, Becca was able to get her condition (more or less) under control. You had to get her *extremely* angry or happy to get a rise out of her, so to speak. Just look at these puns I'm busting out.

Once she got used to it, Becca expressed interest in switching to the field division at MACRO. A part-time giantess would be an asset to the field division, right? Much as I appreciated the enthusiasm, she just wasn't cut out for the job. Becca was much better suited to the lab.

"I'm not going to take 'no' for an answer," Becca replied shortly. "I don't even need your permission,"

Ignoring the fact that the ferretess was beginning to cross into bratty adolescent territory, I got to my feet and crossed over to Becca.

"Becca, you know I hate denying you like this," I said. "But you don't stand a chance against Todd. He'll chew you up and spit you out,"

"You and Karl need to stop selling me short!" Becca exploded. "I'm strong. I'm fast. I can take him,"

"Todd *will* kill you," I said, my face deadly serious. "He's really fucking strong. He beat the living shit out of my brother—I was in his pocket at the time, I should know. Still got some bruises. And Warren's a strong guy.

"I appreciate your offer. But it's a no. It isn't even really up to me, anyway. Karl calls the shots as far as assignments are concerned," I concluded with a regretful shrug.

"So what the fuck is your game plan, Roger?" Becca snapped, her tone scathing. "What is your master

strategy? Or are you just going to let that giant walk all over us?"

"Of course not," I snapped.

"Well, you've yet to prove anything to the contrary," Becca sniffed. "Remember your little distress call to the Coast Guard? *That* went oh so well. It took him, what, an hour to destroy them all?"

"I've reached out to the Pacifica army and air force,"

"Oh, good. Todd'll love that. New toys. And when did you contact them?"

"Last week," I mumbled.

"Oh. And they're sending troops?" Becca was starting to smirk.

"We haven't heard back from them as of yet," I avoided eye contact. "I'm sure they're busy,"

"Ah, yes. A 12-story psychotic fox holding an entire city—the capitol, no less—is pretty low on the army's priority list," Becca was practically crowing. "Let me go big. He won't be expecting me. I'll cut him down to size,"

"I refuse to resort to some sort of Toddzilla vs. Becca showdown to resolve it," I spat.

Okay, the names needed work. I would concede that much. And the lack of response from any military personnel was highly distressing and disturbing. But I refused to sink to Todd's level.

"You have to stop being so naïve, Roger. You can't ignore reality. We have to do something drastic if we want to get rid of that bastard. And I'm offering you something drastic. We need to—"

Becca's impassioned plea was interrupted by a concussive blast followed by the sound of gunshots. The ferretess and I bolted into the main office space, bewildered.

Everyone in the office was pressed against the far wall of the space. Occupying the majority of the office were a dozen or so black-clad individuals carrying all manner of firearms.

"What on earth is going on?" I gasped in surprise.

"Against the wall with everyone else," a husky barked.

Becca and I numbly complied. They had guns. What else were we supposed to do?

"Let me go big," Becca muttered again as we took our places in the back of the space. "I'll crush 'em like bugs,"

"And take out the building, too," I hissed in reply. "Besides. What am I going to do? Punch you in the face or give you a vibrator or *what?*"

Becca shot me a venomous look but didn't dignify me with a response.

"All right, as of now, I am in charge of this agency!" the husky barked again. "Nobody leaves. Nobody speaks without my say so,"

I had just finished hemming a jacket when my phone rang. Much as Todd's reign had thrown life into turmoil, things somehow managed to plug along in one way or another. It wasn't normal, by any stretch of the imagination. Hell no. It was impossible to ignore the ration cards, the curfews, the constant power outages, and the colossal fox who could eat you or crush you without any warning.

But many people, myself included, decided not to be ruled by fear. We managed to hack out a living in some way.

Setting down my needle, I picked up the phone. "Suit Yourself. Alterations, adjustments, and embroidery. How can I help you?"

"Reynard!"

"Hon! What's up? Oh! You'll never believe it, but I managed to get an extra ration card for the commissary. Knew Edmond would come through. We're going to eat *good* tonight," I grinned.

"There's no time for that right now, Rey,"

A frown creeping across my brow, I asked for clarification. Why was Roger whispering? I could hear a note of anxiety in his voice.

“There’s a... situation at MACRO,” Roger replied in hushed tones. “We’ve—there are a bunch of people here. Shady people, and that’s putting it kindly. Well, we’re basically hostages here,”

“*What?*” I ran a hand through my hair, sitting on the table, my leg kicking nervously. Roger was in trouble and I needed to help him. “I’m going to come and—”

“And what? Explain to the nice husky that you’re my boyfriend and if he would let me go that would be just great? He’d fucking shoot you. No,”

“What do they want? Why are they there?”

“They didn’t exactly pass out a *modus operandi* sheet when they barged in the door. But I think they’re trying to make sure we don’t cause Todd any trouble. I think he might be worried about something. They’re watching us like hawks. Hell, they’ve even got a hawk watching us.

“But Cameron managed to buy me some time to slip away and talk. There might be something you can help with,”

“Anything,” I replied hastily.

“They keep in constant contact with *someone* over a radio transmitter. One of the thicker members of the group accidentally let slip an address while Cameron was in earshot. I think it may be the location of their contact. If we could knock out the communications, maybe we’d catch ‘em off-guard and have a fighting chance,”

“What do you want me to do? I’m not a MACRO agent or anything like that. I’m just a tailor. Why don’t you talk to your broth—”

I cut myself off a moment too late. Of *course* Warren wasn’t an option. Nobody had seen him since Todd’s appearance. It wasn’t certain if he was even alive.

Roger was silent a moment.

“I know. But you’re all we’ve got at the moment. Please. Just go to the address and do what you can to cut off comm,”

Nervous as hell, I got out a pen and took down the address, promising to do the best I could and that I’d call once I was done. I couldn’t help but laugh a little as I hung up—Roger’s ridiculous habit of stashing his cell phone in his desk drawer at work rather than keeping it in his pocket had finally paid off. The husky and his cohorts had

confiscated everyone else's phones, but apparently hadn't been thorough enough to find his.

"C'mon, Edmond," I called over to my assistant, pulling on my jacket as I headed for the door. "Field trip time. We're gonna go save Saaduuts. Maybe,"

"Are you sure this is the right address?" I asked for the umpteenth time as I started at unassuming three-level apartment building we'd pulled up to.

"Positive," Edmond replied. "13 Belmont Pl SW"

Sure enough, the address matched. Shaking my head, I got out of the car with my assistant in tow. "Well, I guess every evil headquarters needs its disguise,"

It didn't occur to me what a stupid idea just waltzing right up to the front door of the apartment building was until I was standing on the stoop. Secret agent man, right? So smooove.

"Er, Rey?" Edmond tugged on my shirtsleeve like a preschooler. He was positively adorable. "I think we're going into Todd's apartment,"

My jaw went slack. "No fucking way,"

The red panda pointed wordlessly at the call box. Sure enough, the sticker on number 25B indicated that the apartment belonged to one *Todd H.* Shit.

"Well, I guess at least we won't have to worry about him being home," I mumbled.

I'd always wanted to kick down a door. It was just as therapeutic as I'd hoped, if not a bit rough on my knee. Not exactly that great in the subtlety department, but we were in.

I had no idea an apartment building could scare me so much. The door opened onto a kitchen and living area. It was well-kept, but so... unsettling. Spartan and sterile. Pushing through the sparsely-furnished space, Edmond and I entered the bedroom.

"Gods," I gasped.

The space could only technically be considered a bedroom—there was a bed, I supposed, but not much else in terms of the typical furniture. But the rest of the area was crammed with all manner of clutter.

An entire wall had been converted into some sort of collage of newspaper clippings and scrawled notes. A large and heavily annotated map of Saaduuts was spread out on a table.

“Reynard...” Edmond murmured.

I followed the red panda’s wavering finger to the wall opposite the madman’s collage. Photographs plastered on the walls formed some sort of Most Wanted lineup. Except the people pictured were some of my dearest friends and loved ones. Roger... Warren... Tab...

“He’s got everyone just where he wants,” I massaged my temples, sinking onto the bed. “Fuck only knows what’s going on,”

“Isn’t that *Becca*?” Edmond crossed over to the photo wall to study one of the images. “We need to warn them *now*. I don’t want anything happening to Becca,”

Poor Edmond was nervously cleaning his glasses as he studied the photograph. I pulled out my phone and dialed up Roger.

I breathed a sigh of relief as Roger answered. Trying my best to explain the discoveries we’d made, I asked my boyfriend if he knew at all what was happening. He generally seemed to be more in the know than I in these sorts of matters.

Unfortunately, Roger seemed just as baffled as I. He fell silent as a commotion broke out on his end of the line.

“Gottagobye,” Roger said hastily, hanging up before I could get a word in edgewise. Shit.

Edmond was pacing on the opposite end of the room, mumbling feverishly to himself. It was something of a habit of his, which got quite old rather quickly. I walked over to him, blocking one end of the pace circuit.

“We’re going to figure something out,” I spitballed. Not that I had any idea what to do. It just sounded reassuring.

“What are we going to do?” Edmond asked, wide-eyed.

“Let’s just keep looking,” I shrugged. Maybe we could find something that would provide some sort of answer.

Cold water shocked me back into consciousness. I sat up, spluttering and wiping the frigid water out of my eyes. Todd was crouched over me, grinning. He had my Dad gripped in his fist.

“Damn, you know how to *faint*,” the fox commented. “Took out that entire building. Congratulations. But I wanted you to be conscious before I did anything more. I’d hate for you to miss anything else,”

Springing to my feet, I snarled at the fox, lip curled in rage and hands balled into fists. “I’m going to kill you,”

Todd spread his arms wide. “Go on, hit me with your best shot,”

I took a step back. “Be careful with my dad,”

“I promise I’ll be just as careful with him as I was with your mom,” Todd smiled sweetly.

A sob welled in my chest as I glanced over at the building where Mom had been standing. She was gone. I could never talk with her again. And the last thing I’d said to her was basically that I cared more about Ciaran than her.

I was such a selfish bitch. Why hadn’t I picked them up? They’d probably have been safe then. Mom would still be alive. This was my fault. And now Todd was going to hurt my Dad—kill him even, maybe. That couldn’t happen. I would die.

Sniveling miserably, I held out a hand. “Please. Please, I just want my Dad,”

The fox shot me one more cunning look before spinning on his heels, striding purposefully away from me. I called after him, but he ignored me completely, humming gleefully to himself.

Shaking with anger, I cast about myself for something—anything—to use against the fox. I was going to fucking murder him. Todd thought he could take everything from me, he had another thing coming.

My eyes fell on a jagged shard of window glass lying on the street. Stooping, I grasped it, hefting it in my fist like a knife. The edge looked wicked, and indeed it bit into my hand as I gripped it.

Blade in hand, I picked my way after the giant red fox. I needed to be stealthy, not the easiest task when you’re 90 feet tall. But if Todd sensed I was after him, well, I didn’t want to run the risk of finding out what would happen if he did.

By the time I caught up with him, he was standing before a gutted building a little bit shorter than I. Back turned, he was still humming merrily to himself, tail swishing back and forth as he fiddled with something.

Raising the shard of glass into the air, I crept toward Todd, barely able to breathe. I had to be quick. Should I try to slash his throat? Reach around and stab him in the

chest? I wasn't exactly experienced in the field of murder. At least with people my own size.

I cursed myself as an ill-placed foot landed on a sedan, crunching it like a soda can. Todd spun around, facing me with a vicious grin on his lips, amber eyes flashing. Shit. The jig was up.

The fox crossed the distance between us in a few paces. Gripping my wrist and throat in two hands, Todd slammed me up against a building. I yelped as I felt the window-glass shatter, some of the shards slashing through my blouse and digging into my back. Todd matter-of-factly squeezed my wrist until I released the glass shard, dropping it with a clatter to the ground. He appeared almost bored as he stooped to pick it up himself.

The tip of the blade rested against my breast as Todd returned his full attention to me.

"Did your parents teach you any manners?" he asked. "That's no way to greet someone,"

"You aren't a person," I hissed. "You're a monster,"

Todd laughed as his hand dug into my windpipe. "That's really rich coming from *you*," he snorted. "But you've got your old man fooled, that's for sure. He didn't believe me when I told him about your little furicidal meltdown,"

"At least *I'm* not proud of it,"

The fox brushed a lock of hair out of my eyes with the tip of the blade. I whimpered as the shard traced its way down my cheek.

"Shh... shh... none of that," Todd cooed venomously. "Take off your clothes,"

"No. Fuck you, you piece of—"

Todd clucked in disapproval and his grip on my throat tightened, cutting off my air completely. "Let's not have any of that. But don't worry. I'd much rather just rip them off you,"

He undid the top few buttons of my blouse, burying his muzzle in my not-so-ample chest as I struggled. Taking a deep whiff, Todd rumbled pleurably.

"Crushing and devouring thousands has been pretty fun. But fucking you is going to be the definite highlight of this whole giant thing for me so far," he rumbled. The fox was pressed against me so tightly I could feel him start to stiffen. I tried to recoil, but had nowhere to go.

"Don't touch me," I managed to choke out. "Don't hurt me,"

Inhaling deeply one final time, Todd gave me another unsettling smile before returning to the building he had been so intent on earlier. He turned to face me, clutching two people in his hands.

"If you insist. But I really want to hurt *someone*. So here. I'll let you pick," Todd smiled.

Fuck. He had my father gripped in one hand and *Ciaran* in the other. Ciaran was still alive. Thank gods. Then it hit me. He wanted me to pick someone to die.

"No," I shook my head. "Nonono. You can't make me do that,"

Todd shrugged. "I guess I could just kill 'em both,"

"NO!" I bellowed, holding out an arm. "No! Take me instead. Hurt me. I deserve it,"

The fox shook his head. "Too late for that. You already chickened out. I want you to choose. More fun that way. Besides. I can always have fun with you later,"

I shook my head, sinking to the ground with a whimper. I heard Ciaran try to say something, but Todd squeezed him and the sentence became a squeak of pain. Todd heaved a sigh of boredom.

"So let's run down your options, Tabitha. You can save Dad, who provided for you, took care of you, loved and supported you despite your, well, condition..." Todd stared at me with those cold, hard amber eyes, studying me intently.

"Or, you could save Ciaran, your little fuck-toy, who made my life so much more inconvenient by helping to spring you from my facility, who hasn't shut up about you since I got ahold of him, and seems sickeningly devoted to you," he shrugged. "Your choice,"

"Ciaran isn't my *fuck-toy*," I spat, a dull rage creeping in and starting to overwhelm my panic. "And I'm not choosing. You're going to put them both down right now and walk away,"

"You really ought to be more careful with what you say when you haven't got any of the cards," Todd commented, dragging his tongue along Ciaran's trembling, vulnerable body. "Anything could happen. Now. Make your choice,"

I sniffled wretchedly.

"Tab," Dad said, smiling stupidly. He didn't seem scared or angry or anything like that—just reassuring and so happy and calm. "I love you so much, Tab. I really do. You'll always be my little girl. Don't be afraid. Don't worry about me. You're so strong. So brave. I love—"

"Oh, just *can* it," Todd snapped. His gaze returned to me. "Say, I'll give you some advice. Save Daddy Dearest. You can always find a new boy-toy. Trust me, they're

replaceable. There'll always be someone else willing to go spelunking to make you happy.

"Besides, he and I have some catching up to do. He did help steal you away after all. No, really, let me keep him. I want to see how many bits I can take off before he dies,"

"*Ciaran!*" I wailed.

"Is that a choice? Did I hear a choice?" Todd smirked.

"No! No, I wasn't—let me think!" I said hurriedly, holding up a wavering hand in panic. I needed more time. There had to be some way to save them both. But what could I do?

Breathlessly, I rushed to the double doors that lead out to the balcony. Becca stood there, flanked by a pair of the husky's biggest thugs. One was grasping her wrists behind her back in one powerful fist, restraining her as the other held a pistol to her temple. The ferretess put on a brave face, but I could see the fear in her eyes.

I stopped in the doorway, gripping the jam with one hand as I extended my other arm in panic.

"Stop! Let's talk," I gasped to the husky. "Don't do this,"

"Last I checked, we were the ones with the guns," the husky snorted.

Oh, and that entitled him to whatever he wanted? We'd see about that.

"Yes, you are," I conceded. "But that doesn't mean you have to do anything with them. I don't have anything of use to you, anyway,"

Wrong words. The husky nodded to the grunt restraining Becca's wrists and he jerked, pushing her so that she was dangling halfway over the guardrail of the balcony. The ferretess cried out in fear. The grunt's thick arm gripping onto the front of Becca's blouse was the only thing separating her from a harrowing fall.

"Don't fuck with me," the husky warned. "I'd hate for you to have her blood on your hands,"

My mind somehow managed to be running a million miles a minute and completely blank at the same time. Why couldn't I recall any of my crisis training? I'd talked myself out of countless sticky situations before; why couldn't I think of anything now?

"Anything you want. Anything you want," I stammered.

"We need to... *speak* with one of the agents here. Name of Becca Hughes,"

I blinked, more than a little surprise. He had no fucking clue who Becca is. What kind of idiot would barge into a mission or whatever and not even know what your godsdamn target looks like? Probably best to keep it that way.

"O-okay... I-I don't know if she's in today. Why do you need—"

"—It isn't your place to ask questions. Everyone who works here is accounted for. We did a head-count, so don't try to bullshit me. Give me Becca Hughes or people are going to get hurt, starting with *this* one,"

What would these thugs—or Todd, for that matter—want with Becca? Oh, shit. She *did* pose something of a threat to him, after all. These guys were some sort of hit squad, maybe.

Sensing my indecision and capitalizing on it, the husky nodded to his subordinate. Becca squeaked as she was pushed further over the edge, dangling practically upside down. My heart was racing and I practically grabbed the husky by the collar. I hadn't lost a single person in the field yet, and it wasn't going to start on the balcony of my own damn office.

It all happened so fast. Becca's foot lashed out—I couldn't tell if it was accidental or intentional—and nailed her captor straight in the crotch. Reacting as any male with a pair would, the grunt released his grip on the ferretess. I let out a strangled cry as Becca toppled into the abyss, disappearing out of sight. Tears filled my eyes as I sank to the floor.

When Becca's feet thunderously hit the ground, her face was level with the balcony. Dumbfounded, the husky and his cohorts scrambled backwards and readied their weapons as I stumbled to my feet.

"You wanted to speak with Becca?" the massive ferretess smiled sweetly. "Here I am,"

XIV.

Guyamas Sonora

In the hall I heard your faints falling
Your trial and my corrections made
You had all the prayers of my loose heart
You had all the prayers of once had gone
(Beirut)

Mortar disintegrated, glass smashed, and bricks crumbled as the ferretess' massive fist drove through the side of MACRO headquarters. I dove to the side just in time, covering my head with my arms as I rubble showered down on me.

The black-clad hyena and his cohorts on the balcony weren't so lucky. Becca's fist hit its target perfectly, sending the hapless trio flying backwards into the main office space. If they weren't dead on impact, they certainly *wished* they were.

Elbow-deep in the structure, Becca grunted as she pulled her arm back out. She grimaced as a shard of broken glass still in the window frame nicked her wrist. But all things considered, she certainly was the least worse for wear.

I'd barely had time to absorb the chaotic turn of events before the giantess' slender fingers wrapped around my torso, gripping me firmly. She lifted me off the balcony

as I protested loudly, shrugging nonchalantly before returning her attention to the building. The hand holding me dropped by Becca's hip as the other seized a writhing fistful of black-clad operatives.

"I really don't like being pushed around, nor do my coworkers," I couldn't see her face all that well from my vantage point, but she sounded damn smug. "But guess what? I'm a motherfucking *giantess*, bitches! I don't have to take your shit anymore,"

Becca tossed the fistful over her shoulder and went for a fresh batch. I grimaced as I heard a few slam into the glass of the building opposite MACRO HQ and hit the ground far below.

"BECCA! Cut the shit!" I bellowed, pounding her knuckle with my fist.

The ferretess didn't respond, either because she hadn't heard or because she was willfully ignored me. Becca eyed her captives hungrily.

"I'll let you guys off easy," she sighed at length, stooping to let them slip through her fingers to the pavement.

Becca dropped me haphazardly onto her shoulder as she returned her beady gaze to the office and the final few operatives. The tide had shifted completely. She had them cowering against a wall and was clearly loving every moment of it.

"Scram," was all she had to say to send the cohort packing. I was nearly flung into the air as the giantess shrugged again. Becca craned her neck down to look at me. "Guess we won't have to deal with those guys anymore. Now. What was this about Todd?"

I shot Becca a withering look. "You're not going to confront him," I snapped.

Becca's laughter nearly knocked me off my perch, but she put up a hand to steady me. "It's so cute how you think you have control over the situation,"

"Well, I like to think that I do most of the time. I'm a damn good agent, if I don't mind saying," I sniffed.

I couldn't really see Becca's face, but I just *knew* she was rolling her eyes. It's like a sixth sense. A sassy sense.

"It's just... you're still a MACRO agent here. Not even an agent. You're in the lab. You don't know field protocols for... this sort of thing," I pressed.

Not that there was even a protocol for this sort of thing. All of our stuff was written assuming the agent in question was nowhere near giant sized. Totally silly, amirite? Jeez.

"Protocol has clearly gotten us into a stellar situation," Becca snorted, glancing around the corner of a building for the fox she was hunting down. "I'm not going to do anything stupid. Promise. Just trust me. You can do that, right?"

I grumbled indignantly, but offered no rebuttal. Some folks are impossible to reason with. My mobile went off and I sat down, leaning against the base of the giantess' neck as I answered it.

"Smith,"

"It's so cute when you answer your phone with your last name. Secret agent and all that shit,"

"Rey! What's going on?"

"Well... there's something here at Todd's, er, lair that I think you're gonna want to see,"

I blinked, punching Becca on the neck to alert her. "We'll be right over,"

"I'll have you guys know I'm not a godsdamn *bus*," Becca snapped as she made her way down the street once again.

"Oh, can it," I sighed wearily.

"With great power comes great responsibility and all that jazz," Reynard pitched in from the opposite shoulder.

"I'm not godsdamn Spidermink or something," the ferretess spat balefully.

Becca had protested the change of route when Reynard's startling news arrived, but eventually gave in when I threatened to cut her pay. Heh. Like I had any control over payroll. I could only dream. Hell, I'd even once

pondered sleeping with Diane, the Salary Queen to get some sort of raise. The things I would do to bolster my meager wages.

The detour hadn't been half as bad as Becca had made it sound; we'd swung by the site of Todd's apartment, picked up (quite literally) our respective boyfriends, and were merrily on our way in a matter of minutes.

As Becca resumed her search for Todd, Reynard had shouted his findings to me from the ferretess' opposite shoulder.

Apparently, among all of the paraphernalia of madness that littered the apartment Reynard had visited were several mysterious vials. They were startlingly similar to the one that my boyfriend had given to Ciaran some time earlier. Reynard noted that one of the vials was labeled 'REDUCTION'.

"Maybe we could cut Todd down to size with it," Reynard shrugged. "I mean, we'd have to chuck it down his gullet, but wouldn't that work?"

"Remember what Ernest said about interactions between serums and all that bit?" I shook my head. "He might shrink, sure, but it might kill him or something,"

Reynard laughed aloud. "Who gives a shit?"

I supposed he had a point. But I wanted his tail in a courtroom and then in jail, never to see the outside ever again. And I wanted to show up in that jail every day, tie him to a chair, and beat the shit out of him. That was a fairer fate than simple death.

I just about slid off Becca's shoulder and plummeted to my death when the giantess suddenly came to a halt, staring straight ahead.

"There he is," she hissed. "I'll take it from here,"

"No, you won't!" I snapped. "I'm not letting you go it alone—"

Becca unceremoniously deposited Reynard, Edmond, and I on the roof of a building, stopping to smile sweetly at me.

"Don't worry. I've got a plan,"

I started to worry. What else was I supposed to do?

* * * * *

I couldn't bring myself to look at Todd anymore. Ever since I'd escaped from Todd's clutches back in the BoD facility, I felt as if I were fighting for my well-being—for my very *life*. But I couldn't fight anymore. Todd had broken me.

Slumped on the asphalt, I hugged my knees to my chest, staring at the façade of the building in front of me.

"Is that your choice?" Todd hissed, oozing malice from every pore.

I nodded numbly, offering a miserable whimper. I couldn't even find it in myself to cry anymore. Todd won. I lost. That was that. Why couldn't it just end?

"I would say how disgusted you make me feel, but I have a feeling you'd like that," I muttered.

"Thank you," Todd grinned. "But you know, don't beat yourself up. I'm just a better giant than you,"

"You? Better? You're a terrible excuse for a person. Just because you're bigger than everyone else doesn't mean you can ruin and end the lives so many. We're all still people, and we have to look out for each other,"

"I'm sure two dozen of my guards understood that when you were crushing them and tearing them apart,"

Todd snorted as I stumbled to my feet, forcing myself to look at my father. He smiled at me and I cracked.

"Fuck. I'm so sorry. I love you so much," I murmured. "I love you, daddy. I love you, I love you,"

Not that it fucking mattered. Todd was going to eat him and I would be all alone. I should have listened to him.

"Alright, here you go," Todd smirked.

I cried out as the fox upended the palm containing Ciaran, sending him plummeting to earth. Lunging blindly forward, I sprawled out on my stomach, arm outstretched. He landed squarely in the center of my palm. I heard a pained yelp and Ciaran lay there limply.

Tearing my eyes away from my boyfriend, I looked up at Todd standing over me just as he flicked my Dad into the air, opening his jaws wide in wait. I gathered my feet under myself, trying to power upward and snatch my Dad away. All hope vanished as my ankle buckled, sending me sprawling backward. My shoulder glanced off a building, taking a good portion of its façade with me. I grunted in pain as the wind was knocked out of me.

The world went into slow motion. Dad arced up and up through the air, then began to fall again. I hoped it was fast and painless. Down, down, down—

Suddenly, a hand came out of nowhere, snatching my father out of thin air. As is usually the case, there was a person attached to that hand, a ferretess perhaps a dozen or so feet taller than me. She gently broke my father's fall, curling her hand around him. In one fluid movement, she drew the hand clutching my Dad closer to her chest while the other fist lashed out and up, striking Todd across the jaw. He grunted in surprise and pain.

The newcomer glanced over in my direction as I stumbled to my feet before lobbing my father in my general direction.

"Hey!" I shouted as I caught him gently, cushioning his fall. "Be careful! Don't be so fucking cavalier with people,"

"You're welcome," the other ferretess shrugged. "Not like you were doing anything to help,"

Fucking bitch. I scowled at her as she returned her attention to Todd, who seemed to be still trying to process what was going on. Seizing the opportunity, I retreated back a block or so, crouching over to peer at Ciaran and my father in my palms.

"I'm so sorry," I mumbled wretchedly again. "I was trying to help, I swear,"

Dad mumbled something unintelligible before gesturing at Ciaran. "Let me take a look at him,"

I moved my hands so that they were in contact with one another and Dad crossed over, crouching next to Ciaran's prone body. After a few moments of listening and examining, the wolverine looked back up at me.

"He's alright. The force of the impact knocked him out cold, but I don't think anything's broken," he announced. Working as a supervisor in his plant, Dad had plenty of first aid and first response experience.

I broke out into a smile, but the shattering of glass a few blocks distant shocked me back into a state of alertness. We weren't out of the woods yet. This time I was going to do what I should have done in the first place—gotten the fuck out of Saaduuts. I wasn't some sort of fucking hero. But I could help Ciaran and Dad.

"Oi! Tab! Stand up and get your tail over here!"

Getting back to my feet, I looked around, bewildered. My eyes fell on Roger and two others standing on the rooftop terrace of an apartment tower immediately to my right. The fox approached the edge of the rooftop as I set my passengers down on the structure.

"What in the holy fuck is going on?" I asked. "Who's *that* person?"

Roger glanced over at the other giantess, who seemed to be sizing up her opponent.

"Oh, that's Becca. She's got something of... a condition,"

"You could say that again. What are we going to do?"

Roger shrugged. "Becca alleges she has a plan of some sort,"

"And it is..."

"...I suppose we'll just have to find out,"

Tab shot me a look of disapproval as I shrugged again. Hey, it wasn't like I was happy about the whole situation, either.

Motioning for Reynard to help the wolverine move Ciaran's unconscious body to a safer area of the rooftop, I returned my attention to the confrontation unfolding between Becca and Todd. Wait, did I say confrontation? Perhaps a different term was more appropriate. What in the fuck was that giantess playing at?

"Damn. I finally get to meet the fox of the hour," Becca murmured, massaging Todd's chest. "Must say, I really admire your work,"

"Oh, it's hard to think of it as a *job* when it's so much fun," Todd grinned. "But you know what they say, do what you love,"

Becca laughed, bringing herself closer to Todd, resting her head against his chest as she reached up to stroke his shoulder. What the fuck was she playing at?

"Is this standard operating procedure for you guys?" Tab hissed, shooting me a venomous look.

I shook my head numbly. "Becca'd better have something in mind,"

"And if she doesn't?"

I pulled a vial out of his pocket, showing it to her. "We somehow get Todd to swallow this. Cut him down to size in no time. I mean, it might be fatal and all, but at this point, that's the least of my worries,"

Tabitha nodded grimly. We all turned to look at Todd and Becca.

"I believe you owe me an introduction," Todd murmured to Becca. "Though I must say, you're *much* prettier than that other ferret-gal. Someone actually gave you a chest,"

The fox cupped Becca's breast in his hand, smiling as he pinched her nipple. Becca inhaled sharply, running a hand down the small of his back.

"I'm Becca,"

"Becca?" a frown flickered across the giant fox's face, but he quickly pushed it aside. He draped his arms over the ferretess' shoulders, smiling in that predatory manner of his. "I'm sure you'll forgive me for the little, ah, hit I arranged for you. I'd heard about your condition and worried you'd be all Good Samaritan-y. Couldn't have any of that,"

Becca giggled. "But it's so *boring* to be good. And don't worry. I took care of your little welcoming party,"

"My kind of girl," Todd murmured, leaning in to kiss Becca's neck and collar. "I suppose I was wrong about you,"

Becca playfully pushed Todd onto his back, sending him crashing through a building. The ferretess sat on his chest, leaning down to kiss him. The fox yipped in pleasure, raring to go.

Todd rolled on top of Becca, practically growling. His tail was wagging madly—mannerless slob—and he licked the Becca's neck as he slid his fingers into her. The ferretess shuddered.

"Wait'll I find myself a condom. Then I'll show you a *really* good time," Todd hissed. "Gods, it's going to be so good to fuck something warm and alive,"

One of the few moments of vindication I'd had in the weeks since Todd had super-sized himself came early on in his impromptu reign. The fox had decided to celebrate taking over the city by (how else?) fucking a building.

I mean, way to fulfill all those stereotypes about foxes being insatiably horny all the time. I'd never really understood the allure of boning a building, anyway. Yet folks occasionally attempted it if they found themselves

oversized. Disgusting. How difficult would it have been for him to go 'hey, I know I'm a gigantic godsdamn fox, but there are more culturally sensitive ways of showing how pumped I am about it'?

Anyway, stepping back off my soapbox, the whole 'let's fuck a building' thing didn't work out half as well as Todd had probably hoped. He'd penetrated the thing okay, but soon the grunts of exaggerated pleasure turned into gasps of discomfort and pain. As it turns out, sharp glass + sensitive bits = an unpleasant experience, no matter how big you are.

Unfortunately for everyone else, Todd had decided to remedy the situation (after a few days of nursing his shredded-up cock) by creating makeshift 'condoms' out of crowded buses. During one of our little tête-à-têtes, the giant had informed me that the dying twitches of the 'little fuckers' did wonders to enhance orgasm.

TL;DR Todd is a disgusting, despicable person, and always wrap it before you tap it.

"Shit, this is going to be amazing," Todd gasped.

Forcing herself back on top of the fox, Becca put a finger to Todd's lips. "Except,"

"What is it?"

"Except I really don't like it when a guy asks me out by trying to have me killed," she sighed.

"My bad—" Todd mumbled, finding his shoulders pinned down under Becca's knees, his arms pinned to his sides by her legs.

"And I really, *really* don't like it when a guy shows off to me by leveling a good portion of my hometown and eating a lot of my friends. A major turn-off," Becca continued.

Todd squirmed as Becca leaned over, plucking up a street lamp. "What-what's going on?" he spluttered, an edge of panic creeping into his voice.

"You have really pretty eyes, you know," Becca smiled.

I cringed as Becca leaned over Todd's face, brandishing the street lamp. The fox's panicked shouts and pleas morphed into a primal scream.

"She's going to kill him," Tab breathed.

"Do you really care?" I asked, unable to look away from Becca.

"I don't want him to get off that easy,"

That made two of us. But what could I do? I'd dealt with countless crises, but this was on a whole different level.

"Give me the vial," Tab snarled.

I looked up at her, worried, but she fixed me with a glare so intense it could freeze blood. Shaking my head, I fished out the vial and dropped it onto her palm.

Before I could get in another word, Tab had halved the distance between Todd and Becca and the building I was standing on. Becca had discarded the street lamp in favor of a wickedly jagged shard of glass, which she had raised in the air over her head. Todd was gasping wretchedly, struggling to free himself.

Tabitha knocked the shard free of Becca's grip, elbowing her aside to lean in over the fox. She forced his mouth open, dropping the vial in and inducing him to swallow.

For a few heart-stopping moments, nothing happened. Tabitha stepped back from Todd as he let out another strangled cry, clutching at his throat. He writhed on the ground, legs kicking and mouth foaming, blood streaming from the gouged socket of his left eye.

I let out a whoop as I saw Todd begin to rapidly reduce in size. Dashing for the roof access door on the far side of the terrace, I pounded down flight after flight of stairs before bursting out on the ground level.

It took some time to reach Todd and company's location, as the asphalt and pavement of the streets had been torn up and littered with all manner of rubble. I picked my way hurriedly, weaving through the ruined cityscape.

By the time I arrived on the scene, Becca's hormonal imbalance had run its course and she was reduced to normal, standing huffily next to the wretched Todd.

Pulling a pair of handcuffs out of my pocket, I shoved Todd onto his stomach, securing his wrists behind his

back. Normally, I had blankets to help folks cover up after an episode, but my agency van was nowhere nearby and, frankly, he didn't deserve to keep a single shred of dignity.

"Someone get him a fucking bandage," I spat, jerking Todd to his feet.

Reynard and the wolverine came running up beside Becca, supporting a groggy-but-conscious Ciaran between them. My boyfriend shot Todd a look of withering disgust before turning to me.

"I managed to get a hold of your boss. He's sending a chopper to pick up us and... *that*," he jerked his head at Todd.

"Thanks,"

I deposited Todd roughly on his rear next to a large chunk of concrete, securing a strip of cloth offered by Reynard around the fox's head to cover the wound. For the first time since I'd encountered him, Todd had nothing to say. Good. If he did, I don't know how I would have reacted. Probably by breaking a few broken teeth for the bastard, to say the least.

"You're welcome, Roger," Becca sniffed, wandering over towards me.

"Oh, we're going to sit down and have a nice long talk after all this is taken care of," I snapped, glaring at the indignant ferretess. "You're on probation until further notice. Karl is going to have to put all of your actions under review,"

"Is that the kind of thanks I get? I actually *do* something and I'm *punished* for it?"

The whir of helicopter blades saved me from having to respond. Wind buffeted the group as the aircraft came in for an unsteady landing on one of the few nearby level patches of pavement.

I jerked Todd to his feet, pushing him between the shoulder blades towards the helicopter. My progress came to a sudden halt as none other than Warren jumped out of the side of the craft, hurrying towards me with his arm held up against the wind whipped up by the rotors.

"Warren!" I breathed, rushing forward to greet him. "I thought you... hadn't made it,"

Warren's arms wrapped around me. "You should know it takes a lot to kill me," he said. "Though it was nice of these fellows to give me a lift out of the Monster Fox Inn and Suites. I certainly won't be giving that hotel a good rating. Terrible service," he said, glowering over my shoulder at Todd.

"Get this piece of shit into custody," I spat.

"With pleasure," Warren smirked, taking the fox by the back of the neck and guiding him onto the helicopter. "Oops," he snorted as Todd's head made contact with the top of the doorway rather hard.

Becca followed after Todd, accepting a rough blanket offered to her by the copilot. I stayed behind with the others as the chopper took off. There was so much to take care of. We had order to restore, a city to rebuild. But all that mattered at the moment was making sure everyone was okay.

Returning to the group, I smiled to see that Ciaran seemed to have regained his senses.

"Damn. You're one resilient mink," I laughed as he took stock of his surroundings.

"I suppose I have to be, with Tab as my girlfriend and all," Ciaran shrugged in reply. "Wait, where is she?" I frowned, noticing for the first time that Tabitha had indeed disappeared into thin air. How a 90-foot ferret-girl could just slip away unnoticed was beyond me.

"I've got to find her," Ciaran stated.

I protested feebly as Ciaran took off down the street, but Reynard put a hand on my shoulder.

"Let 'im go," he said softly.

When I found Tabitha, she was sitting with her back against a dockside warehouse, arms wrapped around her knees as she stared blankly out across the water. I approached her side cautiously, resting a hand against her hip.

"Hey, Tab," I murmured.

The ferretess didn't offer a response, but half-heartedly offered me her hand.

"It's over," I tried to smile, looking at her expressionless face as she set me on her knee. "It's all over. You're okay, I'm okay, your Dad's okay..."

"Mom isn't," Tabitha replied flatly. "Those people I killed aren't. Everyone Todd killed here isn't,"

"You couldn't do anything about that. It wasn't your fault,"

"Yes it was," Tabitha snapped. "It's my fault Mom's dead,"

"Tab..." I said. "You can't say that. You couldn't control those things. You're not a superhero or something. You're just Tab,"

"Look, Ciaran. I know you're trying to be nice, and that's sweet and all, but come on. Let's not kid ourselves anymore. I'm a giantess. You can't date me,"

I blinked. "What are you talking about? Of *course* I can! Of course I want to be with you!"

"We've been dating for, what, a few months now? And since we started, you've been seriously injured more than once, kidnapped, tortured... I'm not good for you,"

"But—but I *love* you!"

"And I love you. But it's not safe. You can have a normal life. Go to Winthrop and be happy and find someone special. Someone who's *normal*,"

I shook my head. I couldn't go back to Winthrop. What would I do there? Go back to my parents? That wasn't an option.

"But you're normal, Tab," I pleaded. "You don't think you are, but it's true. Sure, you're really big. But that's not all there is to you, really,"

Tabitha laughed bitterly. "Don't mock me,"

"I'm not,"

"Well either you're incredibly naïve or you're making fun of me. *This* isn't normal," she spluttered gesturing at herself. "I just need to go away. Find somewhere I can be alone and not bother anyone,"

"But what about me? What about your dad?"

"Dad probably hates me. And you should too,"

“Before you summarily write off everyone as in your Anti Fan Club or whatever, why don’t you come back with me into town? Let’s just see how it works out,”

So as it turned out, everyone *didn’t* hate me. Dad was subdued in tone for a while, but never blamed me for anything that had happened to him or Mom. Part of me wanted him to, but wouldn’t begrudge him the affection.

There was a lot to address in the aftermath the havoc and chaos of Todd’s reign of terror. The cleanup efforts alone were the stuff of nightmares, to say nothing of the construction necessities. MACRO had, through the authority vested in them for emergency situations, asked my Dad to head up and coordinate all of the various projects that were necessary to rebuild everything that had been leveled, wrecked, or perforated in some fashion during Todd’s rampage. It was the biggest project he’d ever tackled, but went at it with vigor. I think it helped to have something to focus on to take his mind off Mom.

True to his kind heart, Dad took Ciaran under his wing, offering him a place to live at his new apartment in the Bell District. Even more so, he managed to pull some sort of magical strings so that Ciaran and I could take our finals in Saaduuts and still get our diplomas. Ciaran applied to The-College-on-the-Hill, hoping to study chemistry.

And me? Well, one of Dad’s first projects was to make sure the apple of his eye had somewhere to live. So I have new digs up on Pill Hill. It’s great. Roger even offered me a position as an agent at MACRO.

Things weren’t easy with training and a new town to get used to. It was quite a lot to handle. But life wasn’t completely empty. I had loved ones who cared about me, and I cared about them. For the first time in ages, it felt like I had a future. It was going to be challenging and difficult, but it was a future.