

The Breaking Point

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I.

Hyperballad

I go through all this
Before you wake up
So I can feel happier
To be safe again with you
(Björk)

“Tell me, how do you feel?”

My fingers balled into a fist, digging into the soft earth. I swear, if he asked me that *one more time*...

“It ‘makes me feel’ pissed off, that’s what,” I snapped in reply, squinting sidelong at the badger sitting in his armchair. “I think we’ve established that by now. I mean, if you ask me that fucking question enough, am I suddenly going to have a breakthrough or something? Oh, my god, you’re right! I’m *fucking angry*, that’s what,”

Dr. Attwood shifted in his chair, adjusting his posture so that one leg was draped over the other knee. He maintained his stupidly affable expression, adjusting his thick-rimmed glasses and scribbling something on his notepad.

“We’re just talking. Seeing where things take us. You’ve acknowledged that you want to get better at expressing yourself. Part of that is identifying how different things make you feel,” he stated simply.

“Well, it feels like you’re just pulling out every stupid trick in the therapist playbook. I mean, you dragged a fucking *armchair* out here. I get that I’m not all that, er, conducive to your office and all, but *really*? And you didn’t even spring for one of those couch things for me. I’m pretty fucking disappointed in *that*,” I replied in clipped tones.

I rubbed the dirt off on the knee of my jeans, glowering down at the idiotic makeshift office setup next to my knee on the grassy hill. He’d brought it all out in an effort to make me feel like it was a normal office session. But it just made me feel big. I shifted over a little. My legs were starting to go a little numb due to sitting cross-legged for so long.

“We can continue whenever you feel like it, Tabitha,” Dr. Attwood replied evenly, staring down at his notepad.

“Well, I’ll feel like continuing when you cut the bullshit,” I sniffed.

Attwood remained quiet, the scratching of his pen the only thing breaking the silence.

“What the hell do you know about being me, anyway? What gives you the authority to pass judgment on me?” I pushed.

“Nobody said anything about judgment,” Attwood replied in that crisp, posh accent of his. “I’m not wearing a silly wig and judge’s robe or anything like that. We’re just here to talk,”

I scowled. “You don’t know anything about what it’s like to be 90 feet tall. Your stupid Camford degree can’t tell you shit about that,”

“I attended Oxbridge,” Attwood corrected gently. “But I’m not important. This session isn’t about me in any way. I’m just here as a facilitator to help you. This is all about you,”

“Is that why you’re taking all those notes?”

My hand darted out and I plucked the notepad from the startled therapist’s lap between thumb and forefinger. Dr. Attwood let out a small complaint as I screwed my eyes up, scrutinizing the thumbnail-sized paper as best I could.

“Have you been *doodling*? You’ve been fucking doodling. Wow. Thanks for fucking caring, asshole,”

Ignoring the shouted protestations of Dr. Attwood, I got to my feet, brushing off the seat of my pants as I strode away down the hill.

“You can’t just walk off! These sessions are required! Your parole officer is going to hear about this!” the badger bellowed after me, spittle flying from his mouth.

“Eat me,” I muttered, not bothering to look over my shoulder.

The door slammed behind me as I flopped onto my bed. I didn’t give a damn about violating any of those stupid statutes or whatever; they could just take whatever it took to fix any of the resultant broken windows out of my paycheck. Oh, wait, that’s right: I didn’t have a godsdamn job anymore. For an unemployed person I was still pretty damn busy. Roger made sure of that. It was supposedly the court system and all that, but this had that fucking fox’s fingerprints all over it.

Groaning aloud, I rolled onto my back and stared up at the ceiling. That stupid crack was still there, mocking me. How long had it been there? Months? A year? Maybe

it was as old as the house itself, I couldn't remember. But no matter how many times I asked for someone to come and repair it, nothing ever happened.

My mind wandered as I stared around my room. Much of my stuff had been gutted, removed at the behest of one of those godsdamn court orders. Motherfuckers. But those stupid little toy furnishings I'd bought for Ciaran were still sitting around on my bedside table.

Scowling, I balled up a fist, reaching out and bringing it down on the wooden chair. I flinched as one of the legs pierced the side of my hand. Plucking the splinter-like fragment of chair from my hand, I nursed my wound sheepishly.

I missed Ciaran. Talking with him, going out with him, just seeing him. That was what I'd do—pay him a little visit. Yeah, a nice little pick-me-up. Swinging my legs over my bed, I got back to my feet and headed out my door, closing it more gently this time. He was still in the Bell District, right?

"You have some real *nerve* coming here, Tabitha," the wolverine said, his tone even but his eyes betraying his emotion. "Of course you can't see him,"

"But, Dad!" I pleaded softly. "I just want to say hello,"

The wolverine's ears drooped, but he shook his head. "It wouldn't be a good idea. For him or you. He's in a... fragile state, you know that,"

Of course. I'm godsdamn responsible for it. "Yeah..."

"And besides. Aren't you not allowed to even be within 100 yards of him or something? I don't want you to get in any more trouble, sweetie,"

"Don't call me 'sweetie,'"

"But you are. I love you. You know that. I just wish you wouldn't have made some of the choices you did,"

"It's too fucking late for *that* now, isn't it? But great advice. I'll keep it in mind next time,"

"There won't be a next time,"

Any softness or hesitance from Dad's voice was gone when he said that.

"Right," I sniffed.

"I think it's best you left," Dad rubbed his elbow nervously. "I can come by your place sometime later and visit if you like,"

"Don't bother," I snapped as I got to my feet.

"Please don't push everyone away," Dad called after me as I made to stalk away.
"We care about you,"

I spun on my heels, wanting to snatch the naggy little wolverine up and give him a good squeeze before realizing that probably wasn't a good idea. I opted instead to fold my arms across my chest, tapping my foot as I squinted down at him.

"Was that something Roger told you to say? It sounds like something he'd tell people to say,"

"N-no! It's just what I think,"

"Whatever,"

I stalked away from my dad's apartment building, picking my way back towards my home and the stupid crack in my ceiling. Maybe I should just move out of Saaduuts. This place was my own personal Hell.

"You're talking about this place as if it's some sort of hellscape," I snorted, patting Tabitha on the shoulder.

"Ah, that's a good descriptor: hellscape," the ferretess replied, craning her neck to look at me out of the corner of her eye, a small grin playing on her lips.

"Well, if rain is your definition of hell, then Saaduuts is certainly the Ninth Ring. Better get used to it,"

"No. There's rain and then there's *rain*. Last night was not normal by any stretch of the imagination. And during my first solo op, too!"

"Hey, you gotta start sometime. Even if 'sometime' means during one of the worst storms in recent memory," I shrugged. "You did a good job, by the way. Handled that raccoon just as well as anyone could ever hope,"

"Thanks," Tabitha smiled. "It was pretty easy—he seemed pretty fine, just a little freaked out. Didn't hurt that he was cute, either," she added under her breath, flushing slightly.

"Hey, we wouldn't start you on a crazy one. We ease you in with a couple of softies before graduating you to the ones who are suddenly struck with the desire to try and set the record for Most Property Damage in an Hour or whatnot," I replied. Narrowing my eyes and grinning

craftily, I prodded, "Cute, you say? Do I have to warn Ciaran that he has competition?"

"No! Nothing like that," Tabitha insisted hastily. Her voice softened and you could practically hear her go a little glassy-eyed. "It's just, it was a little hard to control myself when there was this really attractive, really naked boy sitting on my bed, wrapped in a blanket and shivering. You want to help him warm up..."

"You took him *home*? Mrowl," I teased.

"Hey, we were soaking wet and freezing! Had to go somewhere,"

"Hey, to each her own," I said as Tabitha came to a halt, arriving in front of MACRO Headquarters. I clambered off her shoulder and onto her offered hand, grasping onto the tip of a finger for support as she guided me over to the balcony.

"I'll have the report completed by early this afternoon. Assuming the Dictaphone doesn't crap out like it did on all of my operation shadows," Tabitha said, withdrawing her hand.

"The IT guy said it was 'fixed for sure this time'... so I wouldn't be surprised if it broke again," I shook my head with a rueful smile. Tabitha snorted, ruffling my fur slightly. "Thanks for the ride. And congrats again on the op. First of many successful ones, right?"

"Of course. And no problem. I'll see you later. Don't forget about the party later! My place, eight o'clock,"

"Wouldn't miss it for the world," I mumbled.

Gods, I hope that didn't come across as the groan I wanted it to be. Parties, really? Those sort of things were never my scene.

Paperwork proved to be the continued bane of my existence. No matter how many times I filed reports, submitted monthly section budgets, or ordered godsdamn office supplies, more sheets demanding to be filled out would appear on my desk each and every morning. I had a pretty good idea what Purgatory was like at this point, if such a place were to actually exist.

Grumbling to myself, I plopped down in my chair and stared aimlessly at the stacks that had materialized on my desk. Maybe I could reorganize the stacks. Yeah, they could probably use color-coding or something. That would take a good half hour or so, right?

With renewed energy, I opened a desk drawer, pulling out sticky notes and highlighter pens of various colors, I grinned from ear to ear. Working at MACRO for several years had taught me plenty of new and exciting ways to waste time while seeming busy. It was a talent.

A knock at the door.

"Come in," I mumbled, focused on sorting through the first stack, consisting primarily of supply requests and other such miscellany. The door slammed open, sounding as if it were just about to come off its hinges. From that alone, I didn't need to look up to know just who it was.

"I suppose I ought to be happy that at least you guys aren't beating around the bush anymore," Becca huffed, standing just inside the doorway of my office, arms folded across her chest.

Yep. Called it. That ferretess had been malcontent about one thing or another for the past weeks.

I glanced up from my papers. "What exactly do you mean?" I asked, trying (and probably failing) not to seem too exasperated.

"Cameron, Karl, and you in the bucket brigade relay race to unabashedly shit on me here at work," Becca snapped, crossing over towards my desk.

I tried to interject, confused and more than a little irritated by the accusations, but Becca ploughed right through me.

"I've worked here at MACRO for, what, six years? I got recruited right out of university," Becca sniffed. "And Tab's been 'working' for like two months. But *who* gets to work in the field? Tabitha,"

"Can we talk about this some other time?" I asked. I'd tread this ground countless times before with Becca. "I've got a lot to do right now. I have *three* case files to finish, the monthly report is due at 1700, and I need

to call legal about the Todd trial. And that's saying nothing of this paperwork,"

Becca's expression indicated she wouldn't be going anywhere any time soon. She cleared off a spot on my desk, shifting a just-sorted pile onto a filing cabinet and sitting down with arms folded. I groaned inwardly.

"Look, Becc. Like I've said before, the position Tab filled was open. We needed someone more in the field and she, frankly, has an advantage in the size department. She could really save time, effort, and *lives* down the road.

"Besides, you're brilliant in the Research and Development Division. It would be impossible to find a replacement for you,"

"You *knew* I wanted that job! You knew I wanted it and you still gave it to that-that-Tabitha," Becca fumed, her slight frame radiating barely-contained frustration as she stood across the desk from me, hands clenching into fists. "I have an 'advantage in the size department', too, I'll have you know. Well, sometimes, at least. But still.

"But do you guys care? No. You've just decided you *hate* me or some bullshit like that, so I can't have anything I want or deserve.

"Oh, and if that's not enough, I don't even get my own office anymore. I have to share with that fucking lynx Jeremy. I don't think he knows what a shower is. Why don't you just cut my salary while you're at it?"

Becca's snippy office comment was the last straw.

"Maybe you should have thought about your office before you, oh, I dunno, put your fucking FIST through the godsdamn BUILDING!" I snapped, fixing the ferretess with my patent-pending death glare. "You'll be getting your office back once repairs to it and the other rooms you damaged are complete,"

"It was the heat of the moment, okay?" Becca sniffed indignantly.

"And that's exactly why you aren't a good fit for the field," I retorted, ears pressed flat against my head. "You're too fucking hot-headed. Sometimes-most of the time-you need to take it down a notch or seven. You

treat it like a godsdamn power trip; take some fucking responsibility.

"I don't even know why you always bitch to *me*. I'm not your boss. I can't change any of that for you, even if I wanted to. And for the record, I think Karl made the right decision,"

Becca opened her mouth, faltered, and then spun on her heels, stalking out of the room in a swirl of starched lab coat.

I slammed my forehead onto the surface of my desk, scattering papers everywhere. Great fucking going, a real mastery of words there, Rodge. Good gods, why was I only able to *not* sound like a complete ass when I was around people much larger than myself? Simple self-preservation?

Becca was waiting at the bottom of the stairs when I got off work at Suit Yourself. Before I even had a chance to register what was going on, she had me by the wrist and was practically dragging me down the street.

"But... but the bus stop is *that* way," I gestured in vain. I knew the look on my girlfriend's face; she was on a mission and wasn't going to be easily swayed by much of anything at that point. "What's going on?"

"Me being totally done with all the bullshit I have to put up with at work is what's going on," Becca snapped in response. She came to a halt, a manic grin on her lips as she turned to face me. "I mean, don't you want to go on a date, Edmond? We haven't been *with* each other in ages,"

I blushed violently; she wasn't incorrect. In all of the months since Becca's accident, we'd only slept together once. She'd broached the topic once or twice, but I was too terrified to even risk it again. I loved her, but when there was suddenly just so *much* of her... Well, it becomes a lot less sexy and much more oh-my-gods-should-I-have-written-my-last-will-and-testiment-before-doing-this.

"Tell me what's going on, really," I said, jerking my wrist free of the ferretess' grip. She scowled at me, narrowing her eyes as her tail lashed back and forth behind her. I plunged onward. "C'mon Becc. You can talk to me,"

"Don't pretend you know what's going on in my life," Becca snapped, dark eyes flashing. "You don't know *shit* about what it's like for me,"

"Becca... I'm trying to understand... honest. Help me understand. Let's just talk it out. Would you like that?" I held out a hand, desperately trying to placate my girlfriend. If I didn't calm her down, well, I didn't want the inevitable outcome to happen.

The ferretess laughed bitterly. "Please. Stay there in your fucking ivory tower. What's the hardest thing you have to put up with at your stupid tailor shop? Running out of thread? Well, I have to sit in a lab, fucking around with test tubes while some stupid *rookie* gets to run around in the field. I *deserved* that position. I have the seniority and the smarts. But Roger, everyone at MACRO, refuses to acknowledge either. I'm done taking shit from him,"

I gulped, nodding silently. Sometimes it was better to let Becca run her mouth. She usually only needed to get something off her chest and would be just fine after that.

Should've intervened that time, though. Becca had succeeded in whipping herself into a frenzy in a matter of minutes, screaming herself hoarse in my face. One moment I was looking into the ferretess' infuriated eyes, the next, I was staring at her ankles, shreds of her tattered clothing arrayed on the pavement before me.

I squeaked as my now-gigantic girlfriend's knee slammed thunderously into the ground a couple of yards to my left. Becca's long, slim fingers wrapped firmly around my torso, yanking me off the ground. I would never be able to get used to the plunging sensation in my stomach that accompanied every time Becca decided she wanted to pick me up. Or the slightly unsettling smile, now magnified to an unimaginable scale as her face filled the majority of my field of view.

"You know, I feel a lot better now," Becca smiled sweetly, looping a lock of dark brown hair behind her ear with her free hand.

"That's, er, good," I breathed nervously as the giantess pinched the end of the measuring tape draped around my neck between thumb and forefinger, sliding it away from its customary location. I felt naked without my trusty tape, though admittedly perhaps a bit less naked than Becca at the moment. She studied the minuscule length of cloth with a smirk on her lips.

"Guess I'd need a few more of those tapes if I wanted to make you a dress," I ventured nervously, earning a hair-ruffling snort from the giantess.

Becca sat down cross-legged in the middle of the street, her knees brushing against the buildings on either side of the thoroughfare. She scowled at a lone car making its way down the street towards us, jerking her head for it to choose an alternate route.

"I think we're going to need to change our plans for the evening, aren't we?" Becca commented.

I offered a feeble protest, not entirely certain what the gigantic ferretess had in mind. Said protest was ignored, either because she didn't notice or didn't care. Hefting me in her palm, Becca was off, striding purposefully down the street.

"You know, Tab, this is probably the best housewarming party I've ever been to," Ciaran chuckled, wandering down the length of the buffet spread that he'd set up on my bedside table and helping himself to another cupful of punch.

I laughed, sitting down on the edge of my bed and resting my chin on the surface of the table, a grin on my lips. "You must not have been to that many housewarming parties, then,"

Ciaran nodded in silent concession walking over to poke me on the tip of my nose. "Winthrop didn't exactly have much of a party-town reputation going for it, I suppose,"

Reaching over the mink's head, I gingerly plucked a bowl of chips off the little buffet table. Ciaran protested mildly as I tossed the bowl's contents into my open mouth.

"Now I'm gonna have to refill that," he sighed as I replaced the empty bowl. "I specifically got you your *own* spread,"

"You're gonna have to open all those packets for me, you know," I giggled, rolling onto my back. "I don't want to test out what all that packaging would do to my system,"

"I just hope people start showing up to *eat* the spread. The party was supposed to start 15 minutes ago..." Ciaran sighed.

"No worries, little dude," I laughed. "Have you never heard of the term 'fashionably late'? Besides. I have the biggest house in town. Ain't nobody gonna miss that,"

Dad had really come through in the housing department. Before he even started arranging for his own apartment, the wolverine had ordered an entire fleet of movers to deconstruct my house back in Winthrop and move it to a vacant lot on top of Pill Hill near downtown. It was like the world's biggest IKEA furniture project or something.

Dad, meanwhile, had landed a humble but comfortable two-bedroom place on Cap Hill. Ciaran had happily accepted his invitation to live there with him, but he spent a lot of time with me when he wasn't sleeping or busy elsewhere. Classes would be starting soon for him, so I had to relish all the time I had before he invariably became some sort of caffeine-addled, book-lugging zombie.

Ciaran and Dad really hit it off quickly, and I was pretty sure Dad needed the company to keep his mind off Mom. I needed that, too. Sometimes, I'd lay awake at night, staring at the ceiling and wishing I hadn't in some way brought about her demise.

A knock at the door jerked the pair of us to attention.

"Was that—" I hesitated.

"A knock," Ciaran confirmed nervously.

"But..."

A buzzer had been installed in the doorjamb at the height of a normal person so that I could unlock the corresponding tiny door and let any visitors in. Nobody would need to knock, unless...

"Er, the door's unlocked," I called out, unable to keep the nervous edge out of my voice. "Come in,"

The knob turned and I shifted over so that I was closer to the nightstand, ready to grab up Ciaran and keep him safe should the need arise. I exhaled through my teeth as the newcomer stepped in.

Becca. Of course.

Closing the door behind her, the giantess glowered at me, the intensity of her stare slightly magnified by the fact that she had to bow her neck in order to fit into the room, her shoulder blades brushing against the rafters. She stood fully head and shoulders taller than myself.

"What's up?" I asked hesitantly, trying to break the ice. I was getting *plenty* of that stuff coming from her chilly gaze.

Becca snorted, more to herself than anything else, before crossing the room, dropping her passenger haphazardly onto the nightstand before plopping herself into the rickety chair next to my desk. The chair was comically small for her; she looked like a parent at a conference for her kindergartener or something.

"Er, could you *not* put your ass all over the furniture?" I mumbled, sitting down on my bed.

"It isn't *all over* the furniture. It's in one place, and a place specifically designed for asses at that," Becca replied scathingly, shifting around defiantly as the chair creaked in complaint.

Deciding to choose my battles, I let it drop. Bigger fish to fry. Or ferrets. Whatever. "Can I help you with something?"

“Not really. You *could* resign your position at MACRO, I suppose,” Becca inspected her nails in boredom.

“You know I’m not going to do that,” I snapped shortly. Softening my tone slightly, I added hastily, “You know I’m really sorry if I stepped on your toes or whatever. I didn’t know you wanted the job. I didn’t intend to piss you off, honest. I’ve explained that to you *and* Roger,”

“Well, that hasn’t seemed to penetrate Roger’s thick skull, has it?” Becca retorted. “He can’t seem to see past your size,”

My eyes flashed. Okay, you aren’t going to pull the not-so-passive aggressive card in my house and hope to get away with it. Game fucking over.

“You know, in all this time, I am still really unclear on two things. One, I don’t know why you’re being such a colossal bitch to me. I really don’t. Just fucking drop it. And secondly, I don’t understand why you think *this* is some kind of godsdamn *gift*!” I snarled, gesturing at myself. “It isn’t, in case you’re curious. It fucking sucks. You know what I want to do? Go to university. Go to a movie theatre that isn’t a drive-in. Eat a fucking hamburger for dinner. As in *one* hamburger. Kiss my boyfriend like a normal godsdamn person. You get my drift?”

Becca stared impassively at me. “I’m a giantess, too. So don’t pretend I don’t know any of that shtick,”

It took every ounce of self-control in my body not to tear Becca’s head off. “You aren’t stuck like this. You end up like this every time you overreact to some doubtlessly stupid bullshit or decide to get your rocks off. That’s a fucking *choice*,” I spat venomously.

Okay, I was starting to get an inkling as to why Becca might hate me. Perhaps it would help if I weren’t so quick to bite everyone’s head off. In my defense, I typically kept a level head. But enough was enough and I was done doormatting myself.

“If you don’t have anything more to say, the door’s over there,” I snapped, pointing.

Becca arched a brow at me before shaking her head slightly, a knowing smirk on her head. “Oh, I’ll leave, but only when I feel like it. Now, listen. I can’t make you do anything. But. I could always mention all of those *things* you’ve done to someone at MACRO,”

My eyes flashed. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, your little, ah, venting session back at that compound that tool Todd was keeping you. You *ate* people. Heavy shit there,” Becca licked her lips for emphasis.

“I—I didn’t eat anyone,” I spluttered.

“About the only thing you *didn’t* do,” the ferretess snorted.

“How do you know about that? Nobody was supposed to know,”

I glanced over at Ciaran, who had stepped closer to my hand, a warning expression on his face. His ears were canted back a little.

“Oh, Roger’s brother has a big mouth. For being all secret-agent-y and whatnot, he can’t keep his gob shut after he’s had a couple. So I got all the juicy details on that little extraction mission.

“It really would be a shame if someone in charge at MACRO found out about it. Don’t you think that would show you’d lied your way through the screening process? I mean, that’s gotta be a sign of *some* sort of psychosis. No way a psycho could pass the psych assessment. Couldn’t risk a repeat episode... I mean, unless your number one fan Roger fudged the results or something,”

“He didn’t—I passed that test. I’m not crazy,” I snapped.

Becca just rolled her eyes. “I get that we’re all a little crazy, but do you honestly think that was a normal response to *anything*?” her gaze shifted hawkishly towards Ciaran. “I mean, what do *you* think? Or are you into that kind of shit? Like the crazy bitches?”

“Leave him out of this,” I snarled.

“I’m just saying... I mean, if the wrong person were to hear about this... People could lose jobs. People could go to jail. Even if MACRO’s into the whole turning-a-blind-eye thing, I’m sure the public would *love* to hear if there’s a furicidal maniac in their midst,”

“Out. Get out,” I spat, launching off my bed, hand poised to slap the insolent ferretess.

Becca looked at me as if I’d proven her point and then slipped out of the room, scooping up Edmond on the way.

Ciaran and I exchanged shaken glances as the door shut after Becca.

“What was that?” I breathed.

“She’s gone. That’s all that matters,” Ciaran replied, though he sounded just as nervous as I felt.

I could smell something cooking as I stepped through the apartment door, pulling off my jacket and hanging it on its peg.

"What's going on?" I called. "Aren't we supposed to be getting ready to head over to Tabitha's party or whatever?"

Reynard poked his head around the corner of the kitchen doorway, tasting something with a wooden spoon. "That thing? Do you really want to go there?"

"Well... not really..." I confessed.

"Then let's skip!" my boyfriend suggested gleefully. "You came down with botulism or something like that. They'll have to understand,"

"Botulism," I snorted.

"Or whatever," Reynard waved the spoon dismissively. "Let's just have a nice night at home. I'm making dinner,"

"I could tell. And sure. I'd like that,"

Giving Reynard a peck on the cheek, I opened a drawer, pulling out a couple of placemats. "I'll set the table,"

"Way ahead of you,"

"Damn. You mean I don't have to lift a finger? You thought of *everything*? Sure you're feeling all right? It might be you with the case of botulism,"

"Hey, I'm not a total fuck-up *all* the time," Reynard protested lightly.

Dinner was actually quite delicious. Reynard whipped up one of his specialties, tuna casserole. It was always good, but tonight it was fucking divine.

"This is really great, Rey," I said glancing up from my plate at the Arctic fox across the table.

I stopped chewing, a slight frown creased my brow as I saw that he was staring back across the table at me, a nervous grin playing at the corners of his mouth.

"Is something the matter?" I asked.

Reynard put his fork down gingerly, blinking a few times before taking a deep breath.

"You know, I came up with a bunch of really stupid ideas for this, but they all seemed really dumb. I just... Roger, will you marry me?"

My fork clattered onto my plate, slipping through my limp fingers as I stared across the table. Reynard winced.

"Oh," he mumbled, barely audible.

"Yes! Of course," I laughed, nearly choking on the mouthful of casserole I'd forgotten to finish chewing.

I launched myself across the table at my now-fiancé. He was my *fiancé*. Holy shit. Holy shit.

II.

Lilith

It's all trouble
It's all trouble
'Cause you want to feel it, you want to feel it
But you don't believe in it
(Susanne Sundfør)

The only redeeming qualities of West Saaduuts—nay, the only reason West Saaduuts should even exist—are the vistas of the good parts of Saaduuts that it offers and the fact that it has the common decency to be located far enough away from everything else that it doesn't stink up the rest of the city with all its godsdamn industry and shipping. Then again, nothing was going to change the fact that I had to pay that godsforsaken neighborhood a visit.

My car rumbled along the crumbling viaduct, the blinding glare of the late-afternoon sun dazzling my eyes. I fumbled for my sunglasses in the glove box as I squinted in the unseasonably bright sunlight. Add 'horrible road orientation' to the list of things wrong with West Saaduuts, I suppose. Massive traffic accident just waiting to happen, I *tell* you.

Tabitha stood thigh-deep in the water of the Port of Saaduuts when I pulled into the dockyard lot. Dressed in her black one-piece bathing suit, she busied herself transferring shoebox-sized shipping containers onto a cargo ship.

Tabitha's eyes snapped towards me as I called out to her, standing on the concrete dock next to the ship she was helping to load.

"You shouldn't be here," she mumbled, wiping off her hands on her hip.

"Don't worry. I'm not trespassing," I flashed the visitor badge I'd received at the gate.

The giantess rolled her eyes. "I don't want you to be here,"

"I have to check on you. See how the community service is going,"

"I know that," she replied shortly. "It's just... it's embarrassing. I don't want to do this,"

Tabitha rounded the ship, sitting down on the edge of dock. She kicked her legs back and forth idly, dark water swirling and eddying around them.

"I'm really sorry, Tab," I approached her hip slowly. "But this is how you need to apologize for..."

I trailed off as Tabitha fixed me with her steely gaze. All the same, she reached down, placing a hand palm-up on the concrete. I hesitated before clambering on, gripping onto her uplifted thumb as she lifted me faceward. Her hand was slightly damp from the water and smelled of oil and steel.

"How are your sessions with Dr. Attwood Coming along?" I asked.

My fur ruffled as Tabitha snorted derisively. "That quack? He's a fucking joke. All a bunch of stupid questions and none of this 'help' that I'm supposedly getting,"

"I'm sorry you feel that way," I replied cautiously, choosing my words carefully. Tabitha had been more... volatile of late. She was improving, but I really didn't want her to realize she was in a position such that she could crush me without much effort if she really wanted. "I thought you'd like Attwood. I made sure the court let would allow me to specially select your therapist. He has impressive credentials. Nice guy, too,"

"The only credentials that man has are in the field of crumpet selection. Seriously. He fucking consumes those things like air. Polishes off a box of the things every session I have with him,"

I chuckled softly, shaking my head. "I've noticed that. But you really need to give him a chance. It's important. You need it. You want it,"

Tabitha's ears flattened and her eyes flashed. "Don't tell me what I want,"

"But it's true," I said gently. "Tabitha, you're your own biggest enemy in this whole thing. Cliché as it may be, it's true. You are surrounded by people who care about you and want to help you. We love you,"

"Ciaran doesn't love me," a ragged sob escaped involuntarily from Tabitha's chest. "I visited him—tried to visit him—yesterday. But Dad wouldn't let me see him. Ciaran hates me,"

I shook my head again, sinking slightly onto the surface of the ferretess' palm. "You shouldn't have done that. You know that wasn't a good idea. Not allowed in the least, either,"

"I don't care about any of that. I just want things to be normal again. But they never will be,"

"You don't know that. You just need to give Ciaran time. Let him put things in order. You owe him that,"

"But I—"

"You can't rush this. He needs to take a break from you. I'm sorry. But that's just how it is,"

Tabitha sniffed and momentarily opened her mouth to speak before changing her mind. She set me gently back on the dock before standing up and wading silently around the boat again, busying herself with more container-loading.

Conversation abruptly ended, I turned and picked my way along the busy dock back towards the lot and my car. It was going to be a long ride back to Saaduuts. I still didn't know whether I pitied Tabitha or feared her.

The smell of Reynard's fur was one of my favorite scents in the entire world. And now it was mine for the rest of my life. I sat on his stomach, showering him with kisses as I drank in the rich, peppery scent, breathing heavily. The sheets were arrayed messily around us, some torn completely away from the bed.

"For a skinny fox, you're pretty godsdamn heavy, you know that," Reynard chuckled, his laughter jostling me up and down gently.

I giggled as Reynard grunted, knocking me onto my back and swapping our positions. His lips began to explore the contours of my neck and collar as I inhaled sharply.

"I love you," I massaged Reynard's back.

"Well, I love you. And I should hope so. Otherwise the past couple of years—hell, the last *hours*—have all been a clever ruse,"

"Mmm... hours..."

"Speaking of," Reynard interrupted his lingual expedition to glance over at the clock, "What do you want for breakfast?"

I guffawed, eyes wide in disbelief. "No way. No godsdamn way. It can't have been that long,"

"You better believe it," Reynard grinned toothily, winking at me.

"I don't believe it. Nobody does that. It's been... that doesn't happen outside the movies,"

"Hey, we took breaks,"

I shook my head numbly as Reynard slid out of bed, giving me a peck on the cheek. "Just promise me this won't happen *all* the time. Sleep is nice on occasion,"

"Just every other night," Reynard laughed in reply. "Breakfast?"

"Mm, I'm not that hungry," I shrugged. "I should probably get ready for work,"

Slipping out of bed, I pulled on a pair of slacks and a collared shirt. As a bathrobe-clad Reynard bustled around the kitchen, pouring himself a bowl of cereal, I fumbled with a tie.

"Want to go somewhere and have a nice dinner tonight?" Reynard asked as I grabbed my case.

"I'd like that," I smiled.

"I'll pick you up after work, then,"

Making my way down the stairs, I hurried through the lobby just in time to meet Tabitha on her way to MACRO. Back to the grind...

"Suit Yourself, speedy tailoring and alterations. How can I help you?"

"Reynard? Are you busy? Can I talk to you?"

"Ciaran? Is that you?"

"If you're busy, it's not a big deal. Doesn't matter,"

"Hey, I'm not doing anything. What's up?" I sat down at my desk, looping the cord around my finger. Needed to get some wireless office phones.

Ciaran took a deep breath on the other end of the line. "It's just, I don't know what to do. My dad called and he wants me to come back—back to Winthrop,"

I blinked, running a hand through my tousled hair. "Well, um... you don't need to, you know. He doesn't own your life,"

"I know. I know. But you don't understand. He—he *threatened* me," Ciaran breathed. "He said that if I didn't 'get my tail back there he'd...' oh, I don't know. But I don't want to find out,"

My frown deepened. Things hadn't exactly been all that amicable between *my* dad and I when I'd been growing up, and I'd split at the first chance I got. Well, it was more of a Dad-telling-me-never-to-darken-his-doorstep-again thing, but I hadn't been back since. Judging by my conversations with Ciaran, it seemed as if *his* father wasn't any more eager for a reunion. So why the sudden need to see him?

"Well, you've got him now, don't you? We need to report him. That's a threat of violence. Bound to be of interest to the cops,"

Ciaran offered a noncommittal mumble.

"Ciaran, you... you've got to do something. I can help. Rodge can too, but you've got to tell someone. Someone who can take steps to stop your dad, that is,"

"But he's still my dad," Ciaran replied. "I couldn't—"

"You walked out of their house," I cut Ciaran off gently but firmly. "You owe them nothing. They failed you. It's not your fault,"

"Mmm,"

"If you want, I can help you out. Let's talk this over in person,"

"Er, I have to go," Ciaran murmured in reply.

"Ciaran, wait," I said hastily, but the mink hung up.

I exhaled forcefully, replacing the phone on the receiver. Combing my fingers through my hair, I stared at the phone before picking it up again.

"Hey, hon," I smiled as Roger answered. "Look, you got a minute? I need to talk to you about Ciaran,"

"What's going on? Is he doing alright?"

"Well, not really, it would seem," I sighed. "Sounds like his father is causing some... trouble. But when I told him that he needed to turn the bastard in, he got all hem-and-haw-y and hung up. He's still petrified of the guy,"

Roger didn't speak, so I continued. "I want to talk with Crane. He's bound to be able to help with something,"

"Well, you don't need my *permission*," Roger snorted. "I'll give him a call this afternoon,"

"Thanks for having us over for dinner, Ed," I smiled, peeling and slicing the last potato before tossing it into the pot with the rest of its brethren.

"Hey, I have to find *someone* to chop my veggies for me," the wolverine chuckled. His face grew serious. "But it really is my pleasure. I've been concerned about Ciaran for a little while. So when you called, well, I figured it would be a good time to talk. Get some extra assistance,"

"No worries. But how do you want to broach things with him? I don't think it's a good idea to make it seem like we're ganging up on him or something like that,"

Ed shook his head. "Of course not. I dunno. I figure we should just let him know that we're all supportive; let him talk about whatever's been on his mind at his own pace,"

It wasn't until we were all sitting around the table and Ed called Ciaran down to dinner that I realized how stilted it all felt. We chewed in silence punctuated

only by stilted small talk and Ciaran's increasingly confused and suspicious stares.

"Ciaran, we all really want to help you," Reynard, ever the master of tact and subtlety, suddenly blurted through a mouthful of salmon.

Without uttering so much as a word, the mink pushed back from the table and vanished into his bedroom. Reynard rushed after him, ignoring my hissed protestation. Ed and I were left at the dinner table. Metal clinked as the wolverine dropped his fork onto his plate.

"I'm really sorry about Rey," I held out a hand. "He gets... carried away sometimes. But it isn't for a lack of caring,"

"I'm a shit father," Ed grunted, staring down at his plate. "Complete shit. I can't do a thing to help Tabitha. Tried and failed repeatedly at that.

"And Ciaran. I thought I had a chance to, I dunno, redeem myself or something like that with him. But he's just so *scared*. I mean, one time, he slipped and accidentally called me 'Dad'. He was totally inconsolable after that. I have no idea what to do,"

"Well, it isn't like they handed out parenting guides, much less manuals for situations such as these. You're doing the absolute best you can. And that's all that matters,"

"But it isn't. I *can't* fail,"

"How about this. Did Ciaran's father call your home line?"

"Yeah...?"

"Good. Then his number will be on the call history. If you give it to me, I'll give the asshole a little call. It probably won't be enough to solve anything, but it's a start,"

Ed nodded slowly, crossing the room and flicking through the phone history. "Here it is," he said after a short while, copying down the number for me on a scrap of paper. "Thank you very much,"

"My pleasure," I smiled thinly. Yep, I really love phone conversations with crazy rednecks.

Everyone had finally left me alone when I heard a tapping on the glass of my window. I uncurled myself unwillingly, rolling off the bed and shuffling towards the window. Undoing the clasp, I threw the window open.

“Hey, Ciaran,”

It was Tabitha. Crouched outside the apartment with a towel draped over her shoulder, she gripped the windowsill with her fingertips.

“I’m pretty tired right now,” I murmured half-heartedly, hoping to circumvent her saying whatever it was she wanted.

“I was going to take a bath, if you wanted to join,” the ferretess grinned mischievously.

I shook my head numbly. “It’s been a long day. I’ve had a lot of... stuff going on,”

Tabitha pouted out a lip. “Why are you such a spoil-sport? I just wanted to have some fun,”

I didn’t know that I would snap so quickly. I didn’t even know I had it in me. But out it all came in a massive torrent.

“Tabitha, leave me *alone*. What part of that didn’t you understand? I don’t want to go with you. I want to be alone. I want everyone to let me alone. Why don’t you get it?”

“I just thought you’d want to spend some time with me,” Tabitha replied, taken aback. She drew back her hand from the windowsill.

“Yeah, spend some time with you,” I laughed coldly. “You. My 90-foot girlfriend. The bastion of *normalcy* in my life,”

Tabitha got to her feet, bending over so she was resting her hands on her knees, staring at me through the window, her expression wounded. “Hey, no need to get mean,”

“I just wish you’d think of someone other than yourself once in awhile,” I turned away from the window.

Tabitha’s expression changed to one of irritation and anger. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

I couldn’t find the words answer. Tabitha left silently as I returned to my bed, sitting with my chin propped up on my hand. I rocked back and forth slowly, tail twitching. That had been a mistake. I shouldn’t have snapped like that. Not like it fixed anything.

All the same, though, I felt a pang of *something* —jealousy? anger?—as I thought about it all. Much as I loved Tabitha, it was so *difficult* to date her. She had all the insecurities and issues of any person our age, except they were magnified on an immense scale. Every aspect of our relationship was fraught with problems, snafus—hell, even *dangers*—that would be unthinkable or laughable to anyone else. Sometimes I really just wanted something *normal* in my life. A lot of the time.

Becca was exceptionally insufferable that morning. As I waited outside MACRO for Roger to finish checking over the copy of my latest report, that damned ferretess sauntered out onto the balcony.

“Have a good evening, Tabitha?”

“Mm,” I responded noncommittally, barely making eye contact. After our previous run-in, I really didn’t want to talk with her.

“Good bath?” You could practically *hear* the smirk. “A nice illegal bath?”

I frowned, looking at Becca out of the corner of my eye. “What are you talking about?”

“Well, maybe ‘illegal’ is a bit strong of a term. But still. You can’t just go bathing wherever the fuck you please. You can use Lake Stillaguamish during certain hours, and that’s it,” Becca retorted snippily. “It was my civic duty to report you to the proper authorities. Don’t want some giantess befouling the water,”

“Becca... what the fuck?” I groaned. “It was cold out. And that’s so far. It isn’t like I hurt anyone or something like that,”

“Rules exist for a reason,” Becca smiled sweetly. Her expression shifted almost imperceptibly. “How are things with Ciaran?”

A slight frown creased my brow. “Fine? Not that it matters to you,”

“I see,”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Oh, nothing. Don’t worry about it,”

Becca turned around with a final smirk, disappearing as silently as she had appeared. I followed her with my gaze, more than a little perplexed at the exchange. At least now I knew what Roger meant by “wanting to talk with me later.” He *knew* that nobody used that old reservoir by Cap Hill anymore. It hadn’t been a public water source for *decades* and was off-limits to everyone, anyway. Safety hazard or whatnot. The city council knew that as well.

As I slunk homeward that evening, nursing a bruised ego courtesy of Roger and his wrist-slapping, I stopped by Dad and Ciaran's apartment. The mink was sitting on his bed, talking on the phone. He was smiling slightly. He hung up as he noticed me, tossing the phone onto the comforter as he hastened over to the window and threw it open.

"Who were you talking to?" I asked, crouching down so I was face-to-face with my boyfriend.

"Huh? Oh, nothing. Just a telemarketer or whatever," Ciaran replied hastily, glancing over his shoulder at the incriminating phone.

"You seemed pretty stressed about that chat with the telemarketer then," I snorted, arching a brow.

"So, how was your day?" Ciaran responded.

"It was—it was alright, I suppose," I said, a little bit confused by the abrupt change in the topic. "Got in a little trouble about the place I chose to bathe last night. Apparently it's a big deal with *some* folks. Well, at least one oh-so-delightful individual,"

"I'm sorry," Ciaran said, noticing my brow furrow.

I shook my head. "No big deal. Really. I'm just done with Becca and her endless shit,"

Ciaran nodded. "Well, I have to get going. But I'll see you later,"

"Hot date or something?" I teased.

Ciaran's cheeks and ear-tips flushed briefly. "Of course not. Just a friend,"

"Well, have a good time doing whatever," I replied, pushing back to my feet. "I'll see you around,"

I returned to my bed as Tabitha walked down the street, headed for her home. My gaze fell on the phone again and my stomach twinged. Why did I feel so guilt-ridden over the whole thing? It wasn't like it was the Seventeenth Century or something. I could associate with girls other than just Tabitha. Hell, it would be nice to spend time with someone who couldn't carry me around in her pocket if she wanted to. I could have friends, couldn't I?

It was something of a happy coincidence that Brie had called that afternoon. I'd been feeling really down in the dumps after the events of the prior evening, so contact with *anyone* who didn't think they were on some sort of charitable mission to sort out my

life for me or shelter me or whatever. There was a lot I needed to sort out in my life, but it was stuff I needed to work through myself.

I'd met Brie at Tabitha's welcome party during her first week at MACRO and run into her a handful of times since. She was an intern in the administrative section, working with Karl and some of the others on the logistical ins and outs of the organization. While perhaps a bit overbearing at times, the dovens really seemed nice and agreeable. I certainly wouldn't mind the chance to get to know her better.

Yet all the same, I couldn't ignore the guilty nagging at the back of my head. Why hadn't I told Tabitha? It wasn't some deep, dark secret or anything like that. Just two people meeting up for a movie and hanging out afterward. Whatever. I could deal with all that later. Just have fun. Do something *normal* for once. I deserved that.

As calls with abusive, crazy rednecks go, things could probably be going worse. Then again, it wasn't as if I had a vast reserve of similar experiences to draw from for comparison. But I'd certainly dreaded worse.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Davies, but we can't just send Ciaran back to you," I repeated myself, leaning back on the overstuffed sofa and massaging my temples with the fingertips of my opposite hand. "But you are more than welcome to come visit him in Saaduuts. We want to work things out with you. Terms and the like. For Ciaran's sake,"

As Ciaran's father slurred out a response that I could barely comprehend, I took some quality self-pity time. *Why did I agree to call? This isn't even really my problem,* I grumbled inwardly. *I'm such a goddamn good Samaritan.*

"Yes, he's here," I answered the never-ending barrage of questions. "He's living with—yes. Yes. Yes. Alright. We'll see. No, the Communists are not indoctrinating him into anything. He's staying with Mr. Crane. No, I can't just give you the address,"

Reynard popped his head around the corner of the kitchen door, arching a brow in derision as he mouthed 'dinner's ready'. I rolled my eyes back at him and gestured for him to start without me. I'd be wrapping this crap up pretty shortly, anyway.

"...so I'm not about to let a couple of West-siders push me around and—"

Okay, party time was over. It was time to lay down the law and get the fuck off the phone.

"—Here's how it's going to go down," I intoned. "You're going to come to Saaduuts next weekend. I don't care if you drive here or if I come out to Winthrop and drag you back by your tail. And you're going to show up sober, you're going to talk through your issues with Ciaran, and you're going to leave him the fuck alone,"

Hearing no arguments on the other end of the line, I took it as a yes. "Next weekend. Show up at the Centennial Court Apartments Saturday evening. Or I'll kick your ass,"

I hung up, tossing my phone onto the ottoman as I got to my feet.

"Dinner had better be fucking amazing. I'm starving," I commented.

"It's just take-out," Reynard replied, laughing. "Can't be too terrible,"

"Is that the mail?" I asked, gesturing at a stack of letters on the kitchen island as I passed.

Reynard nodded as he spooned chow mein out of a white paperboard container onto his plate. "Yeah. Didn't get around to sorting out the crap yet. Sorry,"

"No worries," I replied, picking up the modest stack and sorting through it as I walked to the table and sat down. "I don't even know why we bother with sorting anymore. It's only ever junk mail anyway. And bills. Nobody loves us," I lamented.

"Hey, I love you," Reynard laughed. "Isn't that all that matters?"

"Well, I'd like to think that a few others are at least fond of me—*hello there*,"

Reynard looked quizzical as I sat down, holding up a grubby envelope addressed in an erratic hand to one 'Dearest Roger'. I tore open the envelope, skimming the sheet of paper inside with increasing concern.

"What is it?" Reynard asked through a mouthful of eggroll.

I dropped the letter to the table, ears flattening involuntarily against the back of my head. "Todd wants me to visit him. He says he has a surprise,"

III.

Youth

We're setting fire to our insides for fun
To distract our hearts from ever missing them
But I'm forever missing her
(Daughter)

I stirred my tea slowly, watching the cube of sugar dissolve slowly. I'd taken three lumps—Leslie Frith was brilliant in many ways, but that genius didn't extend to her ability to prepare tea adequately.

"Thanks for taking the time to see me, Les," I smiled, taking a hesitant sip of the bitter drink. No amount of sugar would make it palatable. "I know you've got a busy schedule at your practice,"

The red panda laughed softly, drinking from her own mug. She didn't even flinch. Her poor, poor taste buds—it must have taken *years* of being beaten into submission for that atrocity to be remotely acceptable.

"Hey, it's no problem," Les said. "I've been meaning to get in touch with you for a while now. How long has it been since grad school?"

I shook my head, a smile playing across my lips. "I'd really rather not take the time to count. Too many years,"

I set my mug down on the coffee table, leaning back in the armchair. Les had been fairly Spartan in her tastes during the time I'd known her at university. Age appeared to have softened both her and her choice in furniture. I was tempted to steal some of her living room furniture for myself.

"To what do I owe the pleasure, though?" Les asked, selecting a biscuit from the tray she'd set out.

"I'm afraid it's a bit more on the business end of the spectrum," I sighed. "You know I'm not one to talk shop, normally. But I've run into a wall,"

The red panda leaned towards me across the table, curious. "What's the matter? Difficult patient?"

“She was one of your patients before she came to me, so I was wondering if you had any insights or, well, *anything* that could help me get somewhere. Anywhere,” I confessed.

Les laughed softly. She knew how much I hated puzzles I couldn’t manage to crack. “Who is it?”

“Her name’s Tabitha Crane. She’s, well, she’s—”

Les nearly spilled her tea at the mention of Tabitha’s name. She set the mug down and massaged her knuckles thoughtfully.

“I don’t need any further introduction,” she said. “I remember Tabitha well. Saw what... what happened on the news, too. That poor girl,”

My eyes flashed. “After everything she did, you still think she’s some ‘poor girl’? Are you that naïve?”

“I think she’s done terrible things. But I think she’s done terrible things because she was scared and frustrated and angry and couldn’t cope with those feelings. She’s been scared since I saw her for the first time, since her... event. That doesn’t excuse or justify her actions. Not by a long shot. But it doesn’t make her to be as much of a villain as people seem to be thinking,”

“I know that,” I replied, not liking to be chided by Les. It certainly wasn’t the first time *that* had happened. “But I also know that she’s resentful of me,”

“Trust me. That’s part of the Tabitha Package. You just have to establish a trusting relationship with her,”

“How did you come into contact with her first, anyway?”

“I got called in by the high school Tab was going to when she first, you know, grew. There had been a series of incidences involving her and some of her peers. Tabitha stuck out like a sore thumb at school and some kids decided to give her tons of shit. Exactly why it seemed like a good idea to bully a girl fifteen times their size is beyond me. But they did.

“And Tabitha... well, she went a little, er, Carrie on them. Several students suffered broken limbs and one or two ended up in the ED. Bad stuff.

“The school counselor couldn’t deal, so someone put the principal in contact with me. They figured I could do something to resolve the problem. Figured I’d be better suited for the job,”

I almost laughed. Dr. Frith specialised in abnormal pediatric and adolescent psychology. You certainly couldn’t get any more abnormal than a nine-story-tall ferret-girl.

“But it was nothing like I expected,” the red panda continued. “Granted, I didn’t know *what* I expected; not like they taught us that kind of shit in clinicals. I went into there figuring I’d find some sort of megalomania or superiority complex or something. Someone thinking she was some sort of goddess.

“But Tabitha turned out to be a terrified, insecure little girl trapped inside a gigantic body. Sounds kinda cheesy, I guess. But it all became clearer after wading through the layers of cool indifference she’d put up. I guess she figured that was how she was ‘supposed’ to act. All of the... altercations and so forth, that is,”

“We were starting to make some real progress before she disappeared. And I really believe that we can do some good for her. You just have to establish that same sort of thing,”

“How am I supposed to do that?” I protested. “She’s different now. She’s jaded and disillusioned,”

“Gods, do I have to be *your* therapist now?” Les snorted, picking her mug up again. “I know you can help her. You’ll figure out a way. But a word to the wise: ditch that whole notebook-and-pen bullshit. Can’t believe you still do that crap. I mean, why don’t you just start wearing a smoking jacket and puffing a cigar while you’re at it?”

I rolled my eyes. “Hey. You have your habits and I have mine,”

“Well, I’m not the one with the client who could crush me on a whim,”

I scowled good-naturedly. “Thanks for the support,” I snorted. My face grew serious. “But really. Thank you. It’s nice to hear from you,”

“We’ll have to meet up sometime and talk about things *other* than work,” Les smiled as I got to my feet thanked her for the “tea.”

“You know where I work. Come by some day and we can grab a pint,”

“It’s so cute how you still say that,” Les chuckled as I made my way out the front door of her house. For the first time in a little while, I had a sense of direction in my professional life. I felt like I had an idea on how to proceed with Tabitha.

Once again, Dad had no idea where Ciaran was. I mean, it wasn’t like I expected him to glue a GPS tracker to his tail or something. But wasn’t it every parent’s job to at least *kinda* stalk their children? Well, their quasi-adopted adult children, in this case, I supposed.

“I’ll let him know you were asking about him,” Dad offered as I stood back up to my full height, stepping back from the apartment building.

I pursed my lips thinly. I'd been hoping to talk with him. Maybe have sex with him, too, if things went well. I was getting a bit antsy about that sort of thing. But he'd been MIA for the past week or so and I was starting to get worried. Had I done something to piss him off? Was he avoiding me? I needed to know.

As I made my way home through the darkening streets of Capitol Hill, I noticed Ciaran leaving an apartment building just off Broadway. He was smiling to himself, walking briskly with his hands shoved into his pockets.

Surprisingly enough, he didn't seem to notice me until I dropped to one knee and greeted him.

"Oh, hey there!" he said, startled. "How's it going?"

"Pretty alright," I replied, hugging my knee to my chest as I looked down at him. "Actually, I was hoping we could have a little talk. You know, just see where your things are for us,"

Ciaran hesitated, shuffling from one foot to another. "Well... I'm actually in something of a hurry,"

"Really? We don't have to take long. I haven't seen you in *ages*," I frowned slightly. "Wait a moment. Whose place was that you were coming from?"

Ciaran glanced hurriedly over his shoulder. "That? Nobody's. Nothing. Not important,"

I narrowed my eyes and got back to my feet. "If you're not going to be honest, it isn't going to be worth our time to talk," I sniffed.

The mink protested as I turned tail and strode off down the street towards home. I ignored him; that would teach him.

The ensuing days did nothing for my burgeoning sense of distrust and paranoia. Ciaran continued to avoid me. Roger suddenly decided to reverse earlier position on the infamous Bathing Incident and assigned me punitive measures, forcing me to sit on my ass day in and day out, filling out paperwork. Becca's grubby fingerprints were all over it. I just *knew* it. The puppet master put in an appearance as I finished up another round of forms.

"Hey, congrats," the little ferretess said, her tone chipper.

"Er, what?" I blinked, glancing up at Becca, who was leaning over the rail of the balcony.

I took a sip from the water tank I'd converted into a coffee mug, cringing at the bitterness of the drink. The finer points of my improvised coffee-brewing contraption needed to be ironed out; in the meanwhile, it was at least a source of much-needed caffeine.

“Nasty coffee? You take sweetener?” Becca noticed my expression.

“No,”

“You ought to try this,” the ferretess produced a glass bottle of white powder. “It’s called Stevia. Non-sugar sweetener type of thing. Really delicious. Only takes a little bit to really enhance the flavor,”

“You in the habit of carrying sweeteners around or something?” I snorted but held out my coffee. Eh, a little sweetener couldn’t matter. Becca obliged and I stirred the coffee with my index finger. “What brings you out here? I doubt you just wanted to bring me tidings of great flavor,”

“I ran into Ciaran on my way home yesterday evening,” Becca replied, winding a lock of hair around her finger. “He seemed to have a spring in his step. I just assumed you did something to put it there,”

I scratched my head, mumbling a noncommittal response as I took a gulp of coffee (Damn, it actually did taste better. Or at least palatable). It had been some time since I’d last seen Ciaran. Becca’s eyes flashed victoriously. *Shit*. She knew. What the fuck was she playing at?

“I should get back to work,” Becca replied, turning around. “I just wanted to say I was glad the guy’s doing well. To be honest, I’d been a little concerned about whether you and Ciaran would be able to work things out—stuff had seemed a little tense of late. But I guess I was worrying over nothing,”

“Shut up,” I muttered.

“What was that?” Becca turned around.

“I said ‘shut up’,” I snapped in reply, slamming my now-empty coffee tank onto the roof of a building. “But maybe I should have said ‘shut up, bitch’. I know you’ve got some sort of bug up your ass about you feeling slighted and all that shit, but you need to stop. Now. This is your warning,”

“And what exactly is that supposed to mean?” Becca retorted.

I shrugged. “Just back off,”

With a final little smarmy smile, the ferretess disappeared into the building. I growled softly, scowling sidelong at the door she’d entered.

That bitch knew *damn* well what was going on. She had to be behind—whatever it was she was behind. Still needed to piece all of that together. Ciaran would know. Right? I could talk to him. But could I *trust* him? If whatever Becca said was true, maybe he didn’t care about me anymore. Maybe he didn’t want me anymore. I would be alone again. I didn’t want to be alone. More than anything, I didn’t want to be alone.

The caffeine must have suddenly kicked in, because I was struck with the desire to get up and *do* something. I needed to go for a walk.

Turning my back on MACRO, I made my way down the street, stewing in my thoughts as I stretched my legs. Becca's words percolated through my mind. I needed to talk with Ciaran *right then*. Figure out what the fuck was going on. Set the record straight.

I came to a sudden halt as I rounded a bend. My eyes narrowed. *Speak of the devil*. Ciaran was traipsing down the street, arm in arm with some *floozy* I had never seen before. My eyes flashed. Was *this* what Becca had been talking about?

Neither of the pair seemed to have noticed me, too absorbed in one another to pay much heed to the world around them. I narrowed my eyes, following after them as quietly and discreetly as possible. I needed to get to the bottom of this.

The door on the other side of the barrier buzzed loudly before opening and two armed guards entered the room, escorting between them a chained and cuffed vulpine.

My blood ran cold as my eyes fell on Todd for the first time in months. He was much smaller than last I'd seen him, but somehow he still managed to exude the same air of calculated menace that he had when he was over a hundred feet tall. I almost shouted for the guards to stop as they unlocked his handcuffs for him to sit down, but knew that I couldn't give Todd the upper hand in any way.

I stiffened slightly in my seat as Todd sat, fixing me with his piercing gaze. He slouched back casually in his folding chair, picking up the phone to talk. His russet fur clashed horribly with the orange of his jumpsuit (probably a major reason why I never plan on going to jail), which was unbuttoned at the top, letting a tuft of dense white chest-fur poke through. Incarceration sometimes caused people to waste away, broken down by the confined quarters and challenges of jail, but Todd's lithe frame still reeked of power; he could probably smash through the glass separating me from him and break my neck if he really wanted.

"Come to give a bored inmate someone to talk with?" Todd asked, his tone smooth. "I'm going to be totally honest—prison sucks. Nothing to do. Most of the idiots here are completely worthless. And the cafeteria doesn't serve nearly enough tiny little people,"

The fox grinned ferally, snapping his teeth for effect. My stomach tied in a knot and I fought to hide my revulsion.

"You know why I'm here," I snarled, my tone almost guttural.

Todd waited a minute before choosing to remember. "Ah, yes. You must have gotten my letter,"

"So enlighten me. Why in the fuck am I sitting here looking at you?"

"Well, hmm. It's been a little while since I sent the letter. Prison mail takes a while. All that processing and whatnot. Gotta jog my memory,"

"Well, remember faster," I snarled, pounding my fist on the table.

"I'm getting there," Todd shifted back in his chair, fiddling with the phone cord nonchalantly. "Ah, yes. It's all coming back now.

"See, I am going to *end* you. I was perfectly happy as the *god* of Saaduuts—"

"—No such thing," I muttered to myself.

Todd's eyes flashed at my interruption, but he pushed forward. "But you had to go and ruin that. This whole prison thing? Really not my style.

"So here's how it's going to go down. I *will* spring loose of this miserable little hellhole. And I *will* kill every single person you love. Every last one of them. And then I'll kill you,"

My eyes narrowed. "You dragged me here just for that nonsense?"

"Were you expecting a fruit basket?"

I wouldn't have minded one. "Just piss off,"

"Would if I could. Last I checked, I don't have all that many options as far as 'places to go' is considered,"

Hanging the phone up, I pushed back from the counter as Todd stared at me, the unnerving grin never leaving his lips.

"Take him away!" I snapped at the prison guards, gesturing wildly. Okay, I'd always wanted to say that.

It wasn't until Brie squeezed my fingers that I realized we'd been holding hands for the past few minutes. As we came to the front of her apartment building, the doves smiled a little as she wheeled around to face me, grabbing my other hand in hers.

"That was a lot of fun," Brie smiled, massaging the backs of my hands with her thumbs. "I really like spending this time with you, you know. Especially when it gets me out of work for an afternoon. Why more people don't do lunch dates is beyond me,"

My cheeks flushed briefly. "Me too. I like seeing you,"

"Do you want to come up?" Brie asked softly.

I hesitated,

"I mean, you've always said no," the doves hastily added. "And it's totally up to you. But I figured I'd ask. We wouldn't have to *do* anything. Afternoon sex has never been something I understood, anyway," she laughed shortly. "We could just talk some more,"

Involuntarily, I sank to the ground in front of Brie, burying my face in the fabric of her shirt. The late autumn sun had put in a rare appearance, but I suddenly felt chilled to the bone. Brie crouched down next to me so that we were sitting against the wall of the apartment building.

"I really like you," I confessed thickly. "A lot. But I *love* Tabitha. I don't understand what's been going on with her of late, but I really do,"

Brie smiled wanly. "I... understand. I'll just... I'm going to go home now,"

"I really like being your friend," I blurted, cringing as I realized how stupid that sounded.

The doves leaned over and gave me a gentle peck on the cheek as she got back to her feet. "Maybe give me a call sometime," she said, a thin smile playing at the corners of her mouth as she took a few steps backward. "If you want to talk or something,"

Brie disappeared underneath a massive hand. There was a sickening crunch as Tabitha flattened her under an open palm, twisting a little and pressing into the asphalt.

"Bitch," Tabitha muttered in disgust.

I sat pressed against the building, frozen in shock and fear as the ferretess wiped the mess off her hand onto the side of the building. Brie's broken, lifeless body lay in a crumpled pile half a dozen feet away from me. I threw up in my mouth, my vision going a little blurry around the periphery.

Tab's bloodstained hand encircled me, lifting me roughly off the ground as she got to her feet. She knew how to hold me without causing me any discomfort, but presently, either she was too distracted or she didn't care. I yelped, hitting her knuckle with my fist to let her know I was in pain, but she just squeezed tighter, smirking darkly.

"Why?" I pleaded softly.

Tabitha didn't reply and instead sat on the rooftop of the apartment building. I heard the complaint of brick and wood under her incalculable weight. Sometimes, I almost forgot that she was a giantess. But whenever she was angry, it became all too clear just how big she was and just how utterly powerless I was. But this was something that transcended anger. I squirmed fearfully in her grip, which only tightened.

"Stop," she breathed venomously.

I whimpered my response, complying quickly in the hopes that it would make her slacken her grip. It didn't.

"You—you *killed* her," I stated the obvious through ragged gasps.

My brain was still trying to process the horrific event that had just occurred. It didn't make any sense. Tabitha had anger issues, that was true. Sometimes, she scared me. But this was out of character to say the very least. Tab wouldn't just up and *kill* someone out of the blue.

No, something must have pushed her. Oh, gods. Was it *me*? I should have talked to her more, not avoided her like I had. Fuck.

"I have to pay a little visit to someone. And you're coming with," Tabitha flashed a feral little smile.

"Wait—you aren't going to Becca, are you? That doesn't sound like a good idea,"

"You *cheating* on me doesn't sound like a good idea, either," Tabitha shot back.

"I wasn't," I growled. "We were ironing out the fact that I was with you when you decided to fucking *murder* her,"

"And that's why we're going to have a little chat with Becca. She's behind all of this. She's *got* to be. Fucking psycho bitch," Tab's eyes were wild.

I protested loudly as the ferretess stuffed me haphazardly into the breast pocket of her polo. She slid off the rooftop and began to stride purposefully down the street. Fuck. She was heading in the direction of MACRO. I had to talk some sense into her.

“Tab. What are you doing? You need to turn yourself in. This isn’t you. This isn’t normal,”

“You don’t understand. This is what needs to happen. Becca thinks she can get away with whatever she wants. Well guess what? I’m a motherfucking *giantess*. I get *my* way. I get what *I* want,”

“Tab... but what about Becca? What if she... you know, gets big? I don’t want you getting hurt,” I switched tactics.

Tabitha’s laugh was cold and harsh. “Not worried about that. I’ve been keeping track and her last, ah, episode was yesterday evening. By my count, it takes at least a day to recharge her batteries, if you will. Besides. Even if something does happen, I wouldn’t mind getting the chance to beat the living daylights out of her. She couldn’t put up much of a fight as is,”

“Don’t do this,” I pleaded softly. “Stop now. Please,”

“Just shut up, Ciaran,” Tabitha snarled, not changing course. “Be glad you’re in my pocket and not under my foot,”

I fell silent, taken aback by Tabitha’s open threat. What had I done to make her so angry? Curling up in the ferretess’ breast pocket, I hugged my knees to my chest and sniffled softly, jostled by her every movement.

I had no clue what the hell I was really doing as I arrived at MACRO Headquarters. Staring beadily at the building with arms folded across my chest, I tried to center myself. What a laughable prospect. My mind had been a muddled flurry ever since I’d followed Ciaran and that *slut* from the movie theatre to her apartment.

The tower was only slightly taller than I; maybe I could knock the whole thing down with a good tackle. I scowled. No dice. Even though Ciaran was a cheating piece of shit, I didn’t *really* want to run the risk of hurting him. And there would be more collateral damage than I really cared to deal with. No, I just wanted Becca.

“Give me Becca,” I snarled, my voice ringing. I gripped the sides of the building, crushing the entrance to smithereens with the toe of my shoe. “Give me Becca and I won’t have to kill anyone else,”

The command drew a loud squeak from Ciaran, but I ignored him. I had a vendetta to settle. A thin smile flickered across my face as a door on one of the upper-floor balconies opened. It was replaced just as quickly by a scowl as I saw that the person who walked out of the building was not my target.

“Roger. Are you capable of *listening*? I want Becca, not you,”

“What the hell is going on?” the fox exclaimed. “I leave the office to go see—to take care of something—and suddenly everything goes to shit? I mean, the break room runs out of coffee, none of my reports are completed on time, and *you* decide you want to go on some sort of godsdamn rampage!”

“I’m not going on a fucking rampage,” I muttered defensively. I refocused. “I just want Becca. That’s it,”

“That isn’t going to happen,” Roger replied matter-of-factly. “What the hell do you think you’re playing at? We aren’t going to make some sort of godsdamn *sacrifice* or whatever the fuck you think you’re getting,”

“I’ll ask nicely one more time,”

“You’re not going to hurt anyone,” Roger replied. “That isn’t like you,”

“You wanna bet?” I snarled.

Roger let out a pained grunt as I pinned him by the chest against the wall by my fingertip. He struggled, grappling with the immense digit, but to no avail. I smirked wryly.

“I could press you through the wall if I really wanted to. But I won’t. Because I like you,” I said. “But the more and more you hold out on me, the less and less I like you,”

“Well, tough shit,” Roger croaked. “I’m not going to let you do this,”

I scowled again. Roger had that tone again. Whenever I got angry for whatever reason, that damned fox took on the most insufferable condescending tone.

All the same, I grumbled and let Roger go. He slumped down, massaging his chest. Fucking pussy.

My ears perked up as I heard a loud beep down near my ankle. I glanced down.

“Roger, doesn’t your boyfriend drive one of those stupid Smartcars?”

“Fiancé,” Roger corrected. “And yeah. He does. But it isn’t stupid. It’s an efficient and eco-friendly way of getting around,”

“Okay, are you like some sort of fucking car salesman now? What the fuck is *he* here for?”

Roger either owed me a 17-course dinner or some *really* amazing sex after I did this for him. I had no problems whatsoever with doing favors for the guy. But ‘favors’ did not include driving halfway across the state to pick up some random crazy drunk person and ferrying him back to Saaduuts in my tiny little Smartcar, all for some sort of meeting my fiancé had put together.

I had quickly given up any pretext of attempting polite conversation after my first attempt was answered with a series of bizarre guttural noises. Apparently, Ciaran’s father wasn’t one for chit-chat. *Suit yourself*, I snorted inwardly as I turned on the radio. Whatever was on, I hoped he hated it.

I pulled up to MACRO headquarters, just thankful that the trip was over. It would take me tons of aerating to get his distinct smell out of the upholstery.

“Alright, dude. This is your stop. If you go into the lobby and ask the lady at reception for Roger, she’ll get to the right...”

I trailed off as I actually *looked* at the building. Tabitha was standing just outside, nothing unusual about that, really. But the front entrance was completely smashed to smithereens. The enormous ferretess bent over, reaching down for the car.

Acting instinctively, I shifted the Smartcar into reverse, slamming on the gas pedal. The giantess was too fast and my wheels spun uselessly as she lifted the vehicle into the air. Her fingers dented the metal of the body of the car and the windshield cracked under the pressure of her grip. My heart was racing—last I checked, Tabitha wasn’t normally in the habit of just picking up people’s cars, much less without permission.

“Hey there, Reynard,” the giantess murmured.

I lowered the window, leaning out the side of the car. “Hey there, Tab. Would you mind putting us down? Mr. Davies can find his way up alone,”

Tabitha smiled again. It wasn’t a normal smile. No, there was something... off-balance about her expression. “Ah, Mr. Davies. You know, I’ve been meaning to meet him. Glad you could bring him right to me,”

“Tab... what are you talking about? What’s going on?”

The ferretess didn’t reply. Instead, she matter-of-factly tore off the passenger side door and plucked the protesting person out of the car. He let out an uncharacteristically sissy yelp as Tabitha dangled him in front of her leering face.

“Well, hello there,” she said. “My name’s Tabitha. I’m your son’s girlfriend. But I’m sure he mentioned me at some point. Well, before he did the smart thing and got his tail out of your house. Because you know what? You’re a terrible father,”

I cleared my throat. Tabitha’s eyes flicked towards me for a moment. “He’s here to talk with Ciaran. So why don’t you put him and me down?” I insisted.

The ferretess' eyes flashed. "I don't think Ciaran wants to talk with his scumbag of a father," she said flatly. I suddenly noticed the mink, who was stuffed rather unceremoniously into Tabitha's pocket. "Nah, we'll pass on that,"

Tabitha sat down in the street as she set the car and me down on the pavement. She was too big to sit cross-legged and her knees brushed up against the buildings on either side of the street. She stared almost hungrily at the person clutched in her hand.

"You know, I could really do some good for *Ciaran*, too, while I'm at it," she grinned ferally. "Yeah. I really could,"

Ciaran had been in my mouth a few times before. He'd been a little freaked out at first by the prospect, but it turned out to be kinda fun. But this was the first time someone was in my mouth unwillingly.

It was kind of aggravating, to be perfectly honest. Davies flailed around, all arms and legs everywhere in a vain attempt not to end up where we both knew he would. I tried to swallow, throat muscles working furiously, but he was a bit too big.

Oh, gods. I was going to half to chew.

Frustrated by the never-ending flailing, I bit down, snapping his legs like twigs. A much higher-pitched yip punctuated the stream of shouts and expletives coming from the little twerp.

I became aware of another, even louder, source of complaints coming from my breast pocket. Ciaran. I plucked the mink out of my pocket, holding him in front of my face.

"What is it?" I asked Ciaran through a mouthful of his father. "I'm trying to do something for *you*,"

"Stop! Don't! You can't do that to him! Please! Don't do this," he blubbered.

I glowered at Ciaran. Here I was, trying to *help* him, and he went all soft on me.

Taking advantage of my silence, Ciaran persisted. "Tabitha, I don't know what's gotten into you. Why are you doing this? Don't eat Dad. Please. He's a terrible person. But you don't need to kill him. I don't want that. It won't make me happy, if that's what you're trying to accomplish.

"But that's not even the worst. You—you *murdered* Brie. I wasn't cheating on you with her. I swear. I thought she was cute, sure. But that's no crime. I loved *you*. In fact, I was explaining that *exact thing* to her when you **crushed** her. She was my friend. Nothing more.

“You need to calm down. Just take a step back and *breathe*. Please. Take a breath and slow down for a moment. You aren’t thinking. You’re just angry. Anger is okay. But hurting other people just because you’re angry isn’t right,”

I spat Ciaran’s father indignantly into my palm. I glowered at Ciaran before glancing down at the broken body sprawled in my hand.

Any resolve I thought I’d had vanished in an instant. Shit. The little person looked like he was in serious pain. Pain that *I* had caused him. As if for the first time, I saw that the fur of my hand was matted with Brie’s blood. Oh, *shit*. It was like I was coming out of a haze.

Ciaran and his father slipped through my fingers onto the ground as I leaned back against the side of MACRO. A soft sound escaped my lips. It had happened again. After I’d escaped from Todd’s Warehouse of Nightmares and killed most of his cronies in cold blood, I’d made a promise to myself never to do anything as terrible as that again. But I had.

Ciaran had me fooled. He made me think I wasn’t a monster. But I had been wrong. I was broken. I resolved every problem with murder and destruction.

I sniffled as I watched Ciaran kneeling next to his dad, cradling the alcoholic’s head in his lap and staring into the middle-distance, glassy-eyed. The mink called out to me as I stumbled to me feet and took off running down the street, tears blurring my vision. I had to leave.

I wished that it had all been a dream. Maybe I would wake up and it would all have been the product of my imagination.

The following morning brought not relief but a small police force to my doorway. I was arrested and hauled off to the courtyard of the courthouse. My fate was decided relatively quickly, determined mostly by the fact that there wasn’t a prison around that could accommodate a person of my stature.

For a probably illegal show trial, it probably could have gone worse. Roger managed to negotiate my “sentence” down to what amounted to several months of community service and a few other such punitive measures. I didn’t care. I would go through whatever motions they demanded of me. Didn’t matter.

The deathblows came at the very end of the hearing. Roger dismissed me from MACRO on the grounds of my ‘instability’. As I was still trying to grasp that, the court forbade me to have contact with Ciaran for similar reasons. Most of my life was ended, torn away from me in two sentences.

The following months passed in a fog of malaise. I sat at home most of the time, punctuated only by the times I ventured out to perform some menial task for “community service.” Every day was the same. I had no job. I had no loved ones. Becca had won.