

Courtship

By Terinas Tiger

Part 8: Three Wheels on a Bicycle Built for Two

-Kristoph-

I stared down at the finished arrangement. A bouquet of carnations and daisies, a mix of hues of purple and white swirling about in a spiral pattern. The entire display was arranged in a dull blue clay vase I'd gotten from one of the art students on campus. My roommate, Xavier, had assured me that the two flowers were the favorites of Teri (my other roommate.). It'd taken me a few moments to comprehend that a guy could HAVE a favorite flower at first. But after I'd wrapped my head around the idea, I agreed that it'd be another good way to continue wooing Teri without SEEMING like I was wooing him. If he asked, I'd just say the flowers lit up the kitchenette. The fact that they were his favorites could be "just a coincidence." For the past several weeks, I'd been working on wooing Teri, the cute tiger I'd been sharing an apartment with. This was made complicated by the fact that we had a history, and Teri apparently felt that because of that history, he'd hurt me if he allowed himself to date me again. Which had led us to a situation where I tried to overwhelm Teri's apprehension by doing sweet things for him, strutting around in my underwear, and doing physical exercises around him. To say I was entirely comfortable being so subversive would have been a big fat lie, but...

I couldn't get over Teri.

He was everything I'd found I was attracted to, and I hadn't been able to shake myself of the crush, even when we'd been apart. And he'd forbidden us from ever dating as long as we lived together. Which was how the ridiculous mind games had gotten started in the first place. I'd have confessed my feelings point blank right in front of him if I thought he wouldn't have brushed me off like cheap toothpaste. Since I knew the attraction was mutual, I really felt like I had no other choice at the time. I'd forgiven him for what he'd done in the past. The problem was that he still wouldn't forgive himself.

With the flowers arranged, I sat down at the kitchen table to study. But as I cracked my college calculus textbook open, I kept staring at the door. Last friday, Teri had surprised us both by saying he'd be gone all weekend, visiting a friend off campus. He'd left with a sporty backpack slung over his shoulder and that had been the end of it. Neither of us even knew where he was going, or how he intended on getting there.

Xavier seemed to have some suspicions, but he wouldn't tell me anything. With a sigh, I turned a page, alternating between staring at the words in the textbook, and staring at the door. The apartment had felt too quiet with Teri gone. I wasn't the best at socializing, and Xavier was about as good at it as I was. I tried not to think about how much I wanted him to walk through the front door as I did my readings for class. Thankfully, I lost track of time while I was studying. But however much time passed, it was enough for me to get my wish. In the worst possible way.

Samson made a bad impression on me from the moment we met, simply by virtue of the fact that when the front door opened, he entered the apartment first... and I could clearly see he was holding Teri's hand. I still remember the moment I first saw that smug, wide smile along his muzzle. His gritty gray-white fur swaying as he barged into our lives. The glint in his sorrel eyes as he turned to look at me. The obnoxious confusion in his voice as he spoke. "Oh! Um, hello." In case it's not painfully obvious, I never quite warmed up to the guy. Everything about him annoyed me, down to the little plastic rainbow band on his left wrist. But the worst part was, at the moment he entered, I picked up his scent. It was the exact same scent of squirrel that had been clinging to Teri the day I'd moved in, just a few weeks ago.

As I stared at him, eyes wide, stammering a bit, Teri walked past him, between us both. "Oh! I'm really sorry, Samson." He pulled his paw out of the squirrel's oily grip, and pointed one paw at me, and another at the other man in the room. "Samson, this is one of my roommates, Kristoph." Turning to look at me, he gave a soft smile. "Kristoph, this is Samson, my friend."

"Just a friend?" I said, a bit too quickly. My fingers began to drum along the wood of the kitchen table as I stared over at him.

Teri looked down to tug a wrinkle out of the pastel pink tank top he was wearing, his ears drooping. "Well, uh, he and I broke up in High School. But we've since gotten over it."

"We forgave each other." Samson said, while I stared at his throat in a way that actually concerned certain, more rational, parts of my brain. "Well, sorta. Something like that, anyway."

Teri chuckled. "We decided not to stay mad at each other, at least."

"Right." Samson nodded, averting his gaze from Teri.

“Right.” Teri nodded back, averting his gaze from Samson.

And then it hit me. This was THE Samson. The guy who had abandoned Teri when he’d needed him the most. Someone the girly tiger I had a crush on put his trust into, and who betrayed him. I hadn’t actually put two and two together until just that moment. And I couldn’t say anything about it. Teri had never told me about it. The only reason I knew was because I’d been eavesdropping on a conversation between Teri and Xavier. It was all I could do not to growl. With clenched teeth, I forced a smile. “W-well, that sounds like quite... a story.” My fangs ground against each other as I forced back my bile. Teri had been the first guy I’d ever felt romantically interested in. I’d been sexually attracted to guys before, sure. But Teri was the first one I wanted to date for more than one reason. So jealousy was a feeling I wasn’t quite used to. “It’s really nice to meet you! I, uh, didn’t actually expect Teri to bring anyone home.” I swallowed, looking over him. “Are you, um, s-staying the night?”

Samson chuckled. “It’s nice to meet you too, Kristoph. Teri came down to visit me for the weekend-” While he was talking, I found myself fantasizing about punching his jaw and making out with the tiger right in front of him. It was less unwelcome an idea than I’m comfortable admitting. “-But school’s out for me for all of this coming week. So we figured I’d ride the bus back up here and hang out for one last night, and then I’d just take the bus back tomorrow when he runs back to class.”

Teri moved to stand next to him. “We’re were thinking about watching a movie on the couch. Samson’s hasn’t seen “Marely A Fleeting Desire” yet, and I told him I owned it on blu-ray.” He paused. “Is that ok with you? I don’t want to keep you or Xavier up if you’re going to bed early.”

I felt my hackles raising, my eyes getting as wide as dinner plates. The two of them watching a romantic comedy. Together. Probably snuggling up with each other as the movie went on, their bodies intertwined. “Not a problem for me!” I yelped, perhaps a bit too quickly. And then a wicked thought entered my head. “Actually, I haven’t seen it either. Mind if I join you two?” Without waiting for a response, I stood up and walked over to the couch, taking a seat in the center of it.

“Er...” The squirrel raised an eyebrow as he looked over at the couch.

Teri sauntered over to put a paw on my shoulder, looking down. “Kristoph, would you be willing to move over? I like sitting in the center of the couch.” He smiled down at

me, and I couldn't say no. Any reasons I had sounded petty. With a slight grumble in my voice, I slid across the couch. Teri gently plopped down in the center, with Samson sitting opposite to me. For a moment I found myself glaring at him as Teri queued up the movie. Part of me was wondering what the heck I was doing. Another part of me wanted to pull Teri in for a firm kiss and claim him right in front of the competition. With an exasperated sigh no one else seemed to notice, I let my body sink into the soft embrace of the couch and prepared for an awkward night that I only had myself to blame for.

"You wastrel! I won't stand for your hand to so much as touch the fair Mare-ian, let alone ride her!"

"Ha hah! You know it in your heart, it's me she truly wants!"

The humor of the movie, supposedly a rom com, was tepid. The writing was reliant on puns and the tension relied on two different men going for the same woman, whose feelings seemed almost superfluous to the entire movie. Wrapping it in a faux-fantasy setting hadn't really improved the experience either. But then again, I was a mystery movie fan, myself.

Besides, I'd spent a lot of time watching Teri and Samson instead. At some point, Teri had leaned over to rest his head on Samson's shoulder. And then it became my sole duty to figure out how to get that to stop. After some hesitation, I managed to accomplish that by asking Teri to get some popcorn made. After all, he was the only one of the three of us who'd seen the movie. Samson had shot me an odd glare, but it'd been worth it. At least, I hoped it had.

"I cannot allow one such as you to bruise her pure heart yet again!"

"She'll take me back. What even are her other options? You?!? If she knew the truth about your secrets, she'd hate you!"

My ears drooped as I started to think about what I was really doing. This felt so wrong. Halfway through the movie, and I was regretting even being here. It seemed stupid to try and get in between the two of them all of a sudden. I wasn't even sure what I wanted to accomplish. I just hadn't ever felt so jealous before. It was an unwelcome, but intense, sensation. I'd let it wash me away, and now I just felt like an asshole. Teri

was an adult. He was allowed to make his own decisions. And he wouldn't want me creeping on his date like this. It just made me look bad.

Teri yawned. "Hey guys, I'm gonna use the washroom for a little bit. Be right back!" He got up, his tail swishing back and forth, as he walked towards the bathroom and shut the door.

Apart from the two men snarling at each other on the television screen, the room was silent. And then, Samson looked over at me. "So... how did the two of you meet?" His voice was a loud whisper, audible to me, but probably almost no one else. I looked away, letting movie's babble fill the air between us. I really didn't want to talk to this guy.

"Why do you not speak, Stallabastian?!? Are you so afraid your words will incriminate you?"

But he would just keep staring at me if he never got an answer. "We met in the school library." There was no emotion in my voice. I was so embarrassed to be there, and at the same time the anger I felt just by looking at the squirrel was like a dull roar in the back of my mind. It made it hard to be civil in front of him.

And then he chuckled. "Let me guess. He asked you out?"

My own response surprised me yet again. Baring my fangs, I turned to snarl at him. "I'm going to ask you only once. I want you to leave. Invent any excuse, but LEAVE."

The narrowing eyes and slight frown told me Samson hadn't been surprised by the reaction. "So I wasn't just imagining things huh? Lemme guess. You're sure I'm hitting that kitten, and you're jealous."

"Maybe I just don't want Teri to give the guy who threw him out like trash a second chance." My hands were clenching together.

That time, I got a reaction. For just a moment, Samson's eyes went wide. "Y-you know something about that?" He turned to stare at the movie as the two stallions on the screen were slapping each other and snarling. After a moment, he rubbed his chin. "Knowing Teri, he didn't tell you. He's way too good at hiding old wounds. So you snooped into his life without his permission, didn't you?" His mouth curled up into a slight smirk. "How do you think he'd feel if I told him about that?"

My fist was trembling. “You’re not making me want to hurt you any less, nutmuncher.”

“Oh! Speciast slurs, how original.” Samson chuckled, before glaring at me. “Look, I know what you’re doing here. You’re such a ‘good friend’ that you’re defending Teri’s feelings out of the goodness of-” he patted the center of his red sweater. “-your heart. And you’re hoping that eventually he’ll turn his head your way, and see how wonderful you are, and just fall into your arms, huh?” Samson’s long gray tail fluffed up as he glowered at me. “Grow the fuck up, Snarls. Man up and ask him out, or don’t and then don’t throw a spoiled tantrum when he’s with someone else. Teri doesn’t need some shiny white knight defending his virtue.”

“I shall be fair Mareian’s Ivory shield, warding her purity from all corrupt lowlives like YOU!”

“Oh shut up!” We both said in unison at the screen, before realizing the other one had said it at the same exact time. A moment of silence passed between us as we kept glaring at each other.

Samson turned his body, sitting cross legged on the couch as he locked eyes with me. “I’m sure you find him quite charming, but listen: you don’t know nothing about Teri.” The annoying vermin’s voice was growing louder the longer we talked.

I growled, matching the volume of his voice. “That’s rich, coming from the guy who walked out of his life when it started getting rough. When he needed you most.” I lifted a fist up to illustrate my point. “I saw what he was driven to. What you helped him feel like.” I loomed over him. “You can say what you want. Teri’s special to me, and I do not want, nor will allow, you to hurt him again. This is your last warning. Invent an excuse and get out now. You can be polite about it, or we can let this get ugly.”

Samson backed away, pressing up against the backside of the couch. “W-woah. Look you’re misreading why I’m here. And anyway, I’m just saying, he’s stronger than you think.”

“He’s also right behind you.”

We both looked up, as a certain tiger cleared his throat. Teri’s gaze was inflamed, his muzzle contorted into a fierce scowl. “I try to have a nice night with friends,

and this is what I *get*.” His tail whipped back and forth behind him, as fast as it was moving I almost expected it to crack like a whip.

“T-Teri! I-” Lightning ran through my spine as I jerked up, my muscles stiffening. The nervous stutter I’d tried to outgrow returning in just a second. I hadn’t seen Teri returning at all. In fairness, however, Samson’s gasp told me he hadn’t noticed either.

The tiger put a paw on his forehead. “Kristoph, shut up.”

“Ha HAH! And now your foul secrets have come to light, scoundrel!”

“You shut up too.” The tiger grabbed the remote from the top of the couch and paused the movie.

Samson pushed up off the couch, standing and stuffing his hands in his pockets. “Look, this is getting kinda awkward and personal. I might be able to catch the midnight bus back to my campus. I’m just gonna-”

Teri snarled at him. “Samson, you stay right here.” He sighed, before shifting his gaze to me. “I’m just *SO* done with all this melodramatic nonsense. Puppy, follow me.” He pointed to my bedroom down the hall, growling as he turned away from us both. “We need to have WORDS.”

To be continued in Part 9: The Breaking Point