

The grass-type feline paced back and forth in her office, the heels of her open-toe stilettos clacking aggressively on the tile floor. She glowered as she stared at said floor and her nylon-clad feet-paws which stomped on it with enough force she half expected the tiles to crack. Thankfully for her she paid for only the most resilient of furnishings, as well as of clothing, for times such as this. Even her claws as sharp as knives couldn't tear the fine silky fabric of her pantyhose if she tried. In the mood she was in she was certainly tempted to tear something.

The papers on her desk, mostly graphs and statistics, accounts and reports...all told a most distressing truth...the "show" was in the red. For the past year-and-a-half her department had been primarily funded; along with the entire economy of the region; by the continuous patronage to the daily courtyard executions. It started as a sort-of local stress-relief pass-time; catharsis and retribution for veterans of the revolution who may have lost a parent or sibling to either the conflict or to the tyrannical rule of the royal family; some of whom were still in exile under the protection of neighboring governments. A great thorn in the hearts of many a Hyrim citizen to be sure.

But her job was not to hunt down defecting royals. She was an accountant of-sorts. The one in charge of ensuring the seats were filled with paying spectators and the gallows filled with the condemned giving the last great "performance" of their lives. And there-in lied her dilemma...the "condemned" were a finite resource, and the prison cells were emptying faster than they could be filled. The double-edged blade of a business run of public capital punishment is that as willingly as Pokémon are to empty their wallets to SEE a criminal hang...most are even-more motivated become to not be the one hanging. Even the few they do manage to catch for relatively minor infractions were more-often-than-not too despondent to put on a show worth paying for by the time the "stage" was set. Last hanging was nearly a month ago, and barely a tenth of the seats were filled. Half the number of the previous show a couple weeks before.

And so it was this problem that only a most desperate solution could remedy...the risks of which did not weigh on her mind lightly.

"Madam Thornclaw, the 'list' you ordered," a Mienfoo dressed in business-casual squeaked somewhat nervously, her own little heels clacking on the tile floor as she scurried into the office on her stubby little nylon-clad feet with a folder held out her paw. Thornclaw snatched it from her so fast the short-stack fighting-type almost tripped on her own skirt.

"Hmmm..." the Meowscarada flipped through the pages of the folder with a furrowed brow. "Too scruffy...too many familial connections...THAT one doesn't even have a neck...AH! Here we go!" She pointed a claw at a photo of a young-adult Braixen lady and showed it to the Mienfoo assistant. "Her. Bring me her."

The Mienfoo took the folder back and looked over the subject file. "Let's see...she refers to herself as 'Red' despite having no official birth-name... Mid twenties, primarily works as a bar waitress and amateur dancer... No family aside from a male Nickit she's been dating for about six months now who works at the same bar. No criminal history of any kind associated with either of them nor their place of work. The Braixen lives a small rental den on the outskirts of the capital, the Nickit lives in a similar dwelling a few blocks down. The Braixen works a late shift and gets home well after dark six days of the week.

"Good. Very good." Thornclawn purred as she clasped her claws together, sitting down in her office chair cross-legged in a position that almost looked as though she could show her assistant the inside of her skirt if she lifted one leg just a smidge. "Have our 'off-the-books' patrollers grab her as soon as her shift ends tonight. Keep her in her work-clothes, they look just pretty enough to please a crowd without leaning into 'posh.' Make sure she keeps quiet; one yelp out of her and this whole thing could fall apart."

"And what charges should we forge for her?" The Miefoo asked.

"Hmmm...I know it's an old cliché but I'm thinking 'dark witchcraft.' The kind that can sway male's hearts and conger spells to poison the minds of the masses, that sort of thing. A good 'ol fashion fairytale witch-hunt might be just the excitement our 'show' needs."

The Mienfoo nodded. "Of course, Ma'am. I'll begin preparations immediately."

Red shifted and struggled desperately against her bonds to no avail. Her muffled cries fell on deaf ears...not that even listening ears could make out much through the thick rubber mouth-filling bulb and full maw-covering muzzle strapped tightly to her face with an adhesive inner-layer just to add insult to discomfort. The cell she'd been unceremoniously tossed into had no windows or lighting, so it was pitch-black. All she could hear were her own muffled squeaks and the rattling of the VERY short chains on her wrists and ankle-cuffs, which prevented her from even walking without assistance.

What did she do?! Why was she being treated like a thug?! Never, EVER in her life had she broken the law and yet those two darkly-dressed officers paid her no heed or even gave her a chance to proclaim her innocence when they grabbed her in the dark of night after a long day on her tired feet serving tables. They didn't even bother to change her clothes. She had to sleep on the cold floor in the same dress and tights she'd put on the previous morning...not that she could really tell exactly how much time had passed since she'd been unjustly locked up like a rabid beast.

The silence was only broken by the ear-piercing grinding of the lock on the heavy metal door of her cell slowly opening. She squinted as her eyes adjusted to light beaming into the cell. She could just make out the silhouette of a...Banette? Yes, it was definitely a Banette. One dressed in almost dominatrix-gear by her judgement. The grinning ghost-type hovered towards her and wrapped her doll-like arms behind Red's back, hoisting her up off the floor and forcing her to stand on her tights-clad feet paws. Couldn't they have at least let her keep her shoes?

"Rise and shiiine, you wicked vixen you!~" the Banette teased in an almost sultry manner, "The show is about to start, and you're up neeext!~"

"Mmmmpfff...?" Show? Up next? What's going on here?!

"Oooh, did our main attraction forget alreadyyyy? You're a witch! A nasty, vile, wicked witch! The witchiest of all witches! That's what the authorities say anyway!~ And you know what Pokémon come here to see witches do?"

Red gulped. She didn't know what all this 'witch' business was about but she didn't like where it was going...

"Why hang, of course!~"

"...HMMMMNG?!" Red was full-on panicking now. "WHMMMM? WMMMM?! MMM DMMMN DMMMM NMMMNMMFFMNN!"

"Oooh yes you silly wicked witch you!~ Off to the gallows, it's time to put on a shooow!~"

"NMMMMM! NMMMM LMMMM MMM GMMMM! MMM NMMM MMM WMMMMMMFF! HMMMMMPFF!"

Red could do nothing but muffle and squirm in her restraints and she was lead along by a chain latched to her collar by the alarmingly strong Banette lady. Her ankle chains rattled as her feet tried to keep up with the pathetically little slack they were given. A couple times out of desperation she tried to lean backwards to at least pull herself away from the disturbingly chipper ghost-type, but that only resulted in a painful tug forcing her forward again. It was fruitless, even if she did slip free she'd be hobbled by her restraints and have nowhere to go. She simply sobbed and limped on forward, praying to Valhalla that this was all just some twisted nightmare.

She didn't have long to stew in her sorrow as she was thrust forward into another room; this one a LOT cleaner and nicer than the dungeons. From the desk and furnishings she could only guess it was an office. A precinct, maybe? Would she be able to talk to an attorney? Contact someone?

"A moment with the prisoner please miss Beatrix," a voice purred from nearby, the clack of heels on hard floor drawing Red's attention to another door behind the desk, which began to open. "Wait outside and make sure things are in order."

"Of course, boss!~" the Banette giggled, hovering out yet another doorway and closing it behind her.

"So," the figure in heels; a well-dressed Meowscarada lady; purred as she leaned down to get a good look at Red's muzzled face, forcing her chin up to meet her piercing gaze. "You're the one who refers to herself as 'Red.'"

"Mmm MMMM RMMMMD!" the Braixen snarled. Who did this cat think she was talking to her like that?! She HATED when Pokémon didn't respect her chosen name.

"Hmmm...flustered, are we? Well I supposed that's to be expected," the Meowscarada said dryly as she sat down at her desk, legs crossed. "You're probably wondering why you're here. Don't bother trying to ask questions, that muzzle isn't coming off. I'll do all the talking."

Red growled, knowing any attempt to come across as menacing would look utterly pitiful in the state she was in but she felt compelled to show her anger anyway.

"My name is Delilah Thornclaw. Or 'Madam Thornclaw' as most refer to me. You see, Miss 'Red'...I'm a business woman. I balance books, I keep bottom-lines high, and as long as everything stays in the black everyone stays happy. Well, MOSTLY everyone."

Red snarled again. Get to the point, 'business cat.'

"Ever since the revolution Hyrim's economy has become increasingly dependent on very particular forms of 'entertainment.'" the kind most other regions would probably shun these days....which of course makes it in even higher demand." Thornclaw's chair squeaked as she leaned forward in it. "I thought about preparing some long-winded speech about the 'necessary evils of business' and 'all for the greater good' blah blah blah...but candor is probably the best course for this purpose. I know you're not a witch."

Red gasped through her nose. "Hmmm...?"

"Don't get dreamy-eyed yet, I'm not finished. Yes, those 'officers' who took you and stuffed you in that cell last night were working off the books. Yes, the charges against you are flimsy at best. Bogus I might say. And yes...this whole 'trial' is a complete and total sham...because I'm the one who orchestrated it, you see."

Red's expression went from shock right back to fury again. "...WHMMMMMMFFT?!"

Thornclaw chortled. "It's not complicated. Business has been slow, and we've been dipping into the red. We couldn't find actual convicts to entertain our patronage so we needed a scape-Gogoat...and that scape-Gogoat is you."

Red was fuming now. She'd breath fire if her maw wasn't plugged.

"Why would I be telling you all this, you might wonder... Well unlike a stereotypical 'evil plan monologue' this actually serves a purpose. Our paying viewers love a good show, and the best 'final performances' are given by the most emotional of the condemned. The struggle is far more entertaining than the finale."

Red huffed. The sick freak...

"However...anger in death is not as entertaining to watch as panic in death...and so we've prepared a little something...'extra.'"

Red's eyes widened. What could possibly make this any worse? Torture?

"We know you have a lover. A cute Nickit boy. You met him at work didn't you?"

Red's heart sank. What did you sick freaks do to Hanz?!

"Well...obviously he can't know everything that I'm telling you now. Imagine the optics? The scandal? Why...if he knew even just a WORD of what I'm telling you...our whole 'show' could be shut down indefinitely. You might even go free. Imagine that? If ONLY you could tell him..."

Red didn't know what to feel now. Fury, panic, disgust...

"And wouldn't you know, he's been invited to watch this very execution. Told about every horrible demonic spell you've been accused of casting, every male you've supposedly seduced and bewitched

with your charms, every vile, horrible thing you, as far as HE knows...have done. I'm sure he feels rather betrayed, don't you think?"

Red's heart raced and she began sweating buckets. This was truly evil.

"If only, oh IF ONLY you could shake free of your bindings, tear that muzzle off your face and scream to the mountain-peak that you are innocent. Oooh wouldn't that be such an upheaval? Your boyfriend, maybe even most of the crowd, tearing down the gallows and coming to your aid? Confessions and apologies this way and that, a fairytale wedding proposal maybe even as he scoops you up in his arms...but alas, so long as that maw of your stays nicely stuffed...not a single word will be able to slip for your lips....and your lover will never know you were innocent all along."

Red writhed and thrashed against her restraints. You...you...MONSTER! "MMMRRRRRRMF! GRMMMMMMMMMFFF!"

"Aaah, yes...THAT'S the emotion we need. Someone once said 'There cannot be true despair without hope.' So do keep hoping, my dear vulpine 'performer.' Keep that hope alive until your literal last breath, and if possible beyond... The spectators demand nothing less."

"MMMMMMMMF! MRRRRMMMFFFFFF! NMMMMMMFFF!"

The third door opened again and that crazy Banette was soon once again yanking at her collar like a wild animal. It didn't take long to reach the courtyard, and the bitter cold wind of the ever-snowy fields shook Red to the bone. Another tug on her collar forced her to step into the snow, making her REALLY wish she had shoes... Her tights may have kept her somewhat warm inside, but now soaked to her ankles in ice-melt, every step was agonizing.

Her eyes darted around everywhere, trying to make sense of her surroundings. The crowd gathered was quite large, at least a few hundred, maybe a thousand. She tried to spot Hanz somewhere in the bleachers but it was hard to tell who-was-who with all the cheering and whooping. Maybe he left early...?

Another yank of the chain forced her eyes forward, towards what she assumed must be the gallows. Upon closer scrutiny though there seemed something...odd about it. It wasn't raised very high, maybe a couple feet off the ground...and she couldn't see any trap door. The arm supporting the noose was odd too...it had a pulley anchored to it that threaded the very thick rope down and around towards a mechanism of metal gears at the back. One gear had what appeared to be a crank handle on it. Then the reality of the true cruelty of it dawned on her... She wouldn't be dropped from the platform...the noose was going to ever-so-slowly lift her up by the neck, ensuring the most drawn-out strangulation possible. Sick...all these freaks were SICK!

"Come on now, witchy-witch!~ The show's about to staaart!~" the Banette sang as she dragged the struggling Braixen towards to platform. Even those very short couple steps were a strain on the pitifully short chain binding her ankles together. As soon as she was positioned right below the noose, the creepy Banette wasted no time threading Red's head through it and pulling it taut; there was so little slack the poor Braixen had to stand on her already sore and numb tippy-toes just to keep her windpipe open. She knew even that grace wouldn't last long...

"Males, females and ungended species, welcome one-and-all to the best show in all of Hyrim!~"

That Banette had quite the 'announcer voice.' If she wasn't such a crazed sociopath she might've made a great circus ringleader. Then again...this basically WAS what passed for a circus in this messed up place...

"I'm soooo pleased to present you all a 'performer' the likes of which we haven't seen in ages!~ Yes, this is no ordinary street criminal you see before you... No, this fine-looking vixen is a WITCH!"

The crowd began cheering louder. Red wanted to vomit and scream at the same time, but the rubber bulb and muzzle prevented her from doing either.

"Oooh, yes!~ Don't let her looks fool you, you she'll cast an eeevil, wicked, nasty spell on you all!~ Even a word from her mouth could turn you all into stone!"

The crowd ooowed and aaawed as if they were watching a celestial beast on stage.

"And most despicable of all...she bewitched a poor, innocent Nickit and cast him under her nefaaaairous spells! Why, here he is right now!~ Come on up to the front and see for yourself who this wicked succubus really is!"

...Hanz?!

And there he was, still dressed in his work vest and bowtie, a combined look of dismay and disgust on her face as he stared at her, not saying a word.

"HMMMMMMNZ! HMMMMMMNZ PLMMMMMMS! MMMMMM NMMMMM MMM WMMMMMMFF!
YMMMMM HMMMMMFF TMMM BLMMMMMFF MMMMMMM! PLMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMFFFFF!" Red sobbed, her muzzle dripping with tears as she tried to tell him... "PLMMMMMMS LMMMMMMSMMMMMM
TMMMMMM MMMMMM HMMMMMMMZ! MMMMMMM WMMMMMMMS FRMMMMMMMMMMMD!"

Hanz looked eyes with hers for what felt like an eternity...but then closed them and looked away, returning to his seat.

"NMMMMMMMMMM! HMMMMMMMMMZ! PLMMMMMMMMMMMMHMHMHMHMMMMMSSS!"

This was cruel. It was sick. It wasn't fair. He was RIGHT THERE! And he believed every piece of Muk lie he'd been fed... She thrashed, she strained, she struggled and fought against her chains. She tried in vain to force the thick rubber bulb out of her mouth with her tongue. She screamed muffled grunts into it, hoping, pleading he or ANYONE could make out even ONE single word...but she was met with only coldness and blood-thirst. She sobbed like she had never sobbed before. It wasn't fair.

"Well I think I've kept you all waiting long enough!~ llllits time for the witch to daaaaaance!~"

More cheering. She couldn't see Hanz now through the crowd but she imagined he was too heart-broken to stand up and watch...

The Banette executioner slipped behind the gallows towards the mechanism at the back. Red couldn't turn her head to see but she knew she was going to start cranking the lever.

"liliiiin three...two...one.....aaaaaaaand let those witchy feet flyyyy!~"

There was a loud *CLUNK* as the gears began moving. Almost immediately Red felt the already taut noose tighten even more, slowly closing her airway and forcing her toes to point as far-down as possible to keep in contact with the platform. With one final laboured inhale, the rope sealed her throat, trapping said breath in her chest. Her feet could no longer find any solid surface to touch; she was kicking at air, much to the crowd's delight.

She blinked, vision blurred with tears. Please...Hanz...don't let me die like this...

The clanking of the gears stopped, leaving her toes dangling just a few tantalizing centimeters from the platform. Her chest burning and body in full panic-mode, she thrashed and kicked and squirmed, the rattling of her chains only seeming to excite the crowd even more.

Everything outside her own body seemed to become a blur as all she could sense was her own body pleading for air. Her chest heaved over and over, her paws still desperately trying to pull at her shackles with what strength she had left. It was agonizingly slow, and time seemed to slow down to a crawl, prolonging her suffering even more.

Hanz...please...I...I don't want to go like this...please...h-help...me...

Her muscles started spasming now. Her fingers and toes curled into balls and the frantic kicking turned into more of a half-fetal-position with her legs lifting up on their own in some pitiful attempt to touch something...anything...to feel warm again...

Her chest-heaving had slowed, as did her struggles. She was slipping into unconsciousness. The world spun and melted around her as her thoughts became increasingly jumbled and incoherent. With the last shred of lucidity she had left she clung on for one last moment to hope...hope that she'd be saved...that she'd be warm in Hanz's embrace in front of a fire and hot meal...

It was that hope that kept her in limbo for what felt like eons. She didn't want to die... She didn't want Hanz to think she was a monster... She...didn't...want...