

FORBIDDEN FRUIT

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FORBIDDEN FRUIT

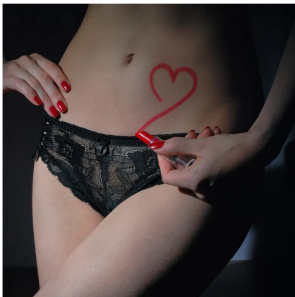
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MISSED CONNECTIONS - A SPICY ROMANCE SHORT



Kim sat alone at a table for two in the back of a dimly lit restaurant. Her feet hurt from the 'sexy' heels she wore, her stockings had a small run just over her ankle, and worst

of all, she wasn't even a fan of sushi. Her blind date insisted that it was only because she hadn't tried good sushi.

Her date was now thirty minutes late. She checked the online dating site. No messages. All she knew about "Dave" was that he was about 5'10, had wavy brown hair, and wore glasses. His photos were mostly limited to his face, all except for the one of him sitting in a recliner reading a copy of *Like a Virgin, A Connoisseur's Guide To Olive Oil*. She laughed when she saw it for the double entendre. She thought he would be quirky and fun, with a little nerd thrown in. He was so eager to meet her that she thought he would be waiting when she arrived.

The waiter came by and filled her iced tea for the third time. He gave her a heartbreaking look of pity mixed with a touch of anger, but he said nothing. Embarrassed, Kim asked for the check. No one was worth waiting more than half an hour for. She sighed, knowing that if he had a good excuse, she would likely give him another chance. The dating pool in today's environment is slim at best.

As she signed the receipt, she heard the jingle of the restaurant's door open. Her heart rose with hope, and she was relieved to see a well-dressed gentleman wearing stylish glasses standing at the podium, scanning the room. He seemed nervous and kept fidgeting with the buttons on his white dress shirt. His hair was wavy and brown, but

he didn't appear to be 5'10. 5'8at best. Kim was used to guys on the sites exaggerating their features, so shewasn't concerned. She was only 5'2, so shorter might be a better fit. Afterspeaking with the hostess, he caught Kim's eye and gave an apprehensive wave. Kim returned the gesture, and the young woman escorted him to her table. As heap-proached, Kim couldn't miss the flashing green eyes that matched her date's profile.

She noticed his slacks looked like they were part of a suit, and a high-end one at that. A little overdressed for a sushi restaurant filled with guys in jeans and t-shirts, but maybe he just got off work. Kim liked men in suits and had worn a fancy maroon dress. They could be overdressed together.

"David. Nice to meet you. I'm so sorry I'm late. The subway did not cooperate." His hand was a bit clammy as if he was nervous. Kim's hand probably felt like that 30 minutes ago, but the nerves disappeared as her frustration grew.

"Kim. Please, sit down. I've been waiting so long, I'm starving. Go ahead and order me something I'd like, and you had better get it right." Kim immediately felt guilty for being so harsh, but she sometimes got aggressive when hungry.

"I know, I know, I really am sorry for being so late, but I promise it will be worth it. I'm starved too." With

that, he turned to the waiter and ordered in fluent Japanese without even looking at the menu.

"Impressive, I didn't know you spoke Japanese." The waiter scurried off to submit the order, his pity having shifted to jealousy.

"Well, I studied abroad for 2 years at the University of Tokyo; it's a dog-eat-dog world there, if you aren't fluent, you get ripped off pretty badly." He paused, unsure how to get the conversation going.

"Have you ever been to Japan?"

Kim smiled for the first time that evening and began telling David about her post-college trip to the far east. The next ten minutes passed with Kim and David exchanging stories of their youth. She began to find him fascinating. When he wasn't studying in foreign lands, he was authoring paper on clean energy.

"I'm looking for a job that will allow me to use my education, yet in an environment where I can develop some of my ideas." The way he spoke about work was odd for a first date, but it was endearing to see someone so excited about his future. She had dated too many guys who were more worried about scraping up enough money for some weed. David still seemed nervous, but the more he spoke about himself, the more charming he became.

The food arrived on a large round tray. The raw fish dishes were presented beautifully, and there were bamboo steamers containing various dumplings. "I took the liberty of ordering a mix of fresh sushi and some cooked dishes, in case you prefer things hot."

"How thoughtful, in their texts, Kim got the impression she would be made to try her date's favorite dishes, but David seemed eager that she enjoy her dining experience, even if she did not share his love for the cuisine." She let herself relax. "You just keep on impressing me like this, and I'll forget the tardiness." They both laughed. She sampled the soup dumplings first, a dish she knew she would enjoy. The texture was light, not like the thick doughy skin she expected. Emboldened, she tried a California roll.

"Go ahead. There is no raw fish in it." To her surprise, the roll was delicious. After they each had a few pieces, she looked into David's eyes and asked, "What else do you suggest?"

"Here, try this." Expertly using his chopsticks, he lifted a pretty pink wrapped roll with a dark red fish inside and avocado and a white colored fish on top. She opened her mouth to ask what she was eating, but he took advantage and placed the roll on her tongue.

"Oh my god, that is amazing." Kim tried picking up a piece with her chopsticks, nearly dropping it before it reached her mouth.

"It is tuna inside and yellow tail out. Here, try this." A roll covered in black rice. She recognized the filling, Salmon, cucumber, and avocado, but there was a thick, meaty-looking fish on top she couldn't place. As David fed it to her, he explained that she was eating a salmon-eel roll. She nearly gagged at the thought of eating eel, but the taste was out of this world.

"I never would have imagined eel would taste good," she said, her voice muffled by the second piece she stuffed into her mouth.

David seemed in his element. Feeding her new tastes and talking about his post-graduate work designing scientific research tools. He loved what he did. He was apparently good at it, too.

By the end of dinner, Kim began to notice how attractive David was. The way his upper lip curled when he smiled. The way his eyes changed colors with his mood. He even smelled good. She felt the first flush of arousal. She allowed her shoe to slip off and touched David's inside right calf with her stocking-clad toes. He shifted nervously in his seat, but didn't push her away.

The check came, and Kim grabbed it first. It was her rule that she always offered to pay on the first date so she wouldn't feel obligated in any way. If David protested, she would agree to split the bill. David, for his part, seemed to take it in stride, thanking her profusely. She found his politeness a bit odd; maybe she had misjudged his intentions. He seemed interested in what she had to say, had no problem talking about himself, didn't pull away when she rubbed his leg, but now he seemed confused.

She decided to test him. "I live a few blocks from here. Why not walk me home? We can chat more on the way." She figured if he was interested, he would try to kiss her when they reached her door; if not, he would at least be a ward against any dangers and good company. David relaxed a little, though he still looked at her oddly.

The walk home went quickly as David continued to arouse her with his sharp mind, sarcastic wit, and aloofness that infuriated her. He was charming the panties off of her, yet had not shown anything more than a professional interest. Was he shy? Not interested? Whatever it was, it was igniting her desire.

All too soon, they arrived at the door to the apartment building. Kim stood at the door, looking through her purse for her keys. Truth was, she had them in her hand already, but she was taking her time to give David a

chance to make a move. He just stood there, sheepishly leaning against the rail with his hands in his pockets, looking adorable. She took out her keys and said, "Well, David, I had a nice evening." "Me too," David responded, reaching out his hand to shake hers. He had a strong grip, and the contact stirred something deep inside Kim. Her heart pounded in her chest. She paused, hoping David would make his move.

"Fuck this," Kim thought, "If he won't kiss me, I'll kiss him." She pulled his hand toward her, planning to bring him in for a storybook kiss. Instead, she felt him resist and lost her balance, slipping forward where she hit her head against the railing. The only thing that kept her from falling was David's grip on her arm. He reeled her in until she came to rest against his chest. Kim steadied herself and whispered, "Damn," Kim said to herself, noting how good David smelled up close. "Damn what?" David asked in a concerned tone.

Kim blushed; she must have said it out loud. "Nothing, just that my head hurts a bit more than it should." She tried to put her key in the door. David reached, "Here, let me help." For a brief second, their hands touched, sparking Kim's desire again. "I just live on the third floor, will you come up and make sure I get into the apartment ok?" David said, "Of course!"

They made it to the apartment with no more mishaps. Kim opened the door and turned in the doorway to face David. Without any stairs to interfere, she grabbed him by his cheeks with the palms of her hands and pulled his face close. Pressing her lips against his.

She felt his attraction. He even began returning the urgency of her kiss. Then, without reason or warning, to her disappointment, he broke away.

"Are you sure that is appropriate?" David stammered, obviously torn between the arousal and some mysterious fear. Kim was confused. Did he think it was too soon? Isn't that what these apps were for? Maybe he's one of those guys who had to make the first move? She felt her disappointment turn into anger. What was his game? "Appropriate???" Her tone was harsher than she intended, but she couldn't hide the pain of rejection. "Why wouldn't it be appropriate?"

David responded, his nervousness returning. "Well, I'm having a good evening and all, but this is an interview, although a very weird one, and if I'm hired, you will be my boss."

Kim's jaw dropped. For an impossibly long minute, she stood there. Slowly, it all made sense. The job talk, the nervousness. Any anger she had faded as she broke down and laughed. Slowly at first, but it was infectious, and soon

she was laughing uncontrollably. "You, you thought... oh, oh god. If I wasnot laughing so hard, I would be so embarrassed."

At first, David remained confused, though he chuckled-nervously. Then it dawned on him. "Wait, you mean you aren't from TechCo?"

Kim was tearing up from laughing. "And you aren't Dave fromDatestarter?"

That did it. They both doubled over in laughter, theirhandshake becoming a half-hug as they kept themselves standing by holding eachother.

When they regained composure, Kim felt a different emotiontake over. The arousal that had disappeared when she thought he was rejectingher returned with a vengeance. David's arm wrapped around her, pulling her-close. His eyes gleamed with a hunger that matched Kim's. This wasn't thenervous professional that she chatted with through dinner. His guards were down,and his desire pierced through Kim's defenses.

No longer fearing rejection, she looked up at his face andwhispered, "Well, now that that is out of the way, maybe we should try thatkiss again." David placed his hands on her cheeks and leaned down.

This time, the kiss was far different than the earlierat-tempt. The passion was instant, their desire urgent. Every

time his tongue danced with hers, she felt throbbing in her dampening slit. She wasn't sure how long they made out, but the next thing she knew, she was unbuttoning his shirt and practically dragging him toward her bedroom. By the time they reached the foot of the bed, David was clad in just his pants, and Kim's dress was bunched above her waist. She fell backward on the bed, pulling him on top of her, her legs spreading so he fell between them. She could feel the bulge in his trousers rubbing her clit through his slacks, and a hoarse moan escaped her lips.

David's hands slid under her dress and fastened onto her breasts. He rolled her nipples between his fingers. Kim whimpered, running her hand down his hips to his pants and attempting to unbutton them, but their bodies were too close. David slowly ran his fingers over her abdomen as he extricated himself from her dress and rose to his knees. Kim watched as David unbuckled his belt, zipped down his fly, and shimmied out of his slacks. His grey boxer briefs had a wet spot the size of a quarter, and she could see the thick outline of his erection. Her pussy ached for David to slide inside her.

Kim reached and slid her thumbs under the waistband of her panties, lifting her bottom into the air. When she had pushed them to about mid-thigh, David swooped in and took over, pulling the Brazilian cut lace to her ankles

and assisting them over her feet. She watched as he tossed them to her desk chair and then stepped out of his briefs. Rising to a sitting position, she grabbed the bottom of her dress by crossing her arms over her stomach and lifted. For a moment, her vision was blocked. David took advantage, crawling up the bed and fastening his lips on her newly exposed breasts.

"Yes." David drew Kim's right nipple into his mouth as his fingers parted her lips. Kim hadn't intended on going this far on a first date, but the magic connection was there. She freed herself from the dress and let it fall, following it to the bed until her back hit the comforter.

David continued sucking her tit, and she ran her hand through his hair.

So thick and soft. David's fingers were in her core, his thumb on her clit as he plunged them deep inside. Kim pushed his head down, needing to feel his mouth on her pussy. He moaned, turned on by her desire, and inched his way toward her tiny landing strip.

"Don't tease me, David." Her voice was barely more than a whisper. It was nearly impossible to form a coherent thought as his tongue finally reached out to invite her swollen bud to dance. Electricity surged through her midsection. He certainly knew his way around a woman's bo

dy. The peak of her desire was nearing, and he hadn't even put his cock in her.

"Damn, you're delicious." David's voice was muffled between her legs, but she made out the praise. This sent her to the moon.

She rested her legs on his shoulders, arching to meet the thrust of her finger. She couldn't hold back now. Her hips began to rock against his face, and when he caught her clit between his teeth, she arched and the spasms of her orgasm began. When he slid a finger inside her, it took her over the edge, and she started to rock her hips against his face. He bit lightly on her clit as his finger pressed up against the fleshy spot inside her, and she arched her back off the bed and came.

It was David's turn now. He rose to his knees and offered his cock to Kim. Still quivering with aftershocks, she rolled onto her hands and knees and crawled quickly to his waiting rod, taking it in her hand. His cock seemed large in comparison to her small hands, but she was able to fit the remaining two-thirds in her mouth. Within seconds, she developed a rhythm, relishing his slightly sour musk.

"Easy, or you'll make me explode," David spoke as if filling her mouth with his cum was a bad thing. Maybe if giving him a blow job was the beginning of the evening, she might have been able to tease him, but after such a

powerful climax, Kim craved more. She wanted to feel his cum hit the back of her throat. She wanted to make David feel as good as she did. In her mind, as his cock plunged in and out of her mouth, she imagined it was her pussy. How could she be so wet with desire? She ached to be filled. She decided that the flood of words coming over her tongue would have to wait.

Reluctantly, she released his shaft and turned toward the pillow. "Fuck me, David. Take me from behind."

David did not need any further encouragement. He slid his cock inside her with a powerful thrust.

"God, you're so tight around my cock. So wet, too." The slap of his stomach against her bottom was a symphony to her ears.

"That's it, drive into me. Show me how much you want this." When his cock found that sensitive spot deep within her, she cried out. "Yes! Fuck my pussy, make me come, baby."

David seemed to increase his pace the more Kim cried out. When she felt her orgasm build, she reached a hand between her legs, rubbing her clit and enjoying the feel of his cock when it struck them. When her orgasm hit, it overwhelmed her. She felt it not just between her legs but in her nipples, her breasts, her mouth. For the brief moment as she orgasmed, all she desired was another thrust of his

cock. Her whole body had become a sex organ for David's benefit. She came, her muscles twitching around his cock, keeping him from leaving her warmth. Her scream set him over the edge. He pulled out just in time to spray his white cream over her back.

"Fuuck, Kim," he said. Kim later realized that was the first time he ever said her name. "Fuck Kim" became a running joke over the next four years before their wedding, even working its way into David's vows.

WINE, WOMEN, AND ADULT TOYS

WHAT COULD HAPPEN?



A very fortunate wine-tasting host ends up being the dessert to a bunch of wild women. — Loosely based on a semi-true story

It was late and the girls were about to arrive. John had taken care of all the details. He booked the cabana suite at the winery. It consisted of a double bedroom and a small atrium which could be separated by a door. The

atrium was perfect for John's purposes, containing a round table and two comfortable chairs along with a small tv, a kitchen sink and a microwave. John pre-prepared several appetizers and snacks which were arrayed on the table. He sprinkled gummy penises and vagina cookies in between the finger food. As they were at a winery, it wasn't difficult to grab a few bottles of Terry's favorite Reisling while they took a tasting tour on the limo bus that was just now returning.

The women were from several different social circles. Cara and Barbara knew John's wife Terry from many years ago and were awfully close friends. The rest were from John and Terry's swinger lifestyle. A few they met at parties, the rest were from a swinger website. Terry was starting up an adult lingerie and toy business and was hosting her first party tonight. What better crowd than swingers for selling sex toys? To make it more comfortable, the event was for women only. was on strict orders to remain in the atrium unless summoned.

The girls arrived, intoxicated, laughing, giggling.

"How fun that was. Terry, you plan all the best events. You even found a stud to welcome us." Cara kissed John warmly. John had slept with Cara several times since he married Terry. She even let them play together once or twice without her presence. Of course, Terry fucked Cara

whenever she wanted so it was just nice of her to share once in a while.

"We aren't finished yet, Cara. Let's get everyone inside." With a wink in John's direction, Terry led the girls into the bedroom.

John didn't know most of the other guests. Terry took the lead on the website, meeting men and women for the couple to meet. As they filed in, John offered the girls Reisling and Moscato, along with the treats. As instructed, John remained in the atrium while Terry gave her toy presentation. She had perfected a sales pitch that involved several games for the girls to play such as sex toy bingo and dildo ring toss. She also gave lessons on how to give a blow job and how to put a condom on a man without ruining the mood. She must have been killing it because there was raucous laughter and plenty of oooh's and ahh's. Occasionally, one of the guests came into the atrium for a refill or some snacks, but other than that, the happenings in the room were left to John's imagination. After about an hour, John thought he could hear moans of arousal from the room, but this was to be expected, in fact, Terri's parties usually turned into lesbian orgies as the girls almost always insisted on testing the demo toys on themselves and then each other. John listened closer, he could hear the whirring of electronic devices. He was tempted to peak

but he had made a promise in order to be allowed to stay. The thought of what might happen in the room kept him aroused all day but now his erection was straining at his slacks. He was wearing a sky-blue button-down shirt and black dress pants. Terry had insisted he wear a bow tie. If he was going to be a steward, he would play the part.

Terry came out. She was wearing only her tiger print Felina bra and panties. A heady aroma, courtesy of arousal, greeted him before he even saw the wet spot between her legs. Terry kissed him, pressing lips covered with someone else's juice against John's. He began to ask if she was having fun but she stopped him with a wet finger. She leaned in and surrounded his ear with her mouth, whispering, "I have an idea. If you do exactly what I say, you will be rewarded for being so well behaved." John looked at her questioningly but nodded. He recognized the look in her eye. It signaled one of her naughty plans which almost always meant orgasms for everyone involved. Carefully, Terry wrapped his eyes with a blindfold she had brought as a demonstration. As she took his hand to guide him into the bedroom, she ran her hand over the bulge in his trousers.

"Oh yes, you are going to be rewarded." John couldn't see, but from the thick smell of sex and the soft moans

coming from the direction of the beds, he surmised everyone was having a good time.

Suddenly, Terry addressed her group. "Now that the break is over, we have a few items some of you girls were wondering how they were used, so I brought in a mannequin so we can try them out."

She whispered, "Play along dear" and squeezed John's bottom. He was surprised when she placed furry earmuffs to block out the sound.

Gradually, his shirt was unbuttoned, but he had no idea by whom. The first two were by fingers, then they were replaced by soft lips, intent on kissing his flesh as much as they were on removing the shirt. Whoever it was, she took a long time before her lips touched the sensitive flesh above his belt. Were it not for the thin layer of cotton, his cock would have sprung forth and begged for attention.

When his shirt was unbuttoned, someone to his left pulled it down to his forearms, effectively trapping his hands at his sides. The cuffs were still buttoned which made it difficult to extricate his hands from the fabric if he were inclined to do so.

A fragrant lotion that John guessed was vanilla scented was spread by very sensual hands across his back and chest. The lotion was cool to the touch but when a girl blew on it, it caressed his right nipple with heat. A different

lotion was worked into his left chest, this one cooling down when blown on. The dichotomy in temperature was exquisite torture. John felt his belt unbuckle and hang loosely against his thighs. Slowly, his zipper lowered until the girl in front of him was able to remove his pants and underwear in a single motion, leaving them pooled around his ankles. John couldn't see or hear anything, but his sense of smell was overwhelmed by the thickening scent of arousal filling the room. The woman rubbed a cream on his cock. Her hands were gentle and soft, not Terry who had a much firmer grip but not Cara's long fingers either. John was on edge. He tried to picture who might have such soft hands, but her touch was driving him wild even as the cream numbed his shaft. When the girls were satisfied he was ready, they backed away. He was standing, hands immobilized and cock at attention. Without warning, something plastic struck his thigh. Another struck the side of his penis. After several tries, something round landed on his shaft and spun around his erection.

"Ring Toss?" he thought as more rings joined the first. For a second, he wondered if he should be embarrassed to be standing in the room for their amusement, but he was too aroused by the thought of 10 or so women staring at his erection was keeping his mind in the game.

Fingernails trailed over his biceps and forearms until they clasped his wrists, binding them together with leather straps. Only when he was secure were his his ear coverings removed. Someone, a voice he could not place, whispered, her breath hot on his ear. "We want you to listen to what is happening to you."

The moans to his left when he entered the room had grown louder and were joined by muffled whimpers that sounded like Terry. He imagined her head buried in one of her guests' pussy while someone pleased Terry with a toy. John could hear the buzzing of a vibe accompanied by the soft squishes of it plunging in and out of a wet pussy.

Cara's recognizable alto rang out, "Ok, the final contest, with the prize being any item in the catalog, is to see who can make John orgasm first. Each of you has a number on the playing card you just received. You each get 5 minutes to try. You can use your hands, mouth, or any toy on the table." John heard a kitchen timer being wound. "Oh, and Johnny, if you can keep from coming, you can have any girl in this room for the rest of the party."

"Number 1, you are first." John groaned. He had hoped he would get some info as to who was pleasuring him, but not yet.

Still, as soon as his cock was enveloped by a tiny mouth, it no longer mattered. He could tell she wasn't used to

a large cock, but she stuffed him as far as she could and wasted no time trying to make him shoot his load, gripping the base with one hand while she furiously stroked and sucked. One hand was wrapped around his right leg for balance. Whatever they had rubbed on his shaft came to life once her saliva coated him. It was driving him wild with sensation but also seemed to keep him on the edge of climax. The timer rang and the crowd laughed.

"What's the matter, girl, can't make him pop?"

The girl rose, giving John's staff one longing squeeze before moving away. Girl number two took a different approach. She began licking him like a lollipop while massaging his balls and prostate. He could feel the orgasm building but it had become a challenge for him to see how far he could get without shooting his load. He also wanted that prize, though how he would choose his partner, was beyond his current state of mind.

The next girl brought a toy with her, John was convinced it was the Hitachi wand as something large and wide buzzed against his now swollen balls. Impressively, the girl swallowed him all the way to the base. John knew he wasn't the largest cock, but he was thick and just over 6 inches. This girl was a pro. John almost lost it but was saved by the buzzer.

Girl four was tall, she stood in front of John and he could feel her dominating presence. Her breasts grazed his and her lips pressed against his neck. *5'8 or 9* he thought. Well, that narrowed it down to about 3 of the women attending which made him even more aroused. They were all beautiful. She whispered, "I may not get you off, but I can get myself off with you" and promptly pressed and rubbed his cock on her slick clit as if it were a vibrator. She made a show of vocalizing her pleasure.

"Oh god, you're so hard. It feels so good against my little bud." John thought she might slide him inside, but she instead rubbed him through her folds and over her clit until she came, crying out with pleasure. She even bit his neck when she came.

John's orgasm was once again delayed by the buzzer. They let him stand for a few seconds. Sounds of pleasure echoed around him. A shorter woman stood before him, but not touching him, not yet. Instead he heard her purr, then wet fingers pressed his lips, spreading her sweet nectar across them until they parted and John began sucking them clean. Terry's moans were urgent. John wished he could see what was happening to her, but he was distracted when the girl retracted her hand and for a moment, he couldn't sense her presence. With a gasp, he felt his cock enter the stranger's core. John could only

guess that she was bent forward, her hand guiding him into her. Standing, with his hands tied behind his back, John couldn't do anything but feel as he had no leverage to slam his cock into her. That was fine because she was doing all the work, squeezing his cock, rotating her hips and using her hand to push him deeper into her. John closed his eyes beneath his mask, doing his best to keep from climaxing. He might have made it, too, had another girl not sat on the floor beneath him and begun licking his balls and the girl's clit. He wasn't sure whether he came first, causing the girl to climax, or if the spasms of her orgasm was the final straw, but he began filling her pussy with streams of pearly white goo.

When the girl and John finished, they led him to a chair and sat him down. He heard several cameras clicking. Then they removed his blindfold. Terry was tied to the bed. One girl was on her face, two licking her breasts, one fucking her with a strap on, and two others holding her ankles down and using feathers on her feet. From the steady keening coming from her throat and her body twisting, John knew she was in the middle of a multi-orgasmic session. Suddenly, Terry screamed into the girl's pussy, who John recognized as Cara, and set off a chain of orgasms.

Slowly, everyone cleaned up, payed for their purchases, and left, walking by John's chair as they did. They each gave John a passionate kiss and a wink, leaving him wondering who had won the prize. Then he realized, he had won after all. His wife was the absolute best.

Romance,
Adventure
and Fae, Oh
My!

A romantic voyage of
discovery and adventure

THE ROGUE



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photo

“Easy honey, we don’t want our fun to end too quickly”

Sara disengaged her mouth from my erection, to lock my eyes in a devilish stare. The lust in her gaze was as plain as the birthmark on her hip. She said nothing, her breasts heaving with arousal, her hand still gripping my

cock. I placed my hand on her head, giving her permission to proceed. She was eager, more willing to engage in new pleasures than most of the locals. It hadn't taken long to get her on her knees either. Too bad she was the Mayor's young wife and this would be a one-time affair.

I felt my balls tighten. I was close, but I wasn't ready to fill her mouth. No, first I wanted to taste her box, and then I would pound my meat into it.

I never got the chance. The loud slam of the door downstairs let me know the town's leader was home early. I guess the ribbon cutting at the new inn didn't draw the crowd he was hoping for. I could see the panic in Sara's eyes but I reassured her with a smile.

"Don't worry gorgeous, I'll be back soon." As if in promise, I slid two fingers into her sopping slit until they were slick and sticky, then, brought them to my lips so I could get a sample of her sweet nectar, blew her a kiss, then slipped out the window just before her heavy set husband burst in. I watched as she impressively de-escalated the situation by convincing him her arousal was due to thoughts of his prowess. I jumped to the barn's rooftop and then dropped onto a pile of hay.

I would keep my word to return, but not before I took care of business.

I took the scenic route back to the town. It would be sundown soon and I needed the cover of darkness to break into the bank. I wasn't here for the gold. No, there was one thing I craved. The Dagger of Fortune. It had been my grandfather's until he lost the dagger in a poker game. That shouldn't have happened. The Dagger should have kept the odds in his favor, but the universe must balance and Grandpa's luck had run out.

I tracked the dagger through Shadowdawn and into the Lower Fells. The cheater who took the dagger I found dead at the bottom of the Elven Grove. I lost the trail then. Elvish lands were dangerous places for humans to venture.

It took a year, and several cold trails before rumors swirled of a newcomer in the gambling circuit. A dragonborn named Parlac. Dragonborns are not known to be gamblers, so this rumor bore further investigation, ultimately leading to the little town of South Loch. The fool didn't hide the weapon, displaying it proudly on his belt. I knew the gods were with me when he entrusted the dagger to the bank. Surely he didn't trust a single security guard to protect it? Maybe he didn't know the value of the treasure he carried. Either way, I knew the bank well. I arrived three days before Parlac and realized it was the only locale offering a modicum of security. Luckily, one of the tellers was a petite redheaded half-elf who had a penchant for glittery

rocks and gigantic cocks. By the time I left her bed that first night, I knew every entrance, exit, and security measure of the 1st bank of South Loch and some naughtier places. The dagger would be easy pickings.

With nothing else to do, I amused myself by snaking a few coin pouches off the crowd. My grandfather was a rogue, my father was a rogue, and I, Joran, had been trained for this job since I could walk. All I had to do was stay unnoticed till dark.

I nearly made enough profit stealing to buy my own magic dagger, however, none were like the Dagger of Fortune, nor could a new one replace the memories of my dad.

Finally, the streets began clearing and I stood alone in the square munching on an apple. The lights flickered across the way and suddenly the bank went dark. I knew it was time to make my move so I adjusted my pants, checked for my tools, and took that first step toward redemption.

“Just what do you think you are doing!”

My heart jumped into my throat. Had someone outsmarted me? Had they figured out my plan? Or maybe the Mayor was out for blood. I stood perfectly still, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“If you don’t get inside, the evening watch will haul you in for curfew violations.” Here, take a few coins so you can

get a room at the Wayfarer's Inn. Tell John that Bert sent you."

I relaxed. He must have mistaken my rags as evidence of my station instead of a clever blending in disguise. Few people notice the poor, everyone sees the rich.

Thanking the man, I scurried off toward the inn, ducking down an alleyway as soon as Bert turned his back. I let myself smile. Even though I was nearly caught, I still managed to come away with a few coins. My proximity to the dagger was paying off already. Oh, the things I was going to do when it rejoined me at my hip. My optimism was high.

At first glance when I arrived at the bank, it appeared to be deserted. However, you don't become a top-ranking member of the thieves' guild by trusting appearances. I remained in the shadows of the alley and spent a few moments observing.

From my dalliances with the elf, I knew the layout of the bank well. The dagger was stored in the most secured vault in the center of the upper level. There were three guards on duty. One patrolling the first floor, and the other two stationed at the door to the vault. They were of little concern. My genius plan was already set in motion. I would enter through the back of the building. There were latches on the windows that lent themselves to my

grappling hook. I would climb the wall and enter through the upstairs bathroom window.

Only one more thing to do before putting my plan to work. I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, wrapped my palm around the crystal hanging loosely against my tunic, and concentrated. The magic was subtle and it took a moment before it coalesced in a slight shimmer. I felt it expand, slowly spreading across the cobblestone until it enveloped the building. I sensed a figure at the bottom of the stairs, seated. His heartbeat was slow and steady. Nearly asleep, You just cannot find good help these days, I chuckled. With a slight push from my mind, his heart slowed further. He wouldn't sleep for long, just long enough.

I reached out with the magic, easily locating the other two guards. They were wide awake, no way I could nudge them into a trance. But no matter, unless they used the restroom at exactly the most inopportune time, they would never know I was there. With the rest of the magic, I confirmed the safe was the state-of-the-art Boxar 2. Solid reinforced oak with metal bands crisscrossed on the inner walls. The lock was a four chamber cascading cell only a single key could open. Only a master would be able to pick the lock. there were fourteen different locks on the safe, only one of them the correct one, the other thirteen traps. Daunting for most. Even a master would need time

to crack. The precious time lost increased the chance of being caught exponentially.

I smiled. I assisted with the design of this model myself. After all, what better way to become a master safe cracker than to learn about their construction firsthand? Regardless, I wasn't planning on using the locks to enter. That is for amateurs.

Just as the spell faded, a strange energy tugged at my mind, as if the safe was trying to dissuade me from further action. I shrugged it off. It must have been an after-effect of the spell. After all, my crystal was created by a demon. Still, precaution is my middle name and I readied several anti-magic cantrips just in case.

The grapple was where I hid it, behind some shrubs in the town's prized garden maze that connected the bank with City Hall. Within seconds, I was inside the bathroom, undetected. A quick cast of Silent Moving and I soundlessly made my way to the rear of the safe. Detect Magic and Detect Traps yielded nothing so I slid the phase ring over my fingers and moved uncomfortably through the walls. Phasing is great except for the excruciating pain as your atoms and those of the safe pass mingle. So far they have always sorted themselves out in the end so I gritted my teeth and pushed through.

I doubled over once I emerged from the wall, letting the pain subside. When I regained my breath and verified all of my parts were in the right place I took a moment to survey my new surroundings.

The room was larger than I expected, perhaps twice the size of the bedroom I narrowly escaped earlier today. Its walls were lined with rows of wooden boxes each with a gold plate containing a sequential number. No doubt they contained gold and silver coins, jewelry, and perhaps a few land deeds. None would hold what I came for. My eyes wandered until they settled on the prize. The case which held my dagger. It was set off from the rest, a glass case, partially covered in tarpaulin. There was no chance someone else was in the chamber with me, yet I still moved cautiously, keeping against the walls until I was within arm's length. With a flourish, I tore off the canvas covering to reveal the weapon. The silverish blade gleamed in the dim light. The crudely carved handle was unadorned save for the four luck runes encircling its base. Warmth spread through me as I grasped the hilt, hefting it in front of my body. For a brief second, I felt the familiar magic caress my arm. With a smile, I returned it to the sheath I wore at my side and turned to leave.

"It's about time, stud. I was beginning to think the 'great Joran' had gotten stuck between the slutty teller and

the Mayor's wife. That last one was a nice touch. I didn't think she would go for someone of your stature, but we women all want the same thing, no matter how expensive the clothes."

My jaw dropped. Standing before me was my nemesis, Jade. We have a long history, Jade and I. Lovers. Enemies. Reluctant teammates. She would sell her grandmother for a big score, but, at the same time, I would trust her with my life.

"Is that why you're here? Our annual roll in the hay leaving us both bruised?"

While we spoke I turned my body so the dagger was on the farthest side from where she stood. I couldn't help but notice how gorgeous she looked in her skintight leather pants and matching corset. Her body wore a few scars and some of them were from me.

She laughed. "No, not this time, though we do have a bit of a journey together so maybe a few bruises won't hurt."

"What can I say, you bring out the beast in me. I suppose not all wizards are 100-year-old staff-reliant men in badly designed robes."

She rolled her eyes. "You know I prefer the term sorceress."

“Tomato, tomaaaaato.” I said, emphasizing the ah sound. “So, what is this journey you speak of and why would I want to go?”

“The boss will let you know the details, but he hired me to form a team to commit to the impossible job.”

A low whistle escaped my lips. “Oh, and you thought of me first, I’m honored.”

“Don’t be. You were my third choice. The other two had an unfortunate run-in with a fireball when they tried to get me arrested.”

I couldn’t tell from her face whether she was joking. Probably not.

“You won’t have to worry about that from me. So where to?” I already knew the answer. She gave it away when she said “the impossible job” instead of “an impossible job.”

“Why Mystery Island, of course.”

THE BARBARIAN



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I wasn't surprised that we were heading away from the only port where we could find a boat to take us to Mystery Island. Jade has always kept details of missions close to the vest, revealing only what she chose to.

"Jade, I thought you said we were going to Mystery Island?"

My frustration was evident in my tone. Despite Jade's promise of adventure, the past three days seemed wasted on a hard ride through a desolate trail. Calling our horses mangy would have been kind. I much preferred the more luxurious ride in a wagon where I might find time to entertain myself and a lady friend. To make matters worse, Jade's flirtatious banter ended the moment we set on the trail. She spurned every advance I made, even kneeling me twice when I merely reached out to steady her. I was beginning to feel that she suckered me into this trip with false intent. I was hungry, thirsty, and in a sour mood. In other words, my usual self.

"We will get there, I promise. We just have a few stops to make and things to pick up. Come on. There is a town up ahead, we can grab a drink. I'm buying."

Jade's sudden generosity raised the hairs on the back of my neck. There was no way this town wasn't a planned stop and Jade's frown indicated she expected trouble. That Jade's plans would land them in trouble. He wrapped my hand around the hilt of my dagger for reassurance and prepared for the worst.

The inn was small and crowded. It smelled only slightly better than my horse. I leaned against the bar as Jade negotiated with the innkeeper for a hot bowl of stew. Just as it arrived, I found a table in the dark rear corner where we

could eat the food in silence with a modicum of privacy and the ability to have the wall guard our backs. I kept my eye on Jade, noticing her furtive glances around the room. I may be dense, but even I knew that look.

“Expecting someone?” My ey asked, looking where Jade’s eyes kept darting.

To my surprise, I was answered by a swift kick in the shin.

“Discretion, Joran. Honestly, I have no idea how you developed a reputation as a master thief. A child would notice you staring.” I was bewildered. I was the one who noticed Jade staring, was she trying to turn the tables on me and blame me for the three approaching thugs?

“People in these parts don’t much like staring strangers,” the tall man said, taking the seat next to Jade, though he spoke directly to me.

His two buddies took their place at his flanks, echoing his sentiment with an eloquent “yeah”.

I sensed he was about to hit on Jade. “I would...” I tried to warn him but he silenced me with a glare.

“Now unless you want me to cut out your tongue, this pretty bird and I are going to discuss some private business. “

From his sneer and his buddies’ nervous laughter, I surmised the interloper’s business involved Jade naked. Jade

caught it too. When the man put his meaty hand on her leg, anger forming behind her eyes.

“Did you just call me a whore?” That was the man’s first and last mistake. Jade may be a lot of things; a fighter, a drunk, a greedy bitch, but a whore was not one of them. On another day, she might have shoved her knife between the tall man’s legs before he knew what was coming. He wasn’t that lucky.

Before either Jade or Joran could move, a pair of large, leathery hands gripped the gang leader’s shoulders and ripped him from his chair, tossing him like a rag doll over the heads of the crowd. From the sound of the breaking glass window and the thud as he crashed into the fence outside and began wailing, I estimated the window wasn’t the only thing broken.

His friends weren’t too pleased and advanced toward the brute who had intervened. The man took a face in each meaty hand and slammed their heads together. As they slumped to the ground, there was no doubt they would not be getting up anytime soon.

With the roughhousing quickly over, I was able to get a better look at the large well-weathered man looming over their table. His face was covered with scars, his body with tribal tattoos. He had seen many years and likely many wars. His tattered uniform was straight from the recent elf

and goblin skirmishes. From the looks of the stripes on his sleeve, he was a highly-decorated officer.

“No, Jade.”

His words lingered as he turned and walked back to the booth where he sat alone save for a tall flagon of steaming draconian mead. *Nasty stuff*. I had sampled it once. Three days later I awoke in a bathhouse sore and with my entire body covered with fingernail scratches. Sadly, I had no memory of the fun I must have had earning them.

“Nice fella,” I quipped.

“Yeah, a real chatterbox. It's partly because Torq and I had a thing once. It didn't end well.” Inexplicably, I felt a pang of jealousy and regrettably lashed out. “Like a daddy-daughter thing?”

To my surprise, Jade bristled, but refrained from slapping me.

“Come on, let's go change his mind.” Suddenly she was all business.

The crowd parted in front of Jade as she made her way to Torq's table. I grabbed our drinks and trailed behind, scouring for any other unsavory characters.

“I didn't need any help, Torq, I can take care of myself.” Jadeshe slid into the booth without waiting for an invitation.

“I know. I didn’t like the way he looked at you. You know how I get.” Even when he was calm, Torq was an imposing, and quite ugly figure.

As if he could hear my thoughts, he gave me a threatening glance. I silently vowed not to let Torq catch me flirting with Jade when he was within arm’s length.

Jade spoke again, her tone was soft, almost seductive. Most men would have a difficult time resisting her charms.

“Torq, we...” Torq wasn’t having any of it.

“No — I am retired! Also, I’m too old for this shit.”

Jade switched tactics and went right for the jugular.

“Fine, I suppose it won’t change your mind to know we are headed to Mystery Island.”

She paused, letting her words settle over him. I watched as Torq’s resolve faded. For a brief moment, I swear I saw a half smile. It was gone in an instance, replaced by a scowl. Torq was interested, but he needed more.

“What’s in it for me?” The age-old question.

“Elise is there.” Jade played her ace in the hole, though I had no idea what it meant.

If a well-worn suit of leather armor could brighten with hope, it would look something like the expression on Torq’s face.

“If you’re lying!” Torq seemed much less threatening now, though I was certain I didn’t want to be around if Jade’s information was less than accurate.

“I’m not. I received this last week.”

Jade passed Torq a torn parchment. After reading it, he nodded.

“I’ll need till morning. I have some loose ends to wrap up here. We can meet at Fig’s supplies.”

“Of course, I already reserved a room upstairs for Joran and me”

Torq’s face flashed with recognition.

“Joran?” Torq squinted in the my direction. “I thought the scoundrel smelled familiar. Best that my eyesight isn’t so good these days” Torq wrapped his giant hand around my neck and I started to choke. “You stole 300 sovereigns from me, boy.”

I blanched. I had no recollection of stealing anything from Torq, though I couldn’t possibly recall everyone I’ve stolen from. I was about to stammer an apology and make an empty promise about paying him back when we were done with Mystery Island. Suddenly Torq erupted in laughter.

“Did you see the look on his face?” Torq said to Jade as he released his hold, his hand slapping the table. “

Jade nodded while Torq continued.

"Relax, boy, I'm honored to be once again in the presence of the self-proclaimed King of Thieves. Torq Sveltan at your service."

Sveltan...Sveltan, no, it couldn't be. "Legend had it a barbarian by that name single-handedly kept ten score of goblins from entering Widow's Pass. But that was a long time ago. This couldn't be him, could it? "I realized too late that my thoughts were being said outloud.

"Aye, that was me. I can only handle five score now, but that should do on this trip. See you blokes in the morning."

With that, the hulking man drained his flagon and scuffled off with a spring in his step that had not been present earlier.

"Do we really need him?" I asked as we climbed the dusty stairs to our room. "He's older than dirt."

"And he can still crush you with two fingers. Yes, we need him. He is an essential part of my plan."

"Fine. But I'm not babysitting him. And what did you mean you had a thing with him?" I cannot explain why I asked. Jade's return into my life had me acting uncharacteristically emotional.

"What, did you think you were my only thing? Are you jealous?" I swear she was enjoying my discomfort.

Jade suddenly switched into a seductive posture, turned and moved into my personal space. I straightened, expecting danger, but instead, she brushed her lips against my cheek. My face burned crimson as I fought to hide his desire.

“You are jealous! Why, I didn’t think you cared considering I haven’t heard from you in months.”

Her anger wasn’t misplaced. I avoided Jade, but not for the reasons she believed. In her eyes, I was a scoundrel and a player, leaving a trail of broken hearts, including hers. The truth is, I was embarrassed about how things ended. I wasn’t good enough for someone like Jade but we always worked. Until we didn’t.

She ran her hands sensually over my body, evoking shivers of excitement beneath her touch. My caution was fading, but I remained still. Her left hand gently traced the outline of my manhood beneath my pants. Instinctively, I drew a breath. Was she trying to rekindle what we had? We never struggled with passion. I remained unsure of her intentions. Jade was as good a seductress as she was a sorceress but she hid her emotions well. She could just as easily stick a knife in my ribs as she could kneel and swallow my fleshy sword. I didn’t like my predicament.

“Hmm, it seems there is some life in that dagger of yours after all.” Jade rubbed the length of his shaft until I was convinced she was giving into her lust.

I placed my hands on Jade’s hips and leaned in for a kiss. she returned it with unbridled passion, our tongues hungrily tangling. Then suddenly, her left hand squeezed my cock in a vice-like grip.

“Ow! Easy Jade!”

Jade smiled mischievously. “Save it, stud. I promise if we succeed with this mission, we will revisit this scenario, but for now, I need you on top of your game and that means no fooling around, Got it?”

I could only moan as Jade released her grip.

“Got it. eyes on the prize. Speaking of which, care to give me some more details about the prize?”

“All in good time Joran. For now, rest up. In the morning, we have a fairy to catch.”

Oh no. Immediately I Joran groaned in protest. There was only one fairy who would even waste time helping humans on an adventure.

“You don’t mean Lysanda ...”

“Oh, you’ve met?” Jade’s tone betrayed her bemusement.

“You know damn well we’ve fucking met, Jade. Where do you think I got my scar?” He pulled his tunic off his

shoulder to show a jagged vein on otherwise unblemished skin.

“From what she told me, the way you treated her, you deserved it. I considered your....history, but we need an artificer and she is the best there is. At least the best one I can trust.” Jade through a blanket and a lumpy pillow on the floor and waved me over, taking the slightly more comfortable bed for herself.

She's right, damn her. Lysanda was the best artificer there was. Despite their history, she would give her life for me, or Jade for that matter. Besides, having a gorgeous fairy around might work in my favor and make Jade green with envy.

“Fine. I suppose we need to go to the forbidden forest to get her.” That would be a dangerous trip. Suddenly I was glad Torq would be traveling with us.

Jade shook her head. “Not this time. I do believe she is visiting her uncle in the nearby grove. Sleep well, Joran.” *So Lysandra was always part of the plan. She could have warned me sooner.*

She lightly brushed her lips against Joran's scar then disappeared into the washroom to prepare for bed, casting some warding spells on her way.

I watched intently staring at the curtains long after she left, my heart pounding in my chest. It was disconcerting

how, in a few days, she had undone the years of work I put in forgetting that she snuck out of camp and left me the night I proposed.

TINKER TINKER LITTLE STAR



“You said nearby. You also said, Grove. This is neither.” I couldn’t hide my displeasure as I wiped moss from his eyes for the third time in under an hour. “Jade, it’s been a three-day trek from the inn. Are you sure we aren’t los....uugh”

My tirade was interrupted as I was hit by a 4’10 flying ton

of bricks. The force knocked me three steps backwards in an overzealous attempt to greet me with a hug.

“What the...” Before I finished my question, the softest pair of lips in the realm created a vacuum seal around my mouth. I could never forget such a magical kiss.

“Lysandra!” I tried to return the hug, succeeding in grabbing her dainty derriere as she wrapped her arms and legs around my body. *At least someone remembers me fondly.*

In a jovial sing-song, Lysandra responded, “Joran, you scoundrel, it took you long enough.”

“It’s only been a three-day journey. We would have been here sooner if there weren’t so many wards and not enough will-o-wisps to guide us.” *How did she even know we were coming.*

She playfully slapped my arm, but pressed her tiny frame tightly against mine. I didn’t need reminding how sensual her curves were, or the naughty things she could do with them. Lysandra wasn’t your typical faerie. She was much taller and her skin a pale blue. Her mother was only half-faerie so Lysandra was stuck with 1/4 human blood. Still, she inherited the fey’s beauty and her curves could stop any man or fairy in their tracks. As I looked deep into Lysandra’s twinkling green eyes, my arousal began to respond.

"Silly, I wasn't talking about the trip from the Frog and Ale. I knew exactly when you would arrive." A metal bird about the size of a fist fluttered onto her shoulder. "When Jade told me you were coming, I sent out one of my drones to track you."

"No, I'm talking about the three years since you promised to 'come back soon.'"

She punched me again, hitting the exact location her knife had struck three years earlier when she caught me sneaking out of their cabin. This time her blow struck as hard as her words and I shivered as the invitation in her eyes faded into anger. I wasn't certain which jilted lover was the most dangerous, Lysandra or Jade, but I had a feeling I might find out on this trip.

I admit I could have handled things better. Lysandra and I met on my expedition to the Faewild Dungeon to recover her tribe's sacred tome. We immediately hit it off. A real firecracker, her personality drew me in and her body did the rest. For the first few months, all we did was find new places and wild positions to sate our desires. Our passion seemed insatiable. Other than sex, we really had nothing in common. She was a lover of science and I, a lover of romance. Inevitably, life got in the way and my wanderlust kicked in. I tried talking to her about my intent to resume adventuring, but Lysandra can be a bit

difficult when she doesn't get her way. My shoulder wasn't the only injury she gave me that day. My only recourse was to sneak out in the dark cover of the night. In my haste, I forgot about the machines she had patrolling the camp. Lysandra was on me in a flash, stabbing my shoulder with my own dagger as if hurting me would make me stay. Luckily, I was able to escape with my life, using the last charge of my ring of invisibility.

I survived that night, but I never forgot the look in her eyes as I faded from sight. The same sadness that pierced my soul as Lysandra held my gaze just long enough for me to understand the depth of the hurt I caused. Then, as suddenly as it came, the anger dissipated, and she returned to her extremely friendly mood.

"You're here now, and we are going on an adventure together. Just like old times. Hey, speaking of old, what happened to the other guy you came with?"

Jade laughed, a rare, but beautiful sound as she finally acknowledged Lysandra's presence.

"You mean Torq? He isn't that old, barely seventy. You're at least three times his age."

I swear i detected a twinge of jealousy as she turned to see me wrapped up in Lysandra, her tiny, apple bottom, seated firmly in my palms.

“Shhh. You’ll make poor Joran go soft with that talk.” Lysandra could quip with the best of them and I blushed as she revealed my current state of arousal to the woman I couldn’t get out of my head. As if to keep me hard, she squirmed her hips and pressed her head on my chest.

Jade avoided the subject, getting back to business. “Alright. There will be plenty of inns to continue your, um, reunion on the way to the port. In the meantime, I need to speak with Pai.”

“Uncle Pai? What do you want him for?”

“He’s the only one I know who has been to Mystery Island and returned to tell the tale. I need to know what we are facing.”

“Good luck getting him to talk about that. He hasn’t been the same since he returned. Push the topic too far and he might just blast your head off with Faerie Fire. Come on, I’ll take you to him after we eat.”

Lysandra wriggled out of my arms as quickly as she had tackled me. She flew over to Jade and gave her a slightly less passionate welcome, then returned to my side, wrapping her arm possessively around mine. As we walked to Pai’s hut, Lysandra filled my ear with tales of her recent tinker projects, her shimmering wings flapping excitedly behind her. More than once I caught Jade’s brooding glare. Be-

cause Lysandra wouldn't stop talking, I could only return a sheepish grin and a shrug.

Lysandra led us to a long picnic table covered with a sumptuous feast. I was impressed. The table was covered with Jade and my favorite foods, not an easy feat in this neck of the woods. I hadn't realized Jade and Lysandra were that close, in fact, until three days ago, I didn't even know they had met. I took the opportunity to seat myself from with some breathing room between Jade and Lysandra to give my arousal some time to subside. Lysandra had an aura about her that made it literally hard.

I spent most of the meal, talking with some of the young faeries who were eager to hear tales of a devilish rogue while Jade pumped Lysandra for information on how to convince her Uncle Pai to share his information. As the sun set, the fae lights shimmered softly, creating a magical cacophany of colors in the grove. *How could I have forgotten how beautiful the nighttime is in faewild?* Despite knowing it was part of their magic, I felt the urge to dance, to relax, maybe remain here forever. A look at Jade revealed a similarly relaxed expression. *Mystery Island could wait, maybe settling down with Lysandra wasn't such a bad idea after all.*

"Skoll!" A short man, bald except for a tuft of hair above each of his long, pointed ears, stormed out of a nearby

purple hut. "I've told you a thousand times not to use glamours on our guests!"

"BUT UNCLE PAI!" a relatively young Fae boy pouted. "They were so tired and angry when they arrived, I just wanted them to stay and play for a bit. I would have released the spell eventually."

Pai whispered something unintelligible and a fog I had not previously noticed shimmered, then dispersed. Suddenly, I remembered the mission. I didn't need to see Jade's face to know she was struggling to hold back her anger. It wasn't directed at the child, Skoll. Jade had a bit of an ego when it came to her sorcery and falling for a simple fae glamour stung her far worse than Lysandra's dagger hurt me. We looked at Skoll, then Pai, then Lysandra who was almost successfully stifling a laugh. Suddenly she held back no longer.

"Look at your faces. Another few minutes and I might have had my loverboy forever!" We all knew that wasn't true. Fae glamours are potent but short lasting and very draining. Skoll had already fallen asleep on a bench.

Lysandra's mirth was contagious and soon I was joining in the laughter, dancing with the faeries at my own free will. Jade took longer to come around. Humor and forgiveness aren't in her nature, but eventually, the corner of her mouth twitched and a tortured attempt at a

chuckle escaped her lips. She didn't dance with us, but she watched me intently. After a while, her guard dropped and she laughed along with the tribe. Other than the occasional snicker, I had never heard Jade laugh. *Why do I find that so irresistible?* I didn't get to answer myself as the frivolity soon subsided and Jade bowed to Pai. "If I may borrow some of your time, Master Pai."

Pai waved off her honorific. "Just call me Pai. Bronwyn's youngest daughter is always welcome in the fey groves."

Joran made a mental note to question Jade about the familiarity of her family to Pai. As Jade discussed the trip to Mystery Island, Lysandra wrapped her arm around mine and dragged me to her workshop. Before I knew it, she had me on a couch-sized bed and was writhing seductively in my lap, not attempting to be subtle about her attraction.

"Lys..."

Her kiss smothered my protest, fading my resistance into oblivion.

"I missed your kiss, Joran. We don't have much time right now, but can't I just have one little taste?"

I didn't need Lysandra's hands working their way under my waistband to know what she was intending. A dalliance would have been nice, but we never got the chance to go any further. Outside a strange keening broke out. Joran recognized it as an early warning siren that the grove was

breached by unfriendlies, courtesy of one of Lysandra's inventions.

Sure enough, as soon as I had removed Lysandra's hand from his pants and rushed outside, I saw what set off the alarm. At least twenty Goblins stood at the edge of the ward circle where an old hag weaved ancient magic with wildly waving arms. The Goblins were as ugly as the Fae were beautiful. They carried crudely crafted maces and wore studded leather armor that covered all but the right side of their chest.

It was out of the ordinary for Goblins and Hags to work together and my gut told me this was not just a random raid. My suspicion was confirmed as the final ward broke under the Hag's magic and she shouted, "Find the thief and the girl and kill them."

My bow was at the ready before they could move and I let loose a torrent of arrows. The Goblins were surprisingly quick, likely enhanced by the Hag's black spells. The camp burst to life, even the children began chanting glammers and throwing stones. Explosions from Fae traps kept the monsters at bay long enough for me to take out three. My priority was to protect Lysandra. I did not have to bother. A piercing scream echoed in the grove as Lysandra flew through the air throwing knives made of light at the invaders. When I blinked, four of them lay dead on the

ground and another was trying desperately to free itself from where her deadly aim had pinned him to a tree.

I realized the dwindling number of Goblins would not be the problem and instead I searched for the Hag. I almost missed her, but the snap of a twig gave away her location. and my arrow in the back of her neck broke her invisibility spell. The next pierced her leathery skin and struck her down. I gripped the hilt of my lucky dagger, thanking its return for the fortuitous twig break.

While the fae fought the rest of the horde, I searched the Hag for her mushroom bag. It wouldn't do to have her come back to life to find us again. She kept it attached to her belt, inside a larger bag containing some components and a scroll with crude I tossed the bag into the camp fire. As the mushrooms burned, so did her body until she decayed into ash.

At that moment, Jade and Pai emerged from his cottage. She surveyed the smoldering puddle that was once the Hag and counted 15 dead Goblins. Once the Hag was killed, the remaining ones broke rank and ran for their lives. They must have been enchanted into her service. Jade looked to me, seeking an explanation, but once again, all I could do was roll my eyes and shrug.

“What did they want?” Jade asked, unconcerned about anybody's safety as she could see we all escaped unharmed.

I was about to shoot off a snide remark when I remembered the Hag's scroll. I scanned it quickly.

"It seems I am no longer the only one on the run." I tossed Jade the worn parchment.

Jade read it with a frown. It contained crude drawings of Joran and herself and the words, Wanted — Dead.

At that moment, Torq arrived, leading a horse through the woods. He was taking great care to move silently and avoid stepping on any Fae. The dichotomy of watching a barbarian respectfully tiptoe through their home caused me to stifle my amusement. As they neared, I could hear a muffled voice coming from what appeared to be a man tied to the back of the steed.

"Who is that?" I asked as Torq approached.

Torq didn't answer, instead untied the Half-Elf and held him in the air by the shirt collar until the stranger spoke.

"Lyrion Shadowdancer, at your," he paused for a moment, "conscripted service".

"Torq, I told you to ask him nicely!" Jade yelled. It was odd seeing Jade as the .

"I did, but he insisted he was booked for months. I decided to um, cancel some of his bookings."

"You cost me hundreds of gold pieces," Lyrion shouted.

"I heard you play. You'd be lucky if you drew twenty."

"What do you know about art, you bloody barbarian."
Lyrion moped.

I could tell both men were exaggerating their stories.

"Well, the gang is all here!" Jade pronounced. "Thank you Pai for your advice and hospitality. I do hope you will welcome us back when we bring your niece home safe and sound." Her optimism meant Pai gave her the information she needed.

With that, we gathered up our provisions, plus a few ration packs Lysandra had put together, neatly wrapped with sparkling bows, and headed toward the port city of Tanama where Jade said we would catch the boat that would bring us to Mystery Island.

THE DRUNKEN PIRATE

Tanama wasn't your typical port town. If it weren't for the large body of water, you wouldn't even know there was a port. The townsfolk liked it that way. The population was comprised of cutthroats, robbers, and pirates who wanted to lay low between jobs without being bothered by the law. The stench of the sewers that ran beneath the ground was matched only by the stench of the townsfolk. There was no law in Tanama, it was every man for itself and because no one would mind if you shot your best friend over drinks, there was very little crime occurring. Travelers avoided the place, preferring the friendlier port of Samanistra a few miles up the coast. This is why Tanama was the perfect place for myself, Jade, Torq, Lysandra, and a reluctant Lyrion to find a boat to sail to Mystery Island.

The trek from the Fey village was long and arduous, but otherwise uneventful. It took us three days when we could have made it in two if we weren't concerned about being tracked. We took advantage of the kind hospitality of the local farms, sleeping in barns along the route. Of course Torq and Jade kept watch in case the farmers spotted us. People are so much more hospitable when they don't know you are using their facilities. On the last night, the rigors of travel began getting to us.

"We need to lay low. If anyone knew where we were headed, we could be in danger." Jade was always the cautious one.

"Having a sparkly princess here doesn't make it easy to 'lay low.'" Torq quipped.

Lysandra tossed a rock, just missing Torq's groin.

"Hey lady, I wasn't referring to you, it's the freaking Bard who won't shut up."

"I don't recall asking to be part of this operation, Dad." I wasn't sure if Lyrion was being sarcastic, or if he really was Torq's son. There was certainly no resemblance.

Jade stormed off, muttering something about not being paid enough for this.

After a short time, I realized Jade had been gone too long and left the rest of the crew snipping at each other around

the very small campfire Jade had allowed. Lysandra would keep a sisterly eye on the boys.

I found Jade standing at the top of a nearby hill, looking out over Tanama in the distance. It wasn't much of a view.

"We should arrive before noon tomorrow." I stopped a few feet away so Jade didn't slice my throat. She had a reputation for shooting first and asking questions later. I was safe this time, Jade continued staring into the darkness.

"Fuck off, Joran. I'm fine. Save your charm for someone who gives a crap."

"What is wrong with you, Jade? You chose this team, you planned the trip and you are the only one who knows what we are walking into. So what has your loincloths in a bunch? You used to be fun, even in the worst foxholes."

Jade turned toward me and I could see she'd been crying. This was new. I wasn't sure how to handle her tears as I'd never seen her cry before.

"Look, sorceress, I know you and I have a history, but at the end of the day you know you can trust me. You've been so dark on this mission. So why don't you tell me what is really going on." I stood my ground, not willing to be kept in the dark any longer.

"It's better that you don't know. This isn't just any mission. I can't fail" Jade, cryptic as always, had let her guard

down. This wasn't just about the mission, it was about Jade's confidence in herself.

"What's that supposed to mean? Come on J, somehow you convinced me to go on another of your crazy missions after I swore I would never do so again. You got the ancient one out of retirement and you stole a bard. And we all know how jealous you are of Lysandra..." It was a knee jerk reaction which I regretted almost immediately.

Jade interrupted me, shouting, "I am not jealous of Lysandra!

Calmly and gingerly, especially for me, I wrapped my fingers around Jade's wrist and slowly pushed the hand holding a knife to my throat until she lowered it to her side. I forgot how quickly Jade could move when she wanted to. She had a career in theiving waiting for her if she got tired of moving mountains with her magic.

"What I am trying to say is only you could have brought this group together. A master thief, a once legendary barbarian, The most resourceful tinkerer in the land, and a slightly tone-deaf, bard. No matter what awaits us, we can handle it. Speaking of which, why is the bard here anyway?" I hadn't thought about it before, but we were trying to move quietly, did we really need a bard? Especially one who didn't want to be here.

“Lyrion has a particular set of talents we will need. Now go away.” The edge was gone from Jade’s voice but she remained distant.

“Not until you...”

In a sudden change of demeanor I wasn’t expecting, Jade silenced me by pressing her lips softly against mine. The urgent need in her kiss stirred more than just a physical reaction.

“Thank you, Joran. I know you’re right. I’m just worried, about what trouble awaits on Mystery Island.”

“Hold on, Jade,” My hands had encircled her waist. It had been a long time since I held her like this. Standing in the darkness, holding her, it was like a fond memory brought to life. “You mean you don’t know either? No wonder you’re scared.”

Jade pressed her body against mine, her head resting on my chest, turned away so I couldn’t read her face. “I’m not scared!” she said, but her voice trembled, and she lacked the conviction of her earlier protest.

I took the hint, content that I had seen Jade’s vulnerable side, “OK Jade. Forget I asked.”

It seemed like an eternity that we stood in silence, holding each other. My body was responding to the moment. *Maybe I should take her there. Maybe that was what she wants.*

I pushed the thought out of my mind. No doubt it would be good for me, perhaps for both of us, but the time wasn't right, the reason wasn't right. No matter how good it felt, we would both regret it in the morning. *No, Joran. For once, keep it in your pants. She will be better off just knowing you're near.*

As Joran walked away, Jade watched longingly. *No Joran, I won't forget that you came to find me, it was a nice gesture and if we get out of this alive, I will remember to thank you properly.* Her thoughts faded into the night, dreams of Joran's strong arms supporting her brought peace to her sleep.

I spent the ride to Tanama in silence, even Lyssandra's flirtations couldn't bait me into my usual playful banter. Jade's mood troubled me, but she made it clear she wasn't going to talk about it. I witnessed her vulnerability for the first time and it was cause for concern. There was something more than just a mission going on here but I had no choice but to let it play out. I fondled my dagger, drawing comfort from its place at my hip.

Five hours after dawn, we arrived at their destination. The stench of urine and beer drowned out the aroma of the morning tide.

At this hour, the town seemed deserted save for last night's drunks sleeping in a pool of piss and vomit.

"Lovely place, Jade!". Even Lyssandra was finding it difficult to be optimistic and her sarcasm bit through her forced cheer. I could see her trying to wrinkle her nose to block out the stench.

Torq came to the rescue. He let loose a hearty laugh. "I don't know, it reminds me of home!".

Suddenly, Torq was regaling the gang with a tale of his younger days sleeping in horse troughs and how he had to flay his best friend to use as a blanket for warmth. Joran was almost certain he made up the part about flaying his friend for a blanket. Almost.

"Jade, how are we going to find a ship here? Even if we found a captain, I doubt they would be sober enough to leave the dock let alone steer through the Malevolent Straits." The lack of anyone sober in sight was beginning to worry me.

"Have faith, pretty boy, I still have a friend or two in these parts." I smiled. For Jade to call me pretty boy meant she had conquered at least one of her demons. It was

a nickname she hadn't used for me in years, one which evoked memories of the good times we had.

She led us to an inn with a split wooden sign reading Drunken Bastard in three languages. The sign clattering loudly against another sign nailed to the rotting wood panels that read 'The Tortured Pirate'. I guess new management was too lazy to remove the prior owner's signage.

Other than the bartender, only one patron was in the establishment. His right eye was covered with an eye patch and he wore a triangular-shaped hat bearing a skull and crossbones.

"Get a round for all of us," Jade commanded in a tone I knew better than refuse.

Without waiting for a response, she made her way to the pirate. I placed my arm below the bar and secretly waggled the fingers of my left hand. Suddenly I could hear Jade's conversation with the drunk. I thought I hid it well, but Jade's disapproving glare let me know she knew what I had done. Still, she made no move to dispel my cantrip, allowing me to hear their parlay. Ironically, it was Jade who taught me the spell.

"Do you have it?" She asked the man.

"Aye, but with that motley crew, you won't likely survive."

I saw him pass Jade a key.

"Thanks. Can you get me there?"

"Aye, I can take you. But he won't be s"

Is this trash our captain? No, there is something off with him. As a rogue prince, I trusted my instinct. So when Jade stood and followed the pirate out a back door, I was right behind, at least until a well manicured hand stopped me at the door.

"Let her go, she needs to deal with this one herself." The stranger's voice belied his wealthy upbringing, save for a slight hitch at the end of each sentence as if he had been away from home for a long time.

A tall, lanky man in noble finery who looked out of place in this hell hole placed his other hand on Joran's chest.

I protested, "He's a danger. He's not fit to captain a vessel, let alone the one we need."

The man snorted. "You think he's going to be your captain? With that fake pirate accent and enough alcohol to get the famed Army of the Ages drunk for days? I thought you were supposed to be some sort of master rogue, you can't even figure out this easy puzzle."

Now that he mentioned it, I realized the pirate was all wrong for the job. I realized his error, cursing myself for letting my feelings for Jade cloud my judgment. The man was a red herring. The real captain stood beside me.

“So it’s you then?” I said, blushing sheepishly at being misled.

“Perhaps. If you all can convince me it’s worth my trouble, but that’s for later. Right now you need to buy me some dwarven ale and tell me about that fancy blade hanging by your side. Jade will be fine. Her dad will give her the map, even if she has to pry it from his cold dead hands.”

There it was. The missing piece of the puzzle. It sent a chill up my spine. Jade hated her father. No wonder she was coiled up tighter than a rattlesnake about to strike. Her tension made her more dangerous than the snake.

“Corwin,” the man said, offering a firm handshake, then taking a seat at the bar. “Barkeep, your finest ale, pronto, my friend Joran is buying.”

The next hour went quickly as Corwin was a likable sort. By the time Jade returned, her cheek bleeding from what appeared to be a dagger’s point, Corwin and I were in good spirits as if we were old friends. The blood on her face wasn’t much of a concern. If her father was anything like Jade, he would have slashed first and asked questions later. It was the blood on Jade’s knuckles that sobered me quickly.

“You didn’t kill him, did you.” It was a legitimate question which I honestly was afraid to know the answer.

Jade smiled fully for the first time since they left the Fey. “No, but the old man might sully a few nurses exaggerating the broken nose I gave him. I see you met our ride.”

That smile coupled with the returning gleam in Jade’s eyes gave me cause to relax. I had forgotten how pretty she was when she wasn’t so gloomy.

Corwin broke his trance. “Don’t jump the gun, Jade. There is a matter of my fee.”

Jade tossed Corwin one-half of the key. “What you want is waiting for you. You’ll get the other half of the key when we are returned safely.”

“And if you don’t survive? I mean, sometimes things happen...”

I wondered how well Corwin and Jade were connected for Corwin to feel comfortable goading her in such a way. Had Jade been with everyone on this trip?

“Well, then you will have to pry the other half of the key from my cold dead hands, won’t you?”

Corwin laughed, his smooth baritone voice suddenly grating on my ego. I hadn’t expected to have competition for Jade. Then again, I hadn’t expected to care.

“Now who is jealous, big boy?” Jade said, running her nails across my arm as she headed to the bar.

“OK team, we have ourselves the best captain this side of Demon’s point. Take the rest of the afternoon to relax,

we leave at dawn. The good barkeep has offered us rooms for the night. Try not to keep each other up too late.” She gave me a long, sultry stare. I couldn’t decide if her eyes conveyed a promise or a warning, but suddenly, I wanted very much to find out

THE DARK SHADOW

It wasn't the worst room I ever stayed in. Compared to the rest of the city, the inn's accommodations were surprisingly clean. Like any good rogue, the first thing I did was search under the bed, in the closet, and even in the armoire for threats. Then I checked the locks on the windows, setting two iron flacons on each windowsill. If anyone got past the my wards, they would have to be a ghost to avoid knocking the tall mugs to the floor.

Satisfied, I sat on the edge of the bed and stripped to my skivvies. There was no bathroom attached to my room. No reason to expect one either. Only the king's suite would have its own facilities and I doubt Jade was springing for the royal boudoir. I wrapped myself in a towel, grabbed the remaining nub of soap I carried in my pouch, and marched unabashedly down the hall to the common bath.

It could hardly be called a bath. The room consisted of two circular springs connected by cobbled paths. Two crude sinks stood in the center. Separated by a wall were stalls for relieving oneself in wooden chamber pots.

I was in luck. The springs were empty. Climbing in, I immediately felt relief as a week of dirt softened and separated from my body. I scrubbed myself with a flannel patch as if it were my first bath, then dove under the water to make sure I got the dirt out of my hair. It was while I was submerged that I saw the shadow of someone else's presence. I waited, wondering if they would pass by, or pose a threat, but instead, a pair of dainty feet broke through the surface. No threat here. When I came up for air, I was treated to Lysandra's naked body sitting on the edge of the spring, her legs dangling into the water. Magical ripples through her torso with every breath made it difficult for me to look away.

"Oh, I just knew there would be predators in the water, just waiting to take advantage of a helpless, beautiful, naked young woman." Her body shimmered with fey allure, the innate kind, not any spell. She parted her legs as she continued. "Oh handsome devil, if you must use me for your pleasure, be gentle, for I have yet to taste sinful desires."

I couldn't contain my laughter anymore. "You are no more a virgin than I am a priest and you are in no way helpless, though the beautiful part is undeniable"

Lysandra glowered at me. "You're no fun. You were supposed to play along and ravish me."

She dove into the water, swam quickly to my side, and climbed into my lap. "We have some unfinished business, my sweet." Her fleshy bottom wriggled against my swiftly rising dagger. Unlike in the grove, nothing separated our bodies. She presented a nearly irresistible offering, one I would have sampled eagerly only a week ago.

She wrapped my arms around her, intentionally letting them settle on her firm bosom. Was I mistaken, or were her breasts larger than I remembered? It was difficult to discern what was glamour or simply Lysandra's sensual frame.

Using every ounce of willpower, I dove under the water, staring at her legs with a pang of regret as I swam between her thighs and to the far side of the pool.

"Lyss," I said when I surfaced. "You know I would love nothing better than to give you what you want. But we have to sail early on a dangerous quest and I think we both need to keep our wits about us."

Her face twisted in a mix of anger and sadness. "Are you rejecting me? AGAIN!" The water started to heat up.

Lysandra had a bad habit of losing control of her magic when she was emotional.

“Come on Lysandra. You know I would never reject you, again. I only have a few spots on my body left that aren't scarred and I plan to keep it that way. I promise, if we get back from Mystery Island alive, we can pick up where we left off.” My words rang hollow. While I hoped we all made it back alive from our journey, I also hoped Lysandra would forget this bargain.

My promise seemed to placate her and the water began to cool. I didn't intent to hurt her, but just like with Jade, I struck a nerve. I pride myself on my intelligence, wisdom and charm. I can talk any woman into my bed, but I just never learned how to handle them after.

“I will hold you to it, Mr. Predator!” she cracked a half-smile, her playfulness returning, and splashed water at me. Then she teleported herself away. I rose from the water, my cock sticking forward like a compass pointing due north.

“Clap....Clap...Clap”

I turned toward the slow applause to find Jade leaning against the door jamb clad only in a towel, clapping slowly.

“I'm impressed, pretty boy. I didn't think you could refuse anyone, let alone our dear fey princess. Even I had a hard time fighting off the effects of her glamour. Hellfire,

even if she didn't have the spell, that body is irresistible. She must have some siren blood in her. I didn't think you had it in you."

Jade had seen me naked many times before tonight, but I was suddenly very self-conscious of my nakedness. I looked for my towel, but it was gone from the small stool where I left it.

"Looking for this?" Jade dangled my towel like a bull-fighter's cape. "Come get it!" I thought she intended to turn and run, but she remained, beckoning me over. I had two choices: parade through the hall to my room naked, or try to regain the towel. It had been a hot minute since Jade relaxed enough to be playful, so I chose to close the gap between us.

Jade hid the towel behind her back as I approached. When I stepped into her personal space, she halted me with a hand on my naked chest. Shivers of arousal rippled out from her touch as the warmth of her palm I could have pushed forward, but I wasn't sure how far she was willing to go. With a soft thud, my towel dropped to the ground. Another thud as Jade's fell too. Despite the battle scars, her body was as sensual as Lysandra's, without the benefit of the magic. She reached between us, grasping my erection between her fingers. It had been years, but she still remembered how to touch me. After a few strokes, she

leaned close, kissing my lips softly. Then she whispered, her breath warm on my cheek.

“You need to reject me the way you did Lysandra. If you don’t, that lie about the mission being the reason will be exposed and she will be devastated. You know she has eyes and ears everywhere.” As if for emphasis, I heard something scuttle across the floor.

Do it quickly.” She kissed my chest. “because,” another kiss. “I don’t want to stop.”

I hate it when Jade is right. I wondered if she was intentionally teasing me, knowing I had no choice but to reject her. Every fiber in my being wanted to wrap her legs around my waist and impale her on my rigid, throbbing cock. Right now, it was getting difficult to think as Jade’s strokes were long and slow. She was right, though. Lysandra may have teleported away, but if she sensed Jade’s presence, she would be watching. Tonight was proving to be the most difficult challenge of the adventure, and Jade’s increasingly urgent caress of my shaft was not making it easier.

I took a step back, placing my hands on her shoulders to keep her at bay. “Jade, you know how easy it would be to take things further, but you, of all people, should know we have to sail early on a dangerous quest and I think we both need to keep our emotions out of this.”

Jade slapped my face, hard enough to be heard, but in a manner we both learned when we pretended to be part of an acting troupe. There was no pain thanks to the way she cupped her hand. Nothing more than a sting. I drew on my acting skills and shouted, "What the hell Jade!"

"I can't believe you are rejecting me, Joran. I don't know what I was thinking, letting my guard down with you again."

Jade stormed back to her room, leaving both our towels on the ground.

As I covered myself for the walk to my room, I was certain I saw a shimmer of one of her machines outside the baths confirming Lysandra was spying. I didn't need to act confused on the walk back. It was how I felt.

Uncertain how I was going to survive this trip without having one of them cut off my manhood, I collapsed onto the bed, closed my eyes, and...."

"Wake up!" The voice and the accompanying pounding on the door were unmistakably Torq's.

The sun was bright through the window. I must have slept later than I planned. I hurriedly dressed and met Torq at the door just before he broke it down.

"I thought I was the old man, but here you can barely get out of bed. Come on, you missed breakfast." Torq tossed me a hard roll and some jerky and shambled toward the

exit, carrying a large pack. I gratefully downed the food and chased it with some wine in my flask.

Pausing to make sure I had everything including my dagger I hurriedly caught up to the team at the dock in time for Corwin to lay down the wooden planks that would allow us to come aboard his ship.

Long, sleek, and dyed entirely black, our transport looked as sinister as its name, *The Dark Shadow*.

“Welcome aboard lads and lasses. If we make it across the Sea of Storms, through the Devil’s anus, and past the jagged cliffs, we should be at Mystery Island in four days. I hope you brought your sea legs.” Corwin had abandoned his aristocrat outfit in favor of torn pantaloons and a white shirt. Sterotypical pirate gear.

I caught Lyssandra’s glance as we boarded. She was in her usual good spirits, even sending a wink my way. It seems Jade’s plan worked. I looked in her direction, hoping to catch another smile. Even a wink would do. She was leaning over the rail with a scowl on her face. I thought about approaching, but Corwin beat me to it. A huge part of me wished I had taken advantage of her by the pools, but I knew it would have made the next four days miserable, perhaps even jeopardizing the mission. With nowhere else to go, I joined Torq and Lyrion in our tiny cabin put my things away, and brooded. It was going to be a long trip.

THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM



Depositphotos standard license artist digital- storm

The aptly named Sea of Storms battered the Dark Shadow for hours. Grey fog rolled over the dark waters while the sky was obscured by clouds. How the navigator steered us past the treacherous rocks, I will never know. The sailors

all told me the storm was in the center of the convergence of low and high fronts from every direction, but I suspected some nature magic was afoot.

“You don’t want to go in there, matey!” A sailor I recognized as First Mate Rollins blocked my entrance into the Captain’s quarters with a long wooden cane.

“Hey, I was invited, bub.” I hoped my bravado was convincing enough for the 6’5 ruffian to back off.

“Suit yourself. The last passenger who went in there without Corwin’s permission became fish fodder.”

“If I wanted to steal anything, I certainly wouldn’t walk in through the door while you were nearby. I was happy to have the opportunity to verbally spar with someone who didn’t want to see me naked.

Rollins huffed and turned on a heel, returning to the deck, presumably to let Corwin know I was snooping around. That was fine. I merely wanted to talk.

Before I could put my hand on the lock, Corwin strolled up the three steps to my side.

“Rollins said you were looking for me?” His voice was friendly but guarded.

“Just looking to chat with the Captain of this fine ship.”

Cowin smiled, seemingly letting down his guard a bit. Well, come in and have a drink. The Malevolent Straits are a good 5 hours from here and if we are heading into

the Devil's anus, we might as well do it with mead in our bellies.

I laughed nervously. The thought of the rough and dangerous black water of the Malevolent Straits and the frothy furnace of the Anus reminded me why I hated sea travel. There was nowhere to run in a pinch, and I wasn't a stellar swimmer. Rogues didn't like to be trapped.

The Captain led me into his quarters and poured him a pint. Considering we were on a ship that just left the stinkiest town in the seven harbors, the drink was surprisingly palatable.

"So, rogue, what's on your mind, and get to the point. The straits will be rough this time of year and I need to get some rest."

I considered beating around the bush, but there was one question that required answers, one I needed to know before I could trust the Captain with my life.

"What's in it for you?"

Corwin laughed raucously. "I thought you were going to ask me about my intentions with Jade or Lysandra. But I should have pegged you for being all about the money."

His words stung. If he only knew that I could care less about the money. I wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of thinking we were rivals.

"If I thought you were a threat to either of them, you'd be swimming with the sharks. However, you don't seem like the type I can intimidate to back off, nor do I have a claim to either of them. They are grown women. I am sure they can handle either of us. No, this is a dangerous mission and I need to know if we can trust you to get us there, help us get through, and give us safe passage home. Jade seems to think we can, but she has a history of trusting the wrong men, myself included."

To my surprise, the Captain let down his guard, slapped me on the shoulder and said, "Right you are to be cautious m'boy. I appreciate your honesty. And you should know, though both women are certainly shapely lasses with brains to match, the ladies are missing a d if you know what I mean." When I clearly didn't, he explained. "My preference lies with the laddies, not the ladies. And I never mix pleasure with business."

I couldn't help but snicker. It wasn't the best joke, but anyone who could make a half-assed funny remark just before heading to our near-certain doom, was a stand up chap in my book.

Despite my outward bravado, it was nice to know Corwin wasn't going to be my competition. I still needed reassurance as to his trustworthiness.

Corwin read my mind. "Very well." He took the 1/2 of the key I saw Jade give him earlier out from under his shirt, which was now fitted to a chain. "See this key? It opens the greatest treasure in the world. One I have been searching for since my father passed some 10 years ago."

"With all due respect," Joran interrupted, "Treasure doesn't make one trustworthy. What stops you from stealing the key, the gold, and stranding us on Mystery Island?"

Corwin laughed again, this time with a tone of sadness.

"My dear boy. This treasure is not monetary. It is my father's last gift, hidden away on Mystery Island. I've spent my life trying to find it, but the Isle is a magical place filled with treacherous creatures and powerful wards. I've been trying to convince Jade to form a party to escort me there for years. Yes, I see you get it now. I am the one who hired your little team. And the key? Well, the key has a magic of its own. A spell my father worked out. You see, he broke the key into 2 pieces and enchanted them. Then he gave them to Jade. Once in her possession, they bonded to her. If they are stolen, they will be worthless, even if the thief finds the lock. Their magic can only work if passed freely from their host. Without Jade's consent, her half of the key is as useless as a wooden toothpick against the doors that hold the gift."

Joran nodded, finally understanding, though he had picked quite a few locks with a toothpick. “What exactly is the gift?

“No one knows. When he passed, he told me only that it was my inheritance. My father was a cryptic man, and sometimes an ass, so this is his way of teaching me some god forsaken lesson. He knew that he can’t take the pirate out of me, so he gave me one grand adventure. No need to worry Joran, you get me safely to the cave where it is hidden, I will get you safely home. If we fail, none of us will likely get out alive.”

We shared a half keg of that ale before I finally left the Captain’s chamber relieved, mostly. I couldn’t shake a nagging feeling that there was more to this story than Corwin revealed. But, it was enough to satisfy his doubts, for now.

Slap!

Torq’s giant hand cracked against Joran’s back. “Having a heart-to-heart with the Captain, eh? From the smell of things, he shared his finest with ye. You didn’t think to bring some back for your friends?”

Joran could tell Torq was teasing, so he responded in kind. “If I had any friends on board, I would have shared it with them.”

Torq laughed. “Well at least have a drink with me and I’ll tell you about Elise.”

The mess below deck was empty this time of night but there was a keg next to the bar and a few chairs that didn’t look like they would collapse under the barbarian’s hefty ass. The ale wasn’t as good as the Captain’s mead but it went down smoother than expected. While we were pouring, Lyrion appeared in the corner with his lute, seemingly recovered from his latest pout about being carted away on a ship. Oddly, the ale developed a more enjoyable flavor once Lyrion began to play.

“You were going to tell me about Elise? Is she a lost love?” It would be fitting if it were being that Jade and Lysandra were both women I had loved and lost.

It was Torq’s turn to laugh. “You could say that. Elise is my daughter. Haven’t seen her since she was a wee lass, but I love her more for it. It was 15 years ago when her mother left me while I was on an adventure. Elise was 10 and already proficient with a bow, which she gets from me, and her magic, which she gets from her druid mother. Thankfully she got her elven looks from her mother as well.

Joran nodded, but was wise enough not to comment on Torq’s ugly mug.

Torq continued. "I never saw her again, though she always found a way to keep in touch. At first, she studied in a convent but the clerisy was not for her. When her mother passed, she took up in the forest with some distant druid relatives, but that too wasn't for her. She learned their skills quickly and then moved on until she answered a call to sail to Mystery Island. She's gone silent ever since, well, except for Jade. They were friends as children, though Jade was a bit older. Jade used to watch Elise while I was fighting in the wars. As she grew older, when Elise was in trouble but afraid to ask for my help, she sought Jade's advice. Same with any thoughts about boys. Anyway, about 2 years ago, Jade got a message from her claiming she was trapped on Mystery Island, the captive of the cruel King of Monsters. She said she was being treated well, but he wouldn't let her leave. She begged her to come save her. She also begged her not to tell me. Even when she is at her worst, she doesn't want me to worry."

"Sounds a bit sketchy, almost like a trap." Even if it wasn't a trap, I sensed something sinister is afoot.

"Agreed. Jade thought so, too. But she did some scrying and confirmed enough of Elise's letter for us to believe she is on the island and being held against her will. It is the only reason I was convinced to join you. Jade said that it made no sense for Elise to tell her not to bring me on the rescue

mission. She was convinced, Elise was under surveillance and wanted to make sure I was included on the team. She must have known Jade would do the opposite of what she asked. Besides, there was no way to stop me once I saw the letter.

I was touched. Torq was the only one in the party whose motive rang true from the heart. Sadly, that meant that I could not trust him in the event the parties' mission turned out to be at odds with rescuing Elise. Sometimes you have to sacrifice someone you love to save the world. But we would cross that bridge when we came to it. At least I was certain Torq was on our side, for now.

By the time Torq finished his story, Jade, Lysandra, and a few of the crew had made their way to the mess. They all claimed to have heard the music and followed it to its source. Joran waggled his fingers and mouthed a cantrip, exposing waves of power emanating from Lyrion's instrument. Sure enough, Lyrion's song was magic. Oddly, the lyre was not the source of the spell. There was certainly power in the air, yet I could not detect any spell or charm..

I didn't have time to worry about it as Lysandra swept him out of his chair.

"Come on, if you won't take me to bed, at least dance with me."

Dancing with Lysandra was a welcome event. She was light on her feet and in her heart and soon her fae magic mingled with Lyrion's lifting everyone's spirits. I danced with Lysandra until she spun off to drag Torq onto the floor, then Jade joined me and we twirled until it was time to retire to our quarters to rest one last time for the dangerous journey yet to come.

ALL ASHORE



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Overall, the voyage wasn't as bad as it could have been. The weather held up nicely once we passed the storm and the Malevolent Straits only caused minor pitching, though the way Lyrion whined about it, you would think the

ship nearly sank. Despite the spiraling onyx whirlpools and the thrashing waves, as dark as the night sky, Corwin and his crew managed to emerge from the straights with only minor hull damage. Sure I had to learn how to patch a hole in the sails on the fly, but only some minor parts of the ship were damaged or lost to the sea.

We weren't so lucky when they reached the Devil's Anus. Lulled into a false sense of security by a cloudless sky as the sun rose over the horizon, we were relaxing on deck, celebrating the escape from the straights with our stomach intact. Lyrion played a calming tune while we shared some hardtack and ale. The crew knew better, though only a few attempted to warn us not to become complacent.

"You shouldn't be up here, things are going to get rough quickly." the second mate shouted from his position at the bow.

Torq responded, in relatively good spirits for someone who spent the better part of the last few hours puking over the rail. "We conquered the Storms and the Malevolent Straits, I have faith in this stalwart ship and its crew to get us through the bowels of Hell!"

"Suit yourself, mate." The crewman tied a rope between himself and the mainsail post. If the adventurers wanted to risk being tossed overboard, that was their problem.

Corwin announced a final warning that the Anus was approaching and we got our first look at the stretch of ocean which was rumored to be the doom of many a ship. Five large mountains flanked a narrow channel. The entrance was littered with jagged rocks and churning water. To make matters worse, icy water rained over the entrance. There was no way to avoid getting a soaking. Rough waters crashed against the gap, pounding away at the rocks. Wreckages of what were once mighty ships lined the wide bay funneling into the gap.

Torq began to panic. He wasn't sure he could handle another puking session.

"Come on old man, let's bunker down in the cabin." It would be much better to have a calm Torq than the raving lunatic he became in the straits. Also, Joran wasn't sure he wanted to watch the upcoming struggle. He was right.

The entrance to the Anus looked bad, but it didn't even scratch the surface of the dangers. Within 10 feet of the ship-sized opening, the water dropped sharply, plummeting over a hundred feet before leveling out. This pattern repeated several times with the length of the drop being the only variance.

These perils would scare off nearly every sailor in their right mind, but it was the howling were-bats that inhabited the depths of the Anus that were the coup de gras.

Thousands of sharp tooth flying creatures flew upward as soon as they sensed a ship entering the narrows and beginning the first plunge. Most just flew by, but some of the braver monsters made attempts to sample the feast of crewmen cowering on the ship below.

Corwin silently celebrated the adventurers heading below to their quarters. He intended to survive the Anus intact and see them safely to the island. A task which was far easier with them off the deck and out of the way.

He almost succeeded. The first seven plunges left the Dark Shadow bruised but not broken. Corwin's crew worked like a well oiled machine, jumping at each command and performing their duties with efficiency. Corwin should have been elated, but he knew that everything has a balance and if they made it this far with relative ease, something bad was coming their way. He barked orders to the crew, making sure they all manned their station. Roland and Sven had the deck under control while Jade, the lone adventurer who remained up top, was shrouded in a weave of magic that spread over the ship, protecting it from the bats.

However, the Fates weren't kind. As if each successful passing angered the waters, as the ship rounded a sharp turn and prepared for the eighth of ten drops a frightening howl echoed. It was familiar only to Corwin and it sent his

heart pounding with fear. The Wastrilith, a giant demon of the sea, was coming. Few had seen one and only one person was known to have survived an encounter. Corwin had escaped that battle with his life but only because he stayed on the ship even when the crew, stricken with panic, dove into the water. In the end, the monster left him and a swiftly sinking ship to their fate. Corwin used the rowboat usually reserved for trips to shore, to escape. He couldn't do that now, they were headed right into the proverbial belly of the beast, with their destination the only safe harbor within leagues..

We felt the monster's presence before they saw it. The water was the first indicator as it churned, changing from a calm blue to a churning brackish whirlpool that emitted an odor so foul that even below decks our stomachs turned. A crewman screamed in agony as a splash of the murky liquid struck him on the arm, immediately turning the skin red. Necessarily, the ship slowed, unable to navigate at its current pace through the muck created by this demon.

Hoping the air above would mitigate the stench, Torq, Lyrion and I emerged from the hold. "Why are we slowing down, are we thro....."

My question died in the wind as a giant lizard emerged from behind a wave, sending a spout of poisonous water toward the ship. Corwin's arms spun the steering column hard astern, his hands flying faster than I could discern. We managed to turn so the spout landed on the starboard side of the ship, sending up tendrils of smoke as the poison devoured the wooden frame.

Blue magic flashed from Jade's arms as she released her bat-repelling shield and blasted hundreds of ice daggers at the creature. Though they struck the Wastrilith where its heart might have been, there was little visible effect. I managed to send a volley of crossbow bolts which struck true, only to be deflected into the ocean, unable to pierce the creature's thick scales.

A crash echoed as the monster hurled a rock onto the deck, tearing a hole in the planks. Dark, thick water which reminded me of blood began flowing through the newly created holes.

"We can't take much more of this, Cap'n" Roland yelled, his body kneeling on the deck clutching desperately to a thick rope as he held on to the sail rigging.

None of us noticed the calming melody at first. It couldn't be described as a song, yet the Celtic keening emanating from the hold danced a complex harmony. Corwin looked and saw Lyrion and Lysandra, practically float-

ing, arise from the hold, the magic of Lyrion's lyre and Lysandra's soulful song engaged in a waltz as it wove itself together.

Apparently not a fan of music, the vicious Wastrilith bellowed a heart-stopping howl, then launched an angry attack at the ship, striking the mast. Torq caught the falling pole and held it in place while Jade and I fused it together with splinered wood and magic. It was a temporary fix at best, but it would hold for now.

Lysandra's fae aura expanded, reaching out with tendrils of rainbow light until it encompassed the raging monster. Corwin watched helplessly as there was nothing mundane that could stop this creature from destroying the ship. It pained him to rely on others, but magic had its place on this trip, even if he didn't trust it.

Suddenly, the wild demon's eyes changed from anger to fear. If a demon could turn pale, I was sure it would look like the Wastrilith did at that moment. The creature let out one earth-shattering shriek, then dove beneath the water, swimming away impossibly fast until it disappeared from view.

We all silently wondered what could have made such a formidable foe tuck his tail beneath his legs and run, but I was sure we didn't want to find out. Lysandra looked pale, almost transparent, but there wasn't enough time to thank

Lysandra and Lyrion properly as the ship, freed from the mucky water, began plummeting down the final stretch of the Anus.

Corwin rushed back to the helm and grabbed the galver, holding the ship steady as it fell toward a cropping of rocks and coral. Jade leaned as far over the bow as she dared and whispered her magic to the ocean, slowing their descent just enough to avoid the destructive force of the landing. Though the ship shuddered, creaked, and sprung some leaks, Corwin was confident the crew would complete repairs by the time the party finished their mission.

The ninth and tenth drops came almost on top of the eighth but the ship held. This time, it wasn't just Torq leaning over the rails. Several of the stalwart crew had joined him.

When the ocean settled down, I approached Jade, her magic aura fading with her strength. Just as I neared, she fainted, her limp body falling into my arms as I bent to catch her before she hit the ground.

"We made it," she whispered, though her eyes were glazed with exhaustion.

"I know. We survived the anus." Jade blinked, summoning the strength to make sure I understood her message.

"No, I mean we made it. To Mystery Island."

Despite her body being spent, Jade pointed across the water, registering the small island that was now visible in the distance. It was more splendid than the stories foretold. Lush green trees and bright-colored flowers lined the shore. It was a stark contrast to the darkness we had just emerged from.

As Jade's eyes fluttered, she fell asleep in my arms. I chalked her fading smile up to satisfaction that we reached the isle. I took this brief moment of calm to survey the ship. Lyrion and Torq were tending to Lysandra whose body flickered between solid flesh and translucency. Corwin attended to his crew. Despite all of the dangers, only one crewmember was lost when they were thrown overboard by a viscious wave. Two others had broken arms and Roland had severe rope burns on his hands.

It had been rough, but somehow we had survived, battered and torn, but still in one piece.

As our party and the rest of the crew exited the rowboats and stumbled to the shore, our stomachs were churning and our legs wobbling from the treacherous Devil's Anus, Corwin wore a wide smile. "Landlubbers". He rolled his eyes, yet I could see his pride for the crew's successful navigation.

If only we knew what we were about to get ourselves into, we might have preferred another go at the Anus.

MYSTERY UNVEILED



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“Wake up Jade. We need to get moving.” I splashed some water on her face. It had been nearly a day since we came ashore but we camped on the beach until the party was functional. Jade was the last of us to recover. I was relieved when the dark green eyes that were the inspiration for her name finally fluttered open. She felt weak, but that was to be expected given the magic she had expended. It

took a moment before it sank in for all of us. We had made it to Mystery Island.

“How long?” The words grated against her throat and I placed a flask of water to her lips, holding her head off the makeshift cot so she could sip.

“A whole day. We’ve already set up camp and scouted the area. Everyone is just waiting for your direction, but it can wait until you can stand.”

Jade unsuccessfully attempted to rise, then slumped back on the bed. “It can’t wait. We took a long time to get here. Need to find...”

I silenced her with a finger to her lips. “Save your breath. Elise found us. She’s off catching up with Torq right now. Something about a lucky escape when she transformed into a rat. You didn’t tell us you and her were an item. I think the only person in our party one of us hasn’t taken to bed is Corwin.”

Jade chuckled. “It is easier to trust people when you’ve been intimate with them.”

“True, but I think there will be certain hurt feelings at the end of the day.” To be honest, I had a feeling those hurt feelings would be mine. Lysandra seemed to be bonding with Lyrion, Torq was reunited with Elise, Corwin was spending quite a bit of time nursing Roland back to health

“Sort...it...out...later.” Jade's eyes could barely stay open. My concern was growing. She should be improving by now.

“Elise has been using her healing skills on your physical wounds but says she can't fix your exhaustion because you overextended your magic.”

“Sounds...right.” She's a smart girl.

I leaned close, breathing softly in her ear. “There's something off about her. I'm watching her closely and you should too. I haven't said anything for Torq's sake, but her escape story seems abit.... contrived.”

“Probably just your paranoia, Joran, but thanks, I'll keep an eye on her. Just give me a few hours and I'll be up.”

“I will.” Instinctively, I brushed my lips against Jade's forehead and clasped her hand in mine. I felt her tremble in my palm. Waiting until she fell back to sleep, I walked off to find Torq, hoping Jade had enough of her wits about her to get the message I tapped out on her palm.

By the time Jade had the strength to get up, the sun was setting. Lyrion was serenading the party by the campfire as everyone enjoyed a moment of serenity in this beautiful island shore. Jade forced herself to move around, regaining the circulation in her limbs as she searched for Torq and

Elise, but they were not with the group. Everyone looked her way as she approached, their concern evident in their eyes. She intended to quell that immediately.

“I’m starving!” she lied, unsure if she could keep anything down. “What’s there to eat around here anyway?”

“Lysandra handed her a bowl of a thick greyish liquid. “Doctor’s orders. Elise says you will need to take it slow.”

Jade flashed me a glance, then took a sip. Despite its color, she found it oddly flavorful and it immediately restored her vitality. She smiled and allowed herself a moment to enjoy Lyrion’s songs.

Toward the end of the evening, Elise and Torq rejoined the group. Jade watched Elise closely, noticing nothing untoward at first. It wasn’t until she caught Elise’s eye and wriggled her fingers in a code they had created when Jade babysat that she began to believe me. It was a crude code, easily recognizable. Elise should have acknowledged it, but instead she just gave Jade a waggle of her fingers as if waving hello.

Jade frowned. It was a language Elise and she created when Jade used to watch her. Even when Elise was older and she and Jade began dating, they used the code as an endearment. For Elise not to recognize the obvious movement of Jade’s fingers as an attempt at communication

meant one of two things; either she was intentionally ignoring Jade, or she wasn't Elise.

Jade narrowed her eyes, summoning the remnants of her magic, intending to cast a Dispell Illusion cantrip.

"Jade! Why don't we dance? Lyrion, play something a bit more lively!" I swept Jade off the crude upside-down bucket where she sat and began waltzing her around the room.

"So, you guessed it too. That's not Elise!" he whispered.

"Almost immediately. Why did you stop me from dispelling her disguise."

"Because it would break Torq's heart. He wants it to be her so badly, he is ignoring her errant behavior. For example. When she arrived at the camp, she ran to Corwin as if he were her father. If Torq hadn't intercepted her with a huge bear hug, she would have given herself away sooner. But he believes it is her and he should discover the truth on his own. Besides, we know someone set a trap for us, but we still don't know who set it. Perhaps we can use this to our advantage."

To his surprise, Jade planted a passionate kiss on his lips.

"I knew there was a reason I brought you on this god-forsaken adventure! You really have matured and stopped thinking just with your body parts." Jade gave my buns a little squeeze and I pulled away. "Oh, for crying out

loud. Lysandra isn't watching. She's captivated by Lyrion" Flustered, I stumbled nearly crushing Jade's bare feet.

Lyrion wisely chose to stop playing. "I think that's enough music for me tonight. Everyone should get some rest. Jade said we leave at dawn to find the Monster King."

I nodded. It seemed the voyage had done Lyrion some good as he no longer protested his participation in this mission. As he accepted his fate, he became more than a productive member of the party. I took Jade's hand and led her back to the recovery tent.

"MMM, thank you handsome!" she said playfully, tugging on my belt as I helped her to the bed. I turned my back as she changed into cleaner sleepwear.

"What's the matter, Joran, you've seen my body before. Don't you want me anymore?" Her lip jutted out as if she were pouting and she pressed my hand against her hip so she could curl into the nook of my arm and nestle against my chest.

I was caught in a struggle with my emotions. Everything about this trip only confirmed how much I wanted Jade. Not just how sensual she looked, but her mind, her command, and her magic. Still, I mistrusted the situation. Were her flirtations motivated by passion, or the vulnerable state Elise's alcohol-laced soup contrived. I recalled what she had said earlier when she told him to make sure

Jade finished her bowl. "The alcohol is to help her sleep and mask the taste of the Addison's blood." Iknew all too well the bitter taste of the alchemy component that would help heal Jade's magic drain.

I fought my primal urges. I didn't want her this way. Not weakened from her casting and muddled by medicine. "Jade, there is nothing I want more than you right now, but it would be unfair to take advantage of your weakened state. I promise you, if we survive this mission, I will fill every need you desire." I threw her own promise back at her, so she would understand. To seal the deal, I kissed her. It was a slow, burning kiss that left no question that my words, and my passion rang true. Jade relaxed, placing her head on the straw pillow. Almost immediately her eyelids fluttered. Her last thought as she faded away was to wonder if the two empty cups and a tray of half-eaten biscuits meant Joran had watched over her last night.

I turned my chair so he could simultaneously keep an eye on Jade and the door. I carefully cast the wards Jade had taught me. They were stronger than my thieves wards, but I always struggled with the last syllable. For good measure, I lit a candle that was enchanted with a dispel illusion radius spell. Jade's chest rose and fell in a slow rhythm as I watched. Was it possible she had grown more beautiful in the time we were apart?

BOOM!

A loud explosion from the center of the campsite echoed. I checked on Jade but she still slept soundly. Probably best. I grabbed my scabbard and ran to see what was happening.

Thick grey smoke filled my lungs as soon as I stepped out of the tent though I could not sense the source. My eyes burned once the sulfurous cloud entered my system. I couldn't see a foot away in this cloud so I stopped running and waved my hand to clear the air, wishing I had a spell to assist.

With a sound akin to a giant drawing a breath, the air suddenly went clear as the sulfurous cloud formed a cone and shot out over the ocean. Only a trail of smoke slowly disappearing toward Lysandra's tent remained.

"Well, I didn't expect my hand to work so well. I guess I don't know my strength." Torq stood on ground zero, admiring his right hand. His clothes were tattered and his skin smoldered, but he seemed otherwise unharmed.

"Don't flatter yourself, boy." Our captain had approached under cover of the poison. "Our pretty princess, Lysandra, cooked up a gadget to clear the air. Now let's go find out what's going on." The two of us sprinted to find Lysandra.

When they arrived at her tent, Lyrion and Lysandra were standing next to an odd-looking machine that had neutralized the toxin. How she created it so quickly from the few crude materials they had, I had no idea. I learned a long time ago never to ask her about her creations unless I was prepared for a two-hour dissertation. The only thing Lysandra loved as much as sex seemed to be explaining her craft, though others did not always share her enthusiasm.

After a moment, I noticed Torq sitting by the empty campfire. His face was buried in his hands. The wooden shaft of his mace leaned against his hip, the head, oozing a green ichor, was laying in the sand. I approached carefully, sidestepping what was left of the body of a grotesque creature. Instantly, I connected the dots. *Doppelganger*

"I'm sorry Torq," I said softly, putting a hand on his shoulder. Torq stirred.

"No need. I knew it wasn't her almost right away. She wouldn't look at me. She wouldn't let me touch her. She smelled off. Still, part of me hoped. Then a few minutes ago, the darn thing tried to probe my mind."

Despite the situation, I couldn't help but lighten the mood with a quip.

"I take it there wasn't much there?" A quick duck saved me from Torq's half-hearted swing of the mace. "I mean

it didn't find what it was looking for." He was surprised when Torq laughed almost cheerfully.

"It was dead before it could even learn what I had for supper. The real Elise would have known about my mental shields. After all, she was the one who taught me how to do it.

"You must be devastated."

"You know boy, I might be, if there wasn't one thing."

"What's that?"

"You know the thing about Doppelgangers, right? You see, for them to take someone's shape they need to see them. To take their memories, they need to be around them for a long time, and to be able to ambulate in their manner, the model must be alive. Therefore, Elise is here, on this island. There is hope m'boy, and where there is hope, Torq will carry the day!"

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes at Torq's use of the third person to reference himself.

"Well then, get your arse off the bucket, and let's go. There is a mystery waiting to be solved and we need to get moving. Whoever sent that thing will know we are on to them.

THE BARD



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9@mail.ru**

Our group walked the island in silence. Though he professed to be optimistic, his sullen demeanor kept everyone at arms length. Jade led the party while I took up a position in the rear where I could catch any signs of movement in the foliage. The worn and overgrown path was surrounded by majestic trees and beautiful flora. It was difficult to

imagine this island paradise posing a danger, yet few who ventured to this place ever returned.

Even the effervescent Lysandra was subdued, walking side by side with Lyrion, speaking only in hushed whispers. the growing bond between them felt right. I wasn't jealous at all. Lysandra was very dear to me, but our relationship was nothing more than a dalliance, physical in nature. I would never let her know, but she was my rebound after Jade. It was for the best though. Lysandra was flirtatious and in near-constant heat, but even half-fae rarely settled for a mundane human. I never expected anything more, preferring to limit his relations to pleasures of the flesh where my heart couldn't get hurt, even if I broke some in my wake.

Only one woman had come close to winning his heart, but she left him.. Now she led their carefully selected pack into unknown dangers. *Is it odd that my only concern is whether Jade will be open to another try if we both get out of here alive?* I wondered if they would make it through alive, and if so, whether she would be open to another try. We were different than we were the first time around, but deep down, our passion still remained.

“Stop!”

Jade's single word, coupled with the raising of her hand, halted the company in our tracks. We had reached a river

leading into a clearing. The echoes of voices worried me. Whoever was there was not concerned about being discovered. Lysandra opened her backpack and let out a soft whistle. Within a moment, a tiny metal hummingbird rose and flew toward the clearing, flitting between flowers as if it were alive. Fine workmanship, I thought, impressed by Lysandra's skills. I could barely tell it wasn't a hummingbird. Within moments, Lysandra consulted with Jade regarding the findings while I read her lips carefully.

"There are three well-armed guards, one a draconian warrior. One has a magical aura but I can't place it, and the third is an elvish assassin. Elise is in a cage barely tall enough for her to crouch. She appears unconscious and her face is bruised, but she is breathing normally and does not appear to have any permanent damage."

That was a lot of information from one tiny device. It must be an enchanted construct. I was beginning to understand why Jade brought her along.

Jade gathered us into a huddle, leaving Lysandra to stand watch. She softly reiterated the report, leaving out the part about Elise's bruises so Torq didn't rage.

"It's most likely a trap!" Jade's assertion brought a murmur of agreement from the party

"But if there is a chance that Elise is there, I don't care. I'll take them on alone if need be". Torq's eyes flashed with

the same anger reflected in his words. Jade was right not to mention the bruises. No amount of reason would have kept Torq from running in.

Lyrion whispered a soft tune and a glow of blessing surrounded the huddle. I rubbed the shaft of my dagger for extra luck and extended the magical benefit to the group as well. If we were going into battle, we would have every advantage on our side.

"Split up." Jade's eyes flashed. She was in her element now, a born leader. Joran, Lys, and Lyrion hang back. Coram, Torq, and I will try diplomacy. If we get into trouble, perhaps they will underestimate our party's number."

I nodded and immediately faded in with the surroundings. *No doubt Jade could see through my hide in shadows spell, but the enemy couldn't.* I hoped.

It was time. Jade decided on the brazen approach and strolled confidently across the river's small bridge.

Elise's captors rose before they reached the end, each reaching for their weapons.

"We come in peace!" Jade's announcement was met with sneers and growls, but our adversaries made no move to impede their approach.

It wasn't until Jade crossed the bridge that she noticed the three Displacer Beasts standing watch over Elise's cage. Jade winced. I should have guessed the King of Monsters

would have some pets waiting. I thought before focusing on the draconian's hai.

“We cannot let you pass, Jade. But we do not need to kill you. Just turn around and go back to your ship and the Master will let you leave.”

Jade's ears burned. She hadn't recognized Balroc. He was part of the team she sent to Mystery Island as scouts 2 years ago. But from the looks of things, he had aged far more than expected. Perhaps the rumors of time passing differently on the island were true.

“I don't want to fight you, Balroc. What happened to you?”

“You sent us into a trap. Even with your wards, the King overpowered us easily. He gave us a choice, accept his rule and we could live well. Our only task was to stop you from entering his castle. He even captured the druid as bait. He gave her the same offer, but she betrayed him. She only lives as a bargaining chip.”

Jade's face was beet red now as her anger boiled to the surface. The idea of fighting her former captain was bad enough, but Elise's condition was beyond the pale.

“If you did any permanent damage to her, you will be dead before you can swing your sword.”

Balroc smiled. “She's fine, other than the scratches and bruises. She wouldn't have those either if she hadn't tried

to escape. The Master's pets got a hold of her before we could catch her. See for yourself." He waved Jade across but stopped Torq and Corwin. "Just her!"

Balroc stepped aside, offering Jade a direct path to the cage.

Jade feigned ignorance of the invisible monsters waiting. "No need. I can tell she is fine from here. Now, before we do this, is there any scenario other than me turning back that doesn't end in the three of us destroying the six of you?"

The Elven woman looked unphased. Jade didn't need her magic to sense the woman's blood-thirsty streak. She appeared to be in her middle years though it is difficult to tell with elves. Who knew how long she was hunted on this island? From Lysandra's uncle, Jade learned that the seeming paradise was home to Hellspawn. If you didn't find four walls and a roof by day, you were easy pickings at night.

"I can't let you do that, my friend." Balroc's tone betrayed his fear, "But you are outnumbered and out-matched."

"Are you certain about that, Balroc?"

"I know better than to be sure about anything with you, Jade. You always have a backup plan."

“ENOUGH!” The third figure, the one shrouded in shadow magic, commanded silence. Jade flinched as wild magic shimmered forth from the stranger. The plants around the riverbank rapidly grew, their vines moving toward Jade’s group.

“Torq....” Jade trailed off, waiting for his response.

“Yes, Jade.” Torq’s emotions were boiling over, he was itching for a fight. Jade marveled at his self-control.

“Now is a good time.”

Torq let loose a primal yell, his body growing into a hulking mass of muscle. In his normal form, he was intimidating, but in full rage, he was terrifying. With several slashes of his hand, he tore the oncoming vines to shreds, hurling large chunks at the enemy.

Jade didn’t waste any time, diving sharply to her left as Corwin sent a volley of crossbows at the dark mage. With a double tuck and a roll, she popped up on Balroc’s right side, grasped his arm and sent enough electrical energy to stop a giant. Shocking Grasp was a new spell for her, one Balroc wasn’t expecting. It wasn’t enough to fell him, but it froze him long enough for Lyrion and Lysandra to join in with their magic.

A haze formed on the campsite. A loud thump came from nearby the cage. Three fearsome monsters shimmered into view as the Displacer Beasts collapsed. Lyrion’s

doing, Jade supposed. Lysandra's magic had a more subtle effect as a swarm of bees approached from the forest, heading toward the Dark Mage, breaking her concentration. As Torq had freed himself from vine duty, he charged, tossing the Elven woman aside like a curtain.

"Torq, stop!" Jade yelled, but it was too late. He reached for the gate and instantly froze, caught in a Hold-Person spell.

Without thinking, Jade shouted, "Chicalle!" sending an Eldritch Blast at the witch before she could recover from the cloud of bees. The force of the bolt knocked the woman out of the camp circle, where she slammed against a tree. Miraculously, she was only wounded and managed to struggle to her feet, preparing another spell.

No doubt the magic she summoned would have obliterated our party, however I never gave her the chance. With all the commotion, no one noticed a nearly invisible king of thieves. Not even a scream escaped her lips as I slit her throat. Even that might not have been enough to finish her had Jade not hit her with a counterspell. Shades flew from her body as she seemed to age 100 years in less than 3 seconds.

Balroc moaned as he broke out of his stun. He swung his broadsword toward Jade, only to expose his belly to Coram's shoulder as he charged, knocking Balroc to the

ground before the blow struck. A quick jump kick from Jade pushed him towards me where I whacked him on the head with the hilt of my dagger, knocking him unconscious.

As Jade turned her attention to the Elf, she heard Lyrion chanting. It was a mournful tune about a bard breaking his vows. His spell washed over Torq, breaking the powerful hold enchantment and freeing Torq. The magic dispelled the trap on the lock as well and Torq tore open the cage.

Jade closed her eyes, blocked out all distractions, and concentrated. Suddenly, Balroc and the Elf were gone. Only two white mice remained to scurry off into the woods. In an hour, they would return to their mortal forms, that is, if the predators didn't get them first. Jade secretly hoped they survived.

With the danger abated, Jade turned her attention to Torq and Elise. Torq returned to his less frightening form and held Elise's limp body in his arms.

"Why won't she wake?" he asked, trying hard not to let them see the panic in his eyes.

Jade began to chant, but Lyrion got to Elise first, placing his fingers on her temples. Joran watched as a glow formed around Lyrion's hand and began pulsing into Elise's head. Color slowly returned to her face, her wounds closing and mending. By the time Lyrion's light enveloped her from

head to toe, her breathing was strong and her eyes fluttering.

“Dad? But how?” Elise’s ragged breath brought a sigh of relief from Torq.

As soon as she spotted Jade, she had her answer. The message she sent had reached her after all. She had begun to give up hope.

After she gave Torq a giant bear-hug, she gave Jade one as well.

“I wish we had more time for reunions, but we need to get off the island. Now! This whole island is a trap for you, Jade.

“I know, Elise. But that is why we cannot leave. I have to face him. There may be a chance to save him.”

“He’s too far gone, Jade.”

“He’s my brother, Lise.”

“He may never be that again! He’s been changed by the darkness.”

“I have to try. You go, take Torq and the others and go to the boat. I can get myself home.”

“No way am I letting you out of my sight again, pretty lady.” I stood defiantly by her side.

“And I still need that half of the key,” Coram shouted.

“Come on, Jade. I came to have an adventure and test my new toys. I can’t quit in the middle.” Lysandra chirped.

“You helped me find my daughter. I am in your debt. I can’t abandon your quest,” Torq proclaimed.

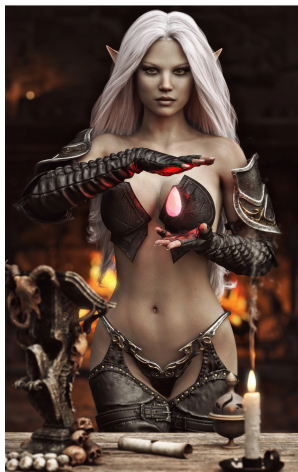
Everyone looked toward Lyrion.

“Well, I guess I don’t have any more gigs for a while, so I’m in.” His glare at Torq was insufficient to stop the group from breaking out in laughter.

“Well, then it’s decided. We see this through, together.” Elise stated, though she couldn’t hide her concern.

“Rest up until sunset, then we storm the castle.”

THE SORCERESS



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storm

“So, it’s been about you all along. This wasn’t some important mission. It was about you finally facing Alex. You should have told us.” I was livid. I felt tricked and betrayed. “I thought this was an important mission, but its just about your family issues.”

“Well that and saving Elise. Would you have come if I told you he was here?”

Alexandrite was Jade’s older brother. They were close as children, but when they both became Wizard’s apprentices, he began teasing Jade mercilessly, often embarrassing her during their lessons. To avoid his ire, she switched paths, studying sorcery instead, even though it was a struggle. Alex’s intelligence and charisma soon had him shooting up the wizard ranks. They remained close, though Alex had become a recluse, focusing only on advancing his chosen class. Jade didn’t mind his teasing. She always saw the good in him. Sadly, he never embraced it.

Jade rarely spoke to me of Alex, though I tried to coax it out of her. Then, one night when we were basking in the afterglow of a marathon love-making session. I ran my fingers gently over the faded pink burn scar across her stomach.

“So are you ever going to tell me about this?” It was the 20th time I asked, each met with a shrug and silence.

To my surprise, Jade rolled to faceme, squeezing her upper leg between mine and laying her head on my chest.

When I turned 16,
Alex and I argued a
lot. Even then, there
was a darkness in him.
I had come to ac-
cept that we had a
sibling rivalry, but I
was unaware of the
source. One day, I
was gathering wood
from the forest to
prepare for the win-
ter's frost. I stum-
bled on Alex picking
on a much younger
kid who lived a farm
over. She couldn't de-
fend herself. I found
out later that he was
trying to obtain a
dragon bone necklace
she wore so he could

try a new spell. It was a family heirloom, and poor Missy refused to give it up. He was about to cast call lightning which would have obliterated her. I counter-spelled it. The look of betrayal in his eyes was unlike any I'd ever seen.

They were pure black, as if he were possessed. He must have had another spell slot ready because he fired a lightning bolt at me. I wasn't prepared. Even if I was, I wouldn't have known how to stop it. It tore through me, burning

my flesh and slicing
a wide gash. If my
mother hadn't shown
up looking for me, I
would have been done
for.

I've only seen my
mother angry once
before. When we lost
my father and the
banker came around
expecting us to be
unable to main-
tain the farm. We
weren't. Mom was
always prepared and
had saved enough to
keep us there for
ages. This was differ-
ent. Alex had struck
me down. Family v.
family. Wild Magic
gathered around my

mother like a shield,
encircling her. Her
High Half-Elf body
shimmered with power.
With Herculean effort,
she spat at Alex.

“Get out of here before....” She trailed off,
too upset to say the
obvious threat.

For a moment, the
darkness in Alex’s
eyes wavered, and I
thought I saw a gleam
of wetness form.

“Please..” It was the
closest thing to a request
to stay he could muster.
On another

day, she might have softened. She had accepted his non-apologies too many times to count. But today, she was done.

“Go now and never return. You are dead to me. Dead to us.”

Alex left in a flash, teleporting out of sight. To this day I am not sure if he left voluntarily or if my mother sent him to another plane. The pain was too much and I collapsed. When I woke two days later, I was healed, though even the most power-

ful elders in the nearby village could not reduce my scar.

As for Alex, he never returned to our home, but it wasn't the last time I saw him. He blamed me for being an outcast. On more than one occasion he confronted me, intending to harm me, but I had grown stronger after my recovery, vowing never to be a victim again. I never fought back, only defended myself. Every time I met him, all I could see was the glimmer of that tear welling in his eyes as my mother banished

him. I am certain there
is still a piece of that
scared little boy inside.

Jade never spoke of her brother again, but I heard things. A powerful wizard doesn't just disappear. Rumor has it that Alex, or the Monster King as he is now known, was on an endless obsession to gather legendary artifacts of power. Ones that could slay demons and depower gods. His goal? To get back at Jade who he blames for his outcast status.

Of course, most of the items he sought turned out to be as fake as the fable surrounding them. Many of the others were once potent, but their magic was gone. They say he went mad trying to find something to give him the edge.

Now that I knew Alex was waiting for them in the nearby castle, I surmised that Alex wanted whatever was hidden by Corwin's father. He needed the key around Jade's neck and he needed it to be given freely. Perhaps he intended to use Elise as a bargain but that chip was lost. Still, I couldn't help but worry that Jade's desire to find the good in Alex would endanger them all.

Joran wasn't the only member of the party that guessed the danger. Corwin must have figured it out as well because he had his hand wrapped around the half of a key

hanging at his belt. His scowl hinted that he wasn't so happy with their fearless leader either. Only Torq and Elise seemed unfazed by the revelation.

The approach to the castle was easy. Too easy. In fact, despite the several dangers they encountered along the way, I couldn't help but feel they were designed not to deter the party, but rather to test our abilities. Even the battle with Balroc and his team was just dangerous enough to put a scare into us, but they were too easily defeated. As a result, my danger sense was on high alert.

Jade stopped just in front of the Castle gate. There was no need to hide their approach. Stealth had never been their plan. She felt around with her mind, searching for traps, illusions, and residual magic.

Just as she was about to open the door, Torq stopped her. "Let me. If there are any traps, I can withstand the most damage." Jade frowned, but remembering how he had survived the doppelganger's explosion, she stepped aside. Torq gave the large door a final glance, then tugged on the handle. With a loud creak, the door opened into a giant hall. In the center was a rounded staircase rising on both sides of a dais with a throne. The seat was empty at the moment, and Joran guessed this room was used only when formally welcoming a large group of guests.

A cloaked gnome was dusting some shelving as we made our way past the stairs and toward the only other exit from this chamber. It made no move to stop us. Nor did it call out to any master. Lysandra floated ahead of the group, scouting with her enhanced eyesight and magic through an item she called “glasses”. For a rare moment, Lyrion was quiet. Although he proved himself useful earlier, Joran was still unsure why he was alone. Lys, Torq, Jade, and Joran had all interacted before. Corwin was Jade’s “ride”. Even Elise was connected to Torq by blood. So what was Lyrion’s role?

A bard can be useful, but none of his skills are unique to the party. Joran had the thieving covered, Lys could handle the inspiration, Torq had more than enough muscle and they each had a myriad of spells at their disposal. Jade wouldn’t have chosen him without careful consideration.

There wasn’t enough time to figure it out. As soon as they entered the next room, the door slammed shut behind them. They heard the snarls before they saw the giant beasts enter through gates on both sides of the grand hall. These weren’t any beasts, but ones with intelligence gleaming behind their eyes. At the opposite end of the room stood a half-elf, clad in a shimmering cloak. Even from a distance, he looked large and intimidating.

“Sister, so nice of you and your friends to join me.”

“Spare it, Alex. It’s not like we had any choice. You knew I would come to rescue Elisa.”

“Ah yes, I see you let my pretty bird out of her cage. I truly hoped she would join me. It would have been more salt in your wound if she fought by my side. Not to mention she’s quite a nice piece of ass.”

It took Lyrion, Corwin, and Joran to hold Torq back. Even Alex’s animals bristled, moving menacingly between the barbarian and their king

Alex sneered. “I see you’re still hanging around with brutes and scoundrels.”

Jade stood her ground in front of the group.

“Alex, you don’t have to do this. Mom is gone. You can come back home. We can be a family again.

Alex’s howl echoed eerily through the room. The sound carried an evil undertone that raised Joran’s hackles.

“Home? Dear sister, why would I ever want to come home? And we were never a family. You were always the favorite. All they wanted from me was another hand milking the cows.”

Thunder crashed in the distance. Unnatural as the sun shone over the island only minutes ago. i tried to check for magic, only to find out that everything around us was infused with some form of the stuff. Nothing I tried could pinpoint anything.

“Besides, it is your fault I am where I am. If you hadn’t meddled and saved that girl, I would have gotten what I wanted long ago.”

“It was just a dragon bone. There are millions of them,” Jade shouted.

“Just a dragon bone? Did Missy never tell you her family’s secret? It had been passed down from generation to generation. It was a bone from the very first dragon and contained enough power within to create or destroy life. If I had that, I wouldn’t need a deceased pirate’s final gift, the dagger of luck, a barbarian’s tear, a fae’s blood, and a sibling’s broken heart.”

Jade’s gasp was lost amidst the shocked sound of the rest of the crew.

“How did you know I would recruit them?” Jade’s mind churned. She was surprised that his plan revolved around her recruits. However, she was elated that he tipped his hand so early.

“You were always so predictable. It only took a few well-placed hints to put you on the path to your friends. I knew Joran would be your first mistake. Lysandra was an obvious choice. To get Torq, I had to capture Elisa but that was easy when I spread rumors of the magical creatures here on the isle. The curious little druid couldn’t help but

walk right into my trap. The bard? Well, the bard wasn't in my plan, but nor is he a threat."

Alex began twisting the gold and ruby ring on his left index finger. I winced as wild magic flowed through the air. Fear ripped through me but I fought the urge to run, inspired at Jade's unperturbed confidence.

"You really don't know, do you?" Everyone in the room turned toward Jade as she made to reveal her most guarded secret.

Alex paused, his brow furrowing as if suddenly perceiving a hole in his plan. "Know what?"

"Who Lyrion is. I guess you wouldn't. You only had eyes for Missy. You probably don't remember she had a younger brother. He idolized you, you know. Followed you around incessantly, mimicking your mannerisms. At least until he found out what happened to Missy that night. You know, even with all the reasons to hate you, he didn't want to come here today. He begged me not to confront you. I still remember what he said when I told him about the plan.

"Please Jade. What's done is done. Missy was ok. Alex isn't the

reason she became a
nun.”

Jade continued, “That’s right Alex. After what you did, Missy couldn’t be around anyone. She joined a nunnery where she spends most of her days in seclusion and the rest helping the abused. She even gave up her birthright and all worldly possessions.”

Alex listened intently, the color slowly draining from his cheeks. He was too caught up in Jade’s distraction to notice me disappear into the shadows and begin inching my way past the growling beasts.

“That’s right, Alex. Lyrion possesses the dragon bone you covet so much. Of course, he doesn’t wear it around his neck. No, he wove it into the neck of his lyre.”

Lyrion strummed a note sending a small gust of wind through the room. He no longer looked like a fragile and scared bard, but he stood firm and proud.

There was fear in Alex’s eyes now. His plan was no longer foolproof. Imbued into a lyre, the dragon bone posed a significant threat, yet was also no longer useful for his prior scheme. He would need to neutralize Lyrion before making Jade and Corwin hand over their key pieces.

Lyrion played a second chord, spreading a shimmering curtain to the center of the room. The nearest animal,

an oversized lion, was pushed backward. It tried to lunge forward, only to be rebuffed by an invisible force.

Alex muttered a spell, creating a flame in the center of the curtain, burning it away from the middle outwards.

All hell broke loose then. The animals charged, met by a raging Torq, finally allowed to express his anger through violence.

Elise sprung into the air, shifting into her preferred form, a falcon. She was met by a blood hawk. The two began a tango in the sky. I might have admired the art of the creatures' battle had I not been preoccupied by Lysandra.

Lysandra began singing, her fae magic dancing gracefully with Lyrion's raw power. As her voice harmonized, her body rippled in voluptuous ways. It was near impossible not to be captivated by her beauty. But there was something new. Her magic mixed with Lyrion's in a way that was more than just two spellcasters. In the midst of the battle, I found myself relieved that she had found someone who could return her affection.

Their energy slammed into a charging rhino, knocking it across the floor, where Alex narrowly avoided being struck. It was the chance I needed. I leaped from where I crouched in the shadows, landing on Alex's back, my dagger slicing through his cloak.

Had Alex been something other than an illusion, my blow would have gutted him from shoulders to hips. Instead, I slammed into the floor, barely managing to use a roll to avoid major damage. A glance to my left revealed three other Alex's standing within 10 feet. With all the magic in this room, I had missed his Mirror Image trick.

Before striking again, I surveyed the field. Corwin was engaged with a monstrous gorilla. I hadn't assessed him as a hand to hand fighter, but he was holding his own. Lyrion and Lysandra's magic swirled, protecting them from the panthers. Lysandra fiddled with something in her pack. I knew whatever gadget she chose, she would be up to the challenge. Torq was holding his own against two bears, a flurry of unconscious animals scattered in his wake. In the sky, Elise dispatched her foe and landed on the second floor in human form, where she was readying a spell.

Jade. Where is Jade? I squinted, trying to see through the haze of blood and magic.

The spot where Jade was last seen had been overrun by animals and there was no sign of her. An explosion caught my attention and he looked just in time to see Lysandra holding a wand towards three panthers whose fur was now on fire. I dove to my left as one of the Alex figures sent a lightning bolt in my direction. Focusing my mind, I blocked out the distractions. With careful aim, I let

four morning stars fly, catching two of the Alex illusions, dispelling their magic. All that remained was the real Alex, who stood close to where Jade was last seen.

A funnel of magic emanated from Alex's hands toward the ceiling, as if opening a portal. Despite our success, we were only keeping the enemy at bay with our skills. If Alex succeeded in bringing in more opponents, the tide would turn in his favor.

Suddenly, the chamber echoed with Jade's voice.

"Enough!"

Monsters and humanoids alike froze in place, perhaps from her magic, more likely from the commanding tone that could not be disobeyed. Only Alex seemed unaffected, turning his body to the stairs.

"I decide when it is enough, Jade." He shot a bolt of energy from the crystal on his staff, but Jade countered it and responded with a silence spell. Her magic disrupted his concentration, setting the animals free from his control. No longer focused, they became confused, attacking the nearest living thing, including their own ranks. However, without Alex coordinating their efforts, we eventually dispatched the frenzied creatures, either sending them running or subduing them.

Elise stood next to Jade, keeping her out of harm's way. Jade's eyes burned white with power as she shredded each

spell Alex hurled at her. Even on the boat, I had never seen her wield so much power.

I slipped into the shadows and crept closer to Alex. The heat from his magic burned, but I pushed on. From the corner of my eye, I could see the others closing in on Alex as well, their eyes squinting as they concentrated on rebuffing the force of his spells.

I reached him first. If there was any other way, I would have tried to knock Alex out, but the buffeting air kept me at bay and it took all of my strength and concentration to breach the shield. I watched as his dagger plunged through the back of Alex's neck, protruding from the other side.

Blood splattered in every direction, and Alex began choking. Suddenly, Jade was by his side, crouching, catching Alex across her knees. Tears filled her eyes. Joran thought she would try to heal Alex, but instead, she put him into a magical sleep, allowing him to pass on without pain.

With Alex gone, the few remaining animals ran off, and we regrouped, bloodied but not broken. I cradled Jade as she sobbed at the loss of her brother. noticed Lyron and Lysandra held hands as they stood watching to make sure Jade was ok. Elise had brought Torq out of his rage state and he began helping her heal the animals.

Corwin approached. He handed Jade his 1/2 of the key.

“Here, you earned this more than I. Whatever is there, you can choose what to do with it,”

Jade rose, wiping tears from her eyes. “No Corwin. It’s your inheritance. And you have more than earned it by getting us here in one piece. Come on, let’s go see what that old geezer left you.”

The cave was not easily found, and it took the better part of the afternoon before I spotted the small opening in a surprisingly large hill. It was a perfect fit for the joined key. A portion of the hillside slid aside leading us into a long hallway. On guard for traps, we slowly made our way to the other side of the hall, where there was a long table. Corwin immediately began sniffing back his emotion.

On the table were three items. His father’s ring, an obsidian stone that radiated magic was framed by his father’s journal on the left, and his father’s captain’s hat on the right. Corwin offered the ring to Jade who politely declined. He gathered up his belongings and was about to lead the party out of the hill when the ring emitted a white glow.

“That bastard!” Corwin said

“What?” Torq responded, worried there would be trouble.

“He said he didn’t leave me any money, but the ring is ensorcelled to find treasure and it says we are standing on a vault full of it.”

He paced ten paces to his left, then an additional 5 paces right. He tapped his foot on the stone ground a few times.

“Here!” He took his sword and plunged it into the rock.

The stone broke easily and fell into a chamber. Hurriedly, Corwin chipped at the surrounding rock until all the fakes were cleared away. About six feet down was a room filled with chests overflowing with gold and jewels. His father’s pirate legacy.

“Go ahead, gang, take what ye can carry and we will seal the rest up. Looks like I’ll be coming back to Mystery Island after all. Might even clean out that old shack and make this place my home. All of you are welcome too!”

Torq slapped him on the back. “This would be the perfect place for my retirement and Elise never did finish studying the fauna.”

Everyone filled their bags with enough treasure to allow them to settle down but no one took more than a fair share. For my part, all I took was a small

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Hours later, Joran sat on the port bow, watching the sun rise over the sea. The crew were below deck readying

breakfast or starboard, managing the quiet water. With no land in sight, the horizon was a beautiful display of colors. Suddenly, Joran felt Jade's hand slide under his right arm, joining his fingers with hers.

Jade kissed his cheek and then bit his earlobe. She whispered, "Thank you for helping me on this crazy trip."

Joran smiled. "No need to thank me. I was going to thank you for reminding me what was important to me."

Jade unbuckled Joran's pants, her hand freeing his fleshy dagger from its sheath. "And what is that, Joran?" His name was a mumble as she surrounded his cock with her lips. Joran rested his hand on her hair, brushing it with his fingers as she licked his hardness.

"You, Jade. It was always you."

BIGGERTON - A VICTORIAN HOTWIFE STORY



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The ball is a success. All of the elite socialites in London are here for the pre-wedding festivities. Tomorrow, my son, Lord Dikherton marries the Princess Layme. My husband

Colin looks resplendent in his formal black tailcoat as he shares the traditional dance with the Queen. Simon Backdoor dances with my sister-in-law Daphne. Guests from the Biggertons, Dikhertons, and Backdoors mingle with the royal family, each trying to gain the Queen's favor. There are stories to tell, and from my position on the balcony of the second floor, I can see them all.

Of course, I have difficulty concentrating while Colin's 35-year-old younger brother Gregory Biggerton grabs my hips and pulls me onto his shaft. He is thicker than Colin and more sure of himself. Gregory knows how to take what he wants. Don't be alarmed, Colin knows. In fact, he suggested I find a lover. Sure he was surprised when I told him that his brother was going to destroy my tight little hole, but the way his cock rose and twitched as I related how the young Biggerton tore off my panties and held my legs against his chest while he pounded me, let me know how much he approved.

As Gregory plunges deep into my pussy I hold onto the railing high above the festivities. I have no choice but to bite my lip to keep from vocalizing my pleasure. It wouldn't do for the royal family to find out my secret. This is one story that will never make my gossip column.

I close my eyes, his strong, sure hand is mashing my breast. My sensitive nipples, hard and pointy against the

decolletage of my gown are stimulated as he presses his palm against them.

Whimpers escape my lips as my climax approaches. Gregory knows how loud I can be when he fills me so he silences me with his hand over my lips. My arousal fills the air like sweet perfume and the steady squish of his rapier sliding in and out of my sheath harmonizes with the music wafting from below. My heat rises and I can hold back no more.

To stifle my screams I gnash my teeth against his palm like a rabid feline. My core tightens, clenching tightly around his cock just before my world explodes in pleasure spreading from deep within. Gregory keeps pumping. 3, 5, 9, I count the ripples of my orgasm ripping through me with each of his strokes. He doesn't reach 10. I feel him slip from my pussy's grip just as the cream erupts from his hardness, coating my clit, perineum, thighs, and of course my billowy dress.

I hear him zip his fly. Without warning, he grabs my neck, roughly forcing me upright

"Make sure you tell old Colin who stretched your pussy wide"

Then Gregory is gone, leaving me to drip my juices while he makes the rounds, the families and friends below none the wiser. I am breathless, temporarily sated, but yearning

for more. I will wait a few minutes to make sure the leaking stops and not to raise any suspicions.

The next few days will be difficult as Gregory will be staying at the royal palace whilst Colin and I return to our manor. But that just gives me time to plan our next rendezvous.

In the meantime, I have so many other stories to tell you.

Sincerely,

Lady Goingdown

PREVIEW OF FALLING (WORKING TITLE) WRITTEN UNDER THE NAME ANGEL SCOTT

Jamie despised the long trek from the parking garage at the off-strip Las Vegas resort. She understood the rationale behind forcing patrons to walk past the flashing lights and pre-recorded coin-dropping sounds, beckoning each passerby to deposit their hard-earned funds for a chance at the ultimate prize. It didn't help that her burgundy patent leather stilettos kept snagging the worn carpet of the Paradise Casino. *I should have valeted. At least*

then I could have been sitting by now. Why do I even wear heels when they hurt my feet.

She quickened her pace as she saw the glittering sign welcoming her to A Cut Above, a once trendy bar connected to a fine dining restaurant serving steak and seafood. Cut, as the locals called it, was rarely crowded these days. The attached restaurant remained popular; however, once happy hour ended, patrons flocked out of the bar to seek other, more trendy locations. Still, the food was excellent, if pricey, the bartenders kept her drinks flowing, and the rotating piano vocalists in the darkened corner were often quite talented, crooning like Frank Sinatra or serenading like Billy Joel.

As she entered Cut, Jamie paused to examine herself in the darkened glass windowpane. Even at thirty, she had a difficult time accepting that she was attractive with her shoulder length red hair and pale skin with freckles across the bridge of her nose and her upper chest. She wasn't a model by any means; she enjoyed food too much to maintain that svelte a figure. Her body was a bit too curvy at the hips and not curvy enough on top. The intense Krav Maga workouts helped, but if she were asked to describe herself, 'average' would be her response. Tonight was different. Tonight she felt sexy in a slinky black dress with a flared and flirty bottom.

"The usual, Camille." Jamie hopped onto an open barstool that gave her a view of the entrance.

She tugged the hem of her dress to maintain her modesty. This was her comfort zone. She frequented the venue at least once a month, sometimes more though she rarely brought a date.

"Here you go, Jamie. Run a tab? Camile, the sweet, blondewho recently had a baby placed a martini glass on the cocktail napkin.

"Not tonight, hon. I have a room. Just charge it to 1522." Jamie checked her watch. Leon was late.

Sliding the black folder across the wooden bar, Camile winked. "Gotcha, hoping to get lucky, or just a staycation?"

"The first one. Sort of."

As she sipped her spiced pear martini, Jamie took the opportunity to survey the dimly lit lounge. She wasn't used to waiting for a man. Usually, it was the other way around. She was glad the bar was following the recent trend of not allowing smoking, or the wait would have been unbearable. Piano Man rose from the piano as the vest-clad singer began his set with a bar standard. A couple in a dark booth caught Jamie's attention. The rings on their fingers indicated the couple was married, but the hands groping under the table were a sign it was not to

each other. Jamie had an instinct for these things and was accurate 95% of the time. For her thesis at Yale, she performed a study on body language in relationships. The subject fascinated her, and she never passed up a chance to hone her skills.

I suppose they could be married, but not likely. Married couples are more loving, less passionate in public.

Her attention diverted to an older gentleman taking a seat on a nearby stool. The worn Armani suit was out of style by at least five years and no longer fit as it was intended. The gentleman kept checking the fake Rolex, which hung loosely around his right wrist. Jamie knew it was fake because, in several locations, the silver or chrome plating was starting to crack and peel. Like Jamie, he was impatiently waiting for someone. A slightly overweight, balding man, Jamie guessed he was once wealthy and fit; now too stubborn to admit his decline. A burnout, they called them. In Las Vegas, they were all too common. Ironically, he was a metaphor for Cut's decline. He stirred his drink, searching the room for a sign that his prime wasn't over, hoping to recapture a memory, perking up a bit when the pretty young bartenders gave him a wink and called him by name.

Must be a regular, like me. Jamie winced at the comparison. It was an irrational fear of hers that she would end

up alone, drowning her sorrows in an empty martini glass. She waved to Camille, who promptly mixed her another.

Jamie smiled at the manager as he passed her chair, greeting some of the wealthier guests at the table behind her. Frank didn't return the gesture, but she knew he would watch out for her as he had many times before. If any patron gave her too handsy, all she had to do was wave Frank over.

By the time the last green-hued drop of liquid pleasure landed on her tongue, Jamie was feelin' tipsy.

Where is this guy? She tapped her foot impatiently against the metal bar bracing the bottom of her stool. Perhaps she had misjudged her date's desires. Hookup apps can be hit or miss. His loss then. He was about to get passed over by her self-imposed two-drink rule. Perhaps two drinks were longer than most would wait, but Jamie believed in giving guys a chance, especially when she had something special planned.

Motioning to Camille, Jamie rose from her seat. If she left now, at least she could avoid the embarrassment of being stood up. This evening was beginning to look like a failure. Jamie hated failures.

She texted her assistant, Suzie.



Tonight's a bust. Going to call it a night. See you at the office tomorrow. I'll tell you all about it.

Removing two twenties from her wallet, she put them on the bar and mouthed to Camille, "For the baby." Her feet had barely set foot on the floor when a voice that reminded her of Joey from Friends rang out a bit too loudly.

"Yo, Jamie."

Oh crap. Looks like I waited too long. Ok, put on a fake smile and stick with the plan. Jamie smoothed out her skirt and flipped her hair as she turned to face her date.

"You must be Leon." She was face to chest with the six-foot-five man towering over her. He wore a tight blue muscle shirt that reeked of cheap women's perfume.

"That's right. Hope you didn't mind waiting a bit. Had some...car trouble." The tone-deaf confidence of this guy was already irritating Jamie.

With incredible self-restraint, she stifled an eye roll. *Does he think all women are that dense?* Leon hadn't bothered to clean himself up after his earlier encounter.. She wondered whether he knew his 'car trouble's' name, but that wasn't her business. Jamie was here for a reason, and whether Leon had just left someone else's bed had no bearing on her needs tonight. It might even make it easier. She needed to close the deal soon, though. She wondered what the

best tactic would be. After a moment of strategizing, she decided to meet him on his level.

“Two in one night? I must be special for you to cut out on your earlier date.” She returned to her stool, making sure he got an ample glimpse of the creamy skin of her left thigh.

“Guilty as charged.”

Leon wasn’t hard to look at. Late twenties, chiseled chin, not an ounce of fat on him. When she noticed the tan line on his left ring finger, Jamie faked a cough, bringing a hand to her mouth to cover her frown.

“So, do you want a drink? I just closed my tab, but...”

Leon snapped towards Camille. “Barkeep, whiskey neat and whatever the pretty little lady was having.” He sat next to Jamand pulled his stool close, placing a meaty hand on her thigh, brushing the edge of her dress.

“I’ll be honest with you,” Leon proclaimed, as if he were exposing his deepest secret. “I’m married, and my wife is planning a surprise party tonight, but she doesn’t know I know, so if I am a few minutes late, she can’t complain. I can hang with you for another hour or so before I have to head over.

He just arrived, and already he is making his exit excuse. Classy.

“What did I expect from a guy whose Tinder Profile reads like a Nick Adams tweet?”

“Now, admit it, I’m even better looking in person, right?” Leon puffed out his chest.

“Well, you certainly look good here in the dark bar, but I have to say you’ve mastered the art of photo angles.”

“Maybe, but I didn’t hear any complaints. You swiped right, after all.”

If he only knew. Jamie wasn’t going to reveal the reason she chose him. Let him believe it was his photos.

“I was curious to see whether someone as narcissistic as you could be a real person or if a bot was writing your dialogue.

Leon bristled, but recovered quickly. He made an exaggerated show of plunging an dagger into his heart. “Ouch, that wounds me.”

“I wasn’t sure men like you had any feelings. My mistake.” Recrossing her legs, she kept Leon’s wandering hand from reaching her panties.

“Are you always so quick with your tongue?” There was a flirtatious undertone to Leon’s question.

“No, sometimes my tongue is nice and slow.” To prove her point, Jamie slowly cleaned the salt from a portion of the rim of the martini Camille had just replenished.

It had the desired effect. Leon rose, again snapping his fingers, this time, the other bartender Sara responded, handing him a black folder with the check.

“You know, most women just laugh at my wit and worship my body.”

“I’m not most women, but I am always up for laughs. Let me know if you say something witty.

I’m going to use the restroom. If you are still here when I get back, we can head upstairs. If you think you can handle me.”

“Handle you, I’m going to ruin you for other men.” The lust in Leon’s eyes repulsed and aroused her at the same time.

The marble floor of the empty ladies’ room gave Jamie a chance to compose herself. Leon was more narcissistic than she expected. No matter, she would never see him again after tonight. She reapplied her lip gloss as she left the restroom, nearly running into Leon’s burly frame as he stood in the hall waiting.

“You look fine, Jamie. Let’s cut to the chase and take this up to your room. You know you want some of this.” Leon’s hand waved across his body.

Dear lord, how do people like him survive without a daily knee to the groin?

“Flattery from a narcissist is like buying wine in a box. Cheap, effective, and brings regret in the morning. However, since you asked so nicely, yes, let’s go upstairs and have some fun.” Jamie had to be careful not to seem too eager. She didn’t want to ruin her plans.

“Alright, that’s it. You’re coming with me. No one talks to me like this and doesn’t end up in my bed.”

Leon grabbed her arm possessively and led her to the golden doors of the casino elevators.

Jamie stumbled a few times, making sure to press her body teasingly close to his. Playing the flirty drunk was a role she enjoyed very much, and it seemed to be working to perfection. Ten years ago, if someone had spoken to her the way Leon did, Jamie would have slapped him and stormed off. Years of therapy and anger management had taught her there were better ways to handle the situation, not to mention, she was the one who had set this date, knowing exactly what Leon was. Isn’t that how the hookup app worked? Swipe right, skip the small talk, and head to the bedroom? Nor had Jamie protested when Leon sent her the photos of his penis. She could enjoy a good cock pic as much as anyone without mistaking it for attraction to the jerk it was attached to.

As they passed a small but delicious-looking bakery, Jamie realized she hadn’t eaten anything since lunch. She

almost stopped to grab one of the croissants calling to her, but she wanted to get upstairs and take the next step before the mood passed.

Leon paused, staring blankly at the entryway to several elevator banks. Clutching Leon's arm in one hand and her Louis Vuitton clutch in the other, Jamie whispered.

"You forget, I'm the one with the room. "Now follow me, stud."

As the lift rose, so did her adrenaline. She glanced around, noting the small orbs concealing the casino cameras. It was why she always met people in the resorts. They had surveillance everywhere. It made for a good excuse to avoid wandering hands in public, and a fantastic method of identification if things went awry.

As expected, as soon as the doors closed, Leon pressed his body against hers, forcing her to the back of the mirrored lift.

"You are hotter in person." He must have sprayed some pheromone-laced Tom Ford knockoff while she was in the bathroom because he reeked of tobacco and vanilla.

Men are such easy marks for advertising. You could sell mayonnaise for fifty dollars an ounce if you packaged it in shiny foil and told them it would attract hot women. She silently scooted under Leon's arm, an advantage of being nearly a foot shorter than her date.

Pointing toward the ceiling, she mouthed, "Cameras."

Leon frowned but nodded. He remained at her side, asserting his dominance with his hand on her arm. Jamie let it slide. In a moment, she would have what she came for. Besides, her black belt and the knife hidden in her sleeve would be enough protection if things got out of hand.

Leon couldn't wait until Jamie opened the door. As she placed her phone against the lock mechanism, his hands lifted her skirt and squeezed her ass. She felt his breath on his neck as he moved to kiss her.

"Wait until we get inside, Leon," she said, intentionally loud. Before Leon could say anything else, the door swung into the room and Jamie dragged Leon over the threshold, closing the door behind her.

Leon's lustful expression deflated like a sputtering balloon as he saw what awaited.

Standing in the anteroom was Leon's faithful and loving wife, Janice. On her left side stood her parents with welcoming smiles. A stack of presents sat on the coffee table next to a birthday cake.

On the grey couch to Janice's right sat Leon's mother, father, brother, and sister. They rose, intending to yell 'surprise' but their words trailed off as quickly as their smiles once they realized Leon was not alone.

As a private investigator specializing in precision exposure, Jamie had orchestrated this evening to bring Leon into direct confrontation with her client Janice and his family. Narcissists are very good at lying, and until tonight, Leon's family believed he was the perfect husband. Even her dad told Janice she was exaggerating her allegations of abuse, thanks to Leon's concerted effort to ingratiate himself with his in-laws. They couldn't deny the truth now, and things got loud, quickly.

"How dare you cheat on my daughter?" Janice's father wasn't as large as Leon, but he was a former army Sergeant who could be very intimidating. Janice's mother was sobbing, hugging her daughter-in-law and muttering apologies for not believing her.

As Jamie slowly backpedaled toward the door, the short, frumpy woman who must have been Leon's mother, slapped Leon's cheek, her face darkening with rage.

"You lying, good-for-nothing pig. Did I raise you to sleep with every whore you meet? You promised us after Elizabeth divorced you that you would be faithful to your next wife, but you couldn't even keep it in your pants for a year. We defended you! How could you do this to us? Think about what the pastor will say! We are going to have to find a new church because of you"

She paused to catch her breath.

There it is. Jamie had wondered how Leon developed such a selfish personality. Now she had proof that his narcissism ran in the family. Not once during his mother's tirade did she express any concern for Janice. Just "me, me, me."

"Oh, crap. What will they say at church? Two divorces? Caught red-handed?" His mother droned on. Even Leon couldn't get a word in edgewise.

"Don't you talk to me with that lying tongue." Venom spewed from her lips.

Leon's father kept quiet, his face clouded with disappointment. Now and then, he would chime in, affirming a point made by his wife. However, when Leon turned to him, eyes pleading for an advocate on his behalf, his father lost his cool and shouted so loudly that Jamie heard his booming bass echo down the hall, "YOU ARE NO LONGER MY SON"

Ding

As she boarded the elevator, Jamie almost felt sorry for Leon. Almost. From what Janice had told her, cheating was only a small part of Leon's abuse. Jamie had no tolerance for anyone who beat their wife or refused to let them leave the house unaccompanied. Women weren't property. She was glad she could help Janice before she had a child with that bastard.

The only regret Jamie had was that no one would be enjoying the gorgeous suite. She hadn't paid for it, of course. Janice used the debit card for Leon's not-so-secret, secret account.

"Spare no expense." She had said.

Jamie's work as an investigator was ninety percent on-line research and photographs taken from a distance, but sometimes a client wants the full confrontation package. In a voyeuristic way, Jamie preferred the cases where she was privileged to witness the well-deserved humiliation the most.

When she arrived at her car, Jamie checked the video feed one last time on her phone. This was the drama she enjoyed. Janice had drawn strength from the confrontation and was shouting Leon into submission. Her performance was worthy of an Oscar. Like Leon's mother, Janice referred to Jamie as "a cheap slut" but it was fine. It was Jamie's job, after all, to entice men to cheat. Her fees were hefty, but women like Janice were coming out of the woodwork to pay them in advance.

It was cartoonish to see Leon turn from a confident Alpha Male into a blubbering idiot faster than Wile E Coyote falling off a cliff.

The camera image faded as she closed the app, but Jamie wouldn't forget image of Leon on his knees, tears rolling

down his face, begging Janice not to divorce him. Even while he begged for forgiveness, Leon put Janice down.

“You ruined everything. No one else would give you what I gave you. I can’t afford a divorce. I knew I should have bred you!”

Jamie had no regrets.

It's always the same with men these days. Guys think they can do whatever and whoever they want without any consequences.

Back home, she climbed into the bathtub, a glass of wine in hand. As the warm water washed the filth of Leon’s touch off her body, the evening’s excitement faded. She was proud of what she accomplished today. One more person like her father was taken down, though she doubted the lesson would stick. Leon would likely find another victim somewhere down the road. She hoped not, but she knew the pattern well. Linda, Jamie’s mother, though she no longer gave her the satisfaction of the title, stayed loyal to Jim, even after he tried to convince Jamie to get bred by his boss and give the baby to his barren wife. When her mother tried to convince her it was the right thing to do, Jamie ran away, finally staying with her Aunt Kathryne. It hurt more than anything that her mother remained with Jim, choosing an abusive husband over her baby girl.

Her phone buzzed. A text from Janice scrolled across the screen.

You were great. I'm going to head to California to stay with my parents until Leon moves out of the house. He put it in my name because his credit is shot. I can't thank you enough.

Jamie fell onto the bed with a smile. A client thanking you when their marriage had just ended irrevocably was the cherry on the top of the cake.

The euphoria won't last. Jamie thought as she drifted off to sleep, already planning her next seduction.

Look for *Falling*, a spicy romance coming this fall.

